



Music for Torching

A.M. Homes

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Paul and Elaine have two boys and a beautiful home, yet they find themselves thoroughly, inexplicably stuck. Obsessed with 'making things good again', they spin the quiet terrors of family life into a fantastical frenzy that careens well and truly out of control. As A. M. Homes's incendiary novel unfolds, the Kodacolor hues of the American good life become nearly hallucinogenic: from a strange and hilarious encounter on the floor of the pantry with a Stepford-wife neighbour, to a house-cleaning team in space suits, to a hostage situation at the school. Homes lays bare the foundations of marriage and family life, and creates characters outrageously flawed, deeply human and entirely believable.

Music for Torching Details

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Anna says

Three thoughts:

1. How do these people have so much sex?
 2. The feeling of ennui, and floating through your life--well, I only wish AM Homes could have given a way of fixing it, instead of just capturing it so well.
 3. *Do Not Read* if you are thinking about pursuing the stereotypical suburban lifestyle...and have an inkling of a reservation about it.
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Cynthia says

I'm only saying this was 'okay' because the book was well written and there were the odd amusing moments. I didn't enjoy the story; it was basically a series of "poor me" moments that culminated in an event that I thought was awful and unnecessary. I didn't enjoy the characters, again because they were all so pre-occupied with feeling sorry for themselves, despite their largely cushy lives. The characters are awful to themselves and to each other.

I realise that this is the point of the book - that the lives of those who have supposedly achieved the American dream are not perfect - but the book explores the theme in a really obvious, annoying and gratuitous way.

Mulligan says

Delightfully devastating. With this book, A.M. Homes paints a haunting picture of suburbia. The main characters, Paul and Elaine, have managed to keep up with the Joneses in their seemingly perfect suburban town, but their lovely house, friendly neighbors and two boys have left them with a life filled with boredom and despair. They want to make things good again in their lives, yet are caught in a shame spiral that begins with a failed attempt to burn down their house and ends with a hostage situation.

Homes does a terrific job of creating painfully honest characters with terribly unfortunate lives to whom the reader can actually relate. Both the writing and plot entertain throughout and make you never want to set foot in a cul-de-sac again.

Peggy says

Okay, I was cleaning out my bookcases and this book was shelved as though it had been read. I read the synopsis and had no memory of this book. I started reading the opening pages, sure it would come back to me. Fifty pages in, I'm totally hooked and very sure that I had not ever actually read it. That was at maybe 5-something pm. I just finished it in one marathon read and am blown away and ready to order everything else

she's written. To recount the plot makes it sound like every late 20th century suburban midlife crisis piece of crap ever written. Let me say unequivocally: it is original and a bit hysterical and otherworldly in a worldly way. In short, its own amazing thing with an ending that drops you off so abruptly you will actually blink your eyes. At least I did.

Mike Polizzi says

(2.5) Today's suburban dweller is a different type of beast. One can read Homes' account of the Weiss family and find the heartbreaks and frustrations rendered by Cheever, Updike and Yates ghosted over with a dash of DeLillo. The characters totter on the edge of chaos. An apt portrait of the thrill seeking, self gratifying set. Written in clean and crisp sentences with episodic momentum, the novel has the feeling of a vaguely entertaining TV show: distanced, cool, impeccable. No place for tragedy, no place for outrage, things simply are.

Mizah says

I had to force myself to finish this almost plot-less book. There is no clear sense of time- for all those affairs and drama to happen in the span of one week, I mean really?! Everything was just so unexpected and crazy that eventually crazy became normal.

And it's disturbing on so many levels, though I'm sure it somewhat reflects the problems of suburban Americans and the flaws of the American Dream.

The only character that I genuinely cared for is the one that Homes killed.

julieta says

Wow! What a book! it's intense, and crazy, like a night out with non stop action and crazyness going around. It doesn't give you much hope in marriage or suburban life, but it is very very fun! I love A.M Homes!

Katie Mansfield says

I'm speechless. The ending... WHAT?! I loved the book almost the entire way through. A.M. Homes has a writing style I really appreciate and enjoy. But the ending! How could she do that? I can't decide if I want to cry or burn my book in the Weiss Family barbeque.

Edmole says

I have been rewatching the Sopranos from the start. Like the Sopranos, this is a study of selfish kids of baby boomers who have themselves had kids who are now caught in the maelstrom of their indulgent selfishness.

AM Homes first novel, Jack, is dark but hopeful, as are her last two, May We Be Forgiven and This Book Will Save Your Life. But there's no hope in this book. These are people who have everything they need and do most of what they want and don't enjoy it and don't know what to do with it.

It's a very well written book, but I didn't enjoy living with the people in it. In the Sopranos there's charm and gags to alleviate the horror of people's true selves. Nothing here.

Quick tip