



## **Black Lake**

*Johanna Lane*

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## **Black Lake** Johanna Lane

A debut novel about a family losing grip of its legacy: a majestic house on the cliffs of Ireland.

The Campbells have lived happily at Dulough--an idyllic, rambling estate isolated on the Irish seaside--for generations. But upkeep has drained the family coffers, and so John Campbell must be bold: to keep Dulough, he will open its doors to the public as a museum. He and his wife, daughter, and son will move from the luxury of the big house to a dank, small caretaker's cottage. The upheaval strains the already tenuous threads that bind the family and, when a tragic accident befalls them, long-simmering resentments and unanswered yearnings surface.

As each character is given a turn to speak, their voices tell a complicated, fascinating story about what happens when the upstairs becomes the downstairs, and what legacy is left when family secrets are revealed.

## **Black Lake Details**

Date : Published May 20th 2014 by Little, Brown and Company (first published May 1st 2014)

ISBN : 9780316228831

Author : Johanna Lane

Format : Hardcover 224 pages

Genre : Fiction, Cultural, Ireland, Literary Fiction, European Literature, Irish Literature, Adult Fiction

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## From Reader Review Black Lake for online ebook

### Garnet Walters says

I liked this book even if it didn't live up to the promise of the first few pages. It was low-key so I never quite felt the sadness that I should have. I also would have liked to have heard some of the story from the perspective of the daughter, she felt like a missing voice. Sad and bleak but not moving enough.

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### Kirsty says

Loving stories about old houses, and the families which live in them, *Black Lake* by Johanna Lane piqued my interest as soon as I spotted its blurb on my local library catalogue. Despite Ireland being a country that I love to visit, I have found of late that barely any Irish literature has made its way onto my yearly reading lists. Of course, I wanted to rectify this, and again, *Black Lake* ticked that box.

The *Irish Examiner* calls the novel: 'A complex and beautifully structured story', and the *Irish Independent* writes: 'Lane's prose is graceful, textured and her elegant style reflects the Campbells' glazed retrograde world.' John Burnside also praises the novel highly, deeming it: 'A beautiful portrait of a family faced with unbearable loss.'

The Campbell family have lived on a sprawling estate named Dulough, the Irish for 'black lake', on the Irish coast of Donegal, for generations. Like many families whose homes have been handed down, the Campbells have run out of money, and have little choice but to let the government take over the care and upkeep of the house, making it into a 'tourist attraction' in the process. The family have to therefore move into a 'small, damp caretaker's cottage' on the estate. The 'upheaval of this move strains the already tenuous threads that bind the family, and when a tragic accident befalls them, long-simmering resentments and unanswered yearnings are forced to the surface.'

*Black Lake* opens in autumn, when the family have opened up the house to the public, and moved into their new cottage. The tragic accident described in the blurb has taken place at this point, and the family's mother struggles to cope; she ends up taking her daughter, twelve-year-old Kate, from her boarding school, and locking her into the abandoned ballroom with her for long stretches of time. At first unnamed, and without voices of their own, the initial chapter gives an insightful glimpse into the Campbell's family dynamic. As winter approaches, Lane describes the way in which, in her beautifully sculpted prologue: 'The girl remembers when the snow began, flakes settling into the windowpane, muffling everything outside, even the wind. The tourists were gone by then and it was just the sound of her father and the housekeeper moving about below, shutting up the house, covering the beds in dust sheets, rolling up the rugs, stowing away quilts no one ever slept under. The girl missed the sound of the visitors, the guide herding them from room to room, story to story. Surely, when the house was finally locked for winter, the father would say that they had to leave, too?'

Lane takes notice of incredibly small details; of the removal men, she writes, from the perspective of the Campbell's eight-year-old son: 'The men were older than his father; they had deep lines in their faces, like valleys, Philip thought. He imagined tiny glaciers settling into their skin, the ice cracking and expanding.'

Whilst *Black Lake* is well structured, with different chapters following each of the characters in turn, there is a sense of detachment to the whole, which is exacerbated by the loose third person narrative voice. I do not feel that *Black Lake* reached its potential; it was rather run-of-the-mill for a familial saga, and the writing

was nowhere near as poetic as I expected after reading its prologue. Unfortunately, *Black Lake* quite failed to hold my interest; it is not a bad book, but simply did not stand out enough for my personal liking.

