



Chapman's Odyssey

Paul Bailey

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Harry Chapman is gravely ill in hospital. Why can he hear his mother's voice, acerbic and disappointed in him as usual? Is it because of Dr Pereira's wonder drug? Perhaps her presence would be understandable enough, but what is Pip from Great Expectations doing here? Soon, more and more voices add to the chorus.

Chapman's Odyssey Details

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From Reader Review Chapman's *Odyssey* for online ebook

Douglas Penick says

Harry Chapman is dying He's not quite sure, of course, and the nurses and doctors are reassuring. His deceased parents, vanished lovers, distant friends, and the literary characters he has loved come and go unbidden as his mind drifts. Some are helpful, some consoling, others importunate, and relentlessly unpleasant. These relationships with the vanished, the distant, the imaginary continue and evolve.

Paul Bailey unfolds this journey in a way that is effortless, comic, and deeply poignant; it is utterly unsentimental. CHAPMAN'S ODYSSEY is the work of a great artist. It's a marvel.

Janet says

In this novel Bailey writes about the vague dividing line between being asleep and awake and between life and death. An old man is taken to a London hospital with severe stomach problems. Under the influence of pain and medicines he loses himself in hallucinations. He hears and sees people and voices that interfere with his state of mind. Reminiscent of the Singing Detective and equally funny and moving. Harry Chapman doesn't sing though, he recites poetry to the nurses, who adore him for being so polite and old-fashioned.

Moshin M says

Chapman's Odyssey is a wonderful and poignant story that takes place entirely in a hospital bed. I recently spent some time in one of these beds myself, where I was reminded of the fever days of my youth. Murmurs in the background, intense images inside my head. The dream state that you wish for and then wish to go away, once it captures you. Sickness is a retreat from life, and at the same time a strong reminder of that life. This is the atmosphere in which Paul Bailey writes the story of Harry Chapman, who is (perhaps) dying, in a hospital, in the company of nurses, fellow dying patients, his mother's ghost (who is hardly the ghost of the mean mother of Harry's childhood), and a few memorable fiction characters, such as Melville's scrivener Bartleby. In the delirium of sickness and sedation, these presences fuse into a distorted crowd that colors (and taints) Chapman's introspections and reflections on his life.

Jonathan says

A fantastic book. Moving and funny by turns. I can't recommend it more highly, unless you're in hospital, but then again, if you have a sense of humour...

Giedre says

3.5/5

An old man's hospital stay turns into a hallucinogenic odyssey through his life and memory. And it's all a bit sad, funny and weird. *Chapman's Odyssey* is a charming little novel that packs surprisingly a lot, but, perhaps, doesn't go quite as far as I'd like it to.

Wilde Sky says

A seventy year old writer is in hospital with a stomach complaint. He is visited by the voices of childhood friends, characters from novels and his dead parents.

A very well told story that develops in a very touching manner. This book is both entertaining and thought provoking.

If you wonder about the haphazard way that life unfolds then you may find this book worth reading.

Caroline says

I pulled this off the new fiction shelf at the library out of desperation. It is a very curious book about a professor of poetry and his last days in hospital. He talks to all sorts of people some who are real and others remembered. Chapman is gay and has numerous partners and lovers. His mother is the strongest negative voice that visits him regularly. The incredible thing is that he has memorized 100's of poems and can quote them easily. Paul Bailey is British so some references are opaque to Americans.

Ann-Marie says

If you delight only in easy to read, linear plots laid out with a predictable dramatic arc, then this book is not for you. "Odyssey's" references to literature, poetry, the theatre and the creative world bring Mr. Chapman's unique sensibilities and take on life to light. Bailey builds this indelible portrait through the time frame of one critical experience - hospitalization and surgery - along the way weaving in Chapman's circle of family, friends and lovers where Chapman's drug induced brain works them in. Where else would you find Mom (long dead) and Pip from Great Expectations sharing pages if not barbs? Puns abound, great writing throughout, emotions are lovingly conveyed without sentimentality or reproach. This is one writer deserving a wider audience.

Thanks to Doug Pennick for recommending this one.

Joy says

I found this to be a warm, whimsical story of a man sifting through his perceptions and memories while lying

in a hospital ward during his final days. Harry Chapman is wry and observant, even as he drifts between waking and dreaming. His nurses are fond of him, the patient in the next bed tries to sell him T.S. Eliot's dentures, and his doctor resembles a fruitseller in a painting by Fillipino Lippi. He receives visits from his long-dead mother, Bartleby the Scrivener, and Babar the Elephant. Chapman takes it all in stride as Bailly tells a story about love, absurdity, and the pleasures of reading. There is nothing precious or sentimental about Chapman's deathbed musings: he's just a man making sense of the world as he always has. He is someone I would have liked to know.

