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Winner of the Orange Prize for Fiction 2001

Dark Places Details

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Author : Kate Grenville

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Erin says

Novels that rely heavily on Freudian and Lacanian references and images have no business being even remotely enjoyable (see: Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*). Likewise a first person narration of a violent, predatory, sadistic and narcissistic protagonist are, at best, an exercise for the reader in empathizing with the darker aspects of humanity (see: Nabokov's *Lolita*), and done poorly, rewarding for the reader in the sense of self-satisfaction of never being like the narrator (or even believing that such a narrator could ever find a real, living equivalent) (see: the latter half of *The Kindly Ones*).

So it is that Kate Grenville's *Albion's Story* is better than it should be, but still a long way off from good. The Freudian and Lacanian emphasis is repetitive and exhausting, but before becoming so (that is, in the first 50 pages) the narrator's anxiety about his (sexual) maturation, virility and coherent identity are, somewhat, intriguing. What, he asks, does it mean to be a "whole" individual? what is required of man of reason and what is required of a man of nature? Unfortunately these questions continue to be asked throughout the novel, never gaining complexity, proposing a few answers.

The narrator is despicable. He rapes, degrades, and emotionally abuses every woman he encounters in the text, including his wife and daughter. His narrative voice repeatedly proclaims that the women "want" this kind of abuse; or, justifies abusive actions based on an innate feminine weakness of will/intelligence that requires his intervention. Such misogyny is taxing for any reader - even when these thoughts are made absurd by the sheer repetitiveness of their utterance. I was, therefore, surprised to find myself sympathizing, however briefly and reluctantly, with the narrator in the last ten pages of the narrative. I can only account for this sympathy by supposing that Grenville succeeds in temporarily separating Albion's sadism from his desperate loneliness, traits that the narrative otherwise represents as begetting one another.

Reading *Albion's Story* one cannot help but wonder whether the novel might have made an entirely successful short story. A compressed version would allow the reader to sustain a degree of openness to Albion's character that the repetitive misogynist thoughts and actions negate. Likewise the heavy-handed layering of Freudian and Lacanian thinking might be parsed and focused. As it is, the gem of the last ten pages is not equal to the slog of the first three hundred.

Velvetink says

It's rare that I don't finish a book. This one is one of them.

Marianne says

Dark Places (aka *Albion's Story*) is the prequel to *Lilian's Story* by Kate Grenville, although it was published after *Lilian's Story*. Albion Gidley Singer can be defined as: the son of George Augustus Singer and Angelica Singer; the brother of Kristabel Singer; an acquaintance of James Ogilvie; proprietor of Singer Enterprises and pillar of society; husband of Norah Singer; father of Lilian and John Singer. But who is he really? He cannot grasp his real self; he feels he is an empty, hollow shell. This novel is filled with beautiful,

evocative prose and haunting characters. The story dovetails neatly with events in *Lilian's Story*, and, after reading that novel, it is intriguing to see Albion's point of view of events described in common. It is also interesting to come to understand how Lilian's father came to be the way he was. A thought-provoking read.

Vikki Patis says

This book is a hauntingly dark train wreck. You know what's going to happen, you can feel it coming from the beginning, but when it finally arrives, there's no time to feel smug about predicting it.

Albion Singer is an awful, misogynistic man of his time, full of nothing but contempt and complete ignorance (dressed up as "male intelligence" in a finely tailored suit) for women. You meet the many faces of Albion - disappointing son, inadequate father, abusive husband - but also the many faces of the women he uses throughout his life. His mother, who loves him, receives only distaste in return, and is cast away as he "becomes a man". His sister, unfeminine and a tease, the first of his many victims. His wife, subject to his depraved ideas of sex; the prostitutes and girls that work in his shop, subject to his sexual advances; his daughter's friends that he ogles. And Lilian, his daughter, a tragic figure, confused in his mind and utterly innocent.

This shows very clearly what ignorance can do. Men growing up to believe that they are better, stronger, smarter, and treating women with disdain. Society teaching women to cover up, look pretty, how to bag a husband. This may be historical fiction, but the themes are sadly not historical. They are current, and they are awful.

Troy says

A compelling and disturbing account of a misogynist in the truest sense.

