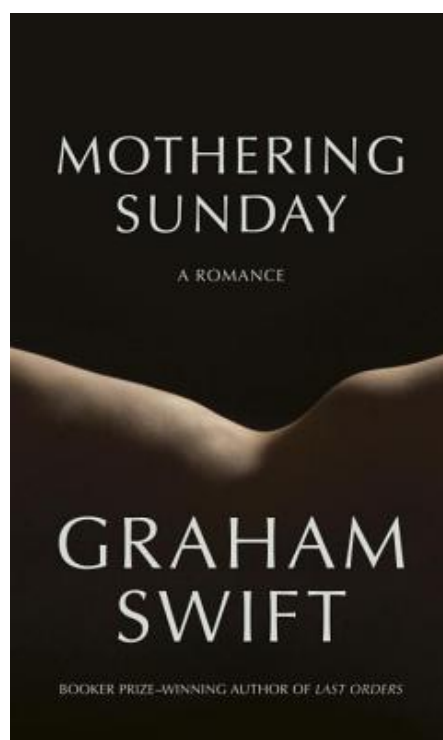




Mothering Sunday

Graham Swift

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Mothering Sunday Graham Swift

A luminous, intensely moving tale that begins with a secret lovers' assignation in the spring of 1924, then unfolds to reveal the whole of a remarkable life.

Twenty-two-year-old Jane Fairchild has worked as a maid at an English country house since she was sixteen. For almost all of those years she has been the clandestine lover to Paul Sheringham, young heir of a neighboring house. The two now meet on an unseasonably warm March day—Mothering Sunday—a day that will change Jane's life forever.

As the narrative moves back and forth from 1924 to the end of the century, what we know and understand about Jane—about the way she loves, thinks, feels, sees, remembers—expands with every vividly captured moment. Her story is one of profound self-discovery, and through her, Graham Swift has created an emotionally soaring, deeply affecting work of fiction.

Mothering Sunday Details

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From Reader Review Mothering Sunday for online ebook

Sally Green says

I found this book exceptionally moving. Beautifully told and on the face of it this is a simple story, although the structure is not straightforward (though it's never confusing). I'm sure other reviews can tell you the characters if you want to know (I always prefer not to) though I have to say that character of Paul is hardly described but each aspect is perfect.

We know there is going to be a bad thing happening and we're told the bad thing half way through the book. The build up to and inevitability of the bad thing seemed to add to it rather than take anything away.

I absolutely loved the way the themes of the story - change, story telling and that we will never understand some things - were woven together.

If I have any slight whinge it's that I found the link to the fourth leg a little clumsy and for me it detracted rather than added to the storytelling. Apart from that it was perfect (so that's a 99/100 from me).

Am I wrong in thinking few male writers tackle writing from a female point of view? Perhaps it's just the male writers that I read, but I'm impressed that Graham Swift writes this woman and her story so well. This is my first Graham Swift book, but I'll look at reading more.

Simon says

Almost five stars because frankly I was completely swept up by it and Janes tale of an affair, with a man she shouldn't have, told at the time and in hindsight. There's a subtle nature to it that makes it beautiful to read and quite heartbreaking in parts. An upside down, flipped around Cinderella story in some ways, though it is the act of a princely type that makes the change in Janes life as well as the man.

Julie Ehlers says

In *Mothering Sunday*, a young man and a young woman who really shouldn't be consorting with each other have an afternoon assignation. Then the young man leaves, and the young woman, our protagonist, wanders around his house naked for a while, thinking the same thoughts over and over again. She thinks a lot about the fact that she's naked, for instance. And she thinks *a lot* about a patch of semen left on the sheet of the bed upstairs. (No offense to any men reading this, but most women just don't think that much about semen in real life. We think about it for a few seconds at a time at most.) But anyway, this first part of the book is nearly all interior and so repetitive. So. Repetitive. The interiority made me think Swift was trying for a Virginia Woolf type of thing, but sadly this part of the book has neither the beauty nor the insight that Woolf herself might bring. It's just our protagonist, Jane, going around and around about being naked and about semen and about a few other things I won't mention because they're a bit spoilery.

Then finally, exactly halfway through the book, some plot actually happens! Unfortunately, it was precisely what I suspected would happen; it was predictable and unoriginal, and therefore mostly just annoying to me. BUT! I do have to say that Swift handled the aftermath of the plot twist quite well, and I ended this book thinking much more fondly of it than I ever expected I would (hence the three stars instead of two).

So should you read *Mothering Sunday*? That depends. Do you like Virginia Woolf lite? Do you like Ian

McEwan, because this reminded me a bit of his *On Chesil Beach*—they're both short, largely interior novels about a young couple who each don't really know what the other is thinking. If you answered yes to either of these questions, you might like *Mothering Sunday*. Also, do you like hearing a lot about (wait for it) patches of semen on sheets? Are you annoyed that I keep talking about semen? Well, don't shoot the messenger—if there weren't so many mentions of it in the book, I wouldn't have to mention it in my review, and we'd all be a lot happier. But one thing's for sure: If you don't like hearing about it here, you probably won't like hearing about it in *Mothering Sunday* either. You've been warned.

