



Memoirs of Emma Courtney

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Memoirs of Emma Courtney is one of the most articulate and detailed expressions of the yearnings and frustrations of a woman living in late eighteenth-century English society. It questions marital arrangements and courtship rituals by depicting a woman who actively pursues the man she loves. In this first fully annotated edition of a key sentimental novel, Hays reveals the lamentable gap between "what women are" and "what women ought to be" by exploring the links between sexuality and desire, and economic and social freedom.

Memoirs of Emma Courtney Details

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noctilucent says

Suddenly remembered this book, by far the best novel of English Romanticism that I've read. A stunningly original work that explores the connections between gender and genre, fiction and autobiography, and literature and the subject.

Tabrizia Jones says

A fictional memoir that is a coming of age story for young women of the 18th century. This is where you see the constant conflict of reason and romantic themes. It is not a plot driven book but the ideas and some of the plotlines make it one interesting read, especially Emma Courtney's obsession over a gentleman. Think "My Crazy Ex-Girlfriend" in the 18th Century and without the musical numbers.

Josie Dabinett says

A book read for my Master's degree on a module called "The Literature of Crisis: Gender and Politics in 1790's Britain." It's by far not the worst book I've read but I just found it rather boring for the most part. I had little interest in Emma as a character and honestly wanted to just scream at her to /get over him already/ (I have very little patience for romance and especially pining).

Mary Hays' writing style was certainly the easiest to read of what we have had to read for this module so far, however the lack of an interesting plot for the majority of the book made it somewhat a trudge to get through nonetheless. I do look forward to discussing it in class.

The most fascinating parts of the novel are the political moment and perhaps if this had been more outrightly political throughout it might have kept my attention. Emma's opinion on soldier's working in the act of murder was both passionate and evocative and lead to a genuinely interesting discussion. The talk of slavery and gender was gripping and I wanted more political debates and less "Why doesn't Mr Harvey love me, oh Augustus whyyyy?" really.

Laz Mercz says

Absolutely loved this one! The story consumed me and the protagonists tragic dialogue made it an intense&gripping experience. MelbUni did not disappoint with this one.

Sarah says

Had to demote this book from a 3 to a 2 upon re-reading. I think the 3 was in honour of the professor I had in one of my favourite university modules that loved this book rather than my genuine enjoyment! The

introspective philosophising was too much for my morning commute so Todmorden's station library has gained one more melodramatic 18th century epistle with a feminist lean.

Herman Gigglesworth says

There may be as many exclamation points in this book as periods. Hays's prose is that melodramatic. Characters cry and faint constantly like in any bad 18th century novel.

Emma Courtney has some interesting things to say about sexism and slavery, but so much of the book is about her unrequited love that you'll want to skim most of the pages. She names her baby after her husband's romantic rival too, making her about as appealing as Bella Swan. I wonder how her "true love" Augustus can stand to be around her. Emma's love letters would probably get her a restraining order today.

Ellie Kidger says

This is a novella that really plays with the tropes popular at the time. Wollstonecraft's influence on Hays' writing is clear, with a heroine hooked on philosophy and conscious of her situation. I enjoyed how modern it felt in its treatment of the women, and how it explored concepts of family.

Ailsa says

I read this book as part of a class called "Regency Women Writers"

Although there is much to mock about this book (especially the last 50 pages or so, which pretty much devolve into sentimental melodrama) I was actually pleasantly surprised by this book. I found Hays' writing style much more engaging than that of Wollstonecraft, whilst she manages to touch on many of the same fascinating issues as her more-celebrated counterpart.

This is an extraordinary book, in many ways, blending as it does the autobiographical, the epistolary (Hays drew on actual letters she herself had written), and fiction: and I thought fiddly metafiction was invented in the 20th Century! Essentially a bildungsroman, the novel charts the development of the eponymous Emma, dwelling upon her quest for education, useful employment and love in a society which is unwilling to allow her the same freedom as a man to create her own happiness.

Hannah Polley says

This book is written from the perspective of Emma Courtney and she is writing the memoirs of her life to her 'son' Augustus to explain his past to him.

Emma had a hard beginning and ended up reaching adulthood with no fortune and no real family to care for her. She was brought up in a middle class manner but soon finds that unless she wants to be a teacher/governess or servant, there are not really any other occupations open to a single woman.

Emma falls in love with her friend Augustus and repeatedly writes to him to tell him her feelings. Augustus does not reciprocate these and I just wanted to shake Emma to tell her to get a grip and say he's just not that into you! I see from the introduction that this was similar for Mary Hays and a lot of the letters were pretty much the same as she wrote in real life so I feel a bit sorry for her.

It turns out that Augustus was already married with children so could not reciprocate Emma's feelings and it doesn't look like she has any avenues in life. Another man who has always been in love with her offers to marry her and although she explains to him that she does not love him like she does Augustus, she accepts and they marry and have a daughter, also called Emma.

Emma's husband thought that he could live with her loving someone else but when Augustus is in a terrible accident and dies, Emma adopts his son (also called Augustus) and Emma's husband cannot handle it. He ends up committing suicide and to be honest, Emma could have been a better wife.

