



# Jenny

*Sigrid Undset , Tiina Nunnally (Translator)*

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When Jenny was published in 1911, Undset found herself called immoral — “this is a side of the free, artistic life that the vast majority of citizens would rather not know.” The novel tells the story of Jenny Winge, a talented Norwegian painter who goes to Rome to seek artistic inspiration but ultimately betrays her own ambitions and ideals. After falling into an affair with the married father of a would-be suitor, Jenny has a baby out-of-wedlock and decides to raise the child on her own. Undset’s portrayal of a woman struggling toward independence and fulfillment is written with an unflinching, clear-eyed honesty that renders her story as compelling today as it was nearly a century ago.

This new translation by Tiina Nunnally captures the fresh, vivid style of Undset’s writing and restores passages omitted from the only previous edition to appear in English, which was published in 1921. Most famous for her later, historical fiction set in Catholic, medieval Scandinavia, Undset stands revealed with Jenny, her first major novel, as an unsparing, compassionate, magnificent realist, the creator of works that are at once thoroughly modern and of enduring interest.

## Jenny Details

Date : Published June 1st 1998 by Steerforth (first published 1911)

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Author : Sigrid Undset , Tiina Nunnally (Translator)

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# From Reader Review Jenny for online ebook

## AnnabelLee says

I read this novel in its original language (Norwegian) and 16 year old me growing up in Trondheim, loved it. True to its realist form Undset adds sudden incidents of devastation and pain to the already melancholy plot. I still remember six years later. This was one of the great "marriage" novels in lieu of Undset's naturalist literary cousin Amalie Skram, that paved my lifelong affair with the genre.

Jenny is a budding artist in Rome. She meets and involves herself with men. Has a baby. The baby dies. End of novel. Maybe moves back to Norway, maybe not.

It is the closeness to the real experiences of women in Norway during her time that make the novel. As well as the precise and crisp language represents Undset's prominent place within this genre and the novel's place within Norwegian literary history and culture.

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## Cherie says

A- Excellent but devastatingly sad book. A young talented female artist is living in Italy, a wonderfully free life to focus on art, friendship, and fun. After a young man pursues her, she falls in love. However, love on vacation does not work out in real life. As her lover proves to be controlling, and familiar issues get in the way, she falls into a romance with a rather unusual choice. Love and heartbreak destroys her life, and this heartbreaking story is sad, gorgeously written, and will haunt the reader for a while after.

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## Gyoza says

This is a very sad story of a young woman artist who lost first her father, then a loving stepfather, too early in life and who has learned to put too high a value on independence. One of her best friends describes Jenny as generous, reliable, and always there for others, but with a strong tendency to withdraw when she herself needs help. She expresses doubt about whether it is possible to love someone and also to be dependent on them. I enjoyed reading it because it explores many of the ideas about relationships and the strong emphasis on independence that are so common now, and that are apparently not as new as we think (*Jenny* was published in 1911, 105 years ago).

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## Lissa says

Its extremely dissappointing that the description of this book on Goodreads is one enormous spoiler. I've been reading this book off and on for years (old Norwegian is difficult even when Norsk is one's first language) and have gotten past that first night when Hege first met Jenny and the others. The way Undsett writes; its

almost as if she is whispering the story in my ear, but as Jenny, not Hege. To some degree this description has robbed me of the intensity I expect to encounter in this book, consequently depleting my enthusiasm for finishing it. However, Undsett is like literary opium, her descriptions are lush, the subtle creation of tension is like a thread in a spider web which she plucks for resonance. As my Norsk improves, so too, does my ability to comprehend Undsett's eloquence. But how dreadfully careless of Goodreads to include a spoiler rather than a description.

I must say it: badly done Goodreads. Badly done indeed. Please take the time, anyone, to edit this description or add a spoiler alert. I would be most grateful if the spoiler could be erased from my memory as well!

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### **Marjorie Campbell says**

Interesting first novel for one of my favorite authors. Takes dramatic, unexpected turns and character of Jenny blossoms, withers and ... won't spoil the ending.