Finally, I've just read some of the other Goodreads reviews for this and now I'm worried I'm going to be burned at the stake for my irreverence toward this tome that others regard so highly. But what can I say? It's not my fault that when I think about this book all I can think about is... well, you can probably guess. Okay, I'll just stop talking now. Have a good evening, everyone.

Karen says

A secret 7 yr love affair between a young English country maid Jane Fairchild, and a wealthy heir Paul Sheringham, from a neighboring property.

It is spring of 1924. This tells how the events of one day, shaped the life of Jane who lived well into her 90's

Trish says

This delicious short novel is in many ways a Mother's Day dream. It is a novel short enough to be read in a long, lazy afternoon; it is a novel for mature audiences, weathered in relationships and outcomes, who bring a kind of life knowledge to one remarkable spring day in 1924 when sunlight poured over yellow and green fields and not a smudge marred the bright blue of the sky. In March a day like June, warm and golden, pregnant with potential and possibility. The strange undercurrent of foreboding that springs unbidden feels like something we bring as we recall in some remembered way the lovemaking in the big house empty in the afternoon with the windows opened wide to streaming sunlight and perhaps a breeze: "the sunlight applauded their nakedness." A young scion and the maid...

He says they were "friends." He did treat her as a friend—exactly as a friend. Their lovemaking was like a sport. He did not talk of the future...there was no need. He needn't say goodbye, since it wasn't goodbye was it? He would marry, but perhaps they would continue their "friendship" long after. One doesn't lose one's friends when one gets married. Not necessarily. Our judgement makes us uncomfortable, but we'd be wrong. The foreboding won't point to that at all. The lovemaking was the maid's liberation, not her downfall. She learned to be comfortable in herself there.

Swift shows his mastery of the form in this novel, telling us pieces of backstory interspersed with conversation and movement...a phone call bidding the maid, fragrant air filled with light and birdsong, a bike ride past still-leafless trees casting skeleton shade on new green and buds ready to open. We will never forget the day, so rare and so precious. Mothering Day. The staff are off to visit their own parents and the scion is preparing for his wedding in a fortnight to the daughter of a wealthy family. His own parents lost two sons in the last war and he is the last of the brood. This is usually a day of remembrance, but it is such an unusual day, coming as it does a fortnight before a wedding...

The beauty of the day suffuses the story and works its magic on us, despite our reservations. We are

unprepared, then, for the foreboding to manifest when it does, finally. And we are unprepared also for the “long course of history” that plays out from the maid’s point of view—how this day will remain in her memory forever and what it meant to her life’s work. It raises questions about the nature and role of fiction and how one gets to the place where fiction can be truth. True things can be imagined, just as fiction can spring from truth. Sometimes fiction might even get closer to truth than real life, getting as it does “to the quick, the heart, the nub, the pith.” That is the trade of fiction, the “trade of truth-telling...It was about being true to the very stuff of life, it was about trying to capture, though you never could, the very feel of being alive.” And that is what this book does. It feels lived.

I hope it is not too late for everyone to buy this gem of a novel before Mother’s Day. It is a rush.

Ilse says

The gathering evening, the apricot light, the gauzy green-gold world, was impossibly beautiful.

Take a look at this self-conscious woman stretched out languorously with her head on a blue cushion, entirely at ease in her sublimely languid nakedness. Amedeo Modigliani’s *Reclining Nude* (on the cover of this enchanting novella) perfectly conjures the mysteries surrounding the young protagonist of **Mothering Sunday**, Jane Fairchild. The sultry look in her nearly closed eyes. How would you imagine her life, present, past and future? What is on her mind? Is she a reader, just like you? Perhaps you don’t care, and are you just focusing on her voluptuous body, like her lover does?

And when she’d told him about her own reading at Beechwood (she wished she hadn’t) he’d scoffed, as he scoffed at so many things, and said, ‘All that tommyrot, Jay? You read all that stuff?’ And reminded her at once that their relationship was essentially bodily, physical and here-and-now, it wasn’t for droning on about books.

Set in south-east England, Swift depicts the events happening in two neighbouring country houses on a single day, 30 March 1924, a ‘mothering Sunday’ – a day-off for the servants so they can pay a visit to their mothers or family. As an orphan, Jane Fairchild, the domestic servant girl working in the Niven household, has no family to return to and imagines spending her day cycling, and reading Conrad’s *Youth*. A call from the neighbouring house implies changing her plans into making love with her secret lover instead, the only son of both houses who survived the trenches, while the other 4 have died, leaving empty rooms kept like shrines. That lover for years, Paul Sheringham, is on the verge of entering a proper marriage of convenience with his wealthy fiancée, and invites Jane for a first and perhaps last time to his home and bed, having the house for themselves.

