



Pearl

Mary Gordon

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On Christmas night of 1998, Maria Meyers learns that her twenty-year-old daughter, Pearl, has chained herself outside the American embassy in Dublin, where she intends to starve herself to death. Although Maria was once a student radical and still proudly lives by her beliefs, gentle, book-loving Pearl has never been interested in politics—nor in the Catholicism her mother rejected years before. What, then, is driving her to martyr herself?

Shaken by this mystery, Maria and her childhood friend (and Pearl's surrogate father), Joseph Kasperman, both rush to Pearl's side. As Mary Gordon tells the story of the bonds among them, she takes us deep into the labyrinths of maternal love, religious faith, and Ireland's tragic history. *Pearl* is a grand and emotionally daring novel of ideas, told with the tension of a thriller.

Pearl Details

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Author : Mary Gordon

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From Reader Review Pearl for online ebook

Ruth says

If I could give 3.5 stars, I would give that many to this book.

It was hard to get into. I was annoyed by the constant narrative interpolations--"Perhaps this uncertainty marks my failure as a chronicler. Nevertheless, this is the way I must tell the story of those times." ""We'll get on with the story. With one of the stories. For now we again take up the chronicle." Gordon interweaves three points of view, which is a complex & admirable undertaking, but surely there was a less talky way to do it.

I slogged through the first half just because others (such as Maxine Hong Kingston) had bestowed high praise on this novel. Then the second half started drawing me in. And toward the end it drew tears.

Gordon worries constantly over maternal love--its power, its ability to harm & blight as well as to bless & save. Not one of my personal obsessions. And generally she fusses too much over her characters' thoughts & motivations. But here they are struggling with questions I have struggled with--is living worth it? can I give anything of real value to others? what to do with all the pain of the world? All three of the protagonists-- Pearl, Maria, Joseph--are God-haunted, though they are not "believers," & their journeys lead them to genuine forgiveness & maturing. That is satisfying.

Carol Douglas says

I started this book once before and put it down because I found it implausible that an American girl would chain herself to a lamppost in Dublin and try to starve to death over the Troubles in Ireland. But I was wrong. Since I've read more novels by the profound Mary Gordon, I realized that I should read this one, and I found it to be just as deep as her others.

This is a book about different kinds of love and commitment. Most of all, it's a story about the love of a mother for her daughter. It's rare to have a fine novel about a mother and daughter who love each other.

Maria, an extrovert who rebelled against Catholicism and injustice in the '60s, has always had difficulty understanding Pearl, who was a quiet child. But Maria, incredulous that Pearl is rebelling, rushes from New York to Ireland to try to save her.

A close friend of the family, Joseph, a widower who is aesthetically inclined, rushes from Rome for the girl to whom he has been like a father. I thought the touch of calling these old friends with a close Platonic relationship Maria and Joseph was too obvious, as was Pearl's name. But those were the only obvious things about this book.

Pearl has become involved with Irish Republicans who want to liberate the Catholics of Northern Ireland. In fact, they belong to the Real IRA, the most violent faction. She wants to die because she feels she has betrayed a rather clueless boy. She wants her death to be her word witnessing for peace. She doesn't know enough about her mother's background to see how her political involvement echoes events in her mother's youth. In the context of the story, Pearl's action is believable.

Gordon uses her characters to illuminate the world. I was moved and provoked to thought. I did find the

device of a narrator, clearly the author, popping in occasionally, to be clumsy. The book could have done very well without that. But do not pass up this fine examination of politics, spirituality (a word Gordon says has become trite), and love.

Shannon says

I disliked this novel. The eponymous character, an American student studying in Ireland, has starved herself in an attempt to make a statement with her death. Our anonymous, omniscient, and very smug narrator guides us through the aftermath and the effects of Pearl's actions on her mother Maria, and Maria's childhood friend Joseph. The names are not coincidental; while this is technically an historical novel, much strenuous effort is spent considering Catholicism and the role of the Church in the lives of the devout and in the lives of those who have left the fold. Maria, Joseph, and Pearl are all unlikeable and, although subjected to their innermost thoughts, the reader never truly understands these characters or their motivations, or feels that a consistent character has emerged from the pages. This would have been passable, but the stilted dialogue and not-quite stream of consciousness analysis of every word thought or uttered by every character gets old quickly. Yes, powerful events can lead to self-analysis and epiphanies, but I don't think that anyone really follows the streams of thought put forward here. Suffice it to say I can't recommend this one.

Abbey says

I really wanted to like this book based on my interest in the subject matter (Northern Ireland, The Troubles), but was very disappointed. The novel begins as a mother learns her daughter, Pearl, who has been studying Irish at Trinity College, has gone on a hunger strike and chained herself to a flag pole at the American Embassy in Dublin. The book follows the characters in real time while also exploring the main characters' pasts in an attempt to make sense of the present.

