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Caro, gallant and adventurous, is one of two Australian sisters who have come to post-war England to seek their fortunes. Courted long and hopelessly by young scientist, Ted Tice, she is to find that love brings passion, sorrow, betrayal and finally hope. The milder Grace seeks fulfilment in an apparently happy marriage. But as the decades pass and the characters weave in and out of each other's lives, love, death and two slow-burning secrets wait in ambush for them.

The Transit of Venus Details

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From Reader Review The Transit of Venus for online ebook

•Karen• says

I've dithered for weeks over my rating for this one and finally settled on the five star 'it was amazing' category because yes, it was amazing. But I'm not sure if I actually liked it. It has to be said that I read it under pressure, which is criminal for a Shirley Hazzard. Fine for a plot-led thriller where the only point of interest is how it ends, but a novel by Ms Hazzard should be enjoyed at leisure. You should luxuriate in that exquisitely fine language, linger over the cadence of the sentences and glory in the subtlety of relationships. Unfortunately, none of that was possible for me: it was the choice for my f2f book group, one lady mailed me to say she hadn't been able to get hold of a copy and could she borrow mine? And I hadn't even started it at that point. So I had to get through it in five days. And at the back of my mind I was thinking that my f2f ladies were going to crucify me for suggesting such a book: none of them are native speakers - how on earth would they cope? For it must be said that Ms Hazzard makes you work. Michaela is my lifeline in English class as she's a walking dictionary. When I come up with words like ostensible or plethora yet cannot come up with the German equivalent, Michaela can. And yet even she protested that she had to read this with the novel in one hand and a dictionary in the other. Oh vey!!

Art is the transfiguration of the commonplace, according to Arthur Danto. I had to keep reminding myself of that as I laboured through, thinking that this was too much commonplace, too much transfiguration.

Sometimes it felt as though the language was more of a barrier than a medium, and this impression was reinforced by the feeling that every single character in the book had done a rigorous course in discourse analysis, as each and every one of them had an uncanny ability to instantly recognize the subtext beneath each other's comments. There were, admittedly some heart stopping, breathtaking moments, but there was also a lot in the middle where I wondered quite why I should still be interested in a couple of sisters from Sydney. But then, but then. There are several slow ticking bombs that Ms Hazzard surreptitiously plants during the course of the novel. And at the end these explode in a dazzling, heartrending conflagration that throws light backwards on what you have read. Ms Hazzard redeems herself: she writes with authority, while simultaneously allowing you to see how she does it. It ends by being a book about the reading process, a book that reveals to us how we hold those details in mind, ready to combine them together as required and directed by a masterly author. Yes, five stars. Deeply satisfying.

Bronson says

I was caught by surprise by this book. I heard about it from an interview with Ann Patchet I'd read online. I think it is one of the finest written novels I have ever read. The night I finished the book, I opened it back up and started reading it again. The second time through I was as engrossed - actually more than the first. It was tough to get started, she doesn't build the characters traditionally. You find out odd things about them that don't seem important until much later in the book. I think if you can make it through the first 100 pages you will be hooked and when you finish it you find that you have read one of the finest pieces of literature available.

Abby says

Read this book – and you *should* read this book – carefully. You should read it carefully because it is packed with passages that you will want to read more than once simply to savor their beauty (“...the sky, on a

shadeless day, suddenly lowered itself like an awning.”) and passages that capture a character in a phrase (“*Dora sat on a corner of the spread rug, longing to be assigned some task so she could resent it.*”). There are also passages you will read more than once to be sure you understand them. But it is a safe bet that even the most attentive reader, at some point in the last 20-30 pages, will skim back through the book to find the breadcrumbs Shirley Hazzard left for us and to confirm that what you think happened did indeed happen.