This is no sappy story of unhappy or impossible love or formulary variation on the masters & servants theme. There is grief. Loss. Motherless children. Childless mothers. The tenderness and indulgence of a grieving father having lost everything dear to him. Class and feminist issues in a society in transition. Swift acknowledges there is more to a woman’s life than romantic love. Books for instance. Jane is no pitiful or miserable orphan, she is a smart and feisty young woman – instead of whining, she embraces life, exploring the full wingspan of her relative freedom as a blessing: “*She’d been put into service at fourteen with a relatively advanced ability to read and write and — free from all family ties — with perhaps more than a usual eagerness for life.*”

? What a difference a day makes
Twenty-four little hours ?

This luscious, warm day in March and the tragedy slowly creeping into it, will turn out to be a watershed that will colour the rest of Jane's life:

A sudden unexpected freedom flooded her. Her life was beginning, it was not ending, it had not ended. She would never be able to explain (or be required to) this illogical, enveloping inversion. As if the day had turned inside out, as if what she was leaving behind was not enclosed, lost, entombed in a house. It had merged somehow — pouring itself outwards — with the air she was breathing. She would never be able to explain it, and she would not feel it any the less even when she discovered, as she would do, how this day had turned really inside out. Could life be so cruel yet so bounteous at the same time?

Throughout the novella Swift offers vistas into Jane's later life as a writer. In her novels she will never disclose which realities have actually moulded her identity as a writer, contemplating how different things would have been if she had been reading that day in March, instead of cycling to Paul's house, or what would have happened to her if she didn't had entered service, or what if other significant moments had got a different outcome, like if her employer wouldn't have granted her access to the house library, to read the adventure books of his late sons. Essentially, she –and Swift- meditates on her – and Swift's - mission as a writer: *Telling stories, telling tales. Always the implication that you were trading in lies. But for her it would always be the task of getting to the quick, the heart, the nub, the pith: the trade of truth-telling.*

By presenting a jocose female writer to write about writing, Swift has crafted a magnificent and sensual hymn to books, libraries and the art of storytelling, and a bounteous ode to life.

So what was it then exactly, this truth-telling? They would always want even the explanation explained! And any writer worth her salt would lead them on, tease them, lead them up the garden path. Wasn't it bloody obvious? It was about being true to the very stuff of life, it was about trying to capture, though you never could, the very feel of being alive. It was about finding a language. And it was about being true to the fact, the one thing only followed from the other, that many things in life — oh so many more than we think — can never be explained at all.

Gaurav says

"One's literary life must turn frequently for sustenance to memories and seek discourse with the shades; unless one has made up one's mind to write only in order to reprove mankind for what it is, or praise it for what it is not, or — generally — to teach it how to behave." So wrote Joseph Conrad in A Personal Record.

How many times it happens that a single moment conjures up the entire narrative, the whole story seems to evolve from that particular event and still it comes across you so beautifully that you- the reader- seem to be part of it; the author, who can brings up such intense prose, is definitely a master in his art. *Mothering Sunday* revolves around one such event and its aftermath. Jane, orphan and housemaid, lies showered in March daylight in her sweetheart's quaint little inn him dress – unthinkable, wonderfully gradually – to abandon her for his future spouse, the account, while layered with premonition, gathers the soaked sensual force of a Donne sonnet. How she occupy her time when she has no mother to visit? How, shaped by the events of this never to be forgotten day, will her future unfold? She has her unfathomable freedom-which can't be measured or taken away, which is something she may be said to be rich of despite being motherless

maidservant- along with a book and half a crown in her pocket bestowed by a kindly employer who, his sons dead in France and his domestic staff reduced, is inclined to be indulgent to her youth.

Feast your eyes. It was an expression that came to her. Expressions had started to come to her. Feast your eyes.

Graham Swift shows us that how Jane's vocation-writing- took birth: the observational gifts she developed as a housemaid, the solitude of her lifestyle gives her ample opportunity to rear those traits which, of course, others-who are blinded with veil of class- may not notice; the freedom she felt, as an orphan, to invent an identity for herself; her love of books facilitated by her access to the library in the house where she worked. The seemingly docile circumstances around her turn out to be fertile ground where seeds of observance, love and talent sprouted and Jane, as world then know her, stood strong on that. Jane may be the motherless maidservant and Paul the carelessly privileged heir, but as she rises from their bed in the wake of his departure, walks naked through his grand empty house and begins to exercise her novelist's entitlement – to watch, to observe, to describe and to transcend her circumstances – the balance of power shifts momentarily in her favour and Swift's small fiction feels like a masterpiece.

