



Flesh of the Peach

Helen McClory

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An intense journey into and out of rage and grief, via sex and violence, following 27 year-old artist, Sarah Browne and set mostly in the American Southwest. In New York, the ending of Sarah's recent relationship with a married woman has coincided with the death of her estranged, aristocratic mother, leaving her a substantial amount of money and an unrecognised burden of toxic grief.

Rather than return home to England, she decides to travel by Greyhound to her mother's cabin in New Mexico. There she's drawn into a passionate relationship with Theo, a man whose quiet stability seems to complement her mercurial character. But as Sarah's emotional turmoil grows, there are warning signs that tragedy could ensue.

In *Flesh of the Peach*, Saltire First Book of the Year winner, Helen McClory, paints a beautiful and painful portrait of a woman's unravelling, combining exquisite, and at times experimental, prose with a powerful understanding of the effects of unresolved loss.

Flesh of the Peach Details

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Author : Helen McClory

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From Reader Review Flesh of the Peach for online ebook

Sarah Rogers says

This debut novel should go on a shelf to be called Non Fluffy Female Characters to be joined by Gwendoline Riley's First Love and Ottessa Moshfegh's Eileen, amongst others. Some beautiful, poetic writing and an interestingly constructed, episodic novel. Definitely not fluffy.

Nicola says

A wonderful read. Review to follow. (Meantime if you're a UK reviewer you can request it on Netgalley.)

Caitlin says

An exquisitely written debut novel. McClory crafts gorgeous sentences that pull you deeply into a novel that's about grief, fury, and the ghosts of the past. I interviewed McClory for Burning House Press. We talked about gender, unlikable women, and much more:

<https://burninghousepress.com/2017/03...>

Gumble's Yard says

I believe that following the demise of its initial publisher, this book is available for a new publisher to take on. If this is true than I can only recommend it to any presses looking for books to publish in 2018, genuinely literary-form merging, with flash fiction skillfully melded into a novel.

She had left home when she was seventeen.

She has never really been back.

She had never really left ...

She has been privileged to live in a mansion ...

She couldn't speak because every word she spoke was privilege, she couldn't stop herself speaking because she was lonely, hopeful. She was the daughter of a famous, popular artist. An unacknowledged daughter of a Japanese-American art lover.

She had been painted many times as a child, but her mother changed her hair from the slink of black it was to fluffy chick blonde in every cottage row and misty riverbank scene.

Skip some steps.

She had left that all long ago and was different now.

She was Sarah New York City.

Sarah Browne, the protagonist, was bought up in a crumbling Cornish mansion, the daughter of a famous artist (whose fame and fortune had faded in Sarah's childhood, but picked up again later) and what seems to

have been an exclusively female and heavily dysfunctional family unit with her mother, Aunt and cousin. She became estranged from her family, not least after an incident where she slashes her sleeping mother with glass, fleeing first to London (art college and sales assistant jobs) and then to New York – where, as a 27 year old, we find her at the start of the novel processing the implications of two pieces of news. The first the sudden break-up of her relationship with a married woman Kennedy (who reveals casually that her husband has discovered about the relationship and hence it must end – Helen suspects Kennedy may have told him), the second the death of her mother and the news of a significant inheritance.

One item of this inheritance is a cabin in New Mexico and Sarah resolves to take a road trip there to *“take her two thousand miles away from Kennedy. Two thousand more on top of the Atlantic to separate her from the family pile.*

There she meets and starts a relationship with a man Theo and his mother Gam (effectively her only neighbours in the cabin), who had previously know Sarah’s mother.

McClory is perhaps better known as a writer of “Flash Fiction” – very short stories of maximum 1000 words, and her first (published) book was “On the Edges of Vision”, a collection of such fiction. Interestingly this book was written first, however as McClory explains *“no one wanted to publish it, so it sat for three years or so, until I wrote and secured publication for my flash fiction collection. The collection was only possible because of the work I’d done on the novel: the novel is only available today because of the collection’s modest success.*

Although this book is a novel it is effectively one written as flash fiction – with over 100 chapters in its 270 pages as well as short interludes where Sarah reflects on ideas on how to spend her inheritance. The book largely progresses forwards in time, although chapters go back to Sarah’s affair with Kennedy and further back to her childhood and student days.

