



# Spilt Milk

*Amanda Hodgkinson*

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## **Spilt Milk** Amanda Hodgkinson

The eagerly anticipated new historical novel from the author of *22 Britannia Road*: a novel about sisterhood, motherhood, and secrets that cannot be laid to rest.

1913. Unmarried sisters Nellie and Vivian Marsh live an impoverished existence in a tiny cottage on the banks of the Little River in Suffolk. Their life is quiet and predictable, until a sudden flood throws up a strange fish on their doorstep and a travelling man who will change them forever.

1939. Eighteen year old Birdie Farr is working as a barmaid in the family pub in London. When she realises she is pregnant she turns to her mother Nellie, who asks her sister to arrange an adoption for Birdie's newborn daughter. But as the years pass Birdie discovers she cannot escape the Marsh sisters' shadowy past - and her own troubling obsession with finding her lost daughter will have deep consequences for all of them...

## **Spilt Milk Details**

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Author : Amanda Hodgkinson

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# From Reader Review *Spilt Milk* for online ebook

## Chris Curran says

*Spilt Milk* is a beautiful novel. The lyrical writing and lush descriptive detail make it a book to savour as it winds its way through the long lives of sisters, Nellie and Vivian. Like the river that flows past the cottage, where we first meet them, in 1912, the future turns out to be tumultuous and sometimes cruel, but also to bring unexpected joys. It may break hearts and destroy dreams, but it can keep secrets safe and reward the resilient with surprising gifts.

As young women, living with their much older sister, Rose, Nellie and Vivian imagine they will remain together in this rural backwater forever, as Rose insists they should. Things turn out very differently, however, when handsome travelling man, Joe, wanders into their lives. The impact of his short stay will change everything and although he is long gone even before his illegitimate child is born he remains a powerful presence through the years. It takes the sisters away from the home they thought would always be theirs and into very different lives.

There are passions and dilemmas aplenty as the years go by, but Amanda Hodgkinson always shines a kindly light on her characters. And one of the many delights of the book is the generosity with which she shares everything with her readers. There are no truths withheld for effect, no shocking revelations. We are allowed to know of the pleasures, the losses, the regrets and above all the secrets that haunt the sisters and those they love. And the novel is the richer for that.

With Nellie's daughter, Birdie, the story moves onto the next generation. She is at home in the bright lights of London and has greater opportunities than her mother and aunt, but her life, and theirs will be overshadowed by the loss of another child and by questions about Birdie's own parentage. Just like the older women there are secrets she feels forced to keep for many years.

Seen through the prism of our modern consciousness the decisions the characters have to make, the choices that confront them, seem almost unbearable and sometimes incomprehensible and yet they endure and find happiness where they can.

Alongside the main characters, the novel is peopled by another, shadowy, group: the lost children and the missing or unacknowledged parents who so powerfully affect the lives of Vivian, Nellie and their families. Tiny moments are slipped in so delicately they could easily be missed (and often are missed by the main characters). The unknown young woman staring at the guest house where Vivian used to shelter pregnant girls, a portrait on the wall of an old house: such fragments, glimpsed almost in passing, assume huge resonance for the reader who shares so many of the novel's secrets.

I loved *Spilt Milk*. A subtle yet powerful novel, it will remain with me for a long time and I'm already looking forward to rereading it. I can't recommend it too highly.

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## Poppy99 says

I took this on holiday with me and it was a great read for the poolside. It was deep enough to be engaging but not so deep that it felt like a chore to read. It starts with three sisters and their secrets which weave through the generations. Some things were left unanswered for me but perhaps I missed a few things along the way. I could feel the dankness and damp as I read it as the river meanders through the novel. I will seek out this author's debut novel as that gets good reviews.

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## Cleo Bannister says

*22 Britannia Road*, the debut novel by this author, has been languishing on my wishlist for years, so I was delighted to win a Goodreads giveaway for *Spilt Milk*, Amanda Hodgkinson's next novel.

*Spilt Milk* starts in 1913 with three sisters living in an isolated cottage next to the Little River in Suffolk, England. Rose the eldest has brought up her younger two sisters, Nellie and Vivian in impoverished conditions and her dearest wish is that the three of them lived together safe from the frightening stories she reads in the local gazette. Working on the nearby farm Rose and Nellie bring in the pennies while Vivian looks after the home and the days are tracked by the changing season. All goes well until one day the river floods, and a stranger arrives changing everything.