A transit of Venus is a rare but predictable astronomical event that occurs when the planet Venus passes directly between the Earth and the Sun. The Transit of Venus is a love story. More precisely, it is a novel about love – about the arc of its passage and its subjection to laws as inexorable as those that govern the movement of the planets. It unfolds over thirty years, following Grace and Caroline Bell, two young Australian sisters orphaned as children, who make their way to England after World War II. Both are beautiful – fair and timid Grace who embarks on a conventional marriage, dark and forthright Caro who is loved, betrayed, and the subject of a long unrequited love. (“...*the tragedy is not that love doesn't last. The tragedy is the love that lasts.*”)

This is an elegantly written and brilliantly constructed novel, often deservedly counted among the best of the 20th century. Its leisurely pace and genteel ambiance belie the depth of Shirley Hazzard's ideas about innocence, power, corruption, injustice, and gender, and the revelation of its secrets, all intricately foreshadowed, leaves us dazzled and shaken. When you've read the last page and have persuaded yourself that you know what happened, don't be surprised if you find yourself reading the ending again to see if it might come out differently. This is a book that demands – and is worthy of – your full attention. More than once.

Jacob Russell says

Some years ago I read a New Yorker story by Hazzard, "In These Islands." I read it a second time, then and there. Turned back to the first page and read it again. Then a third time.

There are expansive writers--like the late DFW, Whitman, Henry Miller--and there those who fuse language in a crucible: Dickinson, Laura Riding, George Oppen: poets more often than novelists... though McCarthy has gone from one to the other, from the expansive Sutree to the compression of The Road.

No one can capture a character in passing a phrase like Hazzard... what reminds me of Dickinson is not her poems, but her letters. My parents, she writes to Higgenson, "address every morning an eclipse they call 'our father.'

This is the novel as a kind of poetry. Visionary... compressed into a kind of breathless irony.

Violet wells says

Shirley Hazard is without question a first rate wordsmith; she can write beautiful sentences and string them together into an exhilarating music. She does it consistently. But she seems incapable of writing a truly first rate novel. The Great Fire nearly made it but failed ultimately for me because of Hazard's obfuscating and belittling worship of romantic love. The central relationship in that novel was a fairy story. Hazard is at her best when her characters are figuratively standing beneath a window in the pouring rain. But it's a sensibility that belongs to a bygone era. And as such can often come across as something sentimental we still feel affection for but have grown out of. It's as if she needs to do what Fitzgerald did in Gatsby – stand outside his own romanticism, project it elsewhere and see it for what it really is, a sustained act of heightened imagination that ultimately is an illusion.

The Transit of Venus is a novel about affairs of the heart. Many of them illicit; or at least, outside matrimony. Characters are only really alive when the heart is engaged and pumping. It reminded me a lot of Rosamond Lehman's the Echoing Grove – the theme of two sisters, one rebellious, the other more willing to compromise to the dictates of domesticity and the romantic lyrical nature of the novel's sensibility. Lehman though did a much better job of examining the backstage realms of domesticity without belittling it as Hazard often does. Hazard isn't interested in her domesticated female until she's contemplating adultery. She isn't really interested in anyone unless they're about to step out into a storm.

Also, stylistically this novel is a nightmare for the first fifty pages. So tangled and cryptic are her sentences that you have to read each one twice – which would be fine if it was worth the effort, but too often it isn't. It reminded me of both late Henry James and Elizabeth Bowen –the trick-or-treat facemasking of the opaque overly wrought prose. The first fifty or so pages are virtually unreadable. Until, it appears, Hazard begins to enjoy her characters and her story and relaxes. As I said there's much to admire in the writing itself but as a novel there was too much that jarred for me – her attempts to politicise the text for example when one of her triumphs is to transcend era: her novels always have an encompassing timeless drift - to truly take it to my heart.

Teresa says

4 and 1/2 stars, though it is **amazing**.

An ambitious novel, well-conceived and well-executed. I loved the well-placed foreshadowing (especially one in the beginning that haunts the rest of the book) and the jolts that occur with the fruition of what you might've thought at first were mere throwaway lines.

There were times I felt disengaged, perhaps from the cleverness that at times took me out of the story -- my fault, more than a fault of the work, I'm sure.

