



## **The Still Point**

*Amy Sackville*

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At the turn of the twentieth century, Arctic explorer Edward Mackley sets out to reach the North Pole and vanishes into the icy landscape without a trace. He leaves behind a young wife, Emily, who awaits his return for decades, her dreams and devotion gradually freezing into rigid widowhood. A hundred years later, on a sweltering mid-summer's day, Edward's great-grand-niece Julia moves through the old family house, attempting to impose some order on the clutter of inherited belongings and memories from that ill-fated expedition, and taking care to ignore the deepening cracks within her own marriage. But as afternoon turns into evening, Julia makes a discovery that splinters her long-held image of Edward and Emily's romance, and her husband Simon faces a precipitous choice that will decide the future of their relationship. Sharply observed and deeply engaging, *The Still Point* is a powerful literary debut, and a moving meditation on the distances - geographical and emotional - that can exist between two people.

## **The Still Point Details**

Date : Published March 1st 2010 by Portobello Books

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Author : Amy Sackville

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## From Reader Review The Still Point for online ebook

### Judy says

I seem to have read quite a few novels recently which interweave a present-day story with one from a previous generation in the same family. This is another along the same lines, which I enjoyed because of its beautiful poetic style - it moves along slowly, with endless lyrical descriptions of landscapes and nature, and some sections feel almost like short stories.

It's a book which particularly appealed to me because it has a polar theme - the present-day heroine, Julia, is researching the life of her great-aunt, Emily, who was married to an explorer who died tragically on a failed North Pole mission, a story which seems to be partly inspired by the Scott expedition to the South Pole. I've recently watched two TV mini-series about polar exploration, 'The Last Place on Earth', about Scott, and 'Shackleton', so I've been thinking a lot about what drives people to go on these missions and what it would be like for their families waiting - and this novel has a focus on the wife waiting for the husband she has only known for a few months, in a sort of suspended honeymoon.

I was gripped by the polar sections of the novel, but rather sorry that there is so much space devoted to the floaty, vague modern heroine, Julia, and her more mundane marital problems with her husband Simon, a butterfly collector. To me this seemed like a hobby too obviously chosen for its symbolic value, suggesting how he is trying to pin her down, since I very much doubt anyone catches butterflies nowadays. I also think it's a pity the dust jacket makes a comparison with Virginia Woolf, since this is an awful lot to live up to. However, I did really like the book and would read more by Amy Shackleton.

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### Susan says

I have always liked books that have more than one story going on at the same time, especially when they are so cleverly intertwined.

I enjoyed the detail of the 'North Pole' story, which I found both interesting and informative, but also moving in the way it showed the deep feelings of the explorer and his wife.

It was, however, the modern day story, in all its facets, which really made me love this book. I found the two main characters real and believable, and I cared about what happened to them.

I wanted to be in that old house, and thought the contrast between the heat of that summer day, and the bitter cold of the ice floes very atmospheric. I just loved it!! (less)

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### Margaret says

Sackville takes her title from Eliot's "Burnt Norton:" "The still point of the turning world," which refers to the North Pole. Her story focuses on two generations, a hundred years apart, of the Mackley family. One hundred years ago, Edward Mackley attempted to reach the North Pole. He never returned, and his wife Emily waits sixty years for him, living all those years in the Mackley house with Edward's brother John and his wife Arrabella. One hundred years later, Julia, the last surviving member of the Mackley family and granddaughter of John, lives in the Mackley house along with her architect husband, Simon. She is trying to go through the things in the house after Helen Mackley, John's daughter and Julia's aunt, has passed away.

The novel is told in alternating narratives of the two time periods. Sackville makes every effort to tell her

story slowly and beautifully, including dream narratives and direct quotations from Edward's long-lost but now found diary detailing his wooing of Emily, his marriage to her, and his lengthy and dangerous trip north. Sackville is always thoughtful and innovative as she writes, but the portions about Edward, Emily, and the journey are just so much more interesting than the contemporary story of Julia and Simon. It's almost as if Sackville's neo-Woolfian style is somehow happier when it deals with events that took place during Woolf's life time rather than those that take place during Sackville's. Still, the book is never bad, just slower when less interesting. As sluggish as it sometimes is, *The Still Point* is a very fine first novel, and I look forward to reading Sackville's future novels.