Further the writing has much of the essence of flash fiction, many of the chapters could serve as small stories in their own right, and in McClory has clearly developed a skill for an economical yet descriptive choice of phrases to conveying sentiment. Examples I enjoyed included the following (but I felt I could have easily noted down phrases from almost every chapter):

“Hope is the thing with barbs that never let’s you go. Or is that loneliness”

“She was going to dress from now on for a beautiful life. Keep saying these words to yourself. It sounds naïve but that is one way to choose to exist. As a polished stone skipped across the hardness of things”

“Nostalgia was like a vine, strangling her, sickly scented.”

“All fictions are aware of their fictionality. Their twenty-six letters of personhood”

“It is irritating when a family has practiced its mistakes too long ... You have no map of what to feel for them, but they want you to feel something”

“How is it by the way her life failed the Bechdel test ... That would be because she didn’t have any friends, or at least could not remember if she did. A collection of email addresses preserved on account”

“The City was like a row of sandcastles and for her the tide was coming in. A sandcastle is never destroyed, it just falls back into damp soft sand. On a different day, in a different

summer, some other child will come along and build the grains back up into the world as they see it”

“Nostalgia was like a vine, strangling her, sickly scented.” serves as perhaps the key quote in the book – with Helen unable to escape her past and its effects on her life – firstly her strange childhood (and her mother’s almost literal air-brushing of Helen’s mixed-race descent) and secondly the sudden break-up of her relationship with Kennedy (and the clear choice Kennedy makes of her husband over Helen). However at the same time much of her life has been trying to deal with and make sense of her past.

“It occurred to her that she had spent too much time reducing the imposing discordant energy of her mother to a pocket sized river pebble. She was trying to make her childhood easier to solve”

“This was an American hospital and spoke medicine in a different language to the one Sarah knew. For example in the language of money in exchange for repair”

Or in the author’s words from an insightful interview

<http://www.theskinny.co.uk/books/feat...>

This whole nostalgia thing, it pains you. That’s the meaning of nostalgia, isn’t it? Something that hurts and that you keep returning to. ... Nostalgia is a necessary force for focusing the mind and understanding who one is as a person. ... I think for most people, self-confidence can be an issue. You don’t have a complete version of yourself. You have all this nostalgia blocking your view but at the same time, you need it to allow a full view of your past and a full view of who you are. The whole book is Sarah coming to terms with who she is, but also pushing forward and changing who she is and how she responds to the world and her surroundings, kind of finessing her canvas.

As the book develops we learn more about the character of Sarah – and the knowledge is not pleasant.

Sarah herself struggles with firstly how she treats others and how, as an effective default option she ends up applying the cruel and hurtful manner in which she learned to interact and fight with her mother and Aunt to others: *The harshest things are so simple to say. Despite this being so, not everyone deserves the worst. But who is not everyone. Distinguishing between people seemed a terrible burden.* Secondly with her inability to source kindness from others: *She was overburdened with her thoughts. A wish for comfort, for palm against palm and fingers latched. No one ever knew how to give it to her. What could she want, given that she seemed a pretty cactus or a thistle pitched all by itself among the rocks, casting a twisted shadow*

The book opens with a dedication *“To all the unlikable women in fiction and outwith it”*.

I have seen in a video interview the author say that she added the dedication after finishing the book, partly to signal to readers that they should not expect to like the protagonist, and that such a reaction was OK. However it’s also clear that the choice of a “unlikeable woman” was a deliberate one.

Such a choice seems fashionable, in literary terms, currently with best-sellers such as *Gone Girl* and *The Girl*

on the Train, and literary books such as Eileen, First Love, Sorry to Disrupt the Peace. McClory gives in this interview one of the most coherent explanations I have seen though for this choice.

<https://burninghousepress.com/2017/03...>

Women, like everyone else, have hugely varying characters. I don't like that reviewers both professional and non- seem to complain about not liking a fictional woman. It is of course fine if some characters are the most lovable and strong-willed or insightful woman (Jane Eyre, she whispered) or witty and clever and good (why, Elizabeth Bennett!) so long as every woman shouldn't have to be that. How shallow an understanding we would have of ourselves, how shamefully we'd view our moral failings, how blankly we'd look at others if all we had were the good girls to show us around the interiors and exteriors of emotional life.

Although not entirely the point McClory is making I saw in her words an interesting literary equivalent to the topical debate around unrealistically perfect body images in the media and the potential effect on eating disorders.

