



The Dean's Watch

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The cathedral Dean, Adam Ayscough, holds a deep love for his parishioners, but he is held captive by an irrational shyness and intimidating manner. He strikes up an unlikely friendship with Isaac Peabody, an obscure watchmaker who does not think he or God have anything in common. This leads to an unusual spiritual awakening that touches the entire community.

The Dean's Watch Details

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From Reader Review *The Dean's Watch* for online ebook

Tadiana ☆Night Owl? says

Before a few Goodreads friends strongly recommended this 1960 novel by Elizabeth Goudge, I had never heard of this author or any of her books. But these friends were so enthusiastic about *The Dean's Watch* that I had to read it – which meant buying an actual copy of the paperback online, since it's not in ebook form, or in the library, or even in my local bookstores. But I'm glad to say the search was worth it.

This is a lovely, inspiring novel set in an English town in the 1870s. The main characters are a diverse set: Isaac Peabody is an older clockmaker, a lifelong bachelor who lives with his embittered sister Emma. He lives for his work with clocks and watches, both creating them and repairing and maintaining them for others.

Every clock of importance in the aristocratic quarter of the city was in his care, intimately known to him and loved and cherished during half a lifetime... Isaac's humility did not discriminate between man and man and scarcely between man and watch. In his thought men were much like their watches. The passage of time was marked as clearly upon a man's face as upon that of his watch and the marvelous mechanism of his body could be as cruelly disturbed by evil hazards. The outer case varied, gunmetal or gold, carter's corduroy or bishop's broadcloth, but the tick of the pulse was the same, the beating of life that gave such a heartbreaking illusion of eternity.

The most intricate and beautiful watch in the city belongs to Adam Ayscough, the Dean of the city cathedral.

The Dean is a brilliant but homely and cripplingly shy man who nevertheless has an absolute gift for cleansing organizations of corruption – be they schools or religious organizations or cities. Although Isaac the clockmaker and the Dean belong to completely different social circles, they become friends through their shared interests in horology (clockmaking), and they begin to affect each other's lives in unexpected ways.

Surrounding these two central characters, moving in and through their lives, are several other unique characters: Polly, who is Emma and Isaac's maid, who is poor in worldly possessions but rich in love and joyfulness; Job, a long-suffering young man apprenticed to a cruel fishmonger, whose artistic soul yearns to make beautiful things and to love Polly; Garland, the Ayscoughs' dedicated butler; and others.

Equally important are the non-human characters in the story: the town cathedral that inspires the Dean and many others, but whose size and darkness scare Isaac to death. The city itself, with its aristocratic quarters, its streets of genteel poverty, and its appalling slums. The watches and clocks that bring order and loveliness to their lives.

This is an unabashedly spiritual story, exploring how God affects our lives and how people can touch each other's lives for good, but I didn't find it sappy or overdone. It's inspiring but at the same time gently humorous and charming. As the Dean watches over the city in his twilight years, he learns more than he ever

thought he would about loving and helping people, and how much the people around him also love him.

Highly recommended!!

Amy says

"Could mere loving be a life's work?"

I cannot tell you how much I loved this book...how much the "simple" act of loving, of reaching out beyond ourselves has far reaching consequences. A timely and beautiful challenge to me as a wife, mother, and friend. This book moved me to tears and Goudge's characters mean SO much to me, her sense of place is WONDERFUL...I was transformed to this cathedral town. The nature descriptions were vivid and gorgeous. Sigh.

Theresa says

This old-fashioned book was a joyful and inspirational place to wind up at this holiday. The author beautifully ties up themes of human and spiritual love within the theme of watch/clockmaking.

Beth Bonini says

"Life had taken on a strange richness since Mr. Peabody had sidled like a terrified crab into his study, had lifted the thin gold shell of his watch and show him the hidden watchcock. Until now life for him had meant the aridity of earthly duty and the dew of God. Now he was aware of something else, a world that was neither earth nor heaven, a heartbreaking, fabulous, lovely world where the conies take refuge in the rainbowed hills and in the deep valleys of the unicorns the songs are sung that men hear in dreams, the world that the poets know and the men who make music."

Even in her realistic stories, like this one - set in a Cathedral city in England during the 1870s - there is the trademark Goudge whimsy, always alive to the magic of the world. The reader is always aware of Goudge's deep religious faith, but it manifests itself in a deep love and wonder for God's creation. She is a unique writer - very old-fashioned, I suppose - but her writing has an enduring beauty to it. I love her writing; like the best children's books, its simple wisdom has the power to move and comfort me.

Only when I finished the book, did I think about how the title has a double meaning. It refers, on the literal level, to the ancient timepiece that was handed down to the Dean (Adam Ayscough), and which he later bequeaths to Isaac Peabody, the watchmaker. But more importantly, it refers to the Dean's 'watch' over the city that has been entrusted into his care. All his life, the Dean has had a sense of dutiful vocation - and he has attempted to eradicate evil where he has found it - but he has struggled to feel or show love. At the end of his life, he discovers the joy (and sometimes pain) of becoming entangled with the lives around him.

