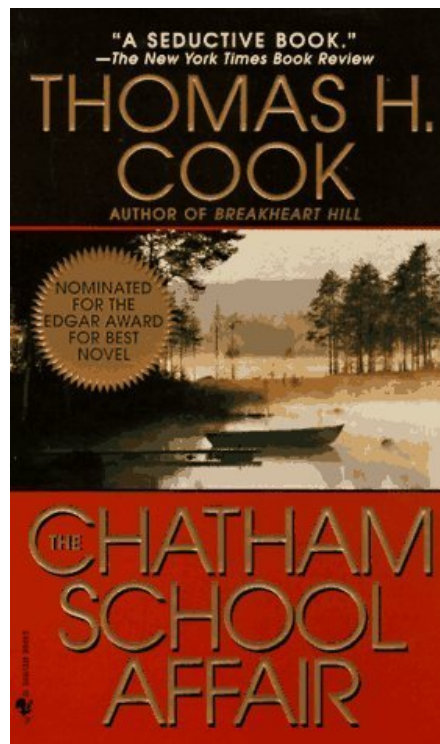




The Chatham School Affair

Thomas H. Cook

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On a summer day, a young woman alighted from a bus in the small Cape Cod village of Chatham and took up residence in a cottage on the edge of Black Pond's dark waters. She was embarking on a voyage she could not foresee --- one that would bring catastrophe to her, to those she loved, and to the town of Chatham itself. Now, seven decades later, only one living soul knows the answer to the question that irrevocably shattered hearts, a town, and a way of life: *What really happened on Black Pond that day?*

The Chatham School Affair Details

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Julie says

Perhaps I am too new to the mystery genre, but I always expect more of a Sherlock Holmes style or even The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo rendering where the excitement of the mystery is uncovering the clues and piecing them together to find the culprit, or perhaps that is my analytically trained mind that wishes for it. Either way, I found Cook's style of reminiscing and only providing a glimpse of a detail here and there quite maddening. Although I suppose in a way, this also leads you through the clues until you find the final culprit, but it's not as linear and the clues are mostly misinterpreted by the reader up until the very end, yet because the crime is known the entire time it doesn't making it nearly as exciting as a "surprise" ending would be. Not my cup of tea.

Jeanette says

Here is a book that could be used for a Psychology class read. I would have given it 5 stars if it had not plodded a bit much in some of its pace within the telling- just after midline it bogged a bit. Became a little redundant in description at the least.

But perhaps that is what was needed to suggest the school year's time in which these events occurred. And the changes in these characters!

And the slow and gradual switch of loyalty and emotional attachments too- not just for the two protagonists in this "love" story. But in the entire town "feel" for the eventual occurrences, as well.

I have read him before and will read others. He has an excellent understanding of human persuasion and influence. How it really works to color human morality and ethics without seeming to do so. Yet he is also very dark.

This story would be excellent fodder for a discussion on moral relativism. It's an excellent study of small town life in that era, as well. I'm going to read all of this writer's work if they aren't too morose- he has perception in depth. Especially upon the role of personal responsibility.

Dave says

Even though Thomas H Cook seemed to be a bit of a tease with his "ham-fisted" suspense (as another reviewer put it), it worked out OK in the long run because although I was saying "yeah, yeah, I know what'll happen in the end" - I didn't.

Well done, Thomas H Cook for another suspenseful novel, but in all honesty I think I'll give him a bit of a break for a while. He's good, but like a good whiskey, if I left it alone for a while I would enjoy it more.

Ellen Brandt says

As I was browsing the shelves at the Bar Harbor library, I overheard a conversation in which one older patron was telling another that *The Chatham School Affair* by Thomas Cook was one of her all time favorite reads. I'd never heard of the book or the author, but decided to give it a try.

In some ways, the book reminds me of *Water for Elephants*; a very old man recalls events of a tumultuous year of his youth which very much shaped the person he was to become.

The narrative goes back and forth between the voice of the old man and that of his adolescent self.