Overall this is an excellent and memorable book and one I would gladly return to, in order to savour more of McClory's compelling imagery. If I had a criticism, however, it would relate to one consequence of that deliberately poetic and slightly mysterious imagery - we spend the whole book in the third party point of view of Sarah (and never from others viewpoint or from an omniscient narrator standpoint) and yet while I felt I had understood aspects of Sarah's character, she still remained much of a mystery.

Finally, unrelated to the book directly I also enjoyed an interview with McClory about Flash Fiction, where she starts with trying to (in my words) dispel the genre biases that we develop as adults, but at the same time talks about an indiscriminate love of reading I recognise in myself and now my own children, and one I am not sure I have entirely lost (left without a book on the tube I will read the adverts):

<http://www.full-stop.net/2017/09/19/b...>

How did you read when you were a child? I read the backs of cereal packets and shampoo bottles with the same hope for something interesting as I did The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, and I am sure I was not alone in this. It was all words, and they were exciting, for the worlds they gave me and the thoughts I had about them and I didn't need to know what sort of form something took to feel the various joys of reading it. Perhaps you, as a child, read just as indiscriminately

Ailsa Crum says

This is a fabulous book - literary in a fresh and engaging style. It's amusing, poetic and intriguing. The intrigue keeps you turning the pages and the poetry has you pausing to enjoy the language. I definitely recommend reading it at least once.

Ignacio Peña says

Flesh of the Peach is a beautiful examination of a young woman named Sarah Browne, who is troubled and displaced by the fractured upbringing from her mother, a famous painter that is willfully negligent of her maternal responsibilities, and how that relationship affects the rest of her life.

The writing is deliberate, and yet oftentimes fractured and sharp, much like the 102 short chapters that the book is comprised of. It's interesting to see McClory, whose writing I am familiar with as predominantly flash fiction, structure her novel in a similar format. I myself haven't read a novel that does this, and was pleasantly surprised at how complete an image I was left with of the book's central figure, and of her inner journey.

Much like *On the Edges of Vision*, for me the book suffers the most when it veers toward the abstract. While the language on display is beautiful throughout, sometimes it becomes harder to trace exactly what the language can be getting at. It's biggest weakness for me shows when the story stops for intimate dialogue, particularly when Sarah meets Gam for the first time, and often after that. Because we are offered so many fleeting glimpses of the main driving narrative, I never really felt a lasting connection with the characters that Sarah encounters. Everyone that enters and exits her life feel like shades of people, and these moments never feel truly present. But this may be deliberate; Sarah herself is someone who doesn't seem invested in her own life, or at least refuses to allow herself this investment, and this distancing kept me at arms length away from most of the players in the story.

It did allow for some rather wonderful moments of introspection though, and it's in this where this novel really shines. In an odd sort of way, *Flesh of the Peach* is a coming-of-age story, despite the central character being 27 years old. Myself being 32 at the time of writing this review, I am all too familiar with the emotional chaos of my late twenties, and a lot of that chaos is something that occurs internally. I felt I could empathize with a lot of what Sarah feels throughout, and it is a credit to McClory's writing; her method in presenting such a kaleidoscope view of Sarah's journey west amplifies a lot of the chaos from Sarah's past and present, and I felt like I had a complete and engaging understanding of the woman being explored. Even when Sarah commits some of her more shocking acts, it didn't surprise me; rather, in some ways I understood, and being from a generation where I still feel at times quite anchorless with respect to the future, there's a lot to Sarah Browne that was cathartic when reading, and it is done so with a beautiful touch.

Melissa says

This is just brilliant and beautiful. From the breathtaking sentences-level writing to the overall story. It's easy to assume that this is a familiar story of a young woman in New York, stumbling through her own narrative, but it becomes clear that there is nothing easy or familiar about Sarah. All of McClory's women are complex, dangerous, unlikeable and even queer! I was worried that McClory wouldn't be able to sustain her lyrical, haunting prose all the way through, but she DELIVERED.

Jackie Law says

"If I owned a horse, I feel like I would ride it until it dropped from exhaustion under me," Maud said [...] "I wouldn't stop until it had given me everything and taken me far further than it could."