I didn't feel connected to any of the characters, and I did not find Pearl's actions believable. Even when her reasons for doing so are made clear, it all feels "off" and I can't buy the story.

I also find the narrator, who appears often throughout the novel, annoying and just plain out of place. The narrator's voice interrupts the flow of the story, asking readers things like "Would you like me to tell you the story of...?" Bizarre.

The final straw for me occurred when the author describes the 1998 bombing in Omagh (an event which has a big impact on Pearl) and states that Omagh is in County Fermanagh. It is, in fact, in County Tyrone. There are only 6 counties in Northern Ireland, so she had a 1 in 6 chance of getting it right, but failed.

Orla Hegarty says

This book connected with me on multiple personal levels. I am a first generation Canadian - Irish. I raised my own daughter on my own and my 23 yo daughter is currently doing an internship in Cambodia.

The exploration of conflict and deep personal relationships developed through blood, longevity or brevity of strong ties as well as the overall meaning of life are artfully and deeply explored in this story.

Carol Storm says

Well, once again Mary Gordon is back, with another long, slow, soggy novel of Catholic guilt, cheap man-bashing feminism, and crude shanty Irish bigotry and self-pity. This time the plot is quite bizarre -- a spoiled Manhattan princess jets to Ireland and chains herself to the American embassy to illustrate her horror at man's inhumanity to man. Specifically she seems to be all choked up about some Irish boy who washed out of the IRA or something. Funny how the princess had to fly all the way to Ireland to find doomed, broken boys to feel sorry for. I hear the prisons in America are full of boys, most of them black or brown. But I suppose a "liberal" Irish Catholic like Mary Gordon doesn't see black boys in prison as having the same allure as Bobby Sands or Wolfe Tone or Patrick Sarsfield or Mary McCarthy or Studs Lonigan!

This book is not only melodramatic and overwrought, (yes, Mary, I said "overwrought") it is screamingly funny in all the wrong places. For example, Pearl's mother Maria is supposed to have been a hippy yippie student radical back in the Sixties. And there is a long (some would say endless) passage at the beginning describing the feverish uncertainty and the horror, the horror, of living through those days as an angry young college girl. (Was it really that much worse than combat in Vietnam, Mary?) And of course we all know hippies really "dig" that crazy rock and roll music, so Mary keeps quoting lyrics from -- from -- wait for it -- wait for it -- "Feeling Groovy (The 59th Street Bridge Song)" by Simon and Garfunkel.

Now call me crazy, but I don't think the really mean, hardcore, bomb throwing SDS type radicals on campus had much time for Simon and Garfunkel. I think Mary Gordon is laughably out of touch, and that it renders the entire hippy section unbelievable and unreadable. Some more believable hippy tunes for the gang:

"Wooden Ships" by Crosby Stills, Nash and Young
"Going Home" by Alvin Lee and Ten Years After
"Going Up The Country" by Canned Heat
"For What It's Worth" by the Buffalo Springfield
"Feel Like I'm Fixin To Die Rag" by Country Joe and The Fish.

Note well that I was born in 1963, and I have a better idea of good Sixties rock and roll than Mary Gordon. What was this woman really doing all through the Sixties? Sitting in a dark room, saying the rosary with the shades drawn? She sure writes like it!

This is more than just a matter of baby-boomer nostalgia. As a sweaty, desperate social climber from Queens, Mary puts an awful lot of emphasis on the value of "good taste." She claims that one way Pearl can tell that Bobby Sands is not a real martyr is that he writes lousy poetry. (Try that one for logic!) But it therefore follows, using this same logic, that hippies who listen to "Feeling Groovy" instead of "Wooden Ships" are fake hippies, not the real thing. It's a matter of taste, and the irony is that poor, mean, stuck up snob Mary Gordon really has no taste when it comes to rock and roll music. No taste at all.

By the way -- in 1863 there was a major race riot in New York City. A certain portion of the rioters were Irish-Americans. Most of the victims were black. If Mary Gordon is really interested in the "will to harm" maybe she could write about that.

Or maybe not.

Carolyn Heinze says

I think it's un-PC to not like Gordon, but don't really understand what all the fuss is about. My edition had blatant errors (she got the location of Bloody Sunday wrong), and really, I wanted everyone-not just Pearl - to die in the end; a much more productive endeavour than being so bloody self-involved. Only reason I read all of it was to see if this wish would be fulfilled. Gordon's supposedly trademark narrative style is interesting, but with this story it just made me dislike her, too. Should probably try another one of her books, but I keep thinking that life is just too short.

Wisewebwoman says

A complex book about mothers and daughters, religion, violence in Ireland and tremendous guilt.

A young woman chains herself to the American Embassy in Dublin and is at the end of her hunger strike when she is forcibly removed to hospital.