Emma brings up Emma and Augustus together and it looks like they will fall in love but then she reveals that her daughter sadly died at 14.

It's a sad ending to quite a sad book.

Kate Elizabeth says

Emma Courtney is a crazy stalker.

Rachel Brand says

Read for EN4363: Romantic Writing and Women.

I was confused by all the negative reviews when I began reading this book, but now as I come to a close, I can understand the complaints. This novel initially captivated me, and I was surprised to find some of the elements of Emma's life akin to those you'd come across in an Austen novel--a young woman passed between relatives due to deaths in her family, an unusual upbringing giving her a freedom to study typically unfeminine subjects, ultimately culminating in her being a bit too forward with a gentleman she has set her heart upon.

I have absolutely no objections to women being open about their feelings with a man they're interested in, and I could see in Emma a lot of who I was as a teenager--convinced I was madly in love with a boy who just wanted to be friends. However, I got frustrated with Emma's incessant chasing of Augustus after a while. I couldn't understand why she was still obsessed with a man who clearly did not care for her. It might sound a little melodramatic--but hey, so is this book!--but she ruined her life over a man who refused to admit that he cared for her until he was on his deathbed. Emma, honey, he wasn't worth all that effort.

As other reviewers have reported, not a lot happens in the middle of the novel and then suddenly half a dozen tragedies happened at once. It almost felt like Mary Hays had ran out of time and/or paper and had to ramp the storyline up. I'm not saying this book was terribly realistic before this point, but the arrival of a certain person at Emma's house felt very contrived, and the number of tragedies that befell her family--three deaths, an abortion, a suicide--felt ridiculously over-the-top and not altogether necessary. I'm not entirely sure what lesson Emma was supposed to learn from all these events. Perhaps: Augustus wasn't worth it, look at all the

people you killed?! I'm afraid the last forty pages of the book spoiled it for me. I could have put up with Emma's pining over Augustus, but the events of the last forty pages needed to be spaced out better in order for the reader to handle them better and not just roll their eyes.

This was definitely an interesting novel, I only wish Mary Hays had paced the ending better in order for me to appreciate it more. 3*

wrench says

It was going p well until that ending!

Jeeeeeerz

(?)/\

Jenn McCollum says

Mary Hays is an eighteenth-century author obsessed with proving that she -- like her romantic contemporaries -- can use highfaluting language as an argument for virtue: her own virtue. Memoirs of Emma Courtney is not an easy read although it is short, but the pay-offs are big. My jaw was hanging down to my feet from practically the first page. I have rarely -- never? -- encountered such a female heroine in English literature in my oh-so-many dimly-lit reading escapades of reading frenzies.

At first, there is nothing really astonishing about Emma Courtney, a well-read, imaginative orphan who blames her heightened sensibilities on her education. You think, of course, of Victoria de Lauredani or Oliphant's Hester, or Isabel Gilbert. Except, there never was such a sentimental heroine in all of human existence. Marianne Dashwood, stand back!

When I learned about the "cult of sensibility" in my "Making Sex" class at Clark University many years ago I wish that Professor Kasmer had made me read Hays's novel. There never was such a clear exploration of sentimentality, such a over-the-top articulation of the power of a girl gone wild with emotion. Hays's novel, which is often in an epistolary style, becomes repetitive and excessive as Courtney actually makes her obsessive love apparent to a young man she has only seen in a portrait, stuffing a letter into his hand before he departs his mother's estate, where Courtney is hiding out from her cruel caregivers.

I was shocked. Never before have I read of a woman from the eighteenth century who is so bold as to confess her plump lust and love for a man. But she goes on to expound about her passion many times over yet Hays never calls into question her heroine's virtue. Contrarily, Hays insists, like Courtney, that she is an exemplar of virtue and is blameless of the havoc wreaked on characters, including a man she marries to rescue herself from poverty.

The novel was not pleasant to read: overwrought. Yet, reading this novel is a must for anyone interesting in gender play during this time in England. I was floored. Here is a heroine -- virtuous, no less -- who throws herself at a married man, drives a husband to suicide, neglects her daughter for love, and blatantly tells off her elders and superiors (men, no less). To say that Courtney is "a romantic enthusiast" as she "melts into tears" at every turn, is a bit of an understatement. She won't leave the object of her passion alone, stalking him endlessly until I had a headache. She practically masturbates herself through the whole novel. Three cheers. (But not enough cheering to make up for writing and style, unfortunately.)

Katelyn says

The plot doesn't progress at all throughout the middle 100 pages, and then ten million things happen right at the end.

Jessica says

This book is in the tradition of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman* and William Godwin's *Things as they Are; or, the Adventures of Caleb Williams*, but it's fascinating in its own right for a few reasons:

1. It's a deliberately experimental text that includes correspondence from Hays's own life.
2. It plumbs the previously unexplored depths of female psychology, including female desire and sexuality (which made it quite scandalous for the 1790s).
3. It was notoriously poorly received upon publication.

The plot can be frustrating at moments, but it's well worth the read.