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### **laura says**

this book was first published in 1911. in 1928, undset won the nobel prize for literature. her earlier works, like jenny, trace the lives of young scandinavian women in a world that is still wrought with the responsibility for upholding traditional norms. jenny is about a starving artist, but not in the sense that the cliché brings to mind: she has a meager inheritance which she uses to survive. she is starving in the sense that she has yet to discover love. when she leaves her teaching position and family in norway, she travels to italy to paint. her talent is tremendous and she finds fellow country-men and -women who have also come to pursue their artistry. she works with full-hearted intensity in this community, but discovers that she desires to find true love. this impairs her vision of what she would like her life to be. she finds herself in a relationship with a fellow norwegian in sprintime. she tells herself that she is in love and they become engaged. but, when they return to norway from their italian paradise, their bond becomes strained and jenny realizes that she is not following a path that is true to her heart and her art becomes neglected. after an argument where jenny reveals that she is intending to go away for a short time, her fiancé instead leaves her and she suffers from conflicted emotions: happiness to be free again and also sorrow for not having discovered love and the loss of helge. the story continues in a complicated set of events where she has an affair of sorts with her ex-fiance's father and becomes pregnant, then flees to berlin. undset was described as portraying women "sympathetically but with merciless truthfulness." jenny fits this description well and undet is able to clearly illustrate the confusion her protagonist feels with desiring an independant persona. in the end, jenny takes the pocketknife she bought in paris and slashes her wrist in her studio. she was held back by her past and couldn't let the feelings of hope and dreams of her earlier times in italy lead her through her sorrow.

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### **Megan says**

Some books have personal expiration dates. So much of the story of Jenny is for people who are struggling through their "years of apprenticeship". There are many long passages where characters expound on the purpose of art, love, how to live, and the complexities of womanhood. What was particularly difficult to me was that after much assertion about how to be a woman and an artist, none of the women in the book are able to sustain such a life.

Parts of the story were endearing, like the scenes between Jenny and Cesca, or memories of her childhood. I felt the character of Jenny was quite well rendered up until the end. I couldn't connect the choices she made in the last chapter with the woman from the rest of the novel.

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## Rebecka says

4,5 stars.

Some classics are classics for a reason. That being said, I don't understand why this book isn't more famous, at least in Sweden (it may very well be more famous in Norway). Perhaps it's the fatalistic touch, the melodrama, and the female main character that pose a problem - because I had never heard of it before I found it a flea market 3 or so years ago. Undset is of course überknown in Scandinavia for *Kristin Lavransdatter* (which shares some traits with *Jenny*), and I read that one at age 14, but I kind of wish I could have read this one earlier as well.

At the same time, it's very fitting to read it now. The book features Jenny, who is 28 (my age!), living temporarily in Rome, pursuing a career as an artist, and who struggles to *\*be\** a person, to be social, to fall in love, etc. This is something as interesting as a book about a woman (hence a book about romance, we all know that), but about a woman who is unable to fall in love. And it's not a coming-of-age type of book, because she's already very much an adult. She has already come out of her shell, but that doesn't necessarily mean that everything will go smoothly from there.

I really, really enjoyed reading this. Undset is a fantastic author; no cardboard characters, no pointless passages, no misplaced lines or weird pacing, everything is really perfectly crafted and thought through. People talk a lot about ideas, but they never, ever sound cliché. People talk naturally, that is they interrupt themselves and each other, they don't finish their sentences, they ramble and lose track of what they were saying. In the dialogue, the only disruptive element for a modern reader is the old-fashioned danified Bokmål!. The humor - what little there is of it in a book of this serious a nature - is still funny today! Not everything in the book is actually featured on the pages; all of a sudden, a new chapter begins, and we understand immediately that some quite big events have taken place, but we are left to imagine them for ourselves. Also, perspectives change throughout the book and there's nothing confusing or unnatural about it.

Extra points, of course, for what was probably quite radical views on women and men and relation between the sexes expressed by various characters in the book (notably Gunnar).

Do they still make authors like these nowadays?

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## dely says

Sigrid Undset riesce ad entrare nella profondità dell'animo femminile con un linguaggio semplice e pacato. Tramite Jenny, il personaggio principale, fa un ritratto di donna in cui molte si possono rispecchiare anche nei giorni odierni. Il libro è stato scritto nel 1911 ma i problemi, le preoccupazioni e i pensieri che affliggono Jenny non hanno età e sono intrinseci dell'animo femminile più sensibile. Jenny, pittrice norvegese, ha quasi trent'anni ed è una donna indipendente, forte, brillante, talentuosa e

intelligente. Forte anche nei suoi valori morali, lo scopo della sua vita è quello di fare sempre la cosa giusta per non avere nulla di cui pentirsi o vergognarsi e di non far mai soffrire nessuno. È una persona buona di cuore, pura, sempre pronta ad aiutare e sostenere gli altri ma è anche una persona molto sola e severa nel giudicare se stessa. Stanca di essere sola, e rendendosi conto che soltanto il lavoro non può riempirle la vita, cerca di aprirsi all'amore per poter sperimentare l'ebbrezza dell'essere amati e dell'amare dando un senso alla propria vita. Ciò che cerca è l'amore vero, quell'affinità spirituale e intellettuale che dovrebbe unire due persone. Purtroppo le cose non vanno come aveva immaginato e quindi inizia un lavoro sempre più intenso e profondo d'introspezione per cercare di capire se stessa e ciò che vuole.