If I ever reread this, I think I'd be even more in awe at how the book is constructed, as I'm sure I missed a lot along the way.

Elaine says

["For the last time, Caroline Vail lay in a bed alo

Anne Sanow says

Brilliant, gorgeous, searing--one of my new (and rare) gold standards.

As others have noted, this is worth sticking with (I actually tried the first few chapters last year and wasn't caught by them, but had no trouble this time). And there comes a point in the latter third that's a bit of a slog. The reward of Hazzard's prose throughout, though, is worth it; her descriptions and observations are amazing, so smart and perfectly, often devastatingly, wrought. It's no mean feat to be able to pull readers into the minds and under the skin of characters the way she does here, while also managing a truly unique omniscient narrative voice--to those who hold that only macho males can pull off the knowing, confident, god-like authorial point of view, I say, pah!--Hazzard can swing with the best of them.

And yes, there is that ending, not to be spoiled here. Masterfully done--masterfully *manipulated*, in the way only great writers can do, so that it seems inevitable. In this case it's also devastating (this is an epic love story, after all). How often do you read one of those that's as smart as this?

4triplezed says

My second Shirley Harzzard novel in a short space of time. The previous, *People in Glass Houses*, I thoroughly enjoyed so was looking forward to reading *The Transit Of Venus*. To say I have been surprised by this book would be an understatement. Both books are chalk and cheese in delivery and concept.

Be that as it may *The Transit Of Venus* is one of the most compelling novels I have read for reasons I am not going to be able to articulate particularly well. The plot itself seems fairly shallow but then the plot may itself not be the point. The title is very good as the book is about Love but not in the cloying way I should imagine a Mills and Boons Novel being. This book is about its transient nature and the morality of it as a weapon. The cast of characters are very middle class and speak to each other in a manner that leaves a lot unsaid and would be very alien to the vast majority of working people.

On reaching the end of the book I realised that I had missed subtleties that the more astute than me would have picked up on the way through. With that I can see me rereading this in the future. It remind's me of that record you buy that on the first listen you know you need to immerse yourself more and once immersed grows to stand the test of time.

Alison says

I could appreciate the intelligent writing in this novel - certainly Ms. Hazzard is quite cerebral. And there were some great points of memorable language and insight. But for me, this is not the brilliant novel that others seem to think it is. One of my problems was the characters: either they were a little obtuse as to make me wonder at their actions based on the way the author had drawn them, or they were so obvious they got boring - the self-satisfied, philandering husband, the long-suffering wife, the lovelorn 'other guy' who pines and pines and pines ad nauseam. The pace of the story was uneven - started slow, picked up, but then seemed to grind to a long slog to the 'big bang' ending. And when I'm so distracted by a story's mechanics that I find myself thinking, "Add the next character, already!" (and then she does) I know it's not working for me. The ending: I don't want to say too much about what others found to be a highly satisfying 'jolt' of a late back story. And I realize she wrote this in a time when her viewpoint would have been widely shared and accepted. But was no one else bothered by this stereotype? I detected a note of prejudice that just really stuck with me/ bugged me. Thus the 1 star. Cannot recommend - but I'm clearly in the minority here.

