



Painting The Darkness

Robert Goddard

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On a mild autumn afternoon in 1882, William Trenchard sits smoking his pipe in the garden of his comfortable family home. When the creak of the garden gate heralds the arrival of an unexpected stranger, he is puzzled but not alarmed. He cannot know the destruction this man will wreak on all he holds most dear.

The stranger announces himself as James Norton, but claims he is in reality Sir James Davenall, the man to whom Trenchard's wife Constance had been engaged, and who had committed suicide eleven years ago. Sir Hugo, James's younger brother, and his mother, Lady Catherine, refuse to recognise Norton and force Trenchard - who fears the loss of his wife's affections - into an uneasy alliance against him. But Trenchard must plumb the depths of his own despair before the dark secrets of the Davenall family can finally, shockingly, be revealed...

Painting The Darkness Details

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Author : Robert Goddard

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Isobel says

Pseudo-Victorian writing from the '80s, this book has just enough mystery to keep you reading. I got tired, fairly quickly, however, of the outdated morales, the "drama" that mainly consisted of "this is shocking because Victorians were prudes" (with a few exceptions), and the characterization. The way that women are idealized or mistreated in this novel was annoying. The woman everyone keeps falling in love with is fallible in that she never got over her first boyfriend, but is beloved mostly because she's beautiful. Also, slightly, because she is so "moral" (although that seems a bit of an afterthought), which seems to translate into boring. The man she falls in love with simply because he looks like her first boyfriend is the "cool" guy who remains unruffled and smokes cigarette after cigarette - and might be lying about who he is (won't give away the answer, since that's the premise of the novel). There is a twist at the end of the novel, but honestly, by the time it comes, you barely care.

Verdict: Mediocre novel; don't recommend (though I seem to be in the minority on this one, based on Goodreads rating).

Roger Neilson says

I had this sorted at 50%, then I had to rethink, sorted again at 70% then had to think again. Amazing both in the plotting and also in the immersion in the life of the period.

Wanda says

23 SEP 2018 - Very Good!

Sarah says

Probably my least favourite Goddard book so far, this suffers from interminable length, a lack of sympathetic characters and a dearth of the great twists we have come to expect from this writer. Special mention must be made of the worst-written female characters in his books; most of them are supposedly so seductive and/or beautiful they drive men to murder, rape and doom-laden betrayal but come across as vapid and personality-free on the page. The period atmosphere and convincing dialogue goes some way towards redeeming the book.

Penny says

This is my second Goddard - both books I have listened to the audio versions.

These books are in many ways unique to Goddard in that they are cross-genre often involving intrigue, treachery, murder, lies and deceit, with some history, politics and romance thrown in!

This one follows the story of a young couple who have been married several years when the earlier fiancee of the wife returns having previously apparently committed suicide. The 'pretender' attempts to prove his identity but his rich and titled family don't believe him - yet his lover (the young wife) from years earlier does. The novel follows the wife's viewpoint, a cousin (a lawyer's) viewpoint, and various members of the pretender's family - meaning we get conflicting ideas and clues as to who is deceiving who and who is hiding crucial information etc. As usual all is not as it seems and the author skillfully manipulates the reader back and forth between belief and denial of the 'pretender' almost to the end. Is he the real thing or not?

I enjoyed this so much I have ordered several more Goddard books.

Amy says

Goddard creates what is, for me, the perfect take-me-away fiction, combining sufficient character development, extremely complicated/interesting plot, and a historical background that's usually pretty informative. I've been on a spree with his novels lately. This one is about a guy who supposedly committed suicide in the 1870's who shows up 11 years later and is trying to prove that he is who he says he is. Definitely lots of twists and turns. If I had to compare Goddard to someone, I'd say Ruth Rendell, but with a less dark view of human nature.

Jeremy says

Hell hath no fury as a woman scorned..... And there is the key to this whole tale. William Trenchard is a successful man and happily married to Constance and with a lovely daughter. Constance was to be married to another but he abandoned her (at the alter as it were) and disappeared, declared dead after 7 years missing. So, was the stranger at the Trenchard gate the disappeared James Davenall? Constance thought so and this sent her into an emotional turmoil. The Davenall family were unequivocal in denying that he was and so a celebrated court case began to decide the true identity of the stranger. A lot was to be had - the Baronetcy was to pass from Gervase to James Davenall but in the event passed to Hugo. One could lose all he had, the other could rise from obscurity to unimagined wealth. In the process we learn the sad, sorry, sordid and uncomfortable truth about the Davenall Family and see the slow mental destruction of William and see how easily others are taken in. Or are they? The final resolution of the case -long after the court has declared its view - leads to no satisfaction for anyone. No one wins but all loose. All that is except the woman scorned.

I found this book so complex and difficult to read that I very nearly gave it up as a bad job. The Christmas holiday gave me the opportunity to spend more time at a sitting reading it and that saved the day. This book really needs your attention and reading spell of an hour or more at a time (not my usual 20 minutes) to get the most out of it - and you will be rewarded.