È un libro che con un ritmo lento e rilassato ci fa entrare nelle profondità recondite dell'anima della protagonista; un'anima che lentamente si schiude per essere osservata e compresa dal lettore.

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## **Claire Larson says**

This was a WILD book... Very engaging. Don't be put-off by Undset's conservative religiosity, she could write one hell of a story, (or several).

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## **Alice Poon says**

This is a heartbreaking story set in the distant past about a young Norwegian woman artist who is torn between her desire for self-development and her longing for true love. However, the values and principles behind the actions of the protagonist could well reflect the moral dilemma of many decent women of today with an educated mind. Is love or work more important?

Born to an unwholesome family where fatherly love is lacking, Jenny has always had to fend for herself while growing up. Her greatest attributes – independence, sense of responsibility, moral fortitude, diligence, compassion for the weak – could be her invincible armor against any adversity in life.

Just as she is set to go out and conquer the world, armed with artistic talent and an optimistic outlook on life, she trips up by making one small mistake – letting herself grow weak and be pampered by a short moment of tender love that she's been long thirsting for (view spoiler) – and she loses all control over her own fate. (view spoiler)

During her fateful love affair and in the aftermath, her independence, sense of responsibility and moral principles drown her in an emotional ebb of guilt, remorse and shame and abandon her to carrying all blame on her shoulders. Her disinclination to hurt others sends her into a downward spiral, from which she never recovers. Her greatest attributes become her greatest curse. Her life is ironically ruined by her longing for true love.

Jenny said this to Gunnar, which sums up her life: *“One day, I made a slight change in course. It seemed to me so difficult and harsh, living the life I thought was the most worthy – it was lonely, you know. So I veered away for a moment, wanting to be young and to play a little. And then I was caught in an undertow that carried me off, and I ended up in circumstances that I never for an instant imagined it would be possible for me to be anywhere near.”*

The novel makes one wonder: can the female soul ever overcome the longing for true love? Are women in truth just like what Gunnar describes: “*so strong and erect in her striving, and yet so frail and brittle.*”?

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### **Nicki Markus says**

Having previously enjoyed Kristin Lavransdatter, I was interested to check out some of Undset's other works. Happily, I liked this early work of hers just as much.

This is an introspective and fairly bleak piece, but it paints an interesting picture of a woman in the early 20th century, trying to find her way through love and life. Jenny is a fascinating, if not entirely sympathetic, character and I quickly became immersed in her story.

I love the descriptive prose and Undset really used her words to great effect to bring the scenes to life. The portrayal of Rome is particularly well done and evocative.

I can highly recommend this book for those who don't insist on a truly happy-ever-after ending in their literary fiction.

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### **Steven Godin says**

This was my third Norwegian writer in a row, after knut hamsun and Henrik Ibsen, but whereas they felt Scandinavian in nature, Sigrid Undset's novel 'Jenny' had more in common with E. M. Forster, Gustave Flaubert and even Thomas Hardy. I didn't really know what to expect, knowing little of both novel and writer (apart from her 1928 Nobel prize), and was taken aback by some gorgeous writing, that was lively, bright, and modernistic considering its age, before the narrative turned into a more sombre affair filled with a mournful sadness, but one that never over powered in the sentimental department.

The novel in essence, looks at the unflinchingly realistic depiction of a women struggling for independence and fulfillment in a male-dominated world. Jenny Winge is a talented young Norwegian painter who journeys to Paris, Florence and then Rome to seek inspiration. The story opens in Rome, where she and her friends spend their days pursuing their dreams, and their evenings socializing in the city's restaurants. Jenny, unlike her sexually liberal friends, vows to keep her virtue intact, that is until she meets fellow Norwegian Helge Gram. Putting aside the art and historical studies for a while, they spend much time in each others company, and eventually become lovers, with plans to marry in the coming months. The eternal city really captures a vibrancy in their coming together, like a holiday romance but one that will continue back on home soil. But this life is a world away from their native land. And it's not long before the cracks start to appear.

