



A World of Love

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In a writing career that spanned the 1920s to the 1960s, Anglo-Irish author Elizabeth Bowen created a rich and nuanced body of work in which she enlarged the comedy of manners with her own stunning brand of emotional and psychological depth.

In **A World of Love**, an uneasy group of relations are living under one roof at Montefort, a decaying manor in the Irish countryside. When twenty-year-old Jane finds in the attic a packet of love letters written years ago by Guy, her mother's one-time fiance who died in World War I, the discovery has explosive repercussions. It is not clear to whom the letters are addressed, and their appearance begins to lay bare the strange and unspoken connections between the adults now living in the house. Soon, a girl on the brink of womanhood, a mother haunted by love lost, and a ruined matchmaker with her own claim on the dead wage a battle that makes the ghostly Guy as real a presence in Montefort as any of the living.

A World of Love Details

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From Reader Review A World of Love for online ebook

Patricia says

The sort of soap opera plot did not draw me in. But her beautiful writing and thoughtful meditation on what death means were eventually irresistible.

Annelies says

This is a marvellous book. You can't just say it's because of this or that. Bowen builds a microclimate inhabited by just a few people. The tension between these people is one of the major themes in the book. The characterisation is phenomenal. The book begins with a staple of letters by a former lover of the mother that is found. Then a satirical drama unfolds itself. It's never boring, it's an interesting world circling around these letters. It's also a book in which love underlines subtly the whole story. One word: subtle.

Bam says

A World of Love is the first of Elizabeth Bowen's work that I have read and I found her to be quite the wordsmith, with sophisticated punctuation and unusual sentence structure; ie: "Heavy was the scent, rank the inside darkness which filtered through." And heavy is the psychological drama of this short novella which delves into the complicated emotional relationship between several people living together in a crumbling manor house in Ireland.

The backstory is that Antonia has inherited Montefort from her cousin, Guy, who was killed in WWI. For some reason, she took on the responsibility for his fiance, Lilia, for whom he had made no financial arrangements before going off to war. Antonia takes Lilia under her wing in such a way that keeps the woman from moving on with her life. A match is struck with Fred, a byblow cousin, and he and Lilia wed and move in with Antonia where he farms the land and splits the profits with her. In exchange, she provides room and board for the couple and the two daughters, Jane and Maud, whom they eventually give birth to. Jane, the oldest daughter, is twenty years old now on the oppressively hot June day on which this story begins. She has been exploring trunks in the attic where she discovered a packet of love letters written by Guy to some unrevealed women. This has the effect of raising his ghost for all of them and shaking up their unexamined lives: Lilia's lost love that has never been tempered by reality, the perfect spectre of a man whom Fred has never quite been able to compete with, a reminder of a youthful love between cousins that might have been something more. Now even Jane begins to fall under Guy's spell as he reveals himself to her in his love letters. Her baby sister Maud is not above tormenting them all with these letters when they fall into her possession, even resorting to a little extortion. What a family! As Lilia bemoans, "I'm beginning to think I'm ill with all the monomania in this house."

The reader gets the sense of lives that have been allowed to drift on day to day without any real purpose or connection. Lilia now comes up smack against her latent emotions: "Sorrow was there in front of her like an apparition: she saw now, with belated dread, what life had proved to be, what it had made of her. Could there have been an otherwise, an alternative? Who was to tell her, who was to know? She did not pity herself, for there is an austere point at which even self-pity halts, forbidden. Loss had been utter: not till today had she wholly taken account. Guy was dead, and only today at dinner had she sorrowed for him. What had now happened must either kill her or, still worse, force her to live..."

Interesting read but not one that will stick with me; hence the three-star rating. I didn't like any of the characters, to tell you the truth. I will look forward to reading more of Bowen's novels however, as she is a fine writer.

Val says

A loosely related Anglo-Irish family living in a large country house experience a range of emotions. That sounds very similar to a previous book of Bowen's I read; both have the same intensity of feeling and very little actually happens in either, but they are not all that similar in feel. While the family in "The Last September" were becalmed awaiting the winds of change, this family are shipwrecked by something that happened many years earlier. Neither family understand each other all that well, but there is not as much affection or goodwill towards each other here.

I think i will try one of her books set in London next.