There was also the word 'fiction'- one day this would be the very thing she dealt in- which could seem almost totally dismissive of truth. A complete fiction! Yet something that was clearly and completely fiction could also contain- this was the nub and the mystery of the matter- truth.

Swift has full grip on his narrative and perfectly knows what is to reveal and what is to conceal. Time slows and there are moments that could be described as Proustian or perhaps, more accurately, as reminiscent of Edward Thomas's great poem "Adlestrop". Here is Jane stopping on her bicycle on her way home to listen to the day passing:

There was not a murmur, in any direction, of traffic. There was only the birdsong and, in the warm air, the half-heard stirring and rousing of – everything. Spring.

This moment of stillness is symptomatic of the book's determined lyricism. Swift is an undoubted master of detail and delay, working by a process of meditation and accumulation to create a narrative that carries far more heft than one might assume from its length.

By then she'd think that Conrad himself must be a sort of secret agent, slipping between worlds. And much later she'd think and sometimes say that all writers are secret agents. But perhaps the truth was- though she wouldn't say this- that we are all secret agents, that's what we are.

Though the plot of the novella is quite straight forward and there are not many thrills for the reader and in fact the reader may even know the outcome of the events well before they materialize, however still an unknown urge keeps you moving. For, it is not always the plot where a book attains its fate, sometimes what matters style and impression than content: the persistence of memory and the ensuing feeling of dissociation that rises in Jane Fairchild. This is a sensation that most writers share, the ultimate mix of reality and

recollection that invites us on the almost interminably frustrating mental journey to make sense of life, which gives us bliss close to that by poetry- the most refined form of literature.

The tenacity of this glorious novella may be ascertained from the fact that when you come across last moments of this beautiful romance with tinge of tragedy, you wish that it could be extended indefinitely. Jane- the writer, giving interviews on her work, is always conscious that a writer's work is not only about what she reveals but it is also about what is concealed-for the power of concealing is too strong which what is revealed may not overcome and in fact perhaps that is what differentiate between great and good piece of art; and the reader knows too that such intensity cannot be overextended- for the bliss of imagination is too much for the obvious. Nor is it accidental that the shyest, most unassuming of narrative forms has been chosen for this, the tale that Jane will never tell and the baton which, by literary sleight of hand, is passed to Swift.

It was about being true to the very stuff of life, it was about trying to capture, though you never could, the very feel of being alive. It was about finding a language. And it was about being true to the fact, the one thing only followed from the other, that many things in life- oh so many more than we think- can never be explained at all.

Jr Bacdayan says

It is hard to find words with such sincerity and warmth for literature, for life. This isn't perfect, but it feels genuine the way only fiction can. It's simple yet its depth is staggering. No matter what I say, it will be hard to convey these concepts best felt. That's why I'm going to skip the discussion and urge you to get yourself a copy. It's best read, experienced, and through it lived. Well, isn't that what books are for anyway?

Holly says

Simply wonderful. I'd never really warmed to Graham Swift in the past, but now think I need to revisit his earlier novels. And I'd much rather read Swift doing English eroticism than Ian McEwan any day. (*On Chesil Beach* came to mind, but how different this is.)

The novel(la) is relatively elliptical but contains entire worlds and thoughts and time periods, and there are tiny asides that speak volumes (causing me to agree with with the NYT critic quoted on the back cover who said that "the depth of field in a Swift novel, thematically and emotionally, is vast.") And oh! ~ the quiet extended scene in which our character walks about the empty house of her soon-to-be former lover without a stitch of clothing on - she's Duchamp's nude descending the staircase - this scene felt timeless within a borrowed time, portentous, and multi-layered. "As if her nakedness conferred on her not just invisibility but an exemption from fact."

One could say that the voice of Jane Fairchild as a ninety-year old writer didn't work (I think it did), or that the Paul Sheringham character was not developed enough (he seems such a cad), but the reader doesn't really need to know anything more about Paul, as he is not the meaning of the story. I could and should read this a second time to feel and understand more - e.g. I get the modernist nods to Woolf and all, but why the Joseph Conrad books, really? Anyway that's for a later day. Today I'm still basking in the sunlight of the

unseasonably warm day of March 30 1924.

Hugh says

It has been several years since I read anything by Graham Swift, but I enjoyed this quiet novella. Most of the book is set on a single day in 1924.

The book has an anonymous third person narrator, but is told from the perspective of Jane Fairchild, an orphan working as a maid in a small country house, who has been involved with Paul Sheringham, a more prosperous young neighbour who is due to marry (largely for money) a few weeks later. He invites her there for Mothering Sunday, having ensured that the house will be empty. Their tryst is described in languorous detail, after which Paul departs late for a lunch with his fiancée, leaving Jane alone and naked to explore the big house. Paul dies in a car crash later the same afternoon, leaving Jane to reflect on what clues she may have left behind.

