



Every Day Is Mother's Day

Hilary Mantel

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Evelyn Axon is a medium by trade; her daughter, Muriel, is a half-wit by nature. Barricaded in their crumbling house, surrounded by the festering rubbish of years, they defy the curiosity of their neighbors and their social worker, Isabel Field. Isabel is young and inexperienced and has troubles of her own: an elderly father who wanders the streets, and a lover, Colin, who wants her to run away with him. But Colin has three horrible children and a shrill wife who is pregnant again; how is he going to run anywhere? As Isabel wrestles with her own problems, a horrible secret grows in the darkness of the Axon household. When at last it comes to light, the result is by turns hilarious and terrifying.

Every Day Is Mother's Day Details

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Sherry Howland says

Dang, this was disappointing! After being swept up in Mantel's "Wolf Hall," I was looking forward to seeing how she would handle contemporary people and situations. Verdict: Not so well. There are 2 basic story lines happening here. The first deals with Evelyn Axon, a widowed mother of a (maybe) mentally challenged pregnant daughter, Muriel. Evelyn, a locally renowned spiritualist, is gradually losing her grip on reality and is convinced evil spirits are taking over their ramshackle flat, room by room. A corresponding story follows a Social Services counselor, Isabelle Field, assigned to monitor Muriel, but more likely to be found having a desultory quickie with an unhappily married school teacher saddled with a drinking problem and a nagging pregnant wife. Does this sound like a fun read? Mantel's talent for well-drawn characters is in full display here, but none of these characters was the least bit sympathetic or even interesting. The conclusion to Muriel's pregnancy was utterly depressing and somewhat disorienting. Isabelle Field's story all but faded into nothingness by the book's end. All in all, can't recommend it under any circumstances.

Mike says

The first book by one of my favorite authors is a nasty piece of work. Practically all the characters are ugly and horrible, and I was pleased that the book was only 225 pages, as that was about all I could take of their company. It left me feeling appreciative that at some point in her career, the author stopped trying to be Martin Amis and started being, well, Hilary Mantel.

Audrey says

Always wanted to read Hilary Mantel. Wish I hadn't waited so long. Now I have lots of good stuff ahead of me. This was an odd book and reminded me a bit of the late, great Ruth Rendell's psychological portraits of really strange English families. I'm looking forward to reading some of her newer books.

Elizabeth says

A bit like watching a train wreck. Very grim. England, 1970s. Characters with serious, sad, issues. No one to like. And yet, I finished it. I was interested. I wanted to find out what happened. Many of the threads were not tied up. We were just left to understand why people were so messed up. Clever writing, interesting sentences, interesting associations and descriptions. But not necessarily an experience I would wish on anyone.

Claire says

I love Mantel's writing but, man, this book is unrelenting. It starts off dark and just gets darker. Misery and more misery. And the ending disappointed me. So . . . I'll stick to her short stories, which I love, and Wolf Hall.

Maia says

not finished, just started, but so far: 1) the 'medium' 's connection to the other world isn't, so far: far from being creepy and supernatural, it's just about someone deluded; 2) it's a sharp, sharp satire on social manners, so far. I can't understand all the reviews about 'the characters are unloveable' or 'there's no plot': it's very clearly a satire of manners and mores and the recent past in little England, why are you expecting 'nice' characters or a 'plot'?

the problem is the whole, not the pieces and parts. The later trick in the book, more common now, of interspersing beautiful writing with sarcastic comic writing works well. The dinner party isn't good, it's dull and improbable, but the Christmas scene before it is perfect. Warning: her characters speak in scintillating wit, all of them.

or: the telling, the book, is fine, you'll enjoy reading it, the affair in particular is perfectly written and the denouement revealing what Evelyn really senses - the 'other world' and what the 'biting and scratching' she feels really is (separately, near the end) are shocking, unexpected and believable - but what you're left with as the sum total in your mind after reading the book is the bad bit, hence 2. Not much really. But as a reading experience, very good

Sarah (Presto agitato) says

I love Hilary Mantel. Her writing has such precision. She misses nothing and finds exactly the right way to phrase her observations.

Unfortunately, even her skill did not save *Every Day is Mother's Day*. This was Mantel's first book, the story of a mentally unfit daughter, her disturbed mother, the social worker assigned to their case, and the married man who sleeps with the social worker. There is an undercurrent of supernatural malevolence thrown in for good measure.

The writing is not quite as polished as it is in Mantel's later books, but it's still very good. What I couldn't handle was the unrelenting dreariness. The characters are all unhappy people living bleak, miserable lives, but they are all so horrible to each other, so mean and malicious, that it's hard to feel much for any of them. On Wikipedia, they call it a "black comedy," which really stretches the definition of comedy. (*A Place of Greater Safety*, Mantel's novel about the French Revolution, is more cheery.) There are some highlights here, like a dinner party that really is amusing, where nothing escapes Mantel's keen eye and sharp tongue, but aside from that, this book is weaker than her later novels.

Martinxo says

A mostly grim book with one or two comic moments. I only read the book because I was on holiday and had run out of novels. Recommended if you enjoy misery.

Karyn Wergland says

All I can say is, don't read this when you're pregnant. You'll end up convinced that you've made a terrible mistake, that family life is a horror, that you are on a downward chute toward abject misery. As soon as you put down the book, you'll realize the author is presenting a one-sided view of that lifestyle. But while you're reading it, you'll feel like you're mucking about in a dirty toilet bowl.