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### **Deb (Readerbuzz) Nance says**

Lane is a masterful dancer. She leads off with a chapter in which it is clear that things in the lives of the Campbell family are a mess. Then she leads us back, to slowly explore how things fell apart, giving each character time to step to the front of the stage and tell her tale. It is a beautiful dance of a book.

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### **Diane S ? says**

3.5 The castle of Dulongh, located on the sea in Northern Ireland in Donegal is the setting for this novel. The Campbell have lived here for generations, after the house was built by a not very nice ancestor. It is told in four voices, the voices of the family now, living there. John Campbell can no longer keep up with the cost of running the estate and though he maintains ownership, the family moves to a cottage on the property and he opens the castle to visitors.

When one's whole identity is associated with a house, a way of life, with a whole history pressing down upon them, what then happens when they loose this? That is the crux of the story. It is a quiet story, simply and elegantly told, very atmospheric and descriptive. The grounds and the house, are the main characters. The Campbell just the latest passing through. There is a tragedy and many, many adjustments to be made.

"Its not difficult to think of the house as a consciousness, a repository of events, the breath whistling through the walls, our lives playing over and over again in its memory. This is as close as I get to ghosts.

Although Marianne, the mother, married into the family she too feels the weight of the house as the above quote exemplifies. I am sure many in the modern day are going through these same types of changes, selling of lands, opening houses the public, so I found the story of this family very current. I did find the ending a bit anti-climatic but this is how many times exactly how it goes.

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### **Graham says**

A poignant tale that leaves the reader with heartache. An intimate journey through the lives of an Irish family who are losing the family heritage of a castle which had been in the family for generations. Told through the eyes of the husband, wife and their two children, the story is compelling and heart rending. The "voices" of each character lend it an aura of reality which captivates the reader. Well worth the quick read.

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## Hugh says

I enjoyed this quiet atmospheric debut novel about a Donegal house and the family that live there. Dulough (Gaelic for Black Lake) is a house with delusions of grandeur built by an unscrupulous Scotsman (Philip the First) in the 19th century, in the shadow of Donegal's highest mountains Errigal and Dooish by a black lake near the sea.

Most of the book takes place in the recent past. The current owner of the house is John, who is unable to maintain the house and is forced to accept a deal with the government in which he and his family have to move into a smaller cottage while the house is made into a tourist attraction.

The first chapter is quite dramatic - John's daughter Kate has been taken out of school by her mother Marianne, who locks them into the house's grand but never used ballroom using the only key, and holds her captive there for several weeks. In this chapter we also learn a little of the history - we hear about Kate's dead brother Philip and that there are tourists below.

The next section alternates between the perspectives of John and Philip - John is preoccupied by the process of opening the house and Philip is trying to escape the upheaval by building a den on the estate's island, which is only accessible at low tide and contains a ruined church and the family graveyard. John also writes a family history for the tourists that includes a few embellishments.

The third part is an extended chapter from Marianne's perspective - we learn about her marriage, her difficulties finding a role on the estate and her problems communicating with John. She discovers the diaries of Philip the First's widow, which are related in some detail and contradict John's version of the story

The final part is a short postscript and partial resolution.

The story is very strong on atmosphere - Lane admits that Dulough is loosely based on a real place (Glenveagh) and some of the family story corresponds to its history, notably the eviction of tenants to make space for the house and improve its view. It is also very strong on family dynamics - both John and Marianne are well-meaning but they are unable to communicate, and Philip's perspective is well realised too. Quite an old-fashioned book but an enjoyable read.

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## Meg says

Johanna Lane's *Black Lake* is moody, atmospheric, compelling and strange. At just over 200 pages, it's a slim novel that still packs a wallop — mostly because of Lane's interesting storytelling. We know right away a tragedy has befallen the family, and it's easy to determine what's transpired. It's another 100 pages until the truth is finally revealed, however, and when it is? It's almost like an afterthought. Stated as fact.

That actually worked for me. Really well.