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## David Hebblethwaite says

'The still point of the turning world' (in the words of T.S. Eliot, quoted in this novel's epigraph) is the North Pole, to where Edward Mackley led a fateful expedition at the turn of the 20th century – his body was not found for another fifty years. In the present day, Julia, a descendant of Mackley's, lives in the explorer's old house with her husband Simon, where she tries to find meaning in life even as her marriage slowly loses its spark. By novel's end, Julia will find herself re-evaluating both her own relationship and what she thought she knew about Mackley and his wife, Emily.

Amy Sackville's debut has to be one of the most intensely *focused* novels I've read in quite some time. The action in the book's present takes place over the course of one day (though there also passages set in Edward Mackley's time, and flashbacks to earlier in Julia's and Simon's relationship), and is almost entirely about the relationships of the two couples. Sackville sets up thematic parallels between the two, using the North Pole as a metaphor; the central idea seems to be that the nature of Arctic geography is such that you can never be sure when you've actually reached the Pole, just as perhaps you can never truly be sure that you've got to the heart of the person you love.

The parallels between the couples are interesting and, in a way, rather challenging. Ostensibly, they're quite straightforward – both Julia and Emily are free spirits who ended up with a domestic existence while their husbands go out to work, and both have reason to wonder, 'Is he coming back?' Think about it more deeply, though, and the comparison starts to seem absurd: there's a world of difference between trekking to the North Pole and commuting to London for the day, and between waiting decades for news of your husband – who, you're well aware, might have died – and waiting a few hours to discover whether he's returning home to you after work, or seeing someone else.

And yet... I think Sackville is challenging us to consider such deeper parallels. It seems clear that Julia sees something of herself in Emily's situation, and undoubtedly both women have been 'left behind', albeit it in different senses. I suppose one could turn the question around and ask what there is of Julia's situation in Emily's, which raises the issue of the human consequences of attempting great feats – if someone is left behind at home, does it really make a difference why that was, if they have to deal with the same emotions? *The Still Point* certainly leaves one with plenty to think about.

Sackville's prose style is interesting, often addressing the reader directly:

Closer inspection of [the couple's:] eyelids will reveal that [Julia:] is dreaming. Behind the skin you will just discern, in the violet dimness, the raised circles of her pupils scud and jitter as the eyes roll in their sockets. You would like to know the hidden colour of the irises. Very well,

then: hers are brown, his are also brown, but darker. [7:]

I wasn't sure for some time whether I'd get along with it, but now I think it suits the novel well; it gives the sense of eavesdropping on the characters rather than inhabiting them, which seems appropriate for a book about how it's a struggle fully to get to know people. This style also leads to some striking effects: for example, there's a scene where Julia and Simon argue, and the clash of their argument with the more poetic writing around it is quite something. Then there are the places where Sackville just writes beautifully, as with many of her descriptions of the Arctic:

Blank, white, vast and silent but for the slush of the summer ice. It is not the heave and roar of the darker months, but a constant drip, the rush of a hundred rivulets. A slick sheen over everything as if coated in glass. There are no shadows here, beneath the Arctic sun. There is no sense of depth, only massive solid forms without contour and, between, the black sea. The sky is almost white. Don't look up, or let your gaze rest anywhere for too long. The sun is everything; try to keep your eyes half closed, the brightness will blind you. [153:]

*The Still Point* is a book which has stayed with me; perhaps it wasn't until I'd finished it that I realised just how much I'd been drawn into its world. I'm glad that I was.

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## **Bettie? says**

Emma Fielding reads from Amy Sackville's debut novel about true courage and enduring love, in which the lives of two couples, living a hundred years apart, collide unexpectedly one summer's day.