There is also a metafictional element - Jane is looking back on these events as a successful novelist in her eighties, so much of the book is about the writing process itself - we learn about the ways she has used elements of her story, what she has never revealed, and also about how exposure to writers like Joseph Conrad helped her as a writer, thanks to her employers' library. All of this is beautifully described, making the book a pleasure to read, albeit one that was over rather quickly.

Robin says

Feast your eyes...

Golden Rain by Leon Francois Comerre

The first half of this seductive novella, Jane Fairchild is reclining much like this: nude, a post-coital feast for the eyes of her lover Paul. She also feasts on him, his "thoroughbred" body and the minutia of his every movement. It is a slow, sensual feast for the reader too, as we share this very private time, which proves to be pivotal in our heroine's life, Mothering Sunday 1924.

Jane is a maid at Beechwood, and today Paul, the dashing young master of neighbouring Upleigh is headed out for lunch with Emma, a lady of means, who he will marry in a few weeks. This may be the last time he and Jane will be together.

Even though the scene is lovely, sun-bathed and languorous, even though it is unpolluted by percussive words and emotions, a tension builds. This is achieved through a lyrical repetitiveness, and the knowledge that this day marks a life changing point on Jane's map.

It was just delicious to read, it was a feast. Graham Swift, with his writerly magic, turned a rather unoriginal story into something captivating, iconic, empowered. It brought to mind for me McEwan's *On Chesil Beach*. Both novellas encapsulate one meaningful day, and show how one day can influence and shape an entire life, in breathtaking simplicity.

This book, however, didn't hold the perfection of purpose I enjoyed in McEwan's story. The last third veered into places that didn't seem to belong. The tension and mood broke for me when Swift focussed on Jane's

later, literary life. I heard his voice, and I learned all about Joseph Conrad (?). Normally, I like authorial consciousness in books that I read, and I do see what he was doing, but it came too suddenly, it needed to be part of the book from the beginning, to belong. The spell he cast was broken, dousing the lovers (and this reader) in a shower of chilly, off-topic prose.

That said, what a lovely story, what a beautiful vignette, a tasty little feast.

Diane Barnes says

This is totally my kind of book. The story of a woman's life told through the events of one day in 1924. Beautiful writing. Graham Swift is one of my favorite authors, I'm never disappointed in his books.

Hilary says

This story mainly happens during one day in March 1924. A maid is having a relationship with the young master of a neighbouring house just before he marries someone from his own background. You get the feeling they would both like this to be different. A short read and an okay story.

John Purcell says

Delicious. That's what this book is. Delicious.

Mothering Sunday reveals Graham Swift to be a master at the peak of his powers. Imagine an artist, a Matisse or a Picasso, deftly sketching a scene or a portrait - a line drawing, seemingly effortless for them to do, just something to capture a moment, to capture a mood. It looks like magic to us, and yet to them, a commonplace. The result of genius and experience.

I imagine Graham Swift talking to his editor about Mothering Sunday. The editor grasping it like it was gold. And Swift saying, Oh, you like that do you? I have many of those laying about.

We need to celebrate books like this. We need to encourage these writers to write more. Great writers get better with age. Our obsession with the new can obscure this simple fact.

Mothering Sunday is erotic, moving, honest and beautiful. A very easy read. With the lightest of touches. But it also has the power to surprise. A hymn to youth, a meditation on ageing and a study on the value of experience.

Pat says

Giorno di festa. Coito ergo sum

Coito.

Ha pensato a tutto, Paul. Persino al contraccettivo (diaframma, tenete a mente). La giovane Jane, cameriera

trovatella a servizio della famiglia Niven, da qualche anno ha una relazione col rampollo di casa Sheringham. Prima la pagava, poi promossala “amica” ha evitato la spesa. Lui risparmia, e lei non si sente più una prostituta. In fondo, “*Amica, [è] meglio ancora che amante*”. E di amanti ne avrà un buon numero in seguito, quando sarà a Oxford: “*Tanti: di questo avrebbe fatto un punto d’onore*”.

E veniamo al 30 marzo 1924, Mothering Sunday. Eccola arrivare, la nostra Jane, in bicicletta. Varca il cancello e pedala lungo il viale d’accesso, tra limoni e narcisi. Questa volta non passa dal retro, ma dall’ingresso principale. La casa di Upleigh è vuota. La famiglia è fuori a festeggiare l’imminente matrimonio fra Paul e Emma Hobday. Le domestiche sono state accompagnate alla stazione dal giovanotto. Trascorreranno la giornata con le rispettive famiglie.