Flesh of the Peach, by Helen McClory, is a story of grief, selfishness, and the lasting damage caused by damaged people. The protagonist is Sarah Browne, a twenty-seven year old aspiring artist who, when the story opens, has been rejected by her married lover on the day she discovers her estranged mother has finally died. Raised in a chaotic household of women, where attention was rare and often caustic, she escaped to London as a teenager and then on to New York, a city she now chooses to leave.

Sarah decides to use her newly acquired inheritance to start again, to move to a cabin in New Mexico where she hopes to find the space to consider what she can now be. She takes with her just a few possessions, including a new yellow sundress, but also decades of emotional baggage that she has worked to suppress.

“She placed the newly purchased dress so that it lay across the bed in a pool like sunshine. [...] She was going to dress from now on for a beautiful life. Keep saying those words to yourself. It sounds naive but that is one way to choose to exist. As a polished stone skipped across the harshness of things.”

Sarah’s wish is that she be the best possible version of herself, which is the most that any can aspire to be.

There follows a roadtrip in a Greyhound bus, a stay in a soulless motel, and then a drive to her late mother’s cabin retreat in the Southern Rockies. Here she meets a neighbour, Theo, and they embark on an ill-fated affair.

There are flashbacks to Sarah’s childhood in Cornwall. The isolation of the cabin unsettles her equilibrium. Theo falls in love with this young woman whose pressure cooked emotions demand release.

Despite the foreboding atmosphere the writing remains lyrical, the imagery painting both sensation and location. Sarah is delicate and fierce, owning her needs without apology, a female willing to reject societal expectation.

The final quarter of the book lost some of the coherency which had held together preceding chapters. Nevertheless, the quality of the prose ensured engagement was retained. The denouement was unexpected yet once read could be regarded as inevitable. Disquieting but pure pleasure to read.

My copy of this book was provided gratis by the publisher, Freight Books.

Kirsty says

Scottish author Helen McClory won both the Saltire Award and the Scottish First Book of the Year Award for her initial publication, a short story collection entitled *On the Edges of Vision*. Her debut novel, *Flesh of the Peach*, is described in its blurb as a 'stunning, intense and deeply moving investigation into the effects of toxic grief'. Kirsty Logan, whom I believe to be one of the most exciting voices in contemporary fiction, deems it 'bold and unflinching', comparing it to '*A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* meets *Inside Llewyn Davis*: A brutal, clear-eyed study of a failing artist that shatters our expectations of what a woman should be.'

Flesh of the Peach follows a twenty seven-year-old artist named Sarah Browne. In New York, the tumultuous end of her relationship with a married woman coincides with the death of her 'estranged, aristocratic' mother. She is left with rather a lot of money, and swathes of grief, which she feels quite unable to deal with. The book essentially depicts Sarah's existential crisis, as she takes off across the United States on a Greyhound bus, from her home in New York to a cabin of her mother's in secluded New Mexico.

When she sets off, the following reasoning with herself occurs:

'Are we doing this then, she asked herself.

The question was vague because she herself was vague. It becomes a lyric in a city like this one. Sarah's lover Kennedy had just severed ties. Kennedy had been everything for a while there.

... Her mother was dead back home in England, that was the other thing. Finally, after a slow dance with cancer. And long after their relationship had died.'

She goes on to think about the family pile back in Cornwall, where she grew up, and clearly never felt as though she belonged: 'But you remain on the threshold, the door never opens, never shuts behind. You are outside and you can go no further. And this outsideness, the jags of memory, fit into your skill to be lodged there, for however long.' Sarah strives to move as far away from her old life as she can, searching for the 'best possible version' of herself, and trying her utmost to be at peace with both her body and her place in the world.

Some of the prose within *Flesh of the Peach* is immeasurably beautiful, but an odd balance has been struck with its many choppy, sometimes unfinished sentences. The often very short chapters serve to exacerbate this; they oscillate between present and past, and thus Sarah's story does tend to feel a little jumbled at times. These sections are interspersed with short intervals detailing what she plans to do with her money; the suggestions thrown up are sometimes sensible, and sometimes utterly wild and strange. The really interesting thing about the construction of *Flesh of the Peach*, however, is the way in which it is told using a mixture of traditional and experimental narrative. This playing around with form is certainly one of McClory's strengths here.

