



Saving Agnes

Rachel Cusk

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Winner of the Whitbread Prize for Best First Novel

Agnes Day is mildly discontent. As a child, she never wanted to be an Agnes—she wanted to be a pleasing Grace. Alas, she remained the terminally middle class, hopelessly romantic Agnes. Now she's living with her two best friends in London and working at a trade magazine. Life and love seem to go on without her. Not only does she not know how to get back into the game, she isn't even sure what the game is. But she gives a good performance—until she learns that her roommates and her boyfriend are keeping secrets from her, and that her boss is quitting and leaving her in charge. In great despair, she decides to make it her business to set things straight. *Saving Agnes* is a perceptive, fresh, and honest novel that has delighted readers and critics on both sides of the Atlantic.

Saving Agnes Details

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Author : Rachel Cusk

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From Reader Review Saving Agnes for online ebook

Jane Juliette Sue says

Some consider "Saving Agnes" depressing - I think it's deep, although it is true that the protagonist, Agnes, IS comfortably depressed. She is actually so depressed and self-absorbed that she doesn't notice that she is dating a junkie. And she is such a greenhorn, that she believes that every junkie shoots, there is more of Agnes' naivety displayed throughout the story, which is not much of a story, more a wordy spiral into the abyss, somewhere dark and lonely, a place where even the most caring parents cannot give you shelter. Some moments in this novel haunted me afterwards. Like the scene in the tube station, which brutally shows how fast you can drop in someone else's esteem and how cold people are. I also very much enjoyed the chapter where Agnes has her date at the Hampton Court. It's bitter sweet and very painful like every heart-break.

Very interesting is the setting - three friends living together in a place that falls apart which I picutered like something in Orson Welles' "The Process".

Since English is not my mother-tongue, I am used to look up words, but in Cusak's case you should always have a dictionary at hand. I can understand that some people may find her writing contrived, but I am very grateful for this book.

Alyson says

Unfortunately not my cup of tea. I found it very slow, virtually nothing happened, I had no interest in the characters, and it seemed to have no plot or substance. Also felt like it was set in the 70s or 80s yet was meant to be current day (written 1993).

Llyn says

Wonderful. Wish i had it to read in my late twenties.

Jennifer (aka EM) says

About 1/3rd of the way in but it's just not grabbing me. The writing is intricate, and maybe it would be better taken in thru the eyes instead of the ears. Then again, the intricacy might be masking a lack of character depth or insight or something, which is better developed in Outline and Transit (the other two I've read by her) than in this, Cusk's first. I just don't find Agnes all that *interesting*, and I don't want to slog through any more of this when I have Kudos waiting in the wings.

Karen says

A great read for feminists. Rachel Cusk is often vilified for some reason because she crosses a couple of taboos. She knows her own worth, she tells the truth of her experiences and these two qualities annoy some

people. But as Alan Bennett says 'Taste is the death of an author.' Cusk is an excellent writer who tells the truth as she experiences it. I sometimes struggle with her desire to cram in as many literary and philosophical allusions as she possibly can, at sometimes unhelpful length. But maybe that's my deficiency. Overall she is a wonderful writer and all young women could learn something from her about how to value their own lives as much as she values and fights for her truth.

Magdelanye says

this is a thoughtful if somewhat verbose exploration of coming into ones own and the internal struggle to identify what that might be.

the rating in my system would be 5 (out of 7) and in a 10 point scale it would be 6.
this my reaction upon just finishing. fuller review to come

Emily says

There were days when she sat until the afternoon died in to darkness, her eyes raking the classified pages in search of she knew not what. Models wanted for mail order catalogue. Commis chef required. Earn hundreds from home--own transportation essential. 7

She realized the higher purpose of the benevolent universe was taking a little longer than usual to reveal itself. 9

It occurred to her that believing in anticipation was not unlike believing in God, another of her covert vices. It was the same drift of soul and mind towards perfection, and to Agnes the thought of perceiving the world without this dimension was to see only shadows and not the things which cast them. 20

She had cheated, but in doing so had assumed that the very fact of her bothering to believe that that was what she was doing would absolve her of it. 29

Fear of Monday also tended to ruin Sunday, an invasion which Agnes resented deeply. Moreover, it made her suspicious of Tuesday; a day whose unrelenting tedium was deceptively camouflaged by the mere fact of its not being Monday. Wednesday, on the other hand, was touch and go, delicately balanced between the memory of the last weekend and the thought of the weekend to come. Wednesday was a plateau, and dangerous things could happen on a plateau. For example, one could forget one was in prison at all. Thursday was Agnes's favorite, a day dedicated to pure anticipation. By then she was on the home stretch, sprinting in glorious slow-motion toward the distant flutter of Friday's finishing line; which, however, when reached, often felt to her like nothing but a memento mori of the next incarceration. 38

She fingered her future like a set of flimsy negatives: a world of dark skies, glaring shadows, black smiles and certain death. 108

'I've just had a bit of a hard time recently. Personal reasons.'