I wouldn't label this book as one of my all-time favorites, but it was a great choice for the last of my 'summer reads'. Quick and compelling. Worth reading

Becca says

This mystery wasn't bad, but honestly I was expecting more from an Edgar winner. I think it was trying for some kind of stylised romanticism, and it mostly succeeded but sometimes just came off as old-fashioned and melodramatic. There was too much build up before we finally find out what "crime" happened, so that it is a bit anti-climactic when what happened it revealed. The whole book kind of plays with ideas of practicality vs. romance and reality vs. fantasy. Since everything is told from the perspective of a teenage boy, some of the melodrama is understandable and even good- it's interesting the way the narrator's perspective changes how you view the mystery. Also, the book's final secret really did surprise me and made the book much darker than I had thought it would be. In all, I'd recommend it to mystery lovers but not to a general audience- it wasn't fast paced and exciting, but it was undoubtably subtle.

Snotchocheez says

5 stars

My (late-blooming) love affair with Thomas H. Cook's sumptuous writing continues with 1996's Edgar award-winner, *The Chatham School Affair*. This is my third encounter with Cook's 30+ novels (*The Orchids* and *The Last Talk With Lola Faye* were the others, both great) but the first title that would solidly fit into the genre Cook is best known for: mystery-writing. I'm thrilled to say it does not disappoint. (Well, it certainly didn't disappoint *me*, anyway. Cook's verbose, sometimes fussily precise delivery probably isn't for everyone {especially not for those readers that demand fast pacing and lurid details from their mystery authors} but I can't get enough of his writing.)

Henry Griswald, in 'present-day' recollections from his assisted living center, provides the narration for this affair, which occurred in 1927 at and around a Cape Cod boys' preparatory school that he attended (and his father was headmaster of). From the moment stunningly beautiful new art teacher Miss Elizabeth Channing alights from the bus, the village of Chatham and its residents (particularly students and fellow teachers at the prep school) seem to be immediately taken by this bohemian young lady, brimming with stories of her recent travels in Africa and her knowledge of bizarre arcana. Like a modern day Circe, though, her arrival provides a harbinger of terrible things to befall the seaside village and its prep school denizens.

With a heady mix of poetry (which I ordinarily don't find at all appealing, but it works perfectly here) and a smattering of Greek mythology, Cook weaves a fascinating, spellbinding tale of heartbreak and deception. It's one that requires some patience, but the payoff is so worth it.

J. says

One from the "dark secret shrouded in the mists of time" department. As a reader, I like framing devices as much as anybody, but they need to have some kind of rules; a modern story can't continually roam around in clouds of fear and suspicion like *The Castle Of Otranto* or *The Mysteries Of Udolfo*. It can be done in our day, but just not as the barrage of verbiage it was in yesteryear.

The author takes his time (and ours) building the world of this novel, framed within multiple removes and perspectives. We are basically two thirds into this when forward motion begins to overtake the restraints pulling it back into the past.

I understand, I think, that there is some attraction to the slowly developing narrative, the techniques that were so unnervingly effective way back closer to the time of the birth of the novel itself: the plaintive diary-entry, the oil-painting in the main hall with secrets hiding in plain sight, the hidden clue in the locket or suicide note. But Cook's story is so weighted with premonitions, visions and re-imaginings, each crafted so as to dissolve back to the present day ... that it becomes a little ridiculous.

"I came into her room with a reluctance and sense of intrusion that I still can't entirely explain, unless, from time to time, we are touched by the opposite of aftermath, feel not the swirling eddies of a retreating wave, but the dark pull of an approaching one."

Cook's prose is a pleasure, and flows nicely until you stop to question it. The flash-forwarding and revisiting are no doubt meant to instill a floating, dreamy storyline, but are very often just annoying. Even 'dreamy' needs some kind of pace, a pulse; gently drifting timelessness becomes more or less interminable.

Frames around frames are no justification for lukewarm momentum. This novel nearly redeems itself in the very end, with a vexing Conradian ethical convolution, almost allowing the reader to get the sense that all the drifty-dreamy was building to something the only way it knew how... But a last stab, on the last page, at a Joycean elegiac paragraph (ala *The Dead*) to sum up ... blows the reconsideration.

Julie Barrett says

The twist at the end of this mystery elevates it from a "2 star/it's ok" sort of book to a solid "3/I liked it". I was sure of path the plot was taking, was only wondering about the particulars of the method, when - boom - something totally different happened. That's always a plus in a mystery.

In terms of the setting and the characters, eh, I wasn't too impressed. I wish the setting had been elaborated on. the story felt like it could be set anywhere. As for the narrator, I never felt any sort of connection with him so didn't feel invested at all in how the story would end. It was more an intellectual exercise than an emotional storyline.

Liz says

This book was recommended by the author of "The House at Riverton". The Riverton book is a much better read. The Chatham School Affair is harder to read, with heavy foreshadowing where the The House at

Riverton had a lighter touch and smoother narrative. Interesting to read of events in our region, but might not have finished it if not stuck on a plane with only this to read!

Sarah Sammis says

Henry Griswald narrates the events that make up The Chatham School Affair, beginning with the arrival of Miss Elizabeth Channing, hired as a favor to a family friend to be the new art teacher at the all boys' school. The way Henry's tale unfolds reminds me of Daphne Du Maurier's Rebecca or perhaps My Cousin Rachel.

Something horrible happened that intimately involved young Henry, Miss Channing and lead to her death and the closure of the school. Over the course of the book through flashbacks, court transcripts and conversations with townsfolk who remember the events but wish they didn't, Cook builds a suspenseful story in a wonderfully gothic setting.

The first couple chapters are so densely packed with important information that I had to reread them a couple of times before I felt comfortable moving on to the rest of the novel. Starting with chapter three, the novel picks up pace and I found myself making time to read the book to finish it as quickly as I could.

Kurt Keefner says

First of all, this book was mistitled. It should have been called The Chatham School Tease, because the author teases the reader every few pages with his ham-handed foreshadowing. How about a little foreshadowing at the beginning and then just telling your story, hmm? Instead Cook spends way too much time with his mooney old narrator who as a young boy had some part in the Affair. I'll tell you about that again in a few pages.

Secondly, all of the characters are undermotivated. It is not credible that X would commit murder. It is not credible that Y would commit suicide. The narrator/young boy does something that such a young man would never do, never.

I kind of liked Miss Channing, the art teacher put on trial (what the charges are Cook coyly does not reveal until 3/4 of the way through), but she was pretty standard example of the sophisticated and cosmopolitan art teacher type. The relationship between the headmaster and his wife was good.

Look, I'm not saying I wasn't drawn in. It's just that I feel cheated. Here's how low Cook stoops: there is actually one character who goes by two completely different names and whose identity Cook does not reveal until the last 5 pages. This isn't a book--it's an author playing games with the reader.

If you want something good in a prep school setting, re-read A Separate Peace. If you want something really good, with creepiness and a seductive professor and insight into evil, read The Secret History. I will not be trying another book by hook or by Cook, and the Edgar imprimatur means nothing to me now.

Al says

This book won an Edgar? What am I missing? I have a vision of an author trying to make something out of nothing by adopting a creaky writing device of foreshadowing. All it did for me was make me wish he would get on with the story, for goodness sake, so I could finally finish the foolish thing and start something more interesting. Maybe the Edgar committee was sorry for Mr. Cook because he had come up short in previous years, and threw him this bone. Or maybe the Edgar isn't that reliable as a quality measuring device. Whatever the reason, this book is a real drag. Skip it.

Christie says

I read my first Thomas H. Cook novel last year when I discovered, by accident, *Breakheart Hill*. I really liked that book; I liked *The Chatham School Affair* even more.

I am not a mystery connoisseur by any stretch, although I admit that I've read a fair amount of suspense thrillers in my day. Cook belongs in another category altogether - sort of in the same way that King belongs in his own special category (and I mean that as a compliment because at the top of his game, there's no one better than King.)

The Chatham School Affair is a richly realized mystery which unfolds as the book's narrator, an elderly lawyer named Henry Griswald, recalls the events which transpired the year he was 15. In 1926, Henry is a student at Chatham School where his father is the director. He's an intelligent boy, given to daydreaming and reading rather than socializing with his peers. The arrival of the new art teacher, the beautiful and well-traveled Elizabeth Channing, upends Henry's world in ways impossible to relate without revealing important plot points. Suffice it to say that this book is a wonderful examination of love found and lost, of regret and honour, of sacrifice. It's also a great mystery with a kick-ass ending.

The Chatham School Affair is not told at breakneck speed: the reader is expected to spend a little time with the characters...but it's worth it. Cook's writing is often lyrical – not all that common in 'crime fiction.' In fact, I have a hard time with that label. Henry is a wonderful narrator, sympathetic even, but what I admired most of all about this book is how Cook walked that wonderful tightrope - never vilifying any character, allowing each of them their motivations and mistakes, their dreams and, ultimately, their fates.

Two thumbs up.

Rj says

Being from Chatham, I am a bit biased. In all fairness this must be stated up front. I was hoping for more Chatham geographical and historical references but it was not necessary for the plot. I found this book slow yet strangely appealing. It creeps on you like a vine pulling you deeper and deeper into it's thick ravines. The story seems simple enough, and in ways it truly is, yet the ending provides a gem that catches you off guard and leaves you satisfied that you did the right thing in keeping the boobtube off and missing your episodes of Glee and reruns of Matlock. Enjoyable and well written~ perfect for a beach read (especially if that beach is in Chatham along the shores of Black Pond).

Conor says

On the cover, this is described as a "novel of suspense." I didn't know what that was before reading this -- and I am still not sure I do know what it means generally -- but if this is an example of it, give me more. Thomas Cook weaves together an incredible tale about a small town out on Cape Cod. The book starts in the present many years after a horrendous incident and slowly returns to memories of the year of the incident. Cook does a great job of dribbling out details here and there. You are impelled on by these little revelations, you want to find out more. I can't recall reading a book in this style, and I have to say that I am not an easy person to please, but Cook really blew my socks off with this book. It was very, very good.

Leila says

I bought this book because I was vacationing in Cape Cod, in a town that was a bike's ride into Chatham. A local used book seller highly recommended it. I couldn't figure out what the appeal was until the last 5 pages.

Though well written, the plot moves along slowly and I am surprised that I didn't abandon the novel at the beginning. But it does build... The story is essentially about the teen son of the Chatham School headmaster, who ends up caught in the middle (privy to many secrets) of an affair between the mysteriously lovely art teacher and the married history teacher. Events started by the affair lead to tragedy for pretty much all of the major characters.

There is a lot of foreshadowing throughout the novel, and after a while you wish the author would just get to the point; once he does at the end, you are well rewarded. It is rare that I am completely surprised by a book's ending.

I gave the book three stars because although the novel reaches a satisfying conclusion, it was a tough commitment.

Nancy says

The cover of this book characterized it as "A Novel of Suspense." Couldn't prove it my me. I thought this book was a slog and rather indulgent. While the ending had surprises that were not foreshadowed by the many red herrings that Mr. Cook strew about, I thought the conclusion was contrived in a way and rushed. I wound up reading it for his tidbits about Chatham, MA from 85 years ago and got some enjoyment from that, but I'd not recommend this book to others unless they were low on alternatives.

Katharine says

One of the most interesting suspense novels I've ever read

I love it when I jump into a great book and I don't pay attention to how much I have to read. This book captured me! I was at once taken by the beautiful language and hints of tragedy that did surprise me in the end. This was a nearly flawless book-- 4.75 stars. And It's only give five stars to books I want to build my life around. This one, a book about regret and passion, comes awfully close.

Eva says

Σε αρκετές κριτικές διέβασα τι θυμίζει την "Ρεβέκκα", αλλά προσωπικά όσο περισσότερο διβάζα τόσο ρχονταν στο μυαλό μου οι Μπροντ (διαλάχτε ποια θέλετε δεν έχει σημασία), κυρώως λόγω της κλειστοφοβικής, γοθικής ατμόσφαιρας παρόλο που το χωριό Chatham περιγράφεται ως ένα ήσυχο, ήρεμο, ήλιόλουστο μέρος, παρά τις ξαφνικές του καταιγίδες.

Υπόρχα δομημένο λογοτέχνημα, λόγω mystery, καθόλου crime, είναι μια εξαιρετική, μετρημένη με οικονομία, σπουδή για την αγάπη, το πάθος, την ελευθερία, το θόος και την ηθική, τις εσωτερικές συγκρούσεις και αντιθέσεις, τις αποφάσεις που τελικά καθορίζουν "τη ζωή που αναζητούσαμε και τη ζωή που βρήκαμε".

Στο τέλος μέινει ήφωνη ήχι με το τουόστ αλλά με την ανθρωπιά του. Ειδικά μένεα στο χαρακτήρα του πατέρα.

Etienne says

Un roman noir comme il se doit d'être. Tragique, avec des personnages vrais et attachants, avec leurs forces et leurs failles, le tout écrit dans un style et une ambiance sombre et romantique, un peu gothique que j'adore terriblement! Un pur chef-d'oeuvre et un auteur que j'aurais dû découvrir plus tôt!