This is a really good example of a historical saga with plenty of secrets and an underlying theme of female relationships, in all their guises, covering a lengthy time span. The story continues to 1963 but fortunately the author has taken the judicious decision to move the story forward with the characters reflecting on the past as well as narrating the present. This device not only keeps the book length long enough to be fulfilling while avoiding the feeling that it has been unnecessarily padded, but also keeps the reading experience fresh with the change of tense and pace.

Although most of the characters are female the male characters are equally well presented while keeping the feeling of the time period authentic. I loved the way the book charted the changing times from those where women who 'got into trouble' were harshly judged by their peers to a softening of attitudes in the 1960's. At the heart of this book is the relationship between sisters which includes the rivalry and the support they provide.

The author has managed to write a riveting story which is deeper than the premise might suggest, where secrets are revealed and hidden in equal measure, with some remaining a mystery to the protagonists to the very end. I now want to read *22 Britannia Road* after this enjoyable read.

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## Kit Habianic says

Coming in less than a month... This is a book about love and loss, hope and shame, about the lives of three women and a river that may one day spill its secrets.

A beautiful, deeply moving novel by the author of 22 Britannia Road.

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### **JJ Marsh says**

This book had a lot to live up to.

22 Britannia Road is one of my top shelf favourites.

Here, the same lyrical atmospheric use of language, creation of ambience, sense of period and complete absorption in locale whisked me far away from my chair, taking me far away to follow a river and the story of three women.

This gentle tale feels like a river, flowing through the landscape, reflecting the beauty of its surroundings. But this deceptively peaceful scene-setting, woven with skill and delicate prose, hides a darker truth. Secrets, loyalties and the harshness of being a country woman in the early part of the last century force haunting decisions, drawing the reader in like an undertow.

We follow the fortunes of Nellie, Vivian and Birdie through decades of social change, watching the eddies and swirls of the relationships and interactions, impressed by their resilience and appalled by the conditions they had to suffer.

Not a book to hurry, but certainly one to savour with its poetic language, evocative descriptions, believable characters and the thoughtfulness that arises from wondering, 'What would I do, in her shoes?'

It's quite a different read to 22 Britannia Road, but when the river swells and breaks its banks, you feel a similar force - the power of (human) nature.

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### **Barbara Scott-Emmett says**

Spilt Milk is another novel from Amanda Hodgkinson full of the lyrical prose that made 22 Britannia Road such an exquisite read. In fact, whisper it because it could be sacrilege, there were times when I thought Spilt Milk was even better than 22BR. So, that's the difficult second novel nailed, then.

Spilt Milk is a novel about women - sisters and mothers and daughters and aunts; it's about secrets and lies and the inevitable diminution of lives these cause.

Spanning the first half of the 20th century it tells tales of secret pregnancies and lost babies, of longed-for children and regretted adoptions. For a large part of the last century (and of course for centuries before) it is women who have borne the shame of birth out of wedlock, and who have had to find ways to manage that shame.

Hodgkinson delves into the quiet pain of the women involved in these heartbreaking stories, into their guilt and regret and sadness. It's mostly about the women - the men don't know what they've left behind, because, yes, it's the men who leave, who go to war, who go off on their own life's adventure, leaving the women, as usual, to weep alone.

Don't get the idea that this is a Catherine Cookson type saga though. No, this book, like 22BR, has the depth and sensitivity, the beautifully handled sentences, of a literary novel.

I was fortunate enough to win this novel from a Goodreads promotion. I'm so glad I clicked that link to enter.

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## **Marlene Brown says**

I've just finished reading this wonderful novel: subtle, skilful and utterly believable - a nostalgic, intelligent story of love between successive generations of women.

I read fiction at bedtime and the vivid depiction of the Suffolk countryside wove itself into my dreams, in the same way that Iris Murdoch's "The Sea, The Sea" did years ago and which has stayed with me ever since. The fluctuations of the landscape, its daily transformations and unpredictability, become analogous to the events occurring in the lives of the women who live within it. A wonderful sense of place and permanence pervades the story.

The novel's themes struck a deep chord with me, especially the agonising shame and fear of giving birth 'out of wedlock' during the 20th Century – one forgets, or perhaps doesn't realise, that a generation ago women faced the most appalling consequences for having children outside marriage. Of course, this scenario has been dealt with countless times in many novels but here, in *Spilt Milk*, the plight of the women is handled with such integrity and lack of melodrama that their resilience in the face of overwhelming pain is incredibly moving.