The core of this story is a foursome struggling to find their place in the world — a “room of their own,” if you will. Before we're given an actual timeline and history of the estate, I believed *Black Lake* took place in the early twentieth century. Once I realized John and Marianne's birth dates and college years would put them closer to modern day, I was actually . . . shocked. There's just something so stately and "Downton Abbey" about living in an imposing mansion; I couldn't wrap my mind around the fact that this place could exist in the here and now.

But it could. I felt John's sense of stewardship over the property acutely; it was obvious that history and tradition mean a great deal to him, and to let Dulough be sold would represent a failure. Through diary entries and the revisionist history John himself pens, we're introduced to some of Dulough's past owners and visitors.

The story is short, and not much "happens." I assumed the book would revolve around a single incident, and . . . well, it both did and did not. Marianne and John are complex characters, but we're not privy to most of their thoughts. The narration shifts several times throughout the story, from husband to son back to husband and, finally, to wife. I enjoyed getting Marianne's perspective the most, especially because she was the most unmoored.

Though I never fell in love with these characters, exactly, I did feel as though I came to truly understand them. The Campbells are captains of a crumbling ship, and the atmosphere Lane creates is thick and palpable. It wasn't hard to imagine myself standing on a cliff, bracing sea air whipping my hair from my face; I could easily run my fingers across the shoddy cottages or sturdy furniture moved from Dulough, or see the green-capped mountains in the distance.

*Black Lake* is well-written, interesting, unusual. Not like anything I've read recently, and definitely one that gave me pause. Fans of literary fiction, character studies and family dynamics will be intrigued by this one. Though rather sad, it's a powerful book that would hardly qualify as a beach read . . . but is likely to be one on the lips of readers this summer.

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## **Anne says**

Black Lake by Johanna Lane was published on 1 May 2014 by Tinder Press and is the author's first novel.

The story is set on the fictional estate of Dulough, situated deep in the desolate countryside of County Donegal in Ireland. Dulough was built in the mid 1800s by an incomer; Scottish landowner Philip Campbell. Campbell built the house and gardens in this spot after searching for the ideal place, he cruelly evicted the tenant farmers who had previously toiled on the land, not caring where they would live once he had turned them out of their homes.

Campbell's ancestor John Campbell, his Dublin born wife Marianne and their two children Kate and Philip continue to live on the estate, but times are hard. The Celtic Tiger has bitten and John has had to sacrifice many things in order to stay on the estate. After doing a deal with the Irish government, the family now reside in a small cottage on the estate whilst tourists and visitors wander around the big house as tour guides give them a potted history of the place.

Johanna Lane tells the story using the voices of the family which enables the reader to learn the facts, but through different eyes which adds a depth to the story that may have been missing from a single narrator.

The Campbells have to deal with tremendous loss throughout this novel. They lose their home, they see their belongings packed away and replaced by things that the Government officers consider to be more fitting to the surroundings. Signs appear in their garden informing them of what each plant is called - the plants that they planted, and grew and nurtured - and notices telling them to keep off the grass - their grass. The biggest and most tragic loss has the most impact on the family, and although it is obvious from the start of the novel what has happened, it is not until almost half way through that the reader learns of the circumstances.

I was transfixed by this beautifully told story of loss and family. Each of the characters are intricate and

detailed in their creation; the contrast between the well-mannered and dignified John and his emotional and sometimes flamboyant wife who love each other, yet don't seem to know each other is expertly done. Young Philip's sense of loss is palpable, he struggles to come to terms with this new style of living and creates his own hideaway, somewhere of his very own, and it is this which ultimately becomes the downfall of the family.

Johanna Lane incorporates the history of the area into the story with the introduction of the diaries kept by the first Philip Campbell's wife. From these, Marianne discovers the true horror of the evictions, and how the local people suffered first through the Famine and then by being banished from their homes. It is this truth that contributes to Marianne's eventual breakdown, and the knowledge that John hid these facts from her for so many years, in fact he lied about the history of Dulough.

For me though, the true star of Black Lake is the wild desolate beauty that is Donegal itself. Johanna Lane has captured the dramatic landscape, the windswept bogs, the majesty of the mountains and the incredible aura of this area perfectly. My mother is from Donegal, her childhood home is not far away from Glenveagh National Park - the place that Dulough is based on. I spent every summer in Donegal, exploring the countryside, dodging the rain, traipsing through the springy heather, and be assured that Johanna Lane has expertly painted this wondrous and most beautiful of places, just reading it brought back memories so vivid that I could almost smell the turf burning.