For this, I would give the book zero stars. Which may not be entirely fair, since Mantel's not responsible for when I chose to read her book. But even if I weren't huge with child, I will say that I prefer books written with warmth and heart. Perhaps this just wasn't a book for me.

Also, there is a huge coincidence midway through the book that I found pretty unbelievable.

On the other hand, Mantel's writing style is so crisp, lucid, and memorable that I'm willing to throw in a couple of stars just for that. Perhaps her approach, when applied to different subject matter, would appeal to me. The truth was that I was looking for 'Wolf Hall' and the bookstore was out of stock--and thus, the reading of this book. Ugh. I finished it just to see how low the narrative could drag the institutions I hold dear--parenthood, family life, romance. The answer was, pretty low. Mantel does not seem to believe in love.

Odoublegood says

a tale of horror told chiefly by implication

Dan says

Mantel is, as they say, a witty writer and I keep turning page after page with interest. She's not above preposterous coincidence or straight-faced pun. (Mrs. Axon is something of a medium who reaches out like an axon to transmit messages to the other side.)

But you must understand that all the characters in this book are a joyless lot whose lives are so empty they cannot for the most part even find ways to struggle for something better. Colin struggles, ineptly, and fails. Murial struggles and succeeds with some horrifying consequences. Mantel is also able in a few deft pages to show us the worst middle class children I can remember reading about. Maybe its a black comedy as reviewers are wont to say, but the comedic elements are not in the tale but in little nooks and crannies, in some of the absurdities, and in the really good satire of a character who has little connection with the story.

In spite of my occasional real laughter, both characters and story are depressing. Short of egregious generalizations to which some reviewers are given, its tale of northern English emptiness has little to say to readers who sometimes know love, fear, uncertainty or any of the other emotions. Unlike Experiment in Love, itself pretty grim, this novel does not make me want to think more about it. Yet maybe someday I'll read the sequel, Vacant Possession; after all, she is a great writer and keeps you entertained even if you feel depressed in the process.

Doreen says

I love reading prose like Ms Mantel's: brisk, precise and compelling. It's a relief to be able to read two of her books in succession after having slogged through weightier tomes, which is no slur on any of the writing involved nor, indeed, a comment on any of the stories conveyed. But the elegant readability of her language, the way it doesn't ever snag or get in the way of the story: it's like slipping into a comfortable robe at the end of the day. Refreshing and, like the work of Muriel Spark's that it's been compared to, exceedingly crisp.

That said, I'd expected more of a horror element to this book, given the reviews. The ambiguity as to the "tenants" was interesting, as was the reason the police dug up the garden and, of course, the whole thing with Muriel and her condition. I enjoyed how Ms Mantel left so much to the reader's imagination, though I do wish she'd expanded more on Evelyn's trade. I didn't really find the book creepy, though. Grotesque, in that the characters do some really hideous things, but not at all scary. For that, I give the book 3 stars: it's very well-written, but it doesn't evoke the tension that a book like, say, Beryl Bainbridge's "The Dressmaker" might. It's a comfortable read, which pretty much defeats the purpose of the story.

I also thought it misleading that the back cover blurb makes Colin sound like a peripheral character. I found him to be the moral, if flawed, center of the story, as most of it revolved around him and the near-absurdist situations he found himself in. This, for people who've been following my somewhat contentious discussion regarding *The Marriage Artist*, I thought a near-perfect example of a protagonist who isn't also the hero: again, a refreshing use of prose.

I received this book gratis from Picador.

Florence (Lefty) MacIntosh says

Her 1st novel and it's excellent. It's grim, brooding and infinitely entertaining; this author's raw talent as a storyteller is immediately evident. The main character is Muriel Axon, a mentally handicapped shut-in who lives with her equally dysfunctional mother Isobel. Another key player is her barely functioning social worker who is more focused on her married lover than dealing with Muriel & her mother's problems. Despite the subject matter this is a surprisingly funny novel, the humour is very British and decidedly dark. If you like it don't miss its sequel *Vacant Possession*

Derek Baldwin says

I read this several months after reading its sequel (*Vacant Possession*). So I had an inkling of where the story was headed to, but this didn't spoil the story at all.

This is very well-written, economical, convincing. The dark humour doesn't undermine the seriousness of this sharp satire of 1970s Britain. It's a world where people hate their stupid pointless jobs, cannot work out why they sire noisy ungrateful smartarse kids, resist the urge to murder their oppressive paranoid parents... or do they? A succession of social workers try but fail to make any difference whatsoever to their clients' miserable lives.

The small cast of characters are carefully interlinked, and frequently only the subtlest hints point to what is

really going on. Miss a sentence or two and you'll miss the resolution of one of the threads (for example the link between Isabel Field the Social Worker and Muriel, her client, who has become pregnant, is not solely professional. But you could easily miss why!)

There are some excellent set-pieces, for example Christmas Day at the Sidney home - the author captures the grinding tedium of it, the exchanges of rubbishy presents, the maddening turmoil of the hyped-up children, how utterly anti-climactic it cannot fail to be.

The dinner party at Frank's is also quite brilliant, possibly even more excruciating than Abigail's Party.

Definitely recommended, but while Vacant Possession stands up perfectly well on it's own, reading the two books in the correct order is probably the way to go!

Grace says

Rather unsettling.