The book has a small cast of varied characters: the watchmaker Isaac Peabody, his embittered sister Emma, their cheerful maid Polly, the young apprentice Job, the elderly Miss Montague, a wilful child called Bella and several others. The Dean finds a way to befriend each of them, for mutual benefit. The novel is about the qualities of service, faith and love, but that definition doesn't do justice to the charm of the story.

Katherine says

This book stands at the top of my list of favorite novels. It's an old-fashioned story but one with such depth and spirituality, wisdom, and beautiful writing that it has found its way into my heart and remains there. Whenever I feel a real need for comfort and truth I know I can turn to Elizabeth Goudge's books and find it in abundance. I love almost everything Goudge has written but in my opinion this is, without question, her best.

Highest recommendation, a book to treasure and re-read often.

Hana says

At first *The Dean's Watch* seems no more consequential than a lovely tour through a picturesque English village, with a little talk about the town's history and the craft of watchmaking offered after tea.

Then the first accident happens: Isaac Peabody, an elderly, desperately shy watchmaker has two repaired watches to return to their owners, but somehow, a watch paper inscribed with a bit of doggerel verse has gone missing from one customer's watch and ends up inserted in the watchcase of the brilliant and terrifying Dean of Ely's great cathedral.

Isaac always tries to avoid meeting the Dean when he goes to wind the Deanery clocks, yet this time he is caught on the wrong side of the green baize door and finds himself facing the tall black figure holding the returned watch in one hand. 'Personal terror was lost in professional anxiety. Had he failed in his mending of the watch?...He came nearer and his heart nearly stopped...By mistake he had put one of the watch papers he kept for his humbler clients inside the Dean's watch. And what was on it? Several of his watch papers were comic ones, some even vulgar. "It was an accident. Please forgive me, sir."'

This is what the watch paper said:

*I labour here with all my might,
To tell the time by day or night;
In thy devotion copy me,
And serve thy God as I serve thee.*

To tell what happens next would be to deprive you of the pleasure of watching this delicate story unfold, softly, petal by petal. Because the accident was a hidden miracle, and what happens next is a series of small changes, of chance encounters, and moments of compassion that alter dozens of lives.

Each one of the many characters who people this little village in the Fens of Cambridgeshire is drawn with perfection, and the descriptions of the land, the town and the churches are breathtakingly exquisite.

This is a joyful and very old-fashioned book. Authors don't write books like this anymore; no one *thinks* like this anymore. But beyond the literary mastery, for those who enjoy gently told tales, this is a story that lifts the heart.

Content rating G.

Carol She's So Novel?? says

*"About the novels of Elizabeth Goudge there is always something of the fairy-tale, and **The Dean's Watch** is full of the enchantment of goodness- it has the timelessness that marks the author's best work"*
The Scotsman"

From the back cover of my copy - & I don't know if I can improve on this review quotation.

I'll try.

I wasn't well whilst I was reading this novel, so I had trouble getting into it at first, gave it another shot & was swept into a world of magic!

My sisters are wonderful people and one of them has the gift of making people (well, me!) believe that they are better people than they actually are when you are with her. For me, the best of Goudge's writing has that quality. And this book is one of her best. Goudge's characters have flaws, but she *loves* them, and you come to love them too. I was bawling my eyes out from Chapter 12 onwards, but Goudge's sentimental style is never treacly. I *enjoyed* feeling that much emotion!

This would be an ideal Christmas read and I may reread then to get the whole Goudge experience.

My copy is illustrated. I'll put up an example here - I always worry another librarian will think Cover Artist & delete the illustrator credit!

Kelsey Bryant says

I LOVED it! Elizabeth Goudge has done it again for me.

It's hard to know where to start on a review. Maybe I could list the many things that made the book for me?

Elizabeth Goudge's writing style is rich and descriptive and bears a fairytale quality, yet tells stories of realistic settings and daily life. It brings out the beautiful in this world. She shows that, despite sadness and ugliness, there is much that is lovely that we should dwell upon.

It's a tale of redeemed lives. I adore stories that show broken lives put back together by God's love.

She offers rich spiritual insights that you can apply to your own life. She puts you in adoration of the Holy One; her writing imparts reverence for Him.

It has characters whose souls sink into yours so that you wish you knew them. (Most of them, anyway. There are those who need a lot of improvement before they'd be halfway pleasant companions!) They are each unique and easy to distinguish from one another, which makes for a very enjoyable and realistic cast of characters. They are deep—Goudge delves into the innermost spirits of many of them. They transform, like real people. They are English Victorians and therefore lead interesting lives, vastly different from my own, but yet familiar and loveable because I know aspects of their world from classic literature.