Justin Evans says

Sometimes I love Bowen, sometimes she bores me to tears. And this is pretty easy to explain: when she's writing about peoples' relationships and the way we're always talking past one another and not saying what needs to be said, she's fabulous. When she's describing landscape or interior decorating she's almost always insufferable. Unfortunately for this short book, there's too much landscape and not enough people not quite relating to each other. Also, the ending is unbearably stupid; I suggest you just don't read the last chapter, which seems to have been added with the hope that someone would turn the book into a Hollywood rom-com. Also, what is with all the Yoda speak? "Cold, the room was now in the afternoon"? (Okay, I made that up, but you get the point.) Is that how Irish Protestants speak? Really?

Anyway, read Bowen, but read *The Last September* or *The Heat of the Day* instead.

Susan says

Elizabeth Bowen is something of a forgotten author now, which is a shame as she writes so beautifully and is wonderful at capturing the relationships between people. This novel is set in Montefort; a corroding country house in County Cork. The house was owned by Guy, who died in WWI, leaving his cousin, Antonia, as heir. Troubled that Guy had died without leaving a will, and without marrying his fiancée, Lilia, Antonia finds herself interfering in others lives. She engineers a marriage between a distant relation, Fred Danby, and Lilia; allowing her a position of patronage, in which they essentially keep the house and she keeps the best room and flits in and out of their lives.

Fred and Lilia have two daughters – the beautiful, golden haired Jane, and the younger, rather resented and ignored Maud. Jane is certainly Antonia's favourite, as well as Fred's, and Antonia tends to use Jane as a way of asserting power over Lilia. Indeed, for me, the central relationship of the novel is that between Lilia and Antonia, which Bowen writes wonderfully. It is a relationship of mutual dependence, of rivalry, jealousy and resentment on both sides.

Another main character in this novel is Guy, long , but ever present. The house is, indeed, timeless. Despite

the profusion of clocks (and Maud's obsession with listening to the chimes of Big Ben), nobody really knows what the time is. Things have simply been left in the house – as though Guy went off to war and shrugged the house off, for others to move into. One day, in the heat of summer, Jane discovers a packet of love letters from Guy, which triggers all sorts of memories and passions from those in the house. Everyone within the house are full of uncertainty – of their status, their relationships, their past – and the letters create a disturbance among those that live there.

When Lady Latterly, who lives nearby, sends for Jane, this again marks her out as different and chosen. In this novel, we virtually see Jan move from girlhood to womanhood, as she realises what she has done and the repercussions it causes. Her actions change not only the relationships between the members of her family, but her own with them. Bowen deserves to be re-discovered, as she is a brilliant writer, with a real depth of feeling. She wrote this novel after the death of her husband and, although she had many affairs, some long-term, she is obviously missing her partner in this book, which is full of loss and the shadow of the dead that inhabit the spaces of the living.

Lobstergirl says

Bowen's eighth novel started with great promise, terrifically written physical description:

The sun rose on a landscape still pale with the heat of the day before. There was no haze, but a sort of coppery burnish out of the air lit on flowing fields, rocks, the face of the one house and the cliff of limestone overhanging the river. The river gorge cut deep through the uplands. The light at this hour, so unfamiliar, brought into being a new world - painted, expectant, empty, intense. The month was June, of a summer almost unknown; for this was a country accustomed to late wakenings, to daybreaks humid and overcast. At all times open and great with distance, the land this morning seemed to enlarge again, throwing the mountains back almost out of view in the south of Ireland's amazement at being cloudless.

Unfortunately the novel couldn't keep up that standard, with its hazy characters and shapeless premise. Jane, a 20-year-old living at a decaying Irish manor house owned by her parents' friend Antonia, finds a packet of love letters in the attic from Guy, who formerly owned the house and willed it to Antonia before being killed in the Great War. Guy had been Jane's mother, Lilia's, fiance. After Guy's death Antonia fixed up Lilia with Fred, who got married and had Jane and her sister Maud. So ostensibly the novel is going to be all about the letters. Except that it's not. We never read the letters - not a word from them. Only at the end of the novel do we find out who the letters are addressed to, and it's a mild surprise, but not a big one.

There's nothing wrong with teasing us with the letters and then having the novel be about the relationships between the characters both living and dead. The problem is that Bowen is usually trying too hard and the writing gets weird. Example: "The chauffeur, overhearing or not, reclasped Martian gauntlets behind his back: he was staring in the other direction faceless. That uniform of his was disaster-dark among the feckless front garden roses."

