



The Laments

George Hagen

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Meet the Laments—the affably dysfunctional globetrotting family at the center of George Hagen’s exuberant debut novel.

Howard is an engineer who dreams of irrigating the Sahara and lives by the motto “Laments move!” His wife Julia is a fiery spirit who must balance her husband’s oddly peripatetic nature with unexpected aspirations of her own. And Will is the “waif with a paper-thin heart” who is given to Howard and Julia in return for their own child who has been lost in a bizarre maternity ward mishap. As Will makes his way from infancy to manhood in a family that careens from continent to continent, one wonders where the Laments will ever belong.

In Bahrain, Howard takes a job with an oil company and young Will makes his first friend. But in short order he is wrenched off to another land, his mother’s complicated friendship with the American siren Trixie Howitzer causing the family to bolt. In Northern Rhodesia, during its last days as a white colony, the twin enfants terribles Marcus and Julius are born, and Will falls for the gardener’s daughter, a girl so vain that she admires her image in the lid of a biscuit tin. But soon the family’s life is upturned again, this time by their neighbor Major Buck Quinn, with his suburban tirades against black self-rule. Envisioning a more civilized life on “the sceptered isle,” the Laments board an ocean liner bound for England. Alas, poor Will is greeted by the tribal ferocity of his schoolmates and a society fixated on the Blitz. No sooner has he succumbed to British pop culture in the guise of mop-top Sally Byrd and her stacks of 45s, than the Laments uproot themselves once again, and it’s off to New Jersey, where life deals crisis and opportunity in equal measure.

Undeniably eccentric, the Laments are also universal. Every family moves on in life. Children grow up, things are left behind; there is always something to lament. Through the Lament’s restlessness, responses to adversity, and especially their unwieldy love for one another, George Hagen gives us a portrait of every family that is funny, tragic, and improbably true.

From the Hardcover edition.

The Laments Details

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From Reader Review The Laments for online ebook

Nate's Bookgroup says

The Laments was about a south african family who move from continent to continent every time things get a little rough where they live. It was more character driven than plot driven. Rather funny in spots, but not a lot of substance. It had a lot to say about the sacrifices we make every day to maintain relationships, but it did so in such a silly manner you couldn't really take what was being said seriously. There were some great moments when the family moved to America and felt obligated to put up a flag on the fourth of July by their neighbors. When the mother revolted by putting up the Union Jack and the neighborhood fathers came by to discuss the mother's actions with the father, I felt a pang of recognition: there was a winter my parents decided not to put up Christmas lights with similar backlash.

Colleen says

This novel tracking the lives of a globe-trotting family paints a poignant picture of the expat lifestyle and the desperate quest to belong. Julia and Howard Lament are both trying to overcome the shortcomings of their upbringing, and find in each other all that they ever wanted. When their first bouncing happy baby is kidnapped by a troubled young woman in Rhodesia, they find themselves adopting her sickly premature son. Thus begins a life of uncertainty for both Julia and Howard as well as their son Will. Constantly on the move searching for a better job, a better lifestyle, a sense of home, the Laments instead find themselves drifting further and further from each other and from the life they once dreamed of living.

I was impressed by the writing style, and the way characters in the story gradually revealed more and more about themselves as the novel progressed. At heart, I found this a sad book, and was pained by the Laments efforts to create a home for themselves in an ever-changing world. Hagen does a wonderful job of conveying the sense of disconnection that pervades the expat community even today. I highly recommend this debut novel.

Holly says

I expected to enjoy this book a lot as Will is very relatable to me; having lived in three different continents myself and having moved a lot. However this book was hard to concentrate on; I continuously avoided reading it. I don't know what else to say other than that it was a pretty good read but the writing style maybe didn't draw me into the story as well as I would have liked.

Patty says

For a long time I didn't think I liked this book. It seemed too light, no real substance. I kept waiting for some major, tragic event to occur. (That shows what kind of books I've been reading lately!) Eventually the characters and the story grew on me, especially the main character, Will, who is a quiet, serious boy who was switched at birth and doesn't know it. Throughout the book the Lament family travels, always in search of a

fresh start, a better job, and a better life. Each new home brings its own challenges, and the mother is convinced that something is lost every time they move. Eventually I realized that this book wasn't the light, nothing story I had first thought it was (It does have its share of tragedy). By the end I was really enjoying it, and I was sad when it ended. It was a pretty easy read. I'd recommend it as a break between heavier books.

Michael Bohli says

George Hagen versucht in "The Laments" (oder unter dem eher falsch gewählten Titel "Die Zöglinge des Doktor Underberg") gar nicht, seine Geschichte ernst und realistisch darzulegen. Die Ereignisse im Leben der Familie Lament sind zwar meist tragisch und jeder Umzug in ein neues Land bringt weitere Probleme, der Schreibstil von Hagen bietet aber einen lockeren und warmherzigen Umgang mit diesen komplizierten Situationen.