*Blurb - At the turn of the 20th century, Arctic explorer Edward Mackley set out for the North Pole and disappeared into the icy landscape. He left behind a young wife, Emily, who awaited his return for decades, during which her dreams of life with her heroic husband gradually froze into lonely widowhood. A hundred years later, on a sweltering summer's day, Edward's great-grand-niece Julia is searching through the family house, trying to make some sense of the decades of clutter and the memories from that ill-fated expedition. As Julia continues her research into the Arctic journey that ended the life of her beloved ancestor, she can't help but notice the deepening cracks within her own marriage.*

Abridged by Sally Marmion

Broadcast on:  
BBC Radio 4, 10:45pm Monday 25th January 2010

Produced by Justine Willett.

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*Amy Sackville wins John Llewellyn Rhys prize for The Still Point*

*Judges call novel 'breathtaking', predicting a future littered with international awards for the first-time author.*

Tried again with a new head but this really is not for me.

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### **Kristin says**

I went back and forth between "okay" and "like" on this one. It's very literary. It's got some very poetic descriptions (some of which are beautiful and some of which are a stretch). It's definitely a slow-paced read, which starts out nice but ends up frustrating. The last 100 pages I found much more engaging, which is why I leaned toward 3 stars instead of 2, but it just took me way too long to get to that point.

The concept of contrasting two different relationships in two different centuries was a good one. The beauty and the terror of the Arctic compared to the mild ennui of suburban England was a good contrast too.

An enjoyable book, if you have the patience to enjoy it.

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### **Anna says**

Rarely have I read an author that can trace thoughts and emotions and ephemeral impressions of the mind and of the surroundings so acutely. Her world is full of objects luxuriously suffused with memories, of recent and long-gone times. Or perhaps the other way around: it is a book of past events or memories that find shape in the objects that survived them. It read like a walk-through in a museum of the past and present, with the two parallel stories - separated in time by a century - interwoven so delicately.

The chapter *Glass* is one of the finest pieces I've ever read, perhaps only paralleled by Jonathan Dee's opening chapter in *The Privileges*.

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### **Felice says**

If I knew then what I knew at page 150 I would not have read *The Still Point* and that would have been dumb of me. I would have missed out on a very, very good first novel. Why would I have given *Still Point* a pass? The story all takes place over the course of one day. One day. To my small and quick to judge mind *One Day* equals a tiny cast of characters, low page count and (Mrs Dalloway aside) boredom. I was right and I was wrong. I was right that there are few characters in *Still Point* and I was right that it isn't very long. It's only 320 pages. (Apologies to author Amy Sackville. I'm sure 320 pages seems just right to her.) But Boredom? Not at all, just the opposite. Good thing I didn't read the synopsis carefully before I started reading the book.

*The Still Point* is the story of two marriages. Julia and Simon have a seemingly enviable life. He goes off to work and she dawdles through the ancestral home. Appearances though... Sometime in the last few years of their ten year marriage Simon and Julia started keeping secrets from one another. Simon is all restless irritation and helpless to close the growing distance between himself and his wife. Julia has Barbara Cartland

ideas of love and is operating just this side of depression. She is supposed to be archiving the papers and property of her great-great uncle, Edward Mackley. Uncle Ed was a famous turn of the century explorer. The second marriage of the novel is his and Emily's. Two weeks after their vows Edward left for the North Pole and Emily never saw him again.

Julia was brought up on family stories of Edward's bravery and sacrifice. She does view him as a heroic figure but it is the left behind Emily that really captures Julia's imagination. As Julia begins to catalog Edwards relics and read his journals she romanticizes their marriage all out of proportion. Two weeks after their marriage Edward left on his expedition and Emily went to live in what is now Julia and Simon's home with Edward's brother and his wife. While Edward's short life was filled with possibility and misadventure, Emily's long life was much quieter. She waited to hear from Edward and then waited to hear of his death but both of their lives were a mental struggle to survive.