The setting is a character in itself. The cathedral, the city (which is never named), the fen country (located in eastern England, north of London), the clockmaker's shop—they are all portrayed in so much detail it's as if you were there seeing them. Just like the human characters, you wish you could know this setting in person!

She attaches importance and symbolism to objects (usually beautiful objects you want to feast your eyes upon). There are such scrumptious things in *The Dean's Watch* as a celestial clock (clocks and watches galore, actually), cathedral carvings and stained glass, and three darling umbrellas. It makes the story tangible...our lives are full of physical objects that we ascribe importance to, and that come to symbolize to us significant events or people. I know I'm above-average sentimental, but all of us hold on to objects because of the people they remind us of, or the feelings they conjure.

The story was really well crafted. Even though some of the things that occur could be considered ordinary, they are anything but in the light of her pen. She makes life epic. At the end I almost felt the same sense of triumph against all odds that I got from the ending of *Return of the King*. It makes you look at your life in the same light—what will you allow God to accomplish in it?

In short, Elizabeth Goudge is the first author I've found who I'd wholly like to write like. I feel a kinship with her—she writes such soul-satisfying books!

Susan in NC says

What a beautiful, sentimental (without being at all mawkish or maudlin) novel! This was my first Elizabeth Goudge novel, and it will not be my last.

So many wonderful characters - the Dean, his cold but beautiful wife, his many friends in the cathedral city: clockmaker Isaac, his brilliant apprentice Job, the elderly invalid Miss Montague, and the terrifying toddler (wasn't sure of her exact age), Bella. I read this book with the Retro Reads group, and in the discussion one of our members pointed out that although child characters often don't work in books, Goudge had the gift of making each character vital to the plot; Bella is a self-confident, determined little girl who keeps her nanny, her grandparents, and any other adult who comes into her orbit on their toes! No saccharine little miss for Goudge, Bella is a delight in any scene she blows through.

I think my personal favorite character was Polly, an orphan girl who keeps house for Isaac and Emma; she personifies love and comfort and joy to everyone around her. She never overthinks life or suffers from the “bad times” or moods suffered by the artistic craftsmen Isaac and Job, who becomes her beau, or the misery and repression of religious zeal, like Emma, her mistress. She brings love and comfort and warmth to everyone around her!

A wonderful, beautifully written, old-fashioned novel. I loved it, and look forward to reading more of this author’s work.

Barb in Maryland says

What a marvelous book. Very old-fashioned, very spiritual but never preachy or saccharine. Goudge has such a way with characters--every one of the people she involves in her story is so real, so nuanced. No cardboard cut-outs here! I enjoyed meeting all of them, especially the Dean, Adam Ayscough and Isaac Peabody, clock maker *extraordinaire*. And Miss Montague, a very wise and wonderful old woman who knows that love is the answer. And the two young people, Polly (who is naturally happy) and Job (needs to find happiness), and... well, if I go on I'll end up naming almost everyone! This one will stick with me for a long time.

Now to track down a copy for my own shelves, preferably one with the lovely line drawings by A R Whitear. The library wants their copy back. Imagine that!

Lora says

Beautiful Christian writing without that sticky sweet bit that too much of the more modern Christian writing gets. This is fantastic stuff. Loved it. Too many exquisite passages to include here. Too many real heart felt interactions. Finely chiseled humor. Glorious. There, I gushed. I'm done now. If i could give this book 6 stars, I would. Possibly more.

Sylvester says

That image of Isaac the watchmaker stooped over his work in the lamp lit workshop is just so endearing to me. Within the covers of this book, an individual has power to lift people and effect change in a way I believe is possible but rarely witness in real life. Goudge gets very close to over-sentimentalizing without actually tipping over the edge (in my opinion). She is so good at creating atmosphere, I thoroughly enjoyed this world she created, and wished I could stay. Each individual carries a light, it seems - how else can I describe it?!! The world out here seems very cold by comparison, even though it follows the same pattern. This book is the fire to warm our hands by. Loved it.

Jeanette says

Often when reading poster's reviews, I am struck by how much superlatives are used. Often. I have been guilty myself. But not as often as I view here.

Well, this one can't be set into those same scales as "the best", IMHO. It's that good. It's better.

When this novel was written, there seemed to be a much higher regard for self-examination. But that's only one pivotal point in this novel.

It starts off slow and in a rather tedious progression to the history of a Cathedral, and its authority or district leader throughout 400 years or more. A history also of timepieces, watches, clocks from those eras and through the eyes of the present city dwelling watchmaker, Isaac.

But the center is truly the Cathedral city itself. It too, works like a time piece. The city in England that grows as a market town in the fens, around the Cathedral on its hill. The city that is not London of voluminous strangers.