While there was little in her life that wasn't personal, nevertheless the term shamed her. She disliked underselling the drama of her turbulent heart. 126

The man turned around and stared at her; like someone normal, someone in a crowd, his face boarded up like

a derelict place. 133

Leora Bersohn says

Rachel Cusk's writing is witty, intelligent, aesthetically pleasing, yet somehow not very warm. I've been reading and enjoying her since the Library Journal sent me *Arlington Park* to review some years ago, but I've never shaken the feeling of being held at bay. Never quite sure what that distant quality was in Cusk's work, I've wondered guiltily whether I expect female authors to present themselves as my best girlfriend, or whether after all these years of studying British literature, being married to an Englishman, etc., I'm still culturally tone deaf and seeking American-style immediacy where it need not be.

Feeling somewhat absolved after reading this one, which I'm pretty sure is Cusk's first, given the subject-matter: a year or two after graduating from a prestigious university with a degree in English, Agnes feels lost. Her job at a trade magazine seems like pointless drudgery, while her classmates and brother are earning a fortune in finance and management consulting. She misses her caddish, manipulative college boyfriend and dates a man who is almost entirely absent, even when in the same bed. Living with her close friends from college, Agnes watches a large crack in the house wall widen, threatening collapse, and fissures appear in the roommates' relationships as well.

The post-collegiate novel has been done before, and yes, sometimes better, from Waugh (*Decline and Fall*) to McInerney (*Bright Lights, Big City*), but this was diverting.

Whether containing elements of autobiography or not, it also provides an insight into that unique cold or unknowable quality in Cusk's work. Though Agnes has roommates, a boss, a colleague, a lover, parents, and a brother, all of whom appear, the novel is deeply inside Agnes's head, threshing out every nuance of emotion she experiences, rehashing every childhood idiosyncrasy and remembered slight. If these are not details from Cusk's own precocious childhood, I'm not sure why she'd take the trouble to make them up. While they flesh out a portrait of a semi-eccentric as a young woman, they indicate solipsism on either the character or the author's part.

People around Agnes often find her annoying, as does the reader, and yet we are meant to sympathize with her, and we mostly do. When she wrote this novel, Cusk was either a rookie making the common mistake of thinking every personal detail worth including in her semi-autobiographical novel, or else she was already a master of the form intentionally creating an only semi-likable ingenue and playing hide and seek with the reader's sympathies. Damned if I know which is right.

Bill Lalonde says

Second attempt to read this one. Cusk's writing is elegant and witty-- conspicuously, self-consciously so, as if she were afraid of ever writing a sentence which someone else had written before. That's not a bad thing-- at times wearying, but rather entertaining-- except that there's no damn plot. The whole book is an extended warble in someone's head. Or the first half, anyway, before I decided to give up and seek more satisfying sustenance.

Jayne Charles says

Every so often I need to read a Rachel Cusk....a proper wordy workout for the brain, like doing a cryptic crossword. They should all come with a free dictionary because it's a sure thing that I will be reaching for one before long. I would consider it a wasted read if it didn't contribute at least three new words to my vocabulary.

In this novel we meet Agnes who finds just about everything in her life a mystifying ordeal – work, socialising, finding a boyfriend. At first she seemed hard to sympathise with – wealthy family, gainfully employed, living in a house share with two long standing friends...what's to complain about? She should just stop over-thinking everything! Yet I found myself nodding time and time again in agreement with the musings of the embattled Agnes. I find myself in sympathy generally with any character who struggles socially, but I would hazard a guess that many people more sociable than me would agree with her on some things. Faced with the scenario with the ex-boyfriend in the restaurant my reaction would have been the same as Agnes'...just toe-curling and yet totally believable.

As with all Rachel Cusk's novels, there were sentences I had to read numerous times to properly get the gist. All those long words jammed together....and yet when the picture emerges it just shimmers with clarity. I admire the way she builds up a paragraph with complex, wordy sentences like an archer gradually drawing back a bow, and then lets fly with a short snappy sentence – right into the centre of the target.

I wondered whether the end might let the whole thing down by being cheesy – Agnes sees the light etc etc, and yet it wasn't like that. I loved the way the end was done, in fact it was one of my favourite parts of the novel.

So I've got my fix of vocabulary for a while – might be in need to some chick-lit to detox now, mind you.