A beautiful story, so wonderfully created that deals with unbearable losses and burdens, with intricate family dynamics in a setting that perfectly hosts the story.

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## **Margaret Madden says**

Ireland. A home. A childhood lost.

The Campbell family have lived in Dunlough for generations. A large stately home and estate in Co. Donegal, it is steeped with history and memories. When John Campbell realises that he can no longer afford to maintain such a large house, he decides to open the house to the public and move into a small cottage on the property. This is a difficult move for his wife, Marianne and his two children Kate and Philip. Watching the moving men transfer their antique furniture and all their possessions affects young Philip the most. He can't understand why the Government have taken over his house and he watches, unseen, as groups of tourists traipse through his former home.

Marianne seems resigned and just goes with the flow. But when a tragic accident occurs on the grounds of Dunlough, everything changes. Here begins a story of loss, heartache and grief and how each member of a family deals with the effects in their own different way.....

This is Irish author Johanna Lane's first novel, and what a way to start!

The story is split into four different narratives. One for each family member. For me, the most interesting one was young Philip's view of the changing environment and atmosphere. The characters are quite serious and this makes it hard for the reader to fully connect with them. However, a lot of these landed gentry types are insular and distant, in their own way, so the writing depicts this very accurately. The real star of this novel, for me, is the amazing way descriptive passages are used. As the house, and its demesne, are the core of the story, Johanna Lane uses her writing skills to bring the reader into the world of Dunlough. The creaking floorboards, the dusty mirrors, long corridors and imposing tapestries hung on the walls. The workings of the kitchen and gardens, as well as the visuals of an unused ballroom, make for a feeling of the large house and its dark rooms full of large, well used furniture and few modern conveniences. The chill of the water in the rarely used outdoor swimming pool, and the shifting tides of the water on the estate, all add to the feeling of

the unusual habitat of the Campbell family. The sense of family entitlement is still with John but Marianne did not come from this way of life, so is more upset about losing her gardens. The descriptions are the pulse of the novel, pushing life through the pages, chapter by chapter, until the whole package comes to life. The book is a clever piece of contemporary fiction, which should place Johanna Lane on bookshelves beside Sebastian Barry and Maggie O'Farrell.

Highly Recommended.

Black Lake is published by Tinder Press on the 1st May 2014

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### **Jackie Law says**

Black Lake, by Johanna Lane, is a story of a place and the effect it has on a family. Set in the fictional Dulough estate in remote Donegal, which the author has loosely based on Glenveagh, its beauty and isolation have been ingrained in the psyches of each member of the resident family. At the time of the tale they are being forced to move from the big house to a small cottage in the grounds for financial reasons. The estate is to be opened up for tourists. The effect that this change has on each of them is profound.

The Campbells have lived in the rambling and now crumbling big house for generations. John brings his new wife, Marianne, to live there after they graduate from Trinity College, Dublin. She had lived in this city all her life. She struggles to cope with the changes brought about by marriage and the move, with the history, remoteness and grandness of her new home; it takes some time for her to settle. John does not tell her that money is tight.

With the arrival of their two children Marianne determines to fit in to the place which is starting to work its magic on her. She finds solace in the gardens. Where once she was a prospective teacher she now uses her skills to home school the children. They are unaware that their unusual but settled lives are about to be sundered.

The isolation of the place is mirrored in the isolation of the family members. The tale is told from each of their perspectives bringing home how little even those close to us know of each other's thoughts. Assumptions are made about why individuals act as they do. The children are young but still think and feel in ways their parents do not comprehend. An apparently innocuous incident leads to tragedy and this mutual lack of understanding is laid bare.

Loss, grief, guilt and the effect of imposed decisions are powerfully explored. Marianne resents that John has not shared his knowledge of Dulough and his concerns for its future with her. His motives may have been sound but were never explained. Neither parent appreciates the impact the changes in their lives have wrought on their children.

These universal themes are an undercurrent to a fascinating story that weaves one family's history into a contemporary tale of the complexity of relationships. It is gently told but offers much food for thought. At just over two hundred pages the book did not take long to read. The feelings evoked will linger for much longer.

