



The Road Through the Wall

Shirley Jackson

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Everyone knew the residents of Pepper Street were "nice" people -- especially the residents themselves. Among the self-satisfied group were: Mrs Merriam, the sanctimonious shrew who was turning her husband into a nonentity and her daughter into a bigoted spinster; Mr Roberts, who found relief from the street's unending propriety in shoddy side-street amours; Miss Fielding, who considered it more important to boil an egg properly than to save a disturbed girl from destruction. It took the gruesome act of a desperate boy who lived among them to pierce the shell of their complacency and force them to see their own ugliness.

The Road Through the Wall Details

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From Reader Review The Road Through the Wall for online ebook

Melanie Page says

This book is a giant slice-of-life story. There is no narrative arc. Characters come and go without reason. There is no build up or true conclusion of story lines. There are characteristic oddities that only Shirley Jackson can pull off, but those don't seem to add up to anything either. This book could have been 1,000 pages, but instead, it's slice of life.

Phayvanh says

Found at the library book sale, the jacket sold me on the book. Unfortunately, Jackson's fine writing and intriguing characters are lost in a pointless, detailed suburban life that spirals into nowhere.

There are many frustrating points in the story where, had she been a more daring writer, would have filled the novel with more complexity and brought motivations and secrets to light. But she didn't go there. Hester leaves, who knows where. Frederica's sister's condition is never explored, and we do not know how they go on, or how their mother keeps them. What about that little tryst behind the brick wall? And Mrs. Mack and her dog? There are so many things left to uncover.

Perhaps the theme here is that one never really knows another, even one's neighbor. Also, many are content enough with our lives that we choose to keep a distance--even with our "friends".

I found the anti-Semitism curious. There are no rumors or misdeeds that are attributed to the Perlman's. And their daughter falls into a mutually redeeming friendship with Harriet, until her mother discovers it. Given that there are no specific historical references, it's hard to place the cultural atmosphere at the time, reading it now. It's a little timeless, this cloistered place. But given that this book is a product of the Forties... I don't know. Curious.

If you picked up this book for the dead girl and her bloodied head on the cover, as I did, you will be disappointed. It takes a long time to get there, and there is no satisfactory resolution. This book reads more like a collection of vignettes than anything else. Well-written, but not skillfully plotted.

Brent Legault says

This is not the kind of book I would normally take a liking to. It's got a Winesburg, Ohio-ey feel about it, as if the main character were not a person but a place (in this case the protagonist is Pepper Street, somewhere in northern California.) But Jackson writes with such wit and charm and is so very clever and mischievous (with her hints and her sly, dry asides, and her half-said truths and her subtle intimations and her beautiful handling of the cruelties of childhood and the indignities, the savagery of adulthood) that all is forgiven and my only regret is that the novel wasn't twice as long.

Anna says

I am usually a fan of Jackson's work, but this one was a disappointment.

The back cover description of the edition I have said that the plot revolves around how a tragic event disrupts a small town.

I expected the Jackson's sublime ability to unnerve, add tension and mystery without purely through psychological drama.

Instead nothing actually happened until the last 20 pages, and the event that does happen had already been spoiled by the back cover, and by then it was just too little, too late.

I had a hard time reading this book, and I'm usually fairly competent, even though English is my second language.

In the first chapter the reader receives a huge infodump about the neighbourhood, the houses and the people who live in them, but their names are simply too similar - Donald, Desmond, Mary, Marilyn, Hallie, Harriet, James, Johnny, etc.

In the end it's very difficult to keep track of who these people are, and why you should care about it, especially when no character stands out, perhaps except Harriet, and she wasn't so interesting in herself.

Usually I plow through books, but this one I kept putting down, and I had to force myself to stick with it, out of pure loyalty to Jackson, who's "We Have Always Lived in the Castle" is my favourite book to this day. I wouldn't recommend this one to other than people who insist on being Jackson completists though.

You can get better, more exciting things elsewhere - such as the rest of her bibliography.