A prequel to *Lillian's Story*, it's the life of Lillian's father Albion written in first person. It's superbly written, but Albion is a monster. Power hungry, abusive. I pitied Norah first.

4 Stars.

Alison Newell says

I cannot think when I last read such a potent and vivid depiction of character as Kate Grenville's creation Albion Singer. His darkness and brutality, coupled with - indeed, caused by - his crippling sense of personal inadequacy, come something close to Emily Bronte's Heathcliff. In both cases the reader is left feeling deeply conflicted.

As a boy Albion is mollycoddled by his mother and intimidated by this father. She over-feeds him and he sneers and derides him, and he is bullied at school. As a coping-mechanism, Albion arms himself with facts - a veritable disciple of Dickens' Gradgrind with whom Albion also bears useful comparison - which satisfy if they do not impress his father and armour-plate Albion in those awkward social encounters in which a young man is supposed to be able entertain the young ladies with appropriate small-talk. His alphabetic recital of the world's rivers might not interest anyone, but at least they fill up the embarrassing silences.

In time, and especially on the death of his father, Albion creates an entirely new fact for himself - which is, in fact, himself - a new Albion. This Albion is confident and unassailable; nobody's fool - he knows what's what. Whatever this self-assured Albion thinks is indubitable fact; he's unshakably certain - but wrong - about everything. The wispy, insecure Albion is kept firmly entombed within this iron carapace but unfortunately, just as it allows no hint of weakness or emotion out, so it prevents any ray of sentiment from getting in. Neither does it allow for any self-doubt. The result is an inflated alter-ego without a shred of human feeling, completely devoid of empathy; a deluded brute who imposes his own heartless logic onto the world.

With inexorable, ice-cold rationality Albion takes a wife and fathers children. All are a terrible disappointment to him - their failing, of course, not his. He molests his staff and counts them lucky to have attracted his notice. So complete is his belief in his created persona that when he visits prostitutes he scarcely feels it necessary to leave any money - their services surely stem from genuine - and entirely understandable - attraction and admiration for him!

But he meets his match in his daughter, Lilian, who refuses to step into the mould he has cast for her, with truly shocking, dreadful consequences.

Albion would be ridiculous if he was not so coldly cruel, and yet, at his core, his pulpy, vulnerable ego is ours too and saves him - just - from being entirely monstrous. We despise and detest him but we pity him too. This is Kate Grenville's great achievement.

Gravitating around Albion are his victims, satellites caught in the web of his towering self-made façade: Norah, his fluttering, intimidated wife; John, his frail, over-awed son; Rundle, long-time clerk of the company whose gentle autonomy is undermined by Albion's officious interference. And Lilian; clever and beautifully buxom, loud and boisterous, perfectly at home in her own capacious skin: the person Albion should have been.

The language of *Dark Places* is hyper-real, cringingly vivid. Kate Grenville's bodies are tangible flesh and tacky blood; she is merciless about the folds and wobbles, the secretions and smells, the pinched restrictions and sweaty discomfort of Victorian fashion in a hot and fly-infested climate. Her description of the Company picnic is a tour de force.

But Albion Singer remains the central interest of this brave novel. As a study of the bully, the control-freak, the abuser, it is unparalleled.

I have been disappointed with some of Kate Grenville's later novels; nothing, in my opinion, has come close to *The Idea of Perfection*, but *Dark Places* has restored my confidence.

Nick says

For 300 Pages of "*Dark Places*" the reader takes a comic journey through the bourgeois grotesque of middle class 20th century Australia. It reminded me of the Southern American grotesques of Eudora Welty, misshapen characters with a comic flair, only transplanted to the land down under. The lead character, Albion Gidley Singer, is the epitome of corrupt patriarchy in a bourgeois society, and seems to be completely indifferent to it, even innocent -- a big, overblown beach ball of a man drifting (or lazily bouncing) through life.

But as the last pages turn dark, we see that Albion is anything but innocent. And, in reality, we've read that about him that all along. He gropes through one sexual escapade after another with seeming indifference, only rising to genuine feeling in the two episodes in which he relates to other men.

That should be telling enough for how he mistreats the women in his life. It's as if he falls into situations with

them, a complete innocent, and then completely abandons any sense of morals for a devil-may-care attitude. Or maybe it's just a complacency -- "Now-I-have-to-get-through-this." At any rate, it's an attitude which turns bad, monstrously bad, in all cases.