The depiction of Sarah's unravelling, and her struggles to stay afloat is believable for the most part, but I felt rather removed from our protagonist whilst reading about her. The third person omniscient voice is effective in terms of relaying the roadtrip which she takes, and the memories which flood into her mind at intervals, but despite the crisis of knowing herself which takes place, I did not feel as though she was as fully fleshed out as she perhaps could have been. There was an insurmountable barrier between Sarah and I; yes, I could watch her and her actions, and could understand the situation in which she found herself, but it still did not make some of the actions which she took that plausible, or in character.

Flesh of the Peach is a story which both champions and degrades love, and all of its many forms. Whilst the characters are largely interesting, we do not learn enough about the majority of them, and despite the third person narration, we see them only through Sarah's eyes; we are thus given rather a skewed interpretation of other people. With regard to Sarah, we as readers are always aware of her; her life, her behaviour, her thoughts, and her feelings are continually woven together. Despite its strengths, *Flesh of the Peach* did not quite live up to its premise. Regardless, I look forward to reading more of McClory's work in future, as I have a feeling that she is definitely an author to watch.

Paul Fulcher says

And then after that. She would make sure her life would no longer be a sentence fragment or shackled to metaphors, but a steady drawing forward and one day back, back home.

Freight Books is a small UK independent publisher "With a focus on publishing high quality literary fiction ... [with] a commitment to compelling narratives, scrupulous editing, high quality production and imaginative marketing, supported by a strong and identifiable brand".

Helen McClory's *Flesh of the Peach* is her debut novel, written before but published after she had made a

name for herself in short stories and flash fiction.

Wonderfully, the book is dedicated “*To all the unlikable women in fiction and outwith it.*”

As she has explained elsewhere:

There are loads of real women who get slapped with the label ‘unlikeable’ (the violence of the metaphor is apt, I think). Take your pick – as soon as I write this, another one will be being vilified in the public eye. Sometimes for some actual sin, sometimes for having an awkward personality or a mental illness or the temerity to have a body and some opinions, occasionally clumsily expressed. We can’t escape judgements and judging – the internet is a 24-hour courtroom. For fictional women, I think of Good Morning Midnight’s Sasha Jensen. Miss Jean Brodie. Jamaica Kincaid’s Lucy. I think of women written by male authors who get a bit more of a pass – Anna Karenina, Madame Bovary, Becky Sharp. I think of films packed with scheming dames and femmes fatales and bunny boilers. I think of the way we see women as villains when they are oversized, full of feelings that unsettle, when queer, trans, deformed, not one of ‘us’, old. My book is for all these women and the space they make (and necessarily complicate) for the rest of us.

<http://thecaledonianovelaward.com/out...>

In the same interview, when asked to recommend a book, she references a more contemporary example of the unlikable woman character, Helen in Patty Yumi Cottrell’s *Sorry to Disrupt the Peace* (one of my books of 2017). And from my recent reading (and recent award shortlists) Eileen in *Eileen*, Neve in *First Love* and Mattie in *History of Wolves* are other obvious examples.

McClory’s Sarah (as an aside, named Astral in earlier versions of the story - see e.g. <http://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/tennes...>, a name which has a rather different feel) is another in the same mould, but with some interesting differences.

Firstly McClory has chosen to use subjective third person rather than first person narration, which initially I found a little artificial, but on reflection actually works quite effectively as it allows some limited narrative distancing.

Secondly, and as more of a personal view, McClory to me made a brave decision to make Sarah unlikable – difficult to like - rather than dislikable – very possible to strongly dislike. Most of the other contemporary examples fall into the latter camp – the characters almost go out of their way to be unpleasant, there is plenty of black humour, and I at least couldn’t help but secretly like most of them, whereas Sarah is just unlikable.

Related to that, while Sarah has clearly had a very troubled relationship with her mother, she also comes from a life of relative privilege.

She had done so well in the local school.
She had hidden at the front of class.
She had been privileged to live in a mansion.
She contracted bronchitis every February.

She couldn’t speak because every word she spoke was privilege, she couldn’t stop herself speaking because she was lonely, hopeful. She was the daughter of a famous, popular artist. An unacknowledged daughter of a Japanese-American art lover

The novel opens with Sarah Browne (*), in her late twenties, British but living away from her family in New York (*She had left that all long ago and was different now*), and at the top of the Empire State Building. Her

married lover “Kennedy” (that Sarah doesn’t actually know her first name is itself rather emblematic) has just abruptly ended their relationship after her husband found out about it (Sarah suspects at Kennedy’s volition) and almost at the same time, while working in a cafe, Sarah received a phone call telling her of the death, back in England, of her mother, Maud.