La conduce, o meglio, la spinge su per le scale. Raggiunta la stanza da letto, Paul spoglia la giovane mentre lei, ferma, osserva quella stanza fino a ora sconosciuta. Sdraiati sul letto, nudi, immobili, l’una accanto all’altro fissano il fumo delle sigarette, col cinguettio che arriva dal giardino e rompe il silenzio della casa deserta. Per lei, convinta di una “*perfetta politica della nudità*” che cancella le gerarchie, è un momento magico. Un momento di pace e incanto che difficilmente una servetta può conoscere. E qui, per non tediarsi con troppa poesia, ecco che mr Swift le fa sbatacchiare “*via la cenere dall’uccello ancora umido*” di Paul.

Post coito.

A questo punto, i termini nudo, nudi, nudità comparsi già una decina di volte, si replicano per altre trenta e più. Il buon Graham teme che ci dimentichiamo, o che non ci sia chiara la loro condizione di nudità. Lo stesso vuole che rammentiamo l’orfanitudine di Jane (e pensate un po’!, nonostante sia cresciuta in brefotrofio, si rivela essere creatura “*tutt’altro che priva di intelligenza e spirito d’iniziativa. Era venuto fuori che la ragazza sapeva leggere molto meglio di quanto fosse richiesto a una cameriera, scrivere ben più di una semplice lista della spesa, e anche fare di conto*”); si adopera, mr Swift, perché non cadano nell’oblio le numerose “*emissioni notturne*”, prodotte in solitudine o in compagnia. Ha cura che non scordiamo quelle macchie. Tiene altresì a ricordarci, svariate volte, il diaframma o cappuccio che il magnanimo Paul ha procurato alla giovane domestica.

Mentre il seme di Paul abbandona Jane, con notevole sgocciolio tra le gambe (ci spiega che è per il diaframma), il giovane si veste, lentamente, e non prima che l’egregio autore abbia largheggiato sulla di lui nudità. Nel frattempo lei rimane sdraiata sul letto. Nuda.

Paul se ne va nel primo pomeriggio, Jane approfitta per visitare (nuda) la casa. Entra in biblioteca e stringe al petto (nudo) un libro di Stevenson, raggiunta la cucina, si siede (nuda) e consuma il pasticcio messo da parte. Beve birra. All’improvviso si sente miserabile, senza niente addosso. Rutta rumorosamente (giuro!) e torna di sopra per rivestirsi. Infine esce, inforca la bicicletta e si avvia verso casa Niven. L’incontro amoroso è finito. Jane, consapevole che non ne seguiranno altri, pedala.

E qui... bombshell!: “*Aveva ventidue anni. Con il vento che le sollevava la gonna, e le stuzzicava il diaframma.*” (riferito al contraccettivo succitato).

Ora, anche ipotizzando una sella col buco intorno (come la famosa menta), un organo genitale somigliante al traforo del Monte Bianco e un vento potente come una tromba d’aria, vi pare verosimile?

Stringendo: gli eventi si susseguono e si giunge al termine, passando per il cambio importante nella vita di Jane. Il trasferimento a Oxford, il suo lavoro come commessa in una libreria, dove di giorno in giorno i libri le diventano sempre più familiari, così come lo divengono i clienti: “*Cominciò a frequentarne alcuni, a uscire con loro, perfino ad andarci a letto, e non sarebbe stato errato affermare che era esattamente ciò che aveva sperato, e in qualche modo previsto. Se non era potuta “andare a Oxford” nel senso che comunemente veniva associato all’espressione, tanto valeva che diventasse intima di chi godeva di quel privilegio. Sarebbe stato addirittura possibile sostenere che si muoveva nella cerchia universitaria con molta più libertà, e riscuotendo molto più successo, di tanti poveri sgobboni che dell’accademia facevano parte a tutti gli effetti. Riusciva perfino a spacciarsi per un esemplare di una specie rara quanto spaventosa: le studentesse universitarie.*”

Infine la gloria.

Lunga la vita di Jane. Corto (per fortuna) il racconto.

Voleva essere una narrazione sulle convenzioni sociali, sugli strascichi della Grande Guerra, sull'emancipazione, l'indipendenza, i sogni, le aspirazioni, l'amore per le parole? Voleva essere un omaggio alla lettura, alla scrittura? Ai romanzieri citati, primo fra tutti Conrad? Poteva esserlo. Invece no. Ripetitivo fino al fastidio. Tutto per superare le cento pagine e renderlo vendibile?

E ho percepito uno sgradevole velato "invito" al giudizio nei confronti di Jane. I passaggi sulla giovane domestica/giumenta, che ho riportato, sono alcuni esempi. Su Paul lo stallone, perché "*non c'era alcun dubbio che lo fosse*", nulla da dire. O al limite si potrebbe, con un sospiro, borbogliare per "*tutte quelle emissioni sprecate*".

P.S. Il 30 marzo 1924, era veramente domenica. È anche l'anno della morte di Conrad, che a Jane piace tanto (lo immagina persino - il vecchio Joseph - disteso al suo fianco. Nudo, naturalmente). Su su, che a cercare qualcosa si trova. Leggete Conrad. E gli altri scrittori citati. Tutto quel Modigliani in copertina sprecato...