David James says

Paul Bailey, Chapman's Odyssey

Despite the title Paul Bailey's new novel is hardly a sequel to Homer and still less a tribute to George Chapman, the Elizabethan poet who first made Homer accessible to a vast readership, culminating in John Keats with his sonnet, 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer.' No, our hero is not Chapman, the poet and dramatist, and his voyages, alas, are extremely constricted, for throughout the novel Harry Chapman is confined to a hospital bed, from where, forever so to speak at death's door, he is subject to an array of physical and mental tortures as he tries to put his life into some sort of perspective before his inevitable demise.

Harry is obviously, like his author, steeped in literature, a lover of poetry and the quirks of language, a sometime teacher and writer of sorts. None of this would necessarily endear him to a modern reader not a fan of highbrow English literature. The reader may well be tempted to conflate Harry with his author and find his constant so-so apt quotations to himself and to the surrounding hospital staff a little tedious and pedantic. To some extent this may be true; one would not relish spending half an hour at his hospital bedside while he spills out his learning and forever recites perfectly remembered lines. The many attendant nurses, medical orderlies, consultants and surgeons who visit him, however, seem to be fascinated and even delighted by their garrulously eccentric patient; they demand more and more. Give us a poem, Harry! Something cheerful, this time. And Harry duly obliges, sandwiching in between operations a little Shakespeare, Spenser or what-have-you before or after 'going down to the theatre.'

A clever idea, and all good fun for the Eng Lit pundit, but perhaps not for the common reader and surely not for the ward orderly? What, however, is even better fun are the voices that pursue Harry in his sleeping or semi-comatose states. Pip of *Great Expectations* visits him a few times, as does Herman Melville's *Bartleby*. His whole reading past comes back to him under or after anaesthetic. But even more insistent are the voices of his long-dead lovers and above all that of his acerbic mother, forever at his back and calling him to order. The mental and moral jumble caused by voices from his real and imagined past are even more painful and at times more exquisitely revealed than the immediate physical pain he endures from his lower bowel - and twice as embarrassing as he confides to the reader, but not the staff, his not so pretty history as a sexual deviant and moral leper.

In the end one comes to like, or even love, this hopeless and helpless wreck of a man who manages to keep his spirits up and even entertain others. For Harry the pedant and pervert, self-obsessed as we all are, reaches out from the grave (almost) to touch the reader. Here is a man, who, while being constantly confused, is in his heart suffering from very few or no delusions. Here, the reader feels, is an honest man – a deceiver who

knows he is a concealer of much that is socially unmentionable, not respectable. Ultimately Harry wins us over because his revelations allow him to be honest to himself and to let the reader (though not the medical staff) into the inner reaches of his consciousness. You don't have to be an Eng Lit wallah to enjoy this one; but if you are, then that's a bonus.

Robert Wechsler says

Bailey is a masterful writer, whose *Kitty* and *Virgil* I loved. Here, however, I found the frame too pat: a gay actor-novelist finds himself in a hospital, and his life there alternates with memories/flashbacks of his past. The chronologically-named chapters are, of course, anything but chronological, at least with respect to the past.

This was good travel reading but, unlike *Kitty and Virgil*, not very special.
A 3.5 based on the quality of the writing.

Pam says

First I've read by this Brit, but it won't be the last. Terribly ill in hospital, Harry Chapman is "visited" repeatedly by the ghosts of his dead mother and lovers and a eclectic bunch of his favorite literary characters. We learn a lot about Harry through these "conversations".

Lee says

Recreates the hospital ward atmosphere and activity very well as well as the fearful anticipation of diagnosis and treatment. The memories of the main character build into a good narrative.

Barksdale Penick says

The setting is a hospital, with an failing man thinking over his life. The writing cleverly jumps between acts and scenes in his life, just as our thoughts can. It took a bit of time to adjust to this presentation, and sometimes I had to stop and think about the story to realize where in his life his thoughts had drifted to. Overall very well done.

carelessdestiny says

Who would have thought a novel about a man in a hospital bed and about to die, could be so entraining and witty and thoughtful a not in the least bit morbid? The best part of it though, is reading the supremely elegant and lucid sentences he constructs.

Phillip Edwards says

At the front of this book, Paul Bailey expresses his "deep and abiding gratitude" to the Royal Literary Fund. He had had to turn to them for financial support in 2009 when publishers showed no interest in publishing it, despite his belief that it was as good as anything he had done since Gabriel's Lament (which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1986).