And that was how Sarah lost her job

And all she was was an émigré deadmother wifefucker in pieces, spines, vibrating at an awful screeching pitch

From there, to the Empire State building. From there, her pieces sent out to be hopeful and reformatory – somewhere other.

There was no love lost between Sarah and her mother, and her death means Sarah, her only child, inherits the spacious family home, another family lodge in New Mexico, and the money from Maud’s recent resurgence in popularity as an artist. But it still leaves Sarah feeling grief and anger:

But how lucky she was, her mother had left all those millions to her. Just put it in a clean little envelope, Madam Barrister, thank you very much, like a neat towelette slipped alongside the balled-up pink knickers from last night.

She unwrapped another ginger. Sugar rush helped, fire helped. Working the wad against her back teeth, almost choking her. Two paths had emerged. One home across the pond, and another unseen in the American interior beckoning her. It was an easy choice, all considered.

She first undertakes a long road-trip from New York to the family lodge in New Mexico, now hers, first by Greyhound Bus then by hire-car (a car she seems to have no intention of returning):

Here we see the influence of McClory’s short-story background as the story is told in brief vignettes - over 100 chapters in 200 pages - with leaps (albeit small) in the narrative, as well as flashbacks to her relationship with her mother.

The road-trip also allows McClory to showcase her descriptive prose and her admiration for the American countryside, if not necessarily for the culture (in Arthur Dent style, she is often in search of a decent cup of tea).

The day was long and hers alone. American lonesome. She stopped at turnoffs, at petrol stations, at viewpoints. She drank juice, she sang to the dashboard. The afternoon yawned and stretched. The landscape altered by degrees that seemed minuscule until they seemed radical.

In New Mexico she meets and forms an uneasy relationship with the similarly troubled Theo, son of the owner of the neighbouring property (largely home to a concealed cannabis farm).

At one point during a road-trip, they visit the Bandelier National Monument, and the remains of the hotel that was once, rather oddly, run inside the historic archaeological site Frijoles Canyon in the 1920s (<https://www.nps.gov/band/learn/histor...>). *What a charmingly insouciant and invasive thing to do* thinks Sarah and imagines herself as running the hotel and its surrounding fruit farm, the first (I think) of a recurring image of the flesh of a peach that gives the novel its title:

The weight of a home grown peach in a calloused hand. No one else, nothing but that specific, gentle kind of contact, that imagined, tender flesh.

Road-trips aside, Sarah also spends a lot of time alone, thinking:

I was busy masturbating and panicking, she thought. Forward momentum really wasn't my concern.

In particular, there are many flashbacks to her troubled relationship with her mother (rather less to the aftermath of her affair with Kennedy, which seems more implicit). Her mother and her aunt, who lived with them, both drank extensively and while Sarah was used as a model in her mother's painting, her mixed-race origins and black hair were turned into the features of an English rose:

It wasn't really you that Mum immortalised in paint. It was that blonde girl, ethereal, fully white-English. Later Maud would label her 'Little Belle' because it was a name that would work in most markets. You were never more than a prop, a point of reference for Mum's imaginary Little Belle ... once, you scratched off a little of her, just the hair by her face, with your fingernail. Under that top flake of yellow, black hair. Yours.

The narrative is also broken up by interludes of "What She Would Spend Her Money On" often somewhat surreal and troubled:

She would get huge slabs of carcass from best-beloved cattle. Smooth marbled flesh. She would hang these in a specially prepared cellar and frighten herself with their bodies and pungency in the dark. She would buy up old china tea sets, the kind so thin they seem unwell and you fear to hold them. She would never have anything but fires on and drink beef broth to stave all fevers. She would keep a collection of artisan knives and cut the meat for hanging on an antique clockwork roaster that would dangle the carcass part over the fire. She would watch the carcass become meat as it cooked in the huge yellow tiled kitchen. She would eat handfuls of the meat, cooled, bloody, in the salon, all alone, with the window letting in humid air off The Channel. Plush in a chair, chewing. Vases of lilies on coffee tables too high to see if she had guests.