One of the great strengths of this author is that she crafts superbly sympathetic characters so that the reader is effortlessly drawn into their lives. The relationship between the sisters, Nellie and Vivian, is laid bare with insight and truth, so much so that it was almost too painfully accurate for me to read in places - the loyalties, competitiveness, petty jealousies, capriciousness and deep, deep love - the loss of which is like a wound that doesn't heal, although the catharsis in this story is immensely uplifting.

I loved Amanda Hodgkinson's previous novel, *22 Britannia Road*, and had high expectations of *Spilt Milk*. I have not been disappointed. A tour de force and highly recommended.

(I won an Advance Copy of *Spilt Milk* in a Goodreads competition in return for a fair review so thanks to them and Penguin.)

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## **Tricia says**

*Spilt Milk* is brilliantly beautiful. Sisters and daughters affect each others lives as the tides of time sweep over them and back across the century from the beginning of the century through until the 1960s. I would say more about the plot but feel it would spoil your journey, your chance to discover these women and find them revealed through one other, and through time and place. Full of the wonderful elements that make the best books - grounded in solid reality but with a magical feel, secrets echoing down generations, great characters you really care about facing the dilemmas these secrets bring, and masterly use of viewpoint. All expressed in prose that sent me to find a notebook to write out the beautiful, lyrical phrases that lift Amanda Hodgkinson's writing out of its carefully painted settings and into the realms of imagination. At the end I am left with the impression of the river washing back, revealing little by little what was once buried - these secrets sometimes indecipherable to the observing characters, but revealed to the reader, and

then covering them up again. For those who like to immerse themselves in the experience of reading beautiful prose, this book will enrich your life. Enjoy.

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## **Ineke says**

In deze roman staan de zussen Rose, Nellie en Vivian Marsh centraal. De zussen groeien op ver buiten het dorp op het platteland aan de rivier. In het district East Anglia. Ze zijn op elkaar aangewezen. Rose, de oudste, zorgt na het overlijden van hun ouders voor haar twee zussen. Ze hebben alle drie een eigen inbreng in het huishouden. Rose, werkt bij een boer, Nellie verzorgt alles rondom hun huisje en Vivian doet de huishouding. Een grote overstroming en de komst van Joe Ferrier zet het leven van de zussen compleet op zijn kop. Rose wordt ziek, komt te overlijden. Nellie en Vivian voelen zich ontheemd. Rose had altijd de leiding over hun leven gehad. Nellie en Vivian voelen zich aangetrokken tot Joe Ferrier, een goeduitziende, vrolijke man, die werkt op een boerderij in de buurt. Maar wil zich niet binden, gaat uiteindelijk weer weg, een nomade, een zwerver die altijd weer verder trekt. Vivian raakt zwanger van Joe, Nellie is zwaar teleurgesteld en gaat het huis uit. Er is geen contact meer tussen de zussen. Ieder gaat zijn eigen weg.

Maar het lot beslist anders. Door een tragisch voorval komen de zussen weer bij elkaar en wonen zelfs weer samen. Vivian, ontmoet Frank Stewart, een oudere man. Ze trouwen en gaan in het pension wonen van Frank zijn moeder en zetten het voort. Als Frank sterft, erft Vivian alles en is een bemiddelde vrouw geworden.

Nellie trouwt met sergeant Henry Far, ze heeft hem leren kennen in een militair hospitaal. Hij is een oorlogsslachtoffer met een trauma. Ze vertrekken naar Londen, om daar te gaan wonen en werken. Ze trekken in bij George een broer van Henry, hij heeft de leiding over een pub die familieigendom is. Nellie krijgt een dochter, Birdie. Het opvoeden valt Nellie zwaar. Ze vraagt Vivian om hulp, en zij neemt Birdie mee, en zorgt vijf jaar voor haar nichtje.

Birdie komt weer terug naar Londen, groeit daar verder op, gaat ook werken in de pub. Wil graag zangeres worden. Zij raakt ongewenst zwanger op haar twintigste. Zoekt en vraagt hulp aan moeder Nellie. Die roept de hulp van Vivian weer in. Birdie verblijft de hele zwangerschap bij haar tante. Er wordt voor de baby van Birdie een adoptiegezin gevonden. Zodat Birdie weer verder kan met haar leven. Birdie ontmoet Charles, en gaan trouwen. Charles heeft een huis laten bouwen op de plek waar Nellie en Vivian zijn grootgebracht. Ze gaan daar wonen. Zo is de cirkel weer rond.