On returning home to Norway, Jenny meets Helge's parents, but the atmosphere in the Gram household is one full of jealousy and hate that weighs heavy on her shoulders. Helge's father Gert, a failed artist and womaniser takes an affectionate interest in Jenny, which she succumbs to in a confused and dissolutionate state. Is she love sick, or just sick? as her relationship with Helge slowly dissolves. Her plight is worsened when she discovers she is carrying Gert's child, and in a brooding mood, travels away, alone, where matters would only tragically go downhill, losing faith in herself and those trying to help her, leading to a finale that shocked, but still didn't surprise me. No happy ending here.

Undset's masterly depiction of Jenny's evolving emotions makes one realize that one is in the presence of an acute observer of the way not just lovers, but people generally behave, think about, and react to each other. Some may argue Jenny's actions of destroying her artistic ambition and herself could be deemed false or unrealistic, pushed too far, and too quickly. How can a confident young woman one minute, turn into a lost and frightened of life person the next. But who knows just how terrible she was suffering, the shame she burdened really knocked the stuffing out of her. The way she deals with her different surroundings and inner desires is realistic told, and the stream of consciousness plays a big role to show Jenny's uncertainty and conflicts, and the battle she seems to be fighting when it comes to love, a love not just for others but also herself.

The writing is direct and dramatic in a manner whereby mishap and misery are discussed openly, and the weighty issues Undset examines - unrequited love, betrayal, and mortality, are infused with a lingering melancholy. But it's not all misery, as when the sun fills Undset's heart, she writes some beautiful and idyllic parts to the story, conjuring up some wonderful imagery.

I was all set to give Jenny four stars, but thought no, as I found this to be a most fulfilling novel, and surprisingly fresh in terms of classic fiction, with some passages of writing that simply took my breath away. There is a strong sorrowful bleakness to it, but there were also moments of light, filled with warmth and comfort. Undset provided much psychological insight into the lives of her protagonists and an enviable skill to tell a capturing and realistic heartfelt story.

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### **Mary says**

Dark. Introspective. Jenny moves from Norway to Rome to get away from her family and to develop her painting and is part of a group of ex-patriots who lived a free, artistic life that in 1921 a vast majority of citizens called immoral. She ultimately betrays her own ambitions and ideals when she has an affair with the father of her boyfriend, has a baby who is born frail and dies after a few weeks, and finally gives in to the first boyfriend. A compelling and honest story.

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### **Susanne says**

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### **Melissa says**

The writing was beautiful but the ending was soooo predictable

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### **Edith says**

The Nobel Prize laureate in literature of 1928, Norwegian writer Sigrid Undset, begins her novel *Jenny* with Helge Gram's long yearned for arrival in Rome. Lost in the maze of unknown streets, he asks two Northern looking young women for help. They are Jenny Winge and her friend Cesca Jahrman, two painters living in



Rome. During the following weeks they and other friends pass much time together, above all Helge and Jenny. On her birthday in January Helge avows his love to Jenny and asks a kiss of her. At first Jenny is reluctant at first, but eventually she gives in.

The following months are filled with billing and cooing each other neglecting their friends as well as their painting and historical studies respectively. When Jenny's return home is impending in spring, they agree to get married in a couple of months, but Norway is a completely different world from Rome. Soon Jenny and Helge get estranged from one another. When Helge realizes that he isn't and can never be everything in the world to Jenny, more than her work and her friends, he breaks up with her and leaves. Later that night Helge's father Gert, a failed painter himself and a womanizer trapped in an unhappy marriage, visits Jenny to see how she is. Other visits follow and they begin an affair which Jenny ends not knowing yet that she is pregnant. She decides to have the baby alone and gives birth to a son who lives only six weeks.

Grieve-stricken and desperate Jenny travels to Rome again joining her painter friend Gunnar Heggen who does everything in his power to cheer her up. After several months he declares that he loves her and asks her to marry him, but Jenny can't make up her mind to accept the proposal. Then Helge turns up in Rome all of a sudden. Jenny isn't determined and strong enough to send Helge away and to resist his kisses. They spend the night together, but Jenny has already made up her mind to end her sufferings once and for all as soon as Helge leaves. Gunnar remains behind to mourn her at her grave.