Das erleichtert dem Leser, diesen Abenteuerroman voller Entdeckergeist und Aufbruchsstimmung als Unterhaltung abzutun - verhindert aber auch, dass das Buch tiefere Ebenen öffnet. Die Geschichte ist zwar interessant und nett, bewirkt am Ende leider aber zu wenig. Vielleicht wäre hier ein sprachlich sachlicher Ansatz wirkungsvoller gewesen.

Anne says

This book tells the story of Howard and Julia Lament, originally from Southern Rhodesia. When their newborn son is stolen from the hospital, they reluctantly take another couple's child (Will) to raise as their own. They then proceed to move. From Africa to England to America - because, after all, that's what Lament's do. As Julia's irritating mother nags her from thousands of miles away, she gives birth to twin terrors and stands up for racial and gender equality. There is no real ultimate purpose to The Laments and some of the things that happen to the characters seem quite outrageous and unnecessary, but ultimately, it is the story of a very endearing family - in particular the character of the adopted son Will. This was a good read from beginning to end - when I make my Best of 2006 list at the end of the year, I think this will most likely be on it.

Jonathan Gruber says

exactly my kind of book. Big sweeping epic of a family over many locations and times, with great characters, a bit of absurdity, and a lot of heart. Dickensian in its reach but also feels very real. I loved it!

Sharon Watkins says

Will belongs to a family that moves. A lot. It is what the Laments do. They have moved from South Africa to Bahrain to Southern Rhodesia to England and then to New Jersey. His father is talking about moving on to Australia or maybe New Zealand, always looking for that perfect place where he will be able to realize his dreams. But for Will, it means he never feels like he belongs anywhere. And sometimes he wonders if he

really belongs in this family, with his wild twin brothers, his permanently distracted father, and his harried mother. He doesn't know what the reader learns very early in the book: he is a Lament in name, but not by birth. What the reader also sees is that Will is the heart and soul of his family. This is a beautiful, sometimes funny, often heartbreaking coming of age story. I read it first when it was newly published, and I relished the re-read.

Alisa says

George Hagen writes good prose, and this story is of a family that actually sticks together, bucking the trend that tragedy always leads to alienation, affairs, divorce, and rebirth with a new relationship.

It has some story flaws, to be sure, and the chapters are short and jump around quite a bit, but if you don't mind that (I don't) and you are interested in a story about people who can never quite belong where they choose to be, it's a decent read. The exploration of what you take with you when you leave where you were born and try to belong in disparate places is very compelling and well-developed. And the narrator is a distant kind of unsympathetic voice, so you're never forced to feel too much, which I think is a strength considering the events of the Laments' lives.

That said, I can't recommend it without reservations because it didn't move me in the way I want fiction to do. My response overall is just kind of lukewarm.

Nate says

The Laments was about a south african family who move from continent to continent every time things get a little rough where they live. It was more character driven than plot driven. Rather funny in spots, but not a lot of substance. It had a lot to say about the sacrifices we make every day to maintain relationships, but it did so in such a silly manner you couldn't really take what was being said seriously. There were some great moments when the family moved to America and felt obligated to put up a flag on the fourth of July by their neighbors. When the mother revolted by putting up the Union Jack and the neighborhood fathers came by to discuss the mother's actions with the father, I felt a pang of recognition: there was a winter my parents decided not to put up Christmas lights with similar backlash.

Kate Sergejeva says

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Dayna says

What a lovely, heartbreaking and funny novel this is! Many thanks to my friend Sharon for reading this book and sharing her review. I loved it.

Saleh MoonWalker says

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Marjolein says

This is the story of a family, the Laments. Babies are switched and tragedy happens throughout their search for a place to build a happy life. They settle in cities in various continents, finally ending up in America. The tone of writing is very "matter-of-fact", which is sometimes comical. Still I didn't like this book so much. It dragged on, and there is this sphere of despair and destruction.

Mari says

This is an interesting book that takes you through the trials and tribulations of the Lament family. Living in Rhodesia at the beginning of the book, the Laments are struck by tragedy. Making the best of a sorrowful situation, they continue to thrive in this African country. When the battles over apartheid increase, Howard Lament decides it's time to move his family. As he says on numerous occasions, "We're Laments and Laments travel." Travel they do. The books takes you along on their journeys across the continents and allows you to experience the changes in their lives as well as the changes in cultures. The end was a bit predictable and felt as though the author was simply rushing to tie up loose ends.

Even though I was not satisfied with the ending, I enjoyed the book and would recommend it for a fairly quick read.