Het is een pracht verhaal en een tijdsbeeld wat afspeelt op het Engelse platteland. 1917-1964. De beide oorlogen spelen daarin een grote rol. Heel sterk zijn de beschrijvingen van de zussen, en van de natuur, en de omgeving.

Liefde, verraad, moederschap, adoptie en vergevingen dat is het waar het om draait in deze mooie roman.

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## **Ingrid Fasquelle says**

Née en Angleterre dans le Somerset, Amanda Hodgkinson vit dans le sud de la France, où elle est chroniqueuse pour La Dépêche du Midi. 22 Britania Road (Belfond, 2012; Pocket, 2013), son premier roman très remarqué, a été sélectionné sur les listes des meilleurs romans de 2011. Rose et ses sœurs est son deuxième roman à paraître chez Belfond. Amanda Hodgkinson y explore le thème du secret de famille et

confirme son attrait pour des héroïnes fortes, désireuses de s'affranchir du regard et du jugement des autres. Des bas-fonds de Southampton à un petit village isolé du Suffolk, Rose et ses sœurs raconte l'émouvante histoire de trois sœurs hantées par leur héritage familial et le poids du secret.

Si Amanda Hodgkinson n'a pas son pareil pour dépeindre le charme bucolique et paisible de la campagne anglaise, elle excelle également à décrire les liens puissants et uniques qui unissent ces trois sœurs. Élevées par leur aînée au contact de la nature, au bord d'une petite rivière qui rythme leur quotidien, la vie des sœurs Marsh semble toute tracée. Au bord de cette rivière qui cloisonne leur vie et constitue pour elles une prison autant qu'un lieu sûr, Nellie et Vivian coulent des jours paisibles, en marge de la société en pleine transformation du début du XX<sup>ème</sup> siècle. Mais alors que les deux sœurs ont finalement pris leur envol et se sont éloignées du cocon familial après un drame, la rivière de leur enfance, celle qui coule dans leurs veines et les enracine à leur terre, les rappelle et les attire irrémédiablement à elle. Nellie et Vivian n'ont alors pas d'autre choix que de revenir dans le petit cottage où elles sont nées, où elles ont grandi et là où tout a commencé...

Quel est ce secret si lourd qu'il continue à peser sur les femmes de la famille Marsh ? Pourquoi Rose s'évertuait-elle sans cesse à vouloir protéger ses jeunes sœurs du monde extérieur ? Au fil des années et des changements que le nouveau siècle apporte, Amanda Hodgkinson raconte la vie et le destin incroyable de Nellie et Vivian. Profondément attachées à leur rivière, les deux sœurs s'y retrouvent et revivent les joies, les peines, les drames et les espoirs déçus qui ont jalonné leur existence. Elles partent à la recherche d'elles-mêmes, tentent de comprendre leur histoire familiale et de percer le secret que Rose pensait avoir enfoui à tout jamais... C'est beau, touchant, bouleversant même !

La plume de l'auteure est si belle, si délicate et poétique qu'on se sent comme emporté, irrésistiblement, au fil de l'eau. Les pages se tournent, les époques se succèdent et les années défilent, furtives, sans même qu'on se rende compte du temps qui passe !

Entre héritage familial, liens du sang et poids des secrets, Amanda Hodgkinson signe un roman initiatique très émouvant, plein de finesse et d'espoir, qui marque le lecteur et laisse une empreinte indélébile bien longtemps après avoir tourné la dernière page... Une petite merveille à ne pas manquer !

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## **Anne says**

I really enjoyed Amanda Hodgkinson's first novel, 22 Britannia Road, and wrote that I was eagerly awaiting her next – and I was certainly not disappointed in any way. The beautiful writing – the almost cinematic descriptions, the gentle style – is even more fully developed, and this was a simply wonderful read.

The story follows the sisters Nellie and Vivian through their lives – from 1913 through to the early sixties – from their early lives in the isolated Suffolk cottage, through their married lives and into old age, picking up the stories of their children and grandchildren along the way. The whole story is overshadowed by an immense secret the sisters share – a really heartbreaking one, connected to their meeting the travelling man – and which always has the potential of being uncovered. This is a story that swirls through time – several of the characters face similar issues across the years, but the ways they're dealt with are different because of the changing social standards.