My outline of the basic events in The Still Point make it seem like a straightforward, contemporary bad marriage story and it is that but it is also more than that. The study of one marriage that may be ending and another one that never got started is juxtaposed against the individuals in each of these relationships. Edwards reckless quest verses Simon's 9 to 5 office life and Emily's unfulfilled hopes verses Julia's squandered opportunities. Sackville is wonderfully inventive in using Julia's girlish ideas of love to unify both couples stories.

Sackville does step outside of the domestic drama in The Still Point. Through Edward's journals she takes us along on his expedition. We know the end of his trip before Julia ever opens the diaries but that doesn't lessen the vigorous reading experience that Sackville creates. This physically puissant part of the story works well as another opposite to the restrained and secretive lives of Simon and Julia and Emily's life after Edward.

I'm thrilled that I did not let my preconceptions about the whole One Day thing get in the way of reading The Still Point. It was a wonderful novel. The kind of novel that carries you along until suddenly insignificant things start to have new meaning. Amy Sackville's writing is a pleasure to read. If you have missed the great Carol Shields you should give The Still Point a try. It would also make an first rate book club choice.

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### **Hugh says**

This is a hugely impressive debut novel, full of bold language and striking imagery. The book is partly a tale of polar exploration, but the doomed adventurer's family story is equally important, as is the modern love story that frames it

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### **Diane S ? says**

What a beautifully written novel.

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### **Jenny (Reading Envy) says**

I regret that I read this book in summer. It deserves a frozen landscape and several long days. The language

is beautiful, and the way the story is told from a fly-on-the-wall kind of perspective, where sometimes you only catch glimpses of dialogue or story, or can only make assumptions from what is seen and known, is brilliant.

There were definitely a few moments where I wanted to scream at the main character, because she seems trapped in this house that goes back several generations in her family, in the story of her great-grandparents, and doesn't really seem to have her own life outside of the interactions with her husband Simon, and even during those times she is living in her head and the recollections of the journals she has been reading. But it is her barely-there presence that makes the story so dreamlike, so in the end, I'm glad she isn't normal. (It does seem somewhat far-fetched that the dinner never burns...)

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## **Kelly says**

*"When I was a little girl, we cut holes in the world. My sister took a pair of scissors and cut two lines in the air, parallel, horizontal, and then cut down between them to make invisible curtains which she took carefully between finger and thumb and, drawing them back, invited me to put my hand through the gap. The air beyond was a different air, we'd have sworn it. Cleaner, I called it. Cool, unused. I'd wriggle my fingers, circle my wrist and then pull it out again. In time, my sister forgot the game but I tried that little magic again, alone, again and again, even after I was caught and scolded for playing with scissors. But I never cut a hole large enough to step through, for fear of being stranded in that other air.*

*I think perhaps I slipped through one of those holes without noticing, after all.*

I have a new favorite author, guys. Wow, I can't remember the last time I got to say that. It seems that all I've been able to do in these last years has been to bleed favorite authors. The Bronte sisters, Fitzgerald, Stoppard and Austen have stood by me steadfastly, but they've been the few longstanding survivors.

It has felt, for years, like a season of slowly putting away childish things.

For awhile, most of my first crop of authors survived alongside bright shiny new rivals that popped up like a riot in the first few years after college- Woolf and Greene and Tolstoy and Fermor and Yourcenar, Proust and Judt, Byatt and Braudel, Sackville-West, in-depth dives into Shakespeare, Waugh and Eliot. But it couldn't last. Nothing could really compete with them- reading these authors made me doubt my taste and everything I knew about writing- I had to go back and confirm I wasn't crazy about some things, repeatedly.

After the new crowd arrived, then, it made me pickier and doubt myself and my judgment. It also fine-tuned my ear to picking out the kind of prose I love in a way I mostly appreciate (works better than sonar!) but it is also sometimes *super* annoying. I open my heart to authors in a wholehearted way much less easily these days. I think the last time I fell head over heels for an author, without reservation and right away, was either with Graham Greene or with Susanna Clarke, five years ago. It feels like I don't do love at first sight anymore. Even with some of the names I named above, which I found since then, most of the time I've got critical distance on them for a good solid time (yes even with Yourcenar and Fermor) or my love for them snuck up on me slowly and then all at once after circling them for a long and wary time (Tolstoy, Woolf, and through her Sackville-West).