And at the novel's end, she has a rather odd sojourn in Paris, in plot terms to give her practice at being rich as she shops on the Champs Elysee, but gives the author the chance to plug what, to be fair, is the best bookshop I've ever visited, Shakespeare and company.

And underlying the whole novel and Helen's character is a strong air of barely repressed violence - she confesses to an incident with her mother and one senses her relationship with Theo may end similarly.

Overall - 3.5 stars. As mentioned I Helen successfully and bravely (in authorial terms) unlikable but I suspect I won't remember her in time as well as some of the other examples I have mentioned. And while the prose is excellent, the American road-trip parts of the novel felt, at times they belonged in another book.

Rounded up to 4 for now.

Authors website:

<https://schietree.wordpress.com/fiction/>

Jo says

Flesh of the Peach is the debut novel by Scottish author Helen McClory, and wow, what an intense and consuming read. It is about grief and the need to belong.

The novel revolves around twenty-seven-year-old Sarah Browne, an artist, whose estranged mother dies from cancer. Sarah is also dealing with the after effects of the end of her affair with a married woman. She suddenly finds herself alone and wealthy, with the burden of grief upon her shoulders that she does not know

how to deal with, and this is the premise for the story. She leaves her New York home to travel across America in a Greyhound bus to revisit her mother's remote cabin in New Mexico

The language is poetic at times, and the sentence structure took me a little while to fully 'get into ' but this is Sarah's voice that we hear, her innermost thoughts, and the way that these thoughts are put down on paper are important, as they truly represent how she thinks, her unraveling grief and her search for who she is.

While reading I really did feel that Sarah saw herself very much as an outsider, someone who observed rather than living life. This is shown in the recollections of her life growing up in Cornwall, where she felt as if she never really truly fitted in. Her toxic relationship with the married woman, and the affair that she has with Theo once in New Mexico, are all about Sarah's need to find her own identity. To find who she truly is.

As already mentioned, the writing is beautiful, it's lyrical and I got a true sense of who Sarah was and who she wanted to be. The language and imagery used also helps to paint an evocative atmosphere of both her childhood home, and its almost cloying atmosphere, to the barrenness of New Mexico and its many opportunities.

Flesh of the Peach is very much a coming of age story. It's a story about how the past shapes you, makes you who you are, and that we can never truly escape our upbringing. This book has a wonderful, fresh and cathartic feel to it, that is snappy and to the point, just like Sarah. I really enjoyed it and look forward to reading future books by the author.

With thanks to the publisher and author who provided a paperback edition for review purposes.

Jessica says

<https://jessicantdoit.wordpress.com/2...>

A combination of Eimear McBride's *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing*, Emily Fridlund's *History of Wolves*, and Jade Sharma's *Problems*.

McClory's self-confessed unlikeable heroine is equal parts unreliable and erratic in her narration. The prose is searingly vulnerable, experimental, and often challenging. What starts out as a pretty atypical narrative (a grieving young woman embarking on a road trip to find herself), soon twists into a downward spiral of something more compellingly sinister.

I was provided with an eBook of this through Netgalley (many moons ago), in exchange for an honest review, but I had since bought myself a paperback anyway.

Neil says

Flesh of the Peach is published by Freight Books which describes itself like this:

Freight Books is an award-winning UK-based independent publisher founded in September 2011 in the city of Glasgow, Scotland. With a focus on publishing high quality literary fiction, we also publish humour, general illustrated and narrative non-fiction and poetry. At the heart of all our projects is a commitment to compelling narratives, scrupulous editing, high quality production and imaginative marketing, supported by a strong and identifiable brand. Most importantly we want to bring our talented authors to as wide an

audience as possible.

This novel tells the story of Sarah Browne who was raised in Cornwall, England in an environment where both house and family were crumbling around her. She flees first to London and then on to New York which is where we meet her as she is trying to get to grips with the fact that her married lover has rejected her and that her mother has died. Her mother was a relatively successful artist who leaves a large inheritance which Sarah decides to use to travel further away from home into New Mexico. Here she meets Theo and his mother Gam and things proceed from there.

The style of the book is interesting in that it is less a coherent, continuous narrative and more a series of short episodes. We have different timelines mixed covering different periods in Sarah's life. Sometimes there are jumps between chapters that are not explained until something happens that makes you realise some time must have passed.