Udeni says

I read this for the Book Riot's challenge to "Read a debut novel". I realised with a shock that I hadn't read the first novel by my favourite British author, Rachel Cusk

Agnes Day (Agnus Dei, obv's) is a lapsed Catholic, living in a shared house in 1990s London, half-heartedly searching for redemption in one night stands, a publishing career, and her perfect figure. As her boyfriends fail to propose, her work performance suffers and she starts to get fat, she suffers a kind of breakdown. Who, or what, could save her?

This debut novel has a great plot and believable characters. The grubby London of homeless people, drifting graduates and casual cruelties is well drawn. The prose style suffers from an awkward mixture of the baroque and the bathetic:

"Agnes once thought that days existed merely for identification purposes, temporal name tags to facilitate social confluence. Monday was the worst, a jack booted Nazi of the day; people did suicidal things on Mondays, like start diets and watch documentaries."

I have always loved this type of gimlet eye and rococo flourish. After Saving Agnes, her subject matter continued to be domestic, though her style is highbrow. Readers expecting something fluffier tend to be disappointed. Her later novels include other characters' viewpoints and allow her to stretch her limbs as a

psychological novelist. Her final two books are more consistent in tone and have all but dispensed with plot.

As a first novel by a 25-year old Cusk, this was a stunning debut. More than 20 years on, this remains a darkly funny read.

George says

3.5 stars. An interesting, densely written first novel by Cusk about Agnes Day who is in her 20s. She lives with two college friends, working as a sub-editor and is unsure of herself and how to behave with her friends. The first half of the book is filled with interesting, thoughtfully packed, detailed sentences and makes for a slowish read. Agnes and her housemates, Merlin and Nina are fairly ordinary type people in their 20s trying to make sense of things, none in a permanent relationship and all at the beginnings of their careers.

Kendra says

I think it's one of the more elegantly written accounts of the confused twentysomethings. Sometimes Agnes grated on me, but I think that she's meant to do so.

Maya Rock says

Not my favorite of hers, but good, metaphor rich. I love Rachel Cusk in all her bleakness.

Trish says

This first novel by Cusk won the Whitbread Award for First Novel in 1993 and it seems worthy of that distinction. It is less tentative than we would have reason to expect though it depicts a just-new woman carrying a load of insecurities while trying to navigate a large city.

Ultimately Agnes manages to find her way outside the maze inside her own head, recognize the privilege of her upbringing, and to feel something for the difficulties of others, but it is a tough couple hundred pages until she gets there. It is not so much funny as pathetic, and that is because we recognize something of ourselves (and perhaps our children) in her.

I wish I'd had more time to concentrate on this novel, though the reason I didn't is that I always found time to do something besides read it. Reading about Agnes was uncomfortable. Agnes (what a name!) was so unsure of herself it was painful. I do remember those years but do not miss them. It is a miracle we make it through, though Cusk puts in a couple reminders that some folks nearly don't, and many don't come through without damage.

We see the promise of Cusk in this novel in that her seemingly lightweight protagonist manages to discern the outlines of consequential existential questions— about the purpose of life— and this doesn't change in

her later work. Cusk is a heat-seeking missile for “the heart of the matter” and that is why readers eagerly seek out the next installment in how she describes what she has discovered.

Ultimately I was reading this novel at this time is for completionist reasons, but it also strangely dovetailed a major life moment. My oldest brother who’d had a major influence on my life trajectory died suddenly. Preparing his memorial service involved creating a short slideshow—he was a photographer and oceanographer, among other descriptors. He’d taken pictures of me beginning my travels overseas alone at the age of Cusk’s Agnes. Reading of Agnes’ mental circularities, uncertainties, and anxieties reminded me what I’d ditched as soon as I could.

I am having a look at all Cusk’s books to see how she got from here to her adaptation of *Medea* and the *Outline* trilogy. I have one novel left, *The Temporary*, before I will need to circle back to read her later work again. I admire her writing and think her work resonates, particularly for white women of a certain level of wealth, education, and age. That is not to say her later work doesn’t speak to universal experience—I think it does—but I wonder if the humor translates as well. She is easily in the ranks of America’s now dead male writers, Updike and Roth, whose work was claimed by a generation of white men of a certain level of wealth and education.

This early novel feels dated now: it was written twenty-five years ago. Reading about Agnes’s travails reminded me that young women today likely have different experiences with first sex, with boyfriends, girlfriends, even parents. Our relationships have been changed by cell phones and connectedness, and at the risk of seeming out of touch, I venture that the rate of change truly has speeded up. Perhaps everything we really need to learn can, like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, be found in our own backyards after all. There is something to be said for getting a firm foundation in a more limited environment before being hit with the world, but perhaps those faced with choice early are better at navigating it. Whatever the case, we’re not in Kansas anymore.