For the most part, I think this is a good thing. But sometimes I miss enthusing and rapturing and jumping up and down and pointing with a neon sign.

I miss that good ole' instinctual ALL CAPS feelin', y'all!

(Not, let us be clear, that I ever posted in such a way, but it is a figurative thing!)

And I did some wary circling with this one at first, with the beginning of *Orkney*, and threw in some caveats at the end. But nope, I don't care. I'm pulling out a "Deal With It" card because despite all the flaws, I absolutely love this woman's deal. I get it, I see it, I love it, and I can't possibly think that I will get tired of it any time soon.

\* \* \*

In *The Still Point*, we follow, simultaneously and, from the first page, quite rarely in order, the trials of the Mackley family. In the present, we have Julia, the last descendant of the family living in its old manse, and her husband Simon, a quiet, mannered, precisely-on-time architect who was drawn there to see the butterfly collection and ended up, by chance, staying. In the never-quite-past, we have Edward Mackley, an Arctic explorer whose expedition was lost in 1901 and his wife Emily who waited for him for sixty years in the house where his brother John and his wife Arabella lived. Waited and hoped until his body was found on a far northern island, encased, with four others of his expedition, in ice, waiting with a diary of his tale to be told. Upon the death of her Aunt Helen (the last surviving child of John and Arabella), Julia gives up her job to stay home and research through her family's heirlooms- most especially those of the legendary hero of the family. Past and present exist alongside each other for the course of one summer day at the Mackley house as Julia discovers a family secret and Simon, far outside the house and its pull, makes a decision that will either bring him back into the past or persuade him to give it all up.

Sackville lets her characters' sense of time circle forwards and backwards from the night before until moments ago, to predicting moments in the future, and back again to an hour ago in a very organic way. The result is that characters almost never stay in the "present" for more than a line or two- partially this is due to the personalities of the characters themselves (Simon is always stewing over some past recrimination or planning precisely for the future, Julia is always dreaming or sleeping or remembering or reading). Partially this is due to the events of the day themselves, which involve a gathering of facts and a series of assessments for both characters in which they tell themselves the story that will ultimately help them either deal with a fact or make a decision that needs to be made.

In the end, the domestic secret is easy to guess by about halfway through, and Simon's dilemma is a foregone conclusion. But the way that Sackville gets there is absolutely stunning. She is excellent with the tiny little moments that make up the second-to-second accounting of a marriage:

*She lies down lightly as possible on top of the covers so as not to disturb Simon, but he is nonetheless disturbed. She falls immediately asleep and is woken twenty minutes later by the radio alarm, which is very loud and which he does not reach to turn off.. taking a small revenge for having the last twenty minutes snatched from him... When he turns his head he is surprised to see his wife curled towards him, smiling, not angered by his thoughtlessness, (his thought-out thoughtlessness, he is never unknowingly thoughtless). 'I like this tune,' she says, as if to annoy him.*

And she entwines these sorts of observations with precise character creation very deftly:

*Julia wonders, watching him, whether he will be too hot but decides not to say anything. Perhaps she is a little annoyed by him, a man who put a suit jacket on to drive to the station on a summer's day, perhaps this is her little revenge in turn, but she is rarely so calculating or malicious, certainly not before breakfast. It is more a drift across the surface:*

*Warm, to wear a suit, won't you be too... too hot for eggs. I don't want that cloy. Back of the throat. Yellow yolk yellowyolkyellow. I'll just have toast.*

And always the reminder of the real reasons we do things beneath the pettiness, which she is very good at

finding at the end of every short story we pass through on our way:

*He doesn't speak as he opens the door, as he turns to take her coat from her, he doesn't speak. And she hands him her coat and bursts into rare tears, and he folds his arms around her then and she remembers how tall he is, remembers the place for her head beside his breastbone, which has been there for ten years, was there always, and doesn't speak... He knows how close she always is to mourning and wishes he could make this count for it. But she is grateful to him, for his silence, she could not begin to find the words... But he is glad she is warm now, and had need of him.*

Her observations of character are well enough and go on, kindly and gently and then sharply throughout the novel, particularly towards the end.