And: "With a cry, Lady Latterly downed tools."

She what? Was Bowen sober?

I did learn a new word, or maybe just one Bowen made up: wadge. "By the time she looked to see what was happening, the wadge of letters was in his hands..."

She also introduces a brand new character in the last couple pages, which is just wrong.

Violet wells says

So much to love about this short novel which depicts how a family in a ramshackle flaking farmhouse in Ireland live with a ghost.

Lilia is engaged to Guy when he dies in the war. She goes to seed. Eventually Guy's cousin Antonia persuades her to marry Fred, a roving farmhand, and take possession of Guy's house. Lilia and Fred produce two children. The older, Jane, one day finds some old letters in the attic and Guy's ghost is let loose into the house. The letters were written by Guy but to whom is the mystery which explodes into the fragile equilibrium of life at Montefort.

The five main characters in this novel are all fabulous as is the dialogue they share. Lilia is a familiar Bowen character, the disappointed woman who has married beneath herself. The rivalry between her and the artistic but dehydrated Antonia is executed with thrilling insight throughout. I can't recall many novels – Ferrante's maybe – that dramatise so well the competitive rivalry that can exist between two women. They compete for influence over Lilia's daughter Jane whose sexuality is awakened by finding and reading the letters. The younger daughter Maud reads aloud psalms from the Bible as curses and has an invisible familiar called Guy David who she keeps with her at all times. She provides Bowen with so much fabulous comedy. Fred, the husband, is belittled by the presence of the letters. The sixth character and maybe the best of all is the house and surrounding landscape. Bowen's descriptive writing is at its very best here.

Occasionally Bowen is guilty of over mystification, of straining too hard to prise out meaning from her stage sets – usually when summoning Guy's ghost who, it should be said, isn't a physical ghost. It was only these passages and there aren't many of them that persuaded me to meanly dock a star. On the whole though VS Pritchett gets it right – "Electric and urgent...she startles us by sheer originality of mind and boldness of sensibility into seeking our world afresh."

Elizabeth (Alaska) says

I liked the premise for this story, and I wish the author had thought more of it herself to lengthen and strengthen it. As it is, it leaves much to be desired. The reader is left wondering too much. If you're one who likes to fill in between the lines with conjectures of your own, you might like this more than I did. Or maybe I just don't have enough imagination and understanding and need to have things spelled out.

I have never been one who could accurately predict what comes next. On school tests was the inevitable question "what do you think will happen? I always - or almost always - got the wrong answer. (Quibble: I always got it right if the question is "what do **you** think...", but unhappily that wasn't really the question.) The ending in this seemed quite out of the blue and felt totally unrelated to the rest of the novel. Refer to paragraph one: I can't read between the lines.

I must remark on the non-standard sentence structure. I never did quite become accustomed to it. *Not for this had she come. And Crystal the chandelier dripped into the sunset; tense little lit lamps under peach shades were easily floated in upon by the gold of evening. Day had not done with the world yet; trees were in the conspiracy.* This should have been a quicker read, even for this slow reader. I kept tripping over this sort of thing, having to re-read.

Marija says

Elizabeth Bowen has somehow managed to portray stasis as an art form. In a book where mere suggestion alone can result in so much soul searching and change is truly amazing. Yet her story is told beautifully and not only that, but there are some wonderfully bleak moments thrown in as well. The ending is both unexpected and eccentric; yet it's fun...it's on par with that perfect 10 moment with Bo Derek and Dudley Moore. I couldn't help but giggle. ;) That said, this scene does work, since you can almost picture the past reborn.

In regards to the characters:

Antonia: At times, her relationship with Guy reminded me of Cathy and Heathcliff, i.e. after Cathy's marriage...that selfish teasing...playing with each other's emotions getting joy out of witnessing each other's pain. Guy told her, you'll never be rid of me and in some ways, she never was. However, that's also where the similarities end. For Antonia, freedom seems to be her one true love.

Lilia: Guy essentially takes up all of her coherent thoughts...except for her desire to be a mistress of the house. In some ways, these two things are her selfish obsession, even though she knows neither of these two things can be realized. For her, everyone and everything else cancels out, especially her two daughters.

Fred: Outwardly, he has the appearance of everything that is manly—strength, stature and a rakish past. However that's where it all ends, since he turns into mush in Lilia's hands and through the presence of those letters. I wholeheartedly agreed with Maud perceiving him as "looking small."