Steve says

I was torn as to how to rate Shirley Hazzard's *Transit of Venus*. Hazzard is an enormously gifted writer. But the novel itself had me asking the question, When does a great writer become a great artist? It's a fine distinction that one doesn't come across often, since such things unfold on their own. The discerning reader simply knows when they've read a great piece of literature. But Hazzard's own ambition here had me asking that very question. In other words, one gets the sense that Hazzard, in *The Transit of Venus*, set out to write a great novel. There are certainly numerous stretches of great writing - but as a novel, I felt its Jamesian (last phase) excesses turned the reading into something of an ordeal by book's end. In fairness, I think I prefer Hazzard to James in that she writes of Love in a more believable way - and I'm talking of Love as in Shakespeare or Donne. (And stuff actually happens!) People certainly don't talk like Hazzard has them talk - but any lover of language has to wish that they did. Hazzard writes prose that is better than most contemporary poetry. And boy, can she frame a scene, like placing actors on a stage - and with good lines! But such staginess is risky, and in long novel it can wear. Some of Hazzard's side stories, such as Christian's affair, or his wife Grace's near-affair, could have been trimmed. Also, the "political" insertions sounded just like that - insertions, or recollections of old anti-American table talk with Hazzard's good friend Graham Greene. Then there's the sense of time - it comes and goes. Yes, I get a sense of the fifties, but not so much the sixties or later. Such historical convulsions should of made more of a reading impression. In all it makes for an uneven reading effort - which is odd, given the precision of Hazzard's writing and plotting. But the good news is that Hazzard has written a great novel - it's called *The Great Fire*.

Michael Livingston says

An incredible book - Charlotte Wood's discussion says it all more eloquently than I ever could:
<https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/trans...>

Mary says

I don't even know how I felt about this book. Even as I type this I have no idea how I'm going to rate it. At times I thought the writing was brilliant and amazing, and other times I thought it was pretentious and overwrought. No doubt about it, Hazzard's writing is downright beautiful. She's a writer's writer; cerebral, structured, and deliberate. I got the sense the entire time that she was standing over her perfect sentences and elaborate prose with a self-satisfied smirk. Yes, ok, you can write, Shirley, you can write the pants off most authors I've read recently, and that would be great if I read only for the words, but I don't. The thing is, the characters spoke so perfectly and elegantly and with such control, it was as if the whole thing were rehearsed. Everything sounded fancy and lovely and wise, but, I just don't know...

The main protagonist, Caro, for example, was as dry as day old toast. Her sadness was too subdued for me to connect with. Her married sister Grace appears briefly and sporadically, which was a shame because her marital angst wasn't fully realized. There was so much unhappiness, infidelity, longing, brooding; it's a mystery how this book managed to make me feel almost nothing. The characters were far, far away and icy cold, and their sorrows felt remote.

This sounds like I didn't like the book: I did! It's great, thought-provoking literature, and I was mostly enthralled. I just can't shake the feeling that there was an emotional core missing here, and for me emotion is key. While I appreciated and loved the writing, I was too aware of the book's mechanics to ever let go completely.

This book takes patience and perseverance. The first 80 or so pages were rough and overly cryptic. The whole thing is cryptic, actually, and there are monumental clues scattered throughout that are easy to miss. The ending...Let's just say, don't read this when you're sleepy and/or not concentrating completely.

3.5

Ben says

The subject here is love. The contrast of its experience by two sisters. First task is to acclimatise one to the elegiac nature of the prose which seems to be affectionately recalling past eras when great writing was often lyrical and atmospheric, the opposite of forensic. However soon, Hazzard's sentences begin to beguile. They're like things seen by the light of candles, radiant with strange outlying shadows. Soon one also begins to admire the architecture of the novel, how early motifs constantly prefigure the shaping hew and shape of the novel. Because this is also a novel about the power of time. How it can warp, blanch and crumple, and how it can also decipher the code of the heart.

Georgina says

Shirley Hazzard has a very distinctive and somewhat difficult prose style. Often you have to read her sentences twice to get the full meaning and richness. But once you become accustomed to her quirky sentence structures she is an absolute joy to read. I can't recall the last novel I read with so many brilliant insights into love and female feeling.

It's essentially the story of two sisters and their amorous lives. Caro is the more adventurous and unconventional sister. And ostensibly it's she who will suffer more. Grace takes the more conventional path

– wife and mother – but her unhappiness is equally as poignant and brilliantly drawn. There are also some fabulous male characters – two of whom nurse guilty secrets which will play a major part in determining the outcome of the novel.

Shirley Hazzard is very much what came after Elizabeth Taylor, Rosamond Lehman and Elizabeth Bowen. And if you like those three writers you'll love this.