I gave it four stars because it's not perfect. The author paints her story as a gothic portrayal of how a monstrous man turns monstrous while maintaining an unknowing innocence. But the comic nature of most of the book masks that horrible side and that, though wonderfully ambiguous, makes the storytelling a little uneven. But it's a story that definitely makes a reader think about how 20th century society could create, and even applaud, a monster such as Kate Grenville has created here.

Jenny Thomas says

Excellent, compelling writing, yet reading it is an unpleasant, upsetting experience. Every character is ugly, pathetic and to be despised as seen through Singers eyes....I tried 'Lilian's Story' first, but that was equally miserable, depressing and with no character to lighten the general ugliness and nastiness of Kate Genvilles world. A shame.....

Trevor says

What a wonderful portrayal of an absolutely awful man.

Albion Gidley Singer is a monster of a man, who puts down everyone around him, and in particular the women in his life - his mother, his wife, his female work colleagues and of course his daughter, who in his eyes can do not good. His obsession to put down his daughter at every turn is so overwhelming that it leads to tragedy, which eventually leads to his own demise.

Kate Grenville has written a great portrayal of a hideous man, but one which you cannot put down, because it is so well written and compelling. Surely this must be the sign of a great book.

Katie says

I can't give this any more than three stars. It disgusts me. The character disgusts me, but actually...for that, I like the book. I needed to know why someone like Albion would do what he did to Lilian, and that is the only reason I read this book. I hate his decisions. I hate the hollow being that he was written to be, and the way that he found his way to a "whole" existence. But I didn't find him entirely unrelatable. Which is scary, but also wonderful.

Aside from that, I also just appreciate this book for what it for what it is. The writing style is lovely, and easy to read. I had already come to know the characters from Lilian's Story, but I feel like I gained greater insight through Albion's eyes, which I suppose was sort of the point of this book, added perspective.

In short, I suppose, it's painful and grotesque, but beautiful in an exposing-the-darkness-of humanity-as-something-not-so-alien kind of way.

Text Publishing says

There's been a lot of hype about a certain thriller called *Dark Places*, which has recently received the A-list movie treatment.

Well, this isn't it. But it did take the title before it was cool to do so. Kate Grenville ftw.

<https://www.textpublishing.com.au/boo...>

'This is a dark tale, told with surprising humour.'

New Yorker

'A compelling narrative, rendered with compassion.'

Newsday

The ambition behind it is met at almost every point by Grenville's talent: unmistakable voice, solid intelligence, beautiful sharp language.'

Sunday Age

'A ventriloqual tour de force.'

Sydney Morning Herald

'There is nothing like a re-jacketing to bring a great book back into the foreground. Dark Places trumps most of Grenville's other books and proves that she is one of Australia's top authors. A companion volume to Lillian's Story, this is the dark tale of Lillian's father whose abuse led to her madness. This sensitively told story places Sydney in its historical context and unpacks the sins of our fathers in a visceral way.'

Brisbane Sunday Mail

Gay Harding says

Very early on I disliked the main character Albion Singer intensely, yet I felt compelled to read on. Kate Grenville has an uncanny way of getting inside the head of a monster of a man who uses people in ways to achieve how he believes a man should act at various stages of life based on facts he has gathered from books. Fascinating!

Marisa says

Albert Gideon is probably one of the most vile characters in fiction. His incredible misunderstanding of women makes for a compelling, yet disturbing read. I wonder what commentary Grenville's 2008 work thought to stimulate.

Ashley Wigglesworth says

Beautifully written but holy smokes, it is brutal to read. I could barely get through it and the end was the hardest part. I probably should have started with Lilian's Story. I'm starting on that one next but this one left me pretty fatigued about the whole storyline. Perhaps before the "Age of Trump", I could have been a little more objective, but a story featuring this level of blatant and audacious misogyny and narcissism is hitting a little too close to home these days. I'll also say if you are someone for whom sexual assault is a sensitive or difficult subject, this could be a very difficult book to read. Tread lightly.

Eleanor says

A convincingly done portrait of a monster, who tries to cover up his own self-loathing by abusing everyone in his power - mentally, physically and sexually. An unpleasant read but a compelling one.

3.5 stars.