Jane: Jane inadvertently brings everything to the surface and out in the open. She's essentially a young innocent, whose heart has been awakened, yearning for a first love.

Maud: Oh, the bells, the bells! One of her chief pleasures in her young life is listening to chimes of Big Ben on the wireless. She's eccentric for a child, yet she's more of an adult than anyone else in this story. She is the only one who is really trying to put things into motion and get things done. Unfortunately on the surface it seems her efforts are unappreciated.

J.S. Dunn says

It's good to read authors of a bygone era occasionally, and Bowen is always pleasing in style. This slim novel packs a large wallop. It is a methodical and devastating portrayal of remnants of the Ascendancy trying to hang on to --- what, exactly? --- while airplanes and 'modernity' are gaining a tenuous hold in staid Ireland.

Bob says

Elizabeth Bowen wrote 10 novels between 1927 and 1968 - this is a slender one from 1955. Thematically there are some familiar markers - children in complex family structures, and the lives of the well-established but not well-to-do Anglo-Irish.

After WWI, fewer aristocratic young men were sent to die on the battlefield, leading to less literary fiction about the flowers of adolescence cut off in their prime.

The book seems to be set around the time of its publication so the lamented young man of the story has faded 40 years into the past but his former fiancee and his cousin with whom he might or might not have had some sort of romance are still quite caught up in his memory. Jane Danby, the twenty-year-old daughter from the fiancee's subsequent marriage (to a stolid but unromantic farmer) finds a trove of old love letters in the attic about which we are not told much but speculation runs rampant and feelings run high. The implication is they are from him (signed with an occult squiggle) and while it is likely they were addressed to one of the two older women, there are hints it could be neither.

Although the tangle of decades of barely submerged family drama occupies the bulk of the story, the romantic and social awakening of Jane is the note on which it ends.

Roman Clodia says

He had not finished with them, nor they with themselves, nor they with each other: not memories was it but expectations which haunted Montefort.

Written in exquisite prose, this is a novel which requires close reading - like Bowen's *The Heat Of The Day*, much of the substance of the book resides in the not-said; the significance, for example, of a long-estranged married couple sitting under a chestnut tree 'almost apart'.

Taking place in the liminal space between the past and the future, the story is an intimate one, emotionally claustrophobic, and heightened by the unexpected heat of an Irish summer. Bowen, with delicate perceptiveness, unpicks the tense, fragile and yet freighted bonds in a family: a marriage built on misunderstandings, a cousin tied to her relations through resentments and a kind of need, a girl on the cusp of womanhood.

There's a sort of brittleness about Bowen's writing, something ethereal even when she's writing of jealousy and desire. A gorgeous evocation of mood and emotions.

Asta says

Strange sentence structure it has, this novel. A long time reading it I in the end took.

Lisa says

What a strange novel this is!

Jane, a young woman living with her parents, her sister, and Cousin Antonia, an eccentric older relative, in Antonia's old house in the Irish countryside, is stuck in a reality that offers little excitement until she happens to find some old love letters in the attic.

Those letters are written by Guy, a ghost from the past, fallen in the Great War. He was Jane's mother's fiancé. The letters cause disruption in the bored routines of the family. The older generation is forced to remember the long lost feeling of love, and they start to reconsider their present relationships and to rearrange themselves in the fragile world they have built upon the ruins of the lost friend, rival, and lover.

What they realise is that love is greater than the person itself. Had Guy lived, he could not have reached the pedestal they put him on after he died prematurely. Joined in antagonism, the two women who loved him form the only true lifelong relationship. And loving, they find out, is always worth more than being loved.

For Jane, the love story of the past brightens up her dull present tense, until the novel abruptly closes with the beginning of her own future love:

"They no sooner looked than they loved."

That last sentence leaves the reader wondering whether the story about to start could possibly live up to the imaginary perfect love it suggests and hints at. Just like the love for the fallen soldier wouldn't have survived, had he been alive, the story between Jane and her future lover is left untold in order not to lose power in the course of everyday banalities.

A World Of Love - An Abstraction!

A Family - A Life!

Recommended to those of you who like stories that are told with loving detail without giving you the answers, and to those of you who like to imagine the pasts and futures of characters shown in a snapshot, drawn in a quick sketch.