This could be a 4 part TV mini series quite easily

Bryan Higgs says

Robert Goddard's novels continue to confound me: I'm not sure what attracts me to them, but attract me, they do! I always hated history in high school; it was always kings, queens, battles, wars, dates -- all the stuff that was boring and irrelevant to a teenage boy. I'm not one who enjoys historical drama of the sort that the BBC is always praised for, because I seem to be more sensitive to the inequities of the British class system than most -- even those, who, like me, spent their formative years living there -- despite the fact that I don't think I suffered much of its effects. I'm also one who dislikes pretension -- perhaps that's one reason why I'm so sensitive to that class system.

So, along comes Robert Goddard, who seems to specialize in historical fiction involving dysfunctional, often dissolute, upper-class /aristocratic families, living (usually) in the 19th century or early 20th century. He writes in a rather flowery way, using an above average number of words I have to look up (and I consider my vocabulary to be reasonably good); perhaps he does so to represent the English of that period. Normally, I would react against it, but I don't seem to. Not to mention that he often portrays main male characters who are in many respects weak and not worthy of respect -- but some improve as the book progresses. His female characters are usually not weak, and vary from the romantic and idealistic to the cold, calculating, remote and utterly dislikeable.

But he draws me in every time. Grabs me, even. It's really the plots, which are complex, mysterious, and full of unexpected twists and turns, not to mention quite a number of red herrings -- so that you think you're getting a clue about what's happening, but then you don't.

These plots take some concentration to keep track of what's happening, and to keep the characters straight in your mind.

Highly recommended!

Tweedledum says

Robert Goddard has excelled himself in this convoluted Victorian melodrama . I must say I was intrigued from the beginning and vacillated along with Richard Davenall in my belief or otherwise in the man who turns everyone's lives upside down. Lyrical and evocative descriptions contributed to this atmospheric mystery.

All Goddard's books are meticulously researched as to time, place and theme Goddard succeeds in rousing the reader's emotions on behalf of his characters. Painting the darkness is no exception. There were times when I felt angry, frustrated, shocked, desperately sad, etc etc. An emotional roller coaster in fact and interesting too how Goddard was able to turn the reader's initial revulsion for some characters into a more sympathetic viewpoint once the full facts were finally known.

In this sense his stories can help to make the reader more compassionate, think more deeply, and realise that there is always more to learn, to understand about a person.

Painting the darkness is a story which uncovers layer upon layer of secrets and lies. Typically the deepest most shocking secret is not revealed until near the end. Yet that secret is the one that has set everything in

motion.

I loved listening to Michael Kitchen's interpretation of the book. I found his restrained, almost detached reading somehow enabled me to feel more deeply the unexpressed emotions.

Bettie? says

Bettie's Books

Karolina says

The first of Goddard's I have read and by far the best. Gripping, dark, mysterioius. A must read!

Joe Stamber says

Another historical mystery epic from a master of the genre. After reading 4 of his books, I'm pretty sure that Goddard is more comfortable writing of bygone times; like many authors who existed in the periods his tales spend a lot of time in (or all the time in this case), Goddard is light on characterisation but lavish on story and setting. That's not a criticism, although it won't be to everyone's liking.

Goddard likes to flit between characters and time periods as his tales unfold, initially to confuse the reader, then to confuse the reader some more and finally to slowly explain what it all meant... well, in a fashion. In Painting the Darkness, he really lets loose; characters and time jumps come thick and fast and the reader has to concentrate to keep up. Eventually I got to know who was who (and when was when) and settled down to enjoy the story.

The plot twists and turns and keeps the reader guessing as one theory after another is dashed. The tale concerns James Norton, who turns up in 1882 claiming to be an heir who supposedly killed himself 11 years earlier. As always with Goddard, the reader is given the impression that things aren't quite what they seem. Almost the entire cast goes through some sort of turmoil or other, often with disastrous consequences. As the book drew to a close, it seemed to me that Goddard had to a few options that might suit an ending, but (not for the first time!) discarded them all and settled on one that few readers would have guessed. I found it to be a somewhat disappointing conclusion to this sprawling epic.

So, excellent story telling, but not Goddard's best. A solid 3.5 stars if it were possible, I can't bring myself to give it 4 stars, so 3 it is.

Mary says

I just finished reading Painting the Darkness by Robert Goddard. It's bit of an involved plot, but I'll try to explain it. One mild autumn day in 1882, William Trenchard sits smoking his pipe in his family home. When

a stranger approaches him, he is puzzled but not overly worried. Trenchard cannot know what havoc will be wrought on his life and all he holds dear.

The stranger announces he is James Norton - but is, in reality Sir James Davenell - former fiance of Trenchard's wife, Constance. He disappeared 11 years ago and was declared a suicide. Now he's back to claim his inheritance and Constance. Sir Hugo, James' brother, and his mother Lady Catherine, are convinced that James Norton is an imposter and force Trenchard - who fears the loss of his wife - into an uneasy alliance against him. But Trenchard must plumb the depths of his despair before he can uncover the shocking secrets of the Davenell family.

I thought this book was really well-written, although the plot was very convoluted it was very good. I give this story an A!

Amber Stumpf says

Love the plot twists. Thought I had it figured out---several times.

Robert says

Exciting with the usual plot twists and multiple lines of character development of which Goddard is a master. As usual, the ending was less than satisfying -- but I'm never sure whether it's the book that disappoints me or the truth he makes me aware of. As with a couple of other novels by him that I've read, this one is set in an earlier century (the 19th) and makes excellent use of the historical context.