It is clear that Sarah is a damaged person. She often looks for pain to help her come to terms with life's events. One of the more poetic and less dramatic examples of this is

Sarah touched things with the tips of her fingers, testing and hoping for a splinter or just the right tiny cut

Sarah is not a likeable person. There are several recent novels that deal with unlikeable female lead characters. I think immediately of Eileen from the Man Booker list last year and of the more recent Sorry to Disrupt the Peace. But, for my tastes, *Flesh of the Peach* does something that neither of those two other titles managed: it makes me feel some sympathy towards the protagonist. Yes, Sarah is difficult to like. Yes, she always feels on the verge of violence (you have to read the book to see if that ever erupts or whether it smoulders threateningly in the background). But there is something about the way McClory writes about her damage that makes her seem simultaneously more vulnerable. At one point, she is talking to Theo and he says:

*Maybe there isn't any empty thing. It's just you have the idea it's empty. It's kinda like a loud, distorting fiction that distracts you and makes it all too f**king difficult. '*

'Yep. Living my life like that, one hundred per cent,' Sarah said

As we learn about Sarah, we see that she is struggling to come to terms with herself. She doesn't like her default reaction which is to try to damage others in ways that she has been damaged herself. And she therefore hates herself for a lot of her actions. This battle within her becomes the driving force of the story.

There is a lot of poetic writing in this novel, sometimes too poetic for my taste (what does *Someone upstairs screamed an epithet of high colour* actually mean?), but often painting a clear picture with just a few well chosen words.

There are also several swipes at America:

America was obsessed with authenticity, because there is so much that is not quite real.

To transport a castle stone by stone wouldn't do because to import a castle and pretend to be a noble was a particularly American activity.

This was an American hospital and spoke medicine in a different language to the one Sarah knew. For example, in the language of money in exchange for repair.

Where the book felt less successful for me was the narration style which remains with Sarah all the way through. It's not written in the first person, but we never get to hear from any other character except by their

interactions with Sarah. A lot of the poetic language is slightly obscure. And this combination made for a book that felt claustrophobic, perhaps deliberately done by the author to match the themes.

Overall, Sarah is a memorable character and one I found more interesting than “unlikeable women” (to whom the author dedicates this book) that I have read in other novels recently.

My thanks to Freight Books for a review copy.

Kenny Mooney says

I absolutely loved this book. A very real, very honest story, with a protagonist that speaks in a way I found very relatable. A stylish, poetic prose, combined with an engaging story which takes a genuinely surprising, unexpected turn. Seriously, I am rarely stunned when I read novels these days, but one particular moment in this caused me to stop, re-read, and then read it aloud to my partner. The direction this novel goes in, the territory it delves into, is dark and uncomfortable, and handled so well. And it is such an easy book to read as well, divided into short sections that you just burn through - I read over half the book in one sitting, and could have kept going to the end. Helen McClory deserves huge credit and success, this is a fantastic book that everyone should read.

Arja Salafranca says

‘They parted the way lovers should, with a little fine salting of regret, but not too much.’

This novel is dedicated to “all the unlikeable women in fiction and outwith it.” And the star of this novel, twenty-seven-year old Sarah Browne is certainly one of those unlikeable and quirky characters in fiction. At times I warmed to her, at others I felt myself growing distant. As the story opens she has just lost her famous and wealthy artist mother. From England, Sarah is currently in New York, struggling to get over her romance with a married woman. She boards a bus to her mother’s cabin in New Mexico. She doesn’t know what she’s in search of – more love, healing from the past and the brittle relationship she had with her mother, healing from this woman she’s just parted from. Across the landscape of the Americas and finally in New Mexico, her inner journey continues. The writing is lyrical and beautiful, but Sarah remains a difficult heroine to understand, despite the author’s descriptions: ‘She had wanted warmth and to be harmed. To feel beloved and stung. She had wanted to blister from love, not to have to flee.’

But she flees, and in the New Mexico wilderness she encounters others who knew her mother, and a man, with whom she becomes intimate. All through the novel, memories of the past, growing up with her mother, her aunt and her cousin, wash through the present. This is a story about grief, about confronting the past, and holding onto the present in order to do that. This is a story about the rivers of time, and how we have to step in those waters in order to understand and reach the other side.

‘I’m not even a person,’ Sarah said quietly.

‘Maybe not,’ Theo said, ‘grief does that.’