Meanwhile her mother and her uncle/stepfather are on their way to intervene in their own disparate ways. And thereby hangs the tale.

I was initially irritated by the device of the all-knowing narrator but within a short while realized this was the only way the novel could work.

If you like your books literary and reflective and feminist, this one will agree with you.

Jennifer says

"Pearl" was not a happy book, it is full of struggles...modern day struggles of religion, beliefs, politics, sacrifice, martyrdom, and family bonds, particularly mother-daughter relationships...but I loved the 3rd person omniscient narrative. I feel like the narrator was part of the story, perhaps the voice of god, or someone once involved in the story but had passed like Maria's father, Pearl's father, devorah, or the boy who pearl's death will "witness".

For me personally, the story highlighted my own struggles with being a mother and acceptance of my own mother. I can relate to wanting "the best" for your child, but your idea of what's best might not actually be what is best for your child. And when you are the child in question, feeling like your parent does try not understand you...This books helps me to realize it is helpful to take a step back and accept your family members for who they are.

And...I am once again embarrassed of my lack of awareness of the political unrest in Ireland during my own lifetime.

I loved this book, it was a more difficult read but extremely worth the time.

Leah says

My feelings about this book are hard to describe. I found it a difficult book to finish. I wanted to like it, but it took until at least 1/2 way through the book to even care about a single one of the main characters.

One of the reviews says that Gordon's writing is poetic. Perhaps it is too poetic for me. There were so many times when I found myself wanting to scream, "Just get to the point! What happened next?" Gordon lets us in on every little (and grand) thought that each character has. There were times when I really didn't care.

In the end, I was glad that I forced myself to finish the book. It made me think about topics I don't often explore. It did offer an opportunity to explore The Troubles of Ireland and how they might have affected people. It did make me think about the value of a human life, the influence we each have on one another without realizing, and just how nutty people can be. However, had I known what it was going to be like, I wouldn't have started it. For my tastes, more than a wee bit too much navel gazing.

I'm sure there are those people who are moved to tears by Pearl. I was just glad to have made it to the end.

Dennis Fischman says

[In the story, Pearl's Irish friends send a slow-minded young comrade t

Anita Dalton says

Many of some of the most acclaimed writers break every writing rule and god bless them because rules are just to get people started, a means of learning. So write ye merry unpublished and know that all those rules used to reject your manuscript will not matter once you reach the right audience, once you hit the right formula. For much can be forgiven if a book is good enough in the right places and Pearl was just good enough when Pearl was its actual focus. But Pearl was not focused on enough, sadly, for me to like this book very much. (A book can also be forgiven if the intelligentsia has decided that writer is a worthy writer no matter what but best not to get too bogged down in details like that.) Read the rest of the review here: <http://ireadoddbooks.com/ire/pearl-by...>

Ruby says

(Novel)—I loved this book—it just grabbed me and didn't let me go for some time. It is the story of a sensitive young woman named Pearl who commences a hunger strike and chains herself to the flag pole in front of the American embassy in Dublin as a dramatic "act of witness" to her friend's senseless death. The embassy summons her mother, who is joined by their dearest family friend, to Dublin to help Pearl deal with her emotional crisis. The story is told by an unnamed narrator whose voice is intense and demanding. The first time through, I felt like the narrator was almost yelling at me. The second time, it felt more like the narrator and I were two friends who were having an intense discussion about a family we both knew, but one which the narrator knew better than I did and cared about deeply. I finally decided that the narrator is really

the author, telling us her perspective of the characters. The complexity of the characters' relationships feels true to life, particularly the intense dynamic between Pearl and her mother. The foremost reason I love this story is the ending—it is a beautiful ode to the healing power of forgiveness, a power I count on constantly. However, I must warn my friends that my book club didn't like this novel anywhere near as much as I did. They particularly hated the technique of the unknown narrator--they felt it showed laziness on the part of the author.

Mom says

If you're an Irish Catholic woman of a certain age, Mary Gordon will be your favorite author. The culture she describes is so familiar to me. This one concerns her young daughter, so you younger girls should enjoy this one. More often her tales are about maiden aunts, parish priests, etc. They ring true to me. Don't let that scare you off. She has other subjects too. Interesting aside....she teaches in the English department at Barnard College, NYC with Jennie Kassanoff, Kathleen's Harvard roommate. When we visited Jennie last summer, she talked about how great she was as an associate.

Christopher Russell says

There are stories that help you for personal reasons. This is one of them. It contains the following sentence which I keep with me at all times: "Blame is solid platform we can stand on, a still place in the whirlwind. It tells us: this happened because of that; it could have been avoided. Whereas the unbearable possibility is that nothing can be avoided, the wind bloweth where it listeth and becomes a whirlwind that takes everything up: indiscriminate, violent, incapable of turning or slowing down because of any human word."