My copy of this book was provided gratis by the publisher, Tinder Press.

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## **Teresa says**

Dulough is the mysterious house at the heart of this debut novel from Johanna Lane. The house is fictional but the setting reminds me of one of my favourite locations in Donegal, Dunlewey Lough at the foot of Mt Errigal overlooking the Poisoned Glen. In Black Lake this already wild landscape is battered by the winds coming off the Atlantic. There is a savage aspect to the environment, a primitive, ancient ambience dating back to the Ice Age.

The Campbells are relative newcomers, the first of their tribe arriving in the early 1850s. Scottish landowner, Philip Campbell who built the house/castle, Dulough, in 1854, cruelly evicting any tenant families who stood in his way. Now, the roles are reversed as John Campbell, the current owner, can't afford the upkeep of the house and enters into a contract with the Irish government whereby the house is shown to visitors as a tourist attraction and he and his family relocate to a cottage in the grounds.

There is a simmering resentment between the Campbells (landed gentry) and the locals (peasants...not really!). John's young son, Philip, feels particularly affected by the downsizing and is loathe to abide by the new rules and regulations. The mother, Dublin born Marianne, seems out of place in this desolate setting no matter what size of house she's in. The daughter Kate tends to go with the flow and tries to keep the peace. You just know that something bad is lurking round the corner.

This is a solid debut from a talented writer. It's a gentle, slow-moving story dominated by the austere, sombre landscape. You wonder how anyone can thrive in such harsh surroundings at the mercy of the elements...and the recession. I found echoes of William Trevor's *The Story of Lucy Gault* in this ethereal tale of displaced gentry.

Looking forward to seeing how Johanna Lane's writing evolves in the future.

My thanks to Little Brown and Company for providing a review copy.

Black Lake is published by Little Brown and Company on 20th May 2014.

- See more at: <http://www.lovelytreez.com/#sthash.z2...>

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## **Nicole says**

I'm sorry to say this is one of those books I enjoyed reading about, more than actually reading. The writing wasn't terrible, I did enjoy the atmosphere and the history of the island. The storyline felt a bit confused and was terribly anti-climactic.

\*\*I received a free copy of this book through a GoodReads First Reads giveaway.

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## **Melissa says**

The Campbell family has run out of money and have nearly lost the family estate. In an effort to maintain ownership they agree with the government to turn the house into a tourist attraction, while the family

downsizes to the cottage by the lake.

The novel outlines the devastating effects of the move, a traumatic chain reaction, resulting in unbearable loss. Told from the perspective of each of the four family members effected, a wonderfully written account of a man bent on keeping tradition at the expense of his wife's sanity, and an unforeseen sacrifice he didn't account for.

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### **Caitlin says**

I received this book from Goodreads' *First Reads* program.

This was well-written, and fairly entertaining. And yet it never really felt like it had all that much substance, to me. The problem, really, is that nothing really *happens*. You know what the problem is right from the beginning, exactly what all the conflicts are going to be. There is nothing surprising at all in the book, not even really anything personal-secret-wise or in character quirks we learn through changed views. There's just... not really anything.

The book *is* well-written, though, and there were some interesting shifts with the view point. Tense changed, and one chapter is in first-person, depending on which character narrates. But at the same time? Saying it gives every character a chance to speak isn't very accurate. Kate gets all of one chapter, at the beginning. We really learn nothing unique from her perspective, don't even get much of a sense for how she feels about anything that has happened. Marianne offers a bit more in her chapter-- but again, that's singular. The rest are Philip and John, and while there are some slight shifts in things from them, for the most part they do not even touch the same events to give us more than one side of.

It was a good read, yes, but it was really nothing special. If it had been any longer I'm not sure I would be able to recommend it.

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### **Anna Sobotka says**

3.5 stars

I sad family drama that features the Irish landscape nearly as much as the characters. I enjoyed listening to it, but it didn't dig into me deep enough for me to give it a higher rating. I wish there had been more from the mother and daughter's perspective, because they had the least space as narrators, but their perspectives, I think, are just as necessary as the father and son's.

I did enjoy the quiet nature of the book; there isn't much action, and some of the most important action receives the least detail, which I enjoyed. It is much more about the characters (the parents especially) and how family secrets and isolation drive people away from those they love.

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