Both Vivian and Nellie are quite fascinating characters, the products of their unusual early lives and upbringing, making choices around alliances and relationships that change the course of their lives. I loved



Birdie too – she’s vividly drawn, makes her own difficult choices, and there are times when your heart really breaks for her. There’s a wonderful sense of place and time throughout – drawn through rich descriptions full of sights, tastes and smells. The settings are magnificently detailed – this is a book where you really do live with the characters – from the riverside opening, to the London pub with its absence of green, the boarding house and tearooms, through to the bungalow by the sea. But it’s not only the physical descriptions – the emotional depth is there too, beautifully crafted in an easy flowing style, building depths of feeling that are immensely moving.

This novel is described as being about sisterhood, motherhood and secrets that can’t be laid to rest – it’s also a quite beautiful read, slowly unfolding, all absorbing, and I’d really recommend it to anyone who enjoys reading about the twists and turns of life and relationships against a beautifully drawn and constantly evolving historic backdrop. I really loved it.

Spilt Milk will be published by Penguin Books UK on 6th February, and will be available in both Kindle and paperback editions. My thanks to netgalley and the publishers for my advance reading e-copy.

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### **Justine Windsor says**

This is much more than a family saga – there are deep, emotional layers to this story. The author’s prose is beautiful and finely tuned as she takes us through the lives of Rose, Nellie, Vivian and Birdie. Parts of the novel reminded me of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* and *Precious Bane* in its exploration of rural life and the impact of progress, and the atmospheric nature of the descriptions of the country side and country life. I particularly liked the imagery of the river and the family home, which the women returned to at several points in the book

All four women are vividly realised and I cared deeply about them, and the secrets they carried, known and unknown. The author’s exploration of how family events and secrets can echo down the generations is thought provoking and moving.

Spilt Milk garnered some rave reviews in the media and I can see why. As one of those reviews said, this book and its author deserve wide recognition.

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### **Jo Barton says**

From the beginning of this book I was completely taken into another world, to one of rural deprivation and where family secrets run as deep as the river which runs alongside the tumble down cottage which is home to the enigmatic Marsh sisters. In 1913, spinster sisters Nellie and Vivian Marsh eke out a bleak existence in the isolated Suffolk hamlet where dark secrets from their past are set to overshadow the whole of their lives. Fast forward to 1939 and London barmaid Birdie Farr’s story becomes inextricably linked with that of the Marsh sisters and as tendrils of the past start to intertwine, you know that life for Birdie will never be the same again.

The story unfolds almost like beautiful cinematography; sometimes in slow motion and at other times in fast freefall. Time and place are captured so perfectly that I could sense the languorous heat of the summer hay

field and felt the fast flow of the river as it took the Marsh secrets away.

Beautifully written, this story really gets into the heart of soul of relationships; the love and rivalry between sisters is captured in tortuous detail and the heartbreaking pain of unrequited love lingers in hidden corners.

Without doubt Spilt Milk is real joy to read and it is a story which will stay with me for a very long time.

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### **Elaine says**

This is a really good family saga, which is a bit meatier than some that you find, about two sisters Vivian and Nellie who at the start of the book live a solitary life in a cottage by the river. They keep themselves to themselves, they don't need anyone else, and are deemed to be a little odd by the locals. Everything changes however when one betrays the other and their lives are torn apart. It is the story of the very complex relationship between the sisters, as although the betrayal has damaged their relationship they are bound together by a secret they are each sworn to keep. The story starts in 1913 and spans some 50 to 60 years. We watch the girls throughout their lives, we see their loves and follow the birth and life of Nellie's daughter Birdie. As Birdie grows up she will also have her own secrets which she and the sisters are sworn to keep safe. In fact the whole book is stuffed with secrets and it asks the question whether or not it is better to keep a secret or to ease a conscience by sharing it with your loved one – will more damage be done by telling than not telling?

It is a story of family, of sisterhood, motherhood, love, loss, betrayal, regret and guilt. It is a read that I got thoroughly hooked on and really really enjoyed.

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### **Lita says**

This was a very random choice of reading material, so I didn't know what to expect. I think the promise of a historical novel was also misleading because the historical events are just the background of the main story. Essentially, this is a story about three generations of Marsh family women; it's about mothers, sisters, and daughters, their secrets, their life choices, their marriages, their losses, but above all their relationships with each other. The beginning was a bit clumsy, but it gets better about 100 pages in when we are introduced to the first big secret (no, I won't tell you what it is). The story twists and turns as the sisters, mothers, and daughters grow together and apart, and together again in a series of life-changing events. But what I found the most interesting about this book, is that we get to follow the changes in attitudes towards women (especially unmarried women having children) from the early 20th century until about 1960s when the story concludes. Overall, it was a decent book to read!

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