Blue Cypress Books says

"Mrs. Desmond was neither intelligent nor unintelligent, because thinking and all its allied attributes were completely outside her schedule for life; her values did not include mind, and nothing that she intended ever required more than money." These people are the worst and Shirley knew it even back in 1939.

Robert says

I'm currently slowly working my way through all of Shirley Jackson's books (many for the umpteenth time); it was a pleasure to revisit this, her very first novel, originally published in 1948. Road tells the story of the residents of Pepper Street in a genteel suburb of San Francisco in the summer of 1936. That these people are by and large a distinctly unpleasant bunch of alternately backbiting, bigoted, snobbish, or mean-spirited folks is what seems to give a lot of readers pause; but one of Jackson's principles with her fiction was to rip away the veneer of polite society and expose the darker instincts that lie just below the surface. There's also the fact that Road features a rather large cast for such a short book (just under 200 pages). Despite the hard edges of the characters populating Pepper Street (Mrs. Merriam and a young girl named Virginia are among the most horrible people Jackson ever conjured up and that's really saying something), they are vividly, uncomfortably human. And though the cast is a bit unwieldy, Jackson tells her story in short vignette style, with her always-smooth prose, so it's easier to keep up than it would be in the hands of a lesser talent. Road isn't perfect, but it's a fine, dark satire of middle class America. For being a relatively young work, it holds up remarkably well. I give it 3 1/2 to 4 out of 5 Shirleys.

Kat Cui says

At first I thought this was just a bunch of snapshots about extremely unpleasant people but the last third of this book was a legitimate page turner and everything came together (but not entirely, still in pieces..). I think it treads very very familiar territory but in a deft way..the way Jackson was able to put together these anecdotes slowly at 1st and then in taut concise, even like paragraph length, little pieces, was well done.. very much like *The Lottery* actually.. and more uncomfortable to me than her straight horror work

TinHouseBooks says

Jakob Vala (Graphic Designer): It's fitting that I most often find Shirley Jackson in the form of torn paperbacks, on crowded shelves in the back of dusty bookstores. Once, on a post-college dropout road trip, I discovered novel after novel in nearly every tiny coastal bookstore I stepped into. Jackson's stories feel at place in unconventional settings. Disturbing and oddly wry, her writing examines conformity in a manner so precise as to appear almost fetishistic.

A few weeks ago, while walking the long way to lunch (read: avoiding someone), I ducked into a used bookstore and bought a copy of *The Road Through the Wall* (1948). Jackson's first novel takes place in a middle class community of families who strive to move beyond the wall that separates them from their wealthier neighbors. Of course, the pleasant domesticity functions as a façade for something darker and it's only a matter of time before tragedy strikes. I'm only a third of the way through—the promised fatalities have yet to occur—but *The Road Through the Wall*, is a slow-brewing tale that promises the standard Jackson terror.

Shaun says

First let me comment on this particular publication, which was riddled with editing errors, at one point referring to one of the characters, Miss Fielding, as Miss Flemming. Furthermore, the description on the back of the book doesn't fit the story. Very bizarre.

All that said, though slightly different from Jackson's later novels, which more easily fall into the horror genre, *The Road Through the Wall* still delivers in Jackson style.

Most notably is Jackson's insight into middle-class America/suburbia. She's an expert at exploring the good/bad duality of our psyche, and at times this reads like a reality TV show "The Families of Pepper Street" except well crafted with more depth and intentional satire.

She also delivers a chilling ending, the most tragic element, not what happens, but how the various characters react.

This really is Shirley doing what she does best...forcing us to face the evil aspect of our human nature.

As far as the reviews that complain "no plot", I can only shrug my shoulders and think, you missed the point,

which I guess is okay, since not every book is for everyone.

Bottom line: this isn't formulaic Mc-Fiction.

Finally, there are a lot of characters in this book, and at times it is extremely hard to keep track of them. In retrospect, I wouldn't worry about trying as the important themes/characters emerge regardless.