But Sackville's real and true strength is actually, as in Orkney, her descriptions of Place. People and their lives and decisions and feelings are heavily affected by their Place, either the one where they are or the one where they wish to be. The landscape sits at the center of everything:

*At dawn and dusk, a daily cycle, it rolled and piled in extraordinary forms all about them; the men on deck saw mountains, monsters and beasts rise and topple, abstract complex geometrics, gigantic crystals glinting off every surface and smashing slowly into glittering facets. And everything suffused with the sunlight that left its colours lingering, flaming brilliant gold against the cobalt sky before fading to pearlescence, the shadows hollowed out a deep lucent blue...*

*..Circling and circling his mind returns to it. Among the clutter that catches at his thoughts in hints and snatches, Julia lies resplendent on the bearskin like a vivid half-forgotten dream. Is it possible to know her? Even what is past is not constant. Countless versions of her coalesce, flicker, disperse. She is lost moments and habits too familiar to recall and a turn of the head one Tuesday afternoon; memories will fold and flutter and resettle themselves..*

*Skin against snow, spread out across the sky..*

*And when it's over and she opens her eyes, the pupils widen with pleasure but for a moment, she's sure, they are pinpricks, as if she must adjust to the dim world she returns to from wherever she's been, lost in the snow...*

*The butterflies, then, heave and clamber; the bees bustle and hum; Tess is up and prowling, licking the last of a juicy bluebottle from her teeth with a luxuriant tongue. Everywhere the creak and sigh of growing things, of life, but there is only a rumpled basket, a discarded book, where we left Julia. The air stirs, lifting the pages until they hesitantly turn; the words grow faint until there is only regret remaining: 'I cannot go on,' whispering across the garden, then the merciful breeze turns on to the ending, where there is only unfulfilled white.*

But she is not only interested in Place. She is interested in Story. She is interested in the stories we tell ourselves, and the stories that we tell others, and how we convince ourselves that the Kids Are All Right. She has Julia link herself into a legend and find a corner for herself to inhabit, imagining herself into dream over and over again. But what happens when that is shattered? What do you hold on to when the dream is over?

So there it is, a person and a relationship tied to a Place, tied to a Legend, tied to time moving backwards and forwards, and wrapped up in currents moving inwards and out again, never quite recovering in either direction.

It's a beautiful portrait of Time Passing, offered in the most every day and domestic sense, in a quiet way full of clocks striking and ovens heating and humid air. What I love about Sackville in this book is her gentle

guiding hand through all of this, like a loving, understanding tour guide.

And I think that's the key there. Sackville tries to make us understand through sensation and beauty and expression. She is not hurried about it, but she is insistent, and somewhere, sometime, one of her clocks or flowers or butterflies will give you what you need to know.

\* \* \*

Before I end, though, a small protest:

So, *The Still Point* is Amy Sackville's first novel. When it was released, it was crowned with, as everyone's favorite underachieving writer/gigolo Paul Varjak said, "*the dirtiest of all dirty words, promising.*"

And I can see that. The bones are showing here in the sense that I can see the literary troves she borrowed from in a very obvious and almost writer's-exercise sort of way, blueprints borrowed from the senior architect upstairs. Eliot is the title-acknowledged source, and to be fair, she puts that to you right up front. All his sense of simultaneous time, time in a garden with small animals and barely seen tiny atrocities in corners that we're rushed along past when possible. Woolf, too, is the other major well we're drawing from, from *Mrs. Dalloway* and her stream-of-consciousness leading her through her one day in London mostly, but also most definitely from *The Waves* crashing onto and off of our consciousness, and the soothingly all-knowing, slightly condescending at times narrator from *Orlando*, with just a pinch of Thackeray and Austen thrown in to occasionally lighten the mood. She paints with nostalgia and depth and color like Waugh and Greene... I could go on. It's all there.