And we get here 4 to 10 exact personal prisms of individual personalities for the people who have lived in this fen placed city, all of their lives. Some to a nearly complete cognition and others to merely a smaller reflective mirror to part of the crystal or flint inside. They are everyday people. Everyday people who strive-tow the lines. People with a job. And beyond that a place or fixture in their unique societal puzzle. And without them the puzzle lacks. It would not be complete. Like a jigsaw 2000 piece set with 10 key pieces missing.

But beyond this tremendous frame for the art in this novel- Elizabeth Goudge has a masterpiece of individuals' evaluations upon themselves in the center in spectacular oils. Oils of emotive marvels and blessed by Light that engulfs them. The shadows in this masterpiece are not black, they may be dark, but it is the dark of quiet, peace and eventual contentment. Yet it is not free from all sorrow.

They are flawed, these everyday people. They are often unsuccessful, or beyond any notice, or consistently rejected, or ill, or tired, or with odd physical flaws. But they have and hold their identity.

This doesn't begin to describe the peace achieved through these self-evaluations. And the learning to accept the simple joys and being filled with God's love. The chapter on Miss Montague, her thoughts, that chapter alone is worth the 5 stars. Joy in all the small things.

There is also some inclusion to fate here. Read it, and see if you don't see similarities in your own life. How having a fall over a rug, or an open door in a strange place, or just having an odd encounter while shopping or a look over a pew- how all of that can change a whole life! Not often, at all. But I do know it has happened to me. One time when I was very young and locked myself out of the house comes to mind.

This is a book to take very slowly. And to not be discouraged by the long (I can just hear the "boring" swears resounding) introduction and time piece lessons- but to continue to the crux. Come into that dark foyer and into the Cathedral and just sit awhile. Please read this one.

Highly, highly recommend. 6 Stars

And I know they were not contemporaries, but why is Dickens read and not Goudge. That's a travesty.

Elisabeth says

I never know what to make of Elizabeth Goudge. I see her categorized as a Christian author, and her books often have religious themes woven closely through them; and yet she can get much too mystical for my taste, to the point where I wonder whether the Christianity presented in her books is genuine or something to be handled with caution.

In *The Dean's Watch*, the bothersome elements include the complete blurring of the lines between the Catholicism in the history of the fictional cathedral town and the (presumably) Church of England diocese now established there; and too much of a sense of spiritual things being bound up in things and places—i.e. the way it always seems to be the Cathedral itself exercising some sort of mystical influence over the people, not purely their relationship to God.

The theme of the story is the beauty that results from people showing genuine love (not in a romantic sense) for each other, and mostly this seems to be correctly traced back to the influence of divine love on them. There's even a couple of references to divine love exercised through Calvary and to Jesus taking men's sins in his own body. Yet there seems to be a tiny but vital hole in the theology, in that there's no reference to individual repentance or saving belief in Christ—when the Dean speaks of the atonement, that omission almost seems to imply that it automatically applies to all of humanity.

In a purely artistic sense *The Dean's Watch* is a delight, with sparkingly descriptive writing, memorable and lovable characters—Polly, Job, Miss Montague, Garland, Bella—and a moving story. There's also a lovely thread of appreciation for artistic creativity woven through it. I felt conflicted when I finished, because I very much enjoyed the story itself—and also appreciated a novel that could make religious themes so central to the story without being the least dull or preachy—but couldn't get past the fact that the theology felt incomplete at best.

Poiema says

This is my second Elizabeth Goudge read, and I am noticing her propensity to create characters that have disfigurements or oddities. Instead of making them victims or underdogs, she is able to magnify the strengths that each character has developed as a result of their suffering. The parson suffering from dementia, the ugly dean, the watchmaker who goes on drinking binges, the lame old maid who is imprisoned in her home----all considered the "least of these" and all possessing qualities that are the saving grace to others.

Goudge has a very literary touch with the pen and her writing has a depth that causes me to stop and ponder. She melds together elements of history, art, and music. In the case of this book, she explores horology (a new word to me!), the art of making clocks and watches. She weaves many spiritual insights in with her telling, but keeps her analogies subtle. You have to think about them and I prefer that over overtly "preachy" insights.

The title has a dual interpretation---just lovely! You can't go wrong with this book. Here are a few quotes I highlighted:

"There was nowadays an integrity about his obstinacy; his refusal to accept his father's God had in it something of the courage and fire of the true faith."

"Could mere loving be a life's work? Could it be a career like marriage or nursing the sick or going on the stage? Could it be adventure?"

"Until now she had only read her Bible as a pious exercise, but now she read it as an engineer reads a blueprint and a traveler a map"

"Why should we always want a light? He chose darkness for us, darkness of the womb and of the stable, darkness in the garden, darkness on the cross and in the grave. Why do I demand certainty? That is not faith."