Claire says

This is a series of everyday vignettes about the horrible, horrible, normal people that fill the microcosm of Pepper Street. Horrible children, horrible spinsters, horrible wives and husbands. The horribleness of the community builds with each page, so the entire time, I was waiting for a Truly Awful Thing to happen. But don't look for any one Truly Awful Villain; like the Shirley classics to come, the evil is in the mass.

Jackie says

3.5 stars

Judy says

As far as I can tell, this was Shirley Jackson's first novel. It has a few flaws but you can recognize her. She already had her fingers on the pulse of the dark underside in American suburban life. "The Lottery," the short story which made her career, was published in The New Yorker in the same year as this novel.

Over a period of one summer, a group of families, all of which live on the same block, interact in the way of small neighborhoods. Each family is introduced with a bit about their backgrounds, their children if they have any, and a description of their house. (This part was hard to keep straight; I ended up making a map of the block with the names of the characters next to the houses.)

It becomes clear that most of these families are in flux. Each one is either on the way up or down; in the case of a couple elderly women living alone, on the way out.

The children drive the events but with much interference from their hovering parents. For a reader like myself, who grew up in just such a neighborhood during the mid 1950s, reading this short novel was excruciating and eye-opening. We might as well have had these very same families on our block.

Jackson's trademark sense of foreboding is apparent from the first page of the Prologue and continues through to the tragic conclusion. Pepper Street in 1936 in a small California town is home to Harriet Merriam, young teen, overweight, aspiring writer. Her overbearing, Puritanical mother interferes at every opportunity but especially when Harriet befriends the lone Jewish girl on the block. Anyone could say that the parents in the neighborhood mean well, but all of them are caught up in attitudes and outside forces beyond their awareness.

By the end of the summer, the wall that surrounds the highly affluent section which abuts Pepper Street is being broken through to allow for a new street into the area, giving access to a coming subdivision. The wall is symbolic of the barriers which keep certain classes of people out (or in, depending on the point of view.) Most families on Pepper Street aspire to live inside that wall, never acknowledging the walls that already surround them.

The kids only know that something has become unsettled and for the reader they are the barometer of change. It will be another decade or so, but these are the neighborhoods from which my generation boiled out in rebellion, in destruction, in the restructuring of American life known as The Sixties.

Today many baby boomers look back with nostalgia on those years when we knew all our neighbors and could run free all day. They should read *The Road Through The Wall*.

Eeva says

An unpleasant book about bunch of unpleasant people.

The story takes place during a single summer and it shows how much bigotry, hatred, stupidity, infidelity, racism and so on can be hidden under pleasant smiles, neat lawn, clean houses, propriety or good manners. Its not a murder mystery, even though there is a murder, it's not a creepy story, even though there are some major creepers (Tod Daniels, I'm looking at you, you creepy lurker!). But there is this sense of uneasiness that you can't really put your finger on.

It's a great book really, Shirley Jackson's first novel that shows how talented, how observant she was.

My only complain is that it should be sold with a chart of all the characters - it's really hard to follow when they're all have similar names (Hester, Harrie, Helen, Harriet... Mary, Mildred, Marilyn, Mrs. Martin, Mrs. Merriam, Mrs. Mack)....

Megan Robison says

I just finished this book this morning and I'm already trying to see where I can fit it into my schedule to reread.

It does start a bit slow - there's a prologue which I feel is not particularly necessary because Shirley Jackson establishes characterization so well in the moment that she really doesn't need to explain who everyone is beforehand. But the way the tension elevates throughout this book is done so masterfully, by the end you're just tearing through it. I'd advise having a buddy read this with you so that when you finish you have someone to scream with, because my god, the ending just bowls you over.