As Philip Pullman said in his rousing speech in defence of libraries recently: "the greedy ghost of market madness has got into the controlling heights of publishing. Publishers are run by money people now, not book people. The greedy ghost whispers into their ears: Why are you publishing that man? He doesn't sell enough. Stop publishing him. Look at this list of last year's books: over half of them weren't bestsellers. This year you must only publish bestsellers. Why are you publishing this woman? She'll only appeal to a small minority. Minorities are no good to us. We want to double the return we get on each book we publish."

Harry Chapman, a melancholic 70 year-old writer who describes himself as 'a common or garden queen', finds himself in hospital with stomach pains. He drifts in-and-out of consciousness: lapsing between the here-and-now and the there-and-then. Conversations with the nurses, to whom he recites poetry, blur with the internal voices of long-departed family and friends - and various literary characters, including Pip, Emma, Prince Myshkin and Bartleby the Scrivener.

Having finished Chapman's Odyssey - and it was one of those books I really didn't want to end - I would like to offer my thanks to the Royal Literary Fund as well. And also Bloomsbury for using some of the money they earned from another Harry to allow us to get to know this one. Everything Ali Smith is quoted as saying on the cover is spot on. No reviewer could fail to use the words beautiful and moving.

The reminiscences of a life. So many memories, so many people, so much poetry: treasures stored in a mind destined to be lost? Like this book nearly was? Imagine living in a world in which beautiful, moving books like this go unpublished. Like Bartleby, I would prefer not to.

Ciel Dexter says

A wonderful novel about how a writer and serious reader sees the world around him. Funny, cultured, touching, hallucinogenic and beautifully written, I couldn't recommend it more.

Natalie says

An interesting novel on the themes of death and memory. Not original enough - reminiscent of John Banville's recent *The Infinities* (man on his deathbed surveys his life and surroundings). Paul Bailey inserts himself into the book in the guise of Harry Chapman, that novelist famous for writing a book about an old guy when he was still very young. A lot of quotation from poetry and nods to Shakespeare and Marlowe. A book for literary types in the know. Not much narrative drive and I disliked the ending where the first person narration that has gone before is replaced by an omniscient third person who tells us about Harry's funeral - it would have felt more complete to end the novel when Harry's consciousness ended, on his death. Well

written and an enjoyable read with a few very good passages and interesting relationships between characters. Not ambitious enough to stay within Harry's head to the end.

Garry says

If I told you to read a book about an elderly man convalescing in hospital, would you drop everything to read it? Nah, me neither.

I read a review of this book a few months back, and it peaked my interest. I was curious, but sufficiently cautious to avoid actually going out to grab a copy. However; when I found it in a \$5 bargain basement bin at my local bookstore, I figured that I might as well get it. I'm glad that I did!

I had never heard of Paul Bailey before reading this book, but I now know that he'd been shortlisted a couple of times for the Booker Prize; in 1977 and 1986. I also found an opinion piece that in which he was critical of the 2011 Booker Prize nominees in 2011. This was the same year that Chapman's Odyssey was released and overlooked, but let's choose to overlook any potential churlishness. His complaint was that the shortlist was a little too 'eccentric' and 'readable' and 'topical', and included the following quote...

Some people balk at the word "demanding", but I am happy with it. Art of the highest order invariably makes demands on the reader, listener or spectator.

I suppose that there were some demanding elements to Chapman's Odyssey. As Harry Chapman lies in his hospital bed he is visited by a multitude of characters. Aside from doctors, nurses, the occasional visitor and fellow patient, the visitors include ghosts of his past: family, friends, lovers and the occasional virtual stranger. And then there are fictional characters from books that he had loved. And then there are passages that relive memories of important events in his life, and then there are fantastic dreams, such as the one in which Fred Astaire dances with Celeste the Elephant.

OK. Yes, I admit, that does sound 'demanding'. Trust me though, it was as entertaining as any novel that I've picked up, and surprisingly easy to read. And despite being about a dying man in hospital, you would be wrong to think it's depressing - it's most certainly not a funeral speech.

I have now read a few online newspaper reviews of Chapman's Odyssey, and I realise that there were a myriad of hidden meanings and allusions behind the stories that I just didn't get. It seems like the sort of book that could be prodded and studied by literary minds far greater than mine. I don't think this makes it 'demanding'... I think it makes it the sort of book that I would want to re-read to understand some of the additional layers that I hadn't got the first time round.

Joe says

I Review Paul Bailey's "Chapman's Odyssey"

When he's lucid, Harry, a so-so former actor turned accomplished novelist, recites T.S. Eliot and Shakespeare for the nurses and orderlies who tend him. But his periods of lucidity are ephemeral, and it's clear that he is dying.

Go to my blog:

Have Words Will Write 'Em

and then to the Minneapolis Star Tribune

--Joe