But here's the thing. It's used just... so well. It's used the way that borrowing from other authors should be used, with updating and twists and your own pointed spin on the thing. Eliot is used to spin the dreams and reveries of the north, the mythos of Emily, waiting, waiting, waiting, Julia, sleeping and waking. She gets dozens of pages just musing on "the still point," as a concept alone, and she's right to do so. Woolf is used and layered on to go in and out of our characters' minds at will. I particularly liked the way that she used stream-of-consciousness in a very deliberate way- to correct the narration she had just given us of what someone was thinking- to show the different between the outer and inner in a clear and lucid way that added to the text.

So I think this book is "promising" rather than fully realized only in two senses: first, that Sackville didn't clean up her tracks after herself as well as I imagine some people would like. I can only see why in the sense that it is distracting to see another pair of larger footprints continually beside the ones you are meant to be following. I don't mind it- I thought it added to the experience, that it was a great statement on the uses of certain kinds of prose throughout. Second, that as a result of her explorations, we got to see less of her own indulgence in her own prose than I would have liked. Orkney has the same sense of strong influences from the British canon, but it is much more independent in the sense that the focus is on her gorgeous, gorgeous prose rather than on the backbone of the thing and where it came from.

I could not have cared less about that, if that wasn't clear by now.

\* \* \*

A last addendum, lest I forget:

Oh yeah, you should read this.

## **Nina says**

Since I didn't finish the last book for my reading group, I really pushed myself to finish this one. Truth be told, it wasn't my cup of tea. The premise sounded really interesting, but the book focused on the use of language rather than an actual plot. Don't get me wrong, I appreciate Sackville's way with words - but it felt a bit try-hard rather than effortless. I didn't like the characters, I wasn't amazed in the story, but I am interested to find out what the others thought. I want to know what I might have missed.

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## **Iva says**

An original conceit--arctic explorer leaves loving wife for his final journey--real life great-great-granddaughter learns family secrets of her Victorian ancestors while living in family home one hundred years later. Taking place in one day and shifting between the weather extremes of polar exploration and a hot summer day outside of London, the arctic story is beautifully imagined; the contemporary couple's story seemed a bit forced. Won the John Llewellyn Rhys prize.

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## **Mark Zieg says**

This was a perfectly charming little word-painting, a meditative non-act of wordplay that plays out in the silence between reader and page.

The author uses words precisely, shaping each deliberately with expert care in relation to the page and its fellows. Rolling her short, suspended sentences about the tongue, one senses even the mouth-feel of words has been considered in their artful selection and placement. Like a prose poem, this is a text meant to be read aloud, even if only in the echoes of your mind.

Her enjoyment with words is infectious: coruscating to "core us skating"; bare bear skin, padding on pads. Even punctuation plays a part, softly concluding each note so that its heft might weightlessly linger a moment in your mind. Whitespace is evident throughout, from the frozen simplicity of the binding to the ladderly gaps betwixt lines, bleak moats which must be crossed to reach the next flotilla of fine black text.

Not one to leave her reader stranded at the gates of meaning, the author comes with us on this quest, peeling back each page in an unusually present first-person plural point of view; and if omniscient, the narrative accompaniment reflects a mischievous and occasionally absent-minded aspect, easily distracted by will-o-wisp glints of memory.

I'm unsure whether I'm willing to term this delightful text a "novel", which is almost overly replete with cheesy connotations of dime-store pulp; this is more of an interactive still life, rolled out in slo-mo so the reader can savor each succulently crystalline freeze-frame.

I regret that I haven't had a chance to finish it, in part because the gently swaying lap and lull of the languid descriptions evoke such a dreamy state that it becomes an effort to pull one's eyes forward in time. I do want to spend more time with this experiential tour-de-placid, but I suppose I shall have to relinquish my copy and give some other explorer their chance to brave the candent ice :-/

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