In terms of style I think this compares pretty closely with Evan S. Connell's *Mrs. Bridge*. Neither book features a protagonist with an established superobjective, and both read like a series of disconnected anecdotes at least most of the way through. But near the end of the book, Shirley Jackson yanks everything together with a development that had me wanting to start from the beginning immediately upon finishing. I imagine this makes for just as rewarding of a reread as it did a first read, and it's one I'll revisit. Probably sooner than later.

meeners says

phenomenal! objectively speaking i suppose i would agree with other reviewers in rating this below *the haunting of hill house*, *we have always lived in the castle*, and other undisputed heavyweight champions of the literary world - its aims are more modest, for one, and unevenly accomplished. but oh, that prose! shirley jackson skewers her petty nasty snobby spiteful characters with such clean, precise prose - skewers them violently, with glee.

rather than a sustained plot, this book is really nothing more than a series of vignettes, sharp as daggers, meant to convey all the narrow confines of suburban life. or rather - argh, i don't yet have a good way of putting it, because "suburban life" seems to conjure up nothing but a lot of stale images and stereotypes. this isn't that. the families depicted in this book are uniquely themselves; they're also part and parcel of the larger social structure of the suburb, one jackson ultimately condemns as toxic. again, it isn't that she's trying to argue that prejudice and hypocrisy originate in the suburb, or are limited to it. maybe it's the title that comes closest to what's going on here - the idea that a sudden breach in an arbitrary boundary doesn't create blight but rather exposes what had always been there.

(the literal road through the wall, incidentally, doesn't figure into the book until nearly the end. i mention this because the book blurb for the penguin edition i have makes it sound like it's a central catalyst to the plot, when it's not. seems like other editions - including the blurb here on GR - have had trouble in describing the book as well. my favorite, from 1950: "A MARRIED WOMAN PROWLs THE BACK STREETS." haha! just goes to show how tenuous the "plot" really is.)

don't want this review to make it sound like the book is a mean, petty thing; its *characters* are, but not jackson. i suppose the reason why i liked (well, "liked" is not the right word) *the road through the wall* so much is because it's the first time i've seen jackson's ruthless perspicacity so aggressively on display. every vignette knocked me senseless with admiration. though i do have to say that my undisputed favorite moment is when a certain child utters this sublime line, in a rare instance of justice served: "You shut your fat mouth. You just shut up for once in your life and try to act decent."

wise words to live by indeed.

Simon says

Shirley Jackson is one of the few authors I feel happy just picking up and reading anything they have written. That said, I was concerned it would be one of her weaker pieces and might not find it very interesting. That was only partly the case.

The story presents a slice of suburban life in late 1940's America with all the repression, prejudice, conservatism and cruelty that it entails. It is set in a single street, focusing not on any particular character, but hopping in a scattered fashion from one POV to another, both adult and child alike. It is a rather large cast of characters in fact, so much so that even by the end I was still having difficulty putting names to faces as it were.

There are few likeable characters here; most of them being concerned mainly with their social standing and being better than their neighbours. The children are as unkind to each other as the adults, reflecting the same prejudices and attitudes. The adults range from lonely spinsters to married couples in joyless marriages.

The story plods on tracing mundane and trivial incidents in the lives of the residents of Pepper street until you get to the double tragedy at the end that it shockingly concludes with leaving things deliciously ambiguous and unexplained.

This couldn't have been written a decade later, or at least would have been very different, with the advent of teenage culture and rebellion. In that sense it provides a view of then American contemporary life that has disappeared for ever and it is interesting as a period piece.

It's not the sort of thing I normally read but I did find it engaging to hold my interest throughout, her usual bright and readable prose was evident and it was thought provoking. Certainly not up there with her best work but probably worth a read, I'm just not sure who I would recommend it to.

Alexandra Bazhenova-Sorokina says

One of the saddest books I've read in a long while, masterfully written, with periods of tension and relaxation creating a kaleidoscope of suburban middle-class life. The ending is not that much scarier than the rest of the novel as the scariest thing are the people who don't have empathy for anyone, even for their own children.