Considering that *Jenny* has first been published in 1911, thus more than hundred years ago, it is not just a realistic, but also a very modern novel. It concentrates on the protagonist's inner development and the way how she copes with her surroundings and her desires. Consequently the stream of consciousness is an important stylistic device used to show Jenny's inner confusion and conflicts.

I have been agreeably surprised by this almost forgotten classic of Scandinavian literature. *Jenny* was a read which I enjoyed very much although I couldn't always comprehend why Jenny and the others acted or thought the way they did.

To read the complete review please click [here](#) to go to my blog Edith's Miscellany.

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## Sara says

My first Sigrid Undset, *Jenny* is the tale of a woman who is undone by her high moral standards and her desire for true love. At twenty-eight, Jenny is already at an advanced age for any unmarried woman of the time. She is a compassionate and caring person, but she holds her emotions at arm's length in order to avoid any moral slip-up, primarily because she does not want to damage her chances with the "right man" when he finally comes. She wishes to be able to give herself to someone with complete trust and abandon, but consumed by that desire, she agrees to wed the wrong man.

Her friend, Cesca, states about herself,

*That is why I think sometimes I ought to go into a convent. When I am outside a trouble I seem to understand it all, but when I am mixed up in it myself I can't see a thing.*

Perhaps this is true of all of us. It certainly would apply to most of the characters here...they do not see their own limitations or the solutions to their own problems clearly at all. Jenny, I think, is particularly unable to see either the flaws in her plan for her life or how to move forward after her mistake, which shatters them, has been made.

The way Jenny stumbles into her tragic course is so poignant. She is so unaware of her danger before she is consumed by it.

*One day, I made a slight change in course. It seemed to me so difficult and harsh, living the life I thought was the most worthy – it was lonely, you know. So I veered away for a moment, wanting to be young and to play a little. And then I was caught in an undertow that carried me off, and I ended up in circumstances that I never for an instant imagined it would be possible for me to be anywhere near.*

I was reminded of Edith Wharton while reading this novel. It deals with a smart woman who has both intelligence and skill, but who is tied to societal norms and expectations and finds happiness a rather elusive creature. It explores the nature of love and desire in ways that must have been a little shocking for its contemporary audience.

And, amid this confusion, we are offered some views that seemed undeniably true to me.

*Shall I tell you something of what I know about love, little one? If I did not believe in it, I should not have the least particle of faith in men--or in myself. Do you believe that it is only women who think life meaningless, and find their hearts empty and frozen if they have nothing but their work to love or to depend upon? Do you believe there is a single soul living who has not moments of doubt in himself? You must have somebody in whose keeping you can give the best in you--your love and your trust.*

I think this is true. Human beings who try to substitute work for love and family, often find themselves alone and sadder. Every heart yearns for a partner in life who will feed the soul. If you close yourself to pain you might also close yourself to joy. But what to do when you have opened up to the possibility of pain and find you have made a mistake in your choice?

This is a moving, well-composed story and one that I'm sure I will be thinking about for a while.

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## **Linnéa says**

Jeg vet ikke helt hva jeg skal syntes om denne boken. Den er forferdelig, og jeg ble gal av å lese den. Men å lese under tvang (særemne) er kanskje grunnen.

Boken er jo skrevet vakkert, men de utallige sidene med beskrivelser av omgivelsene ble jeg litt gal av. Kanskje det var for å gjennomsyre at flere karakterer, inkludert hovedpersonen, er malere, men jeg kan ikke si jeg klarte å se for meg utsikten som ble beskrevet. Jeg ble bare utålmodig, for ting skjedde utrolig fort når jeg ikke ville det, også tok det evigheter før noe som ga mening skjedde.

I tillegg kunne hele siste kapittel vært kuttet ut, for det var så unødvendig når siste halvdel av nest siste kapittel var dedikert til det samme. Det var en grei slutt, men det var så overflødig.

Jeg kommer sikkert til å endre mening om noe etter jeg har skrevet om boken. Men jeg likte den, trass den mørke tonen den hadde og irritasjonen den vekket i meg.

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## **Stina says**

It is a bit slow and difficult to read in the beginning. Should probably mention that I read the original norwegian version, I would imagine the english translation to be a bit easier. Despite this, Jenny really is an excellent book once you get into it. The last hundred pages or so are unbelievably intense, and the ending is quite shocking and unexpected. Also, Undset put so many beautiful images, you can almost feel like you are there, in Rome in the 1900s. This book really touched me, and I think it will stay with me forever.

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