Agnieszka says

...enjoy your youth...

Mothering Sunday. Such an old-fashioned name for the day when servants had their day-off so they could go home, visit families. In this day the whole world order seemed to be reversed and landlords without daily help of their servants were childly helpless and the routine of housework almost ruined .

Mothering Sunday is a record of one single day, 30 March 1924 and its heroine Jane Fairchild is twenty two then and works at Nivens' household as a maid. She's an orphan, a foundling with no home and parents to go so she may celebrate her day whatever she chooses. Cycling through green country, it's March though it feels more like June, or sitting under a tree with Conrad's *Youth* in her hands. Or, since everything is possible on such a lovely day, answer the call from her lover Paul Sheringham from nearby estate.

Youth. Such a word. Youth. Foundling. Orphan. Orchid. Jane is only gathering words. Savoring its texture, learning its weigh. One day she would become a writer and leave behind her everything except that day. But for now she just collects words.

In this day the whole world order seems to be reversed. Like then when Paul is slowly undressing Jane, isn't it her job as a servant ? There is no rush this time, no furtively stolen kisses, no hasty sex in the shed or greenhouse. There is a sensual pleasure in exposing body, shameless awareness of own beauty and youth, there is a leisurely lovemaking and post-coital languor. Looking at sated Jane lying on the bed Paul is dressing himself. He has an appointment with his soon to-be-wife but seems to not be in hurry at all. It's only March though it feels like June, sun pours through open windows, half-dressed Paul's carefully choosing his clothes and on the shelves photos of his late brothers, immovable, frozen in time and eternal youth.

Where have all the young men gone? But youth was slaughtered in trenches and at Flanders fields and Paul is the only remained heir of Sheringhams and makeshift son for the Nivens, their neighbors.

Mothering Sunday is achingly beautiful novella. I was enchanted by the way Swift captured so many emotions and meaning with so little words, from which some additionally are a few times repeated. Narration is slow and languorously unhurried, full of detailed descriptions as if you had only this one precious moment to memorize that day so you could relive it again and again through the years to come. There is such an atmosphere and dream-like ambience in the scenes when Paul is out of the picture already and Jane having his house to herself, comfortable with her nudity, is wandering through its rooms. Watching,

absorbing, remembering. Leaving unmade bed and scattered clothes. At this very moment she is not a maid. Such a perfect ending for the glorious day.

There never was a day like this, nor even would or could be again .

Swift with subtlety and finesse conjured an image that is wistful being still erotic, fortunately avoiding vulgarity and triviality. But *Mothering Sunday* is much more than this review implies. It's about sense of loss and grieving after the sons that perished in the Great War, it's about storytelling and the role of a writer, it's about gaining independence and self-awareness. But what mostly beguiled me in the novel lies in its style and aura, that evocation of one crucial moment from the past that defined Jane and coloured her whole subsequent life.

4.5/5

Antonomasia says

[4.5] One of those books for which I wish it was possible to write two reviews addressed to different sets of people, although my rating wouldn't change. There are the friends to whom I'd like to point out that this is middlebrow litfic and that they probably wouldn't like it - but it is a particularly well-written example of its type and contains some meta-stuff about writing that might not be uninteresting if they found themselves stuck with a copy of it at a station/library/relative's house etc. (In further meta-ness, all locations which appear in the book.) And once the review is sitting on the book page, where those readers would barely notice it, said caveats are unnecessary and would only make others feel snobbed at, when I'd rather meet them on the level.

This novella is a great example of how really good writing can elevate a story & setting that in outline are clichéd, and more or less make the proverbial silk purse from sow's ear.

It brought back embarrassing memories of a hackish short story I once churned out for a creative writing course, also with a cycling female protagonist resident in an early twentieth-century minor English country house - set maybe 12-15 years earlier - and the use of a Bloomsbury Group name* for a character (I think it might be compulsory in these). I've long rolled my eyes at that story, but Graham Swift's *Mothering Sunday* gave a lesson in what's actually possible. It's very accessible, would appeal to fans of *Downton Abbey* - rather than being a similar tableau, it zooms in to one one character, a maid, Jane; but again it has rather more depth and conscious awareness of tropes than a guilty-pleasure binge on ITV costume drama. (A programme which, come to think of it, started just a few months after I came up with that story - something in the air maybe, and which I haven't seen since the second series...think it was some dread of memories suspended in the theme tune.)

There's excellent attention to detail in the novella, but never too much. Contrasted with a debut historical novel I've been reading the last couple of days, Swift, with at least 35 years of fiction-writing under his belt, knows how not to plaster every page with displays of research, and gets it spot on. Jane is an utterly convincing female character, and there are several details of bodily experience mentioned that a lesser male writer might overlook. If I'd read this book without an author name on it, I'd have been sure the author was a woman. At times Jane reminded me of Will Self's similarly excellent portrayal of young Audrey in *Umbrella*.

Unlike Audrey, Jane has a brighter future ahead of her, one which is hinted at early in the book. I groaned at the appearance of yet another writer protagonist: stories I've read so far this year in which a character isn't an author have been very few - but even to a reader so sick and tired of them as I am [the phrase "another

fucking book about another fucking writer" is waiting in the wings until I can stick it in the review of a less delicate story] this example was actually quite interestingly done: discussion, for instance, of the ways characters emerge sideways from real people. She sounds like the kind of author who would now be in Virago Modern Classics; by the end of the book I could visualise them, she was that convincing. I just really liked Jane - she has a sense of mischief I found entirely relatable, and she likes to have a go at stuff without being bullishly overconfident. Older Jane also sounds rather like - although is a touch more reserved than - the venerable and irreverent Diana Athill, whose wonderful memoirs I must get back to at some point. The way she sees no barriers to taking men as models for her own ambitions I think reflects formidable older British women writers I've long admired, such as Murdoch and Byatt, and, to use that overused r-word again, is a thought process I found easier to understand than always finding it necessary to follow in the path of another woman; it was by women who felt able to emulate men and had that sense of adventure that many of the trails got blazed in the first place. For a fully evidenced example, see Patti Smith's *Just Kids*. (I note one reviewer below finds it unbelievable that Jane likes Conrad... Not a fan myself, but I've met a couple of women now of pension age who liked reading Conrad from their teens; because of this, and their attitudes and achievements, I saw him instead as a particularly astute choice. As Jane says, *But everything had a masculine bias in 1924* - and for quite some time afterwards - and if you didn't much like, or didn't even really want to read, the marriage-focused Austens & Brontes, and had a limited library of classics as your main reading material, his books were among those you might latch on to.)

I'd never seriously considered reading Graham Swift before, but now would certainly do so again. I think this is a great little book with the potential to be both a prize-winner (or at least shortlister) and a popular favourite - and unlike the chunksters crossing occupying that territory lately, and which I wouldn't have bothered with on spec due to the time commitment, it's a very quick read.

* The book uses the fairly unobtrusive "Carrington" as a supporting character's middle name.

[When noticing this book online, I'd been trying to remember what the painting on the British cover was; in case I forget again, or someone else wants to know, it's from Modigliani's Red Nude/Nu couché.]

Joachim Stoop says

Oh, how I disliked this short novel! It's a really thin 'where did I read this before' story. Much ado about nothing... The language is ok, but never wow. I was quite amazed by how such a short book could have such a nagging tone.

When I read the positive reviews on this one, I feel that we read a totally different book.

Jill says

"There never was a day like this, nor even would or could be again." The day in question is Mothering Day, the day that servants were allowed off to visit their families. It is also the last time that Jane Fairchild, a servant girl, and Paul Sheringham, an upper-class neighbor, will meet for their tryst before he "marries up" and moves to London.

The day – a perfect sunny March day that feels more like June – will start off languishingly and sensually yet

will take surprising turns. The initial pace is unhurried, as we play voyeur to Jane and Paul who enjoy their lusty coital time together; after his departure, Jane is left to wander around in an unhurried manner in his wake. Gradually, as the novella reveals its intentions, we discover nuggets about Jane's past and her future as a well-respected novelist.

In certain ways, *Mothering Sunday* reminded me of another book I read recently – a book I also loved: *My Name is Lucy Barton* by Elizabeth Strout. There, too, the theme is profound self-discovery, leading to a career as a writer. And there as well, the focus is on how we remember and convey truths and how fiction can be used to get to “the heart, the nub, the pith: the trade of truth-telling” and what it means to be true to the “very feel of being alive.”

This is an exquisite little book, a paen to the art of fiction and story-telling, a lovingly crafted character tale, and a compelling read. I could have dwelt in this world longer than the 177 pages allotted to me.

Fionnuala says

The arrestingly beautiful painting on the front cover of my copy of this book is a detail cropped from a larger painting, *Nu couché 1917*, by Amedeo Modigliani, in which the artist had already chosen to crop the figure's lower legs and hands and the top of the head. On the back cover of the book, the painting is further cropped and becomes even more powerful as a result of the zooming in.

I think Graham Swift's publishing team made an inspired cover choice - I've rarely come across a jacket design that fits the subject matter as well as this one does. Not only is a large part of the book narrated by a naked woman looking out at the world from a bed, but her narrative zooms in on her subject matter in a very clever way; she takes us right up close to the events of the story, which covers the period 1917 to 1924, and we feel, we know, that everything that isn't absolutely essential to the telling has been cropped.

So, a short book and an economical one. And quite as beautiful in its way as the Modigliani, though we are given, not the artist's gaze but the model's.