Kirsty says

The Road Through the Wall is Queen of Creepy Shirley Jackson's first novel. In the foreword to the Penguin edition which I borrowed from the library, Ruth Franklin writes: 'Compared to *The Haunting of Hill House* or *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Jackson's masterful late novels, *The Road Through the Wall* is a slighter work. But it is marvellously written, with the careful attention to structure, the precision of detail, and the brilliant bite of irony that would always define her style'.

The novel was published in 1948 to a 'largely unappreciative audience'; its critics were 'put off by the book's unpleasant characters, its grim tone, and its violent conclusion'. *The Road Through the Wall* is a prelude of sorts to *The Lottery*, which was published the following year. It takes place in 1936, on Pepper Street in small town California. Instead of a familial saga, it is rather more of a neighbourhood affair, although the familial relations are nothing less than fascinating throughout. We meet several families resident on the street, and come to know them intimately thanks to Jackson's wonderful, measured prose. Every single character has differing traits, and one of Jackson's real strengths here (and there are many) lies in demonstrating the imagination and power of children.

The Road Through the Wall is not my favourite of Jackson's works, but it is taut, surprising and compelling, and certainly an accomplished debut. It took a final direction which I wasn't expecting, but which made an awful lot of sense in retrospect. The ending is marvellously and creepily crafted, and I very much liked the way in which Jackson left some of the most pressing questions unanswered.

Jonathan says

This is Shirley Jackson's first novel which was published in 1948, just one year before her famous short story *The Lottery*.

It's a bit difficult to get into at first as the reader is confronted with all the inhabitants of Pepper Street in suburbia in (presumably) post-war U.S.A. It becomes a bit easier to read once you get to know some of the characters a bit better but I wished that I'd written a list of them as I kept forgetting who was who. But no one character stands out as the 'main character', which is a bit unrewarding for a while. At first the characters come across as perfect little suburban families but the cracks, just little cracks, start to show, as we realise that they are sometimes petty, cruel or vicious.

But it's Tod Donald who comes across as a bit strange:

Tod Donald rarely did anything voluntarily, or with planning, or even with intent acknowledged to himself; he found himself doing one thing, and then he found himself doing another, and that, as he saw it, was the way one lived along, never deciding, never helping.

This quote precedes a section where he enters the Desmond's empty house and wanders around it, examining all the items in the house, but not considering whether he had a right to do so or not. He finds his way to Mrs Desmond's closet, climbs in amongst the dresses and negligees, and says as many dirty words as possible. He goes outside to the backyard lawn and lies face down on the lawn. He only moves when he wakes and hears the Desmond's car. It's a brilliant section.

Near the end of the novel there's a party at one of the houses; not everyone's invited and some end up getting drunk, dancing and/or singing to the disgust of others. Then it's discovered that little Caroline Desmond is missing. I suppose it's a bit obvious what happens and who is responsible but Shirley Jackson still has another surprise up her sleeve. Besides, it's not a murder mystery, it's much better than that, though it does take a while to get going.

File under: suburban horror.

Justin says

Shirley Jackson's first novel isn't her best, but glimpses of her greatness can be found in this story of a middle class suburban neighborhood. Jackson's writes with a full display of subtlety following snapshots of various families every day lives in one summer in Pepper Street. That said, the plot is thin or nonexistent, and reads more like a bunch of vignettes, though many of them I found entertaining and funny. However, I wouldn't necessarily call this character driven since there were far too many characters to care about. In regards to characters, I think Jackson focuses on the neighborhood as an overall character where she explores the meanness, selfishness, and cruelty of human nature through seemingly mundane happenings such as the torn friendship between Harriet and Marilyn because of their mothers' disapproval, and Tod Donald's ostracism from the rest of the children. In these ways, Jackson paints the underlying consciousness of the picture perfect suburban experience, it isn't what it seems on the surface. As for the ending, the pace picks up when something tragic strikes the neighborhood, and like the wall being torn down, leads to the

disintegration of the community. Overall, this novel isn't the most enjoyable or engaging, but I'd recommend it for fans of Jackson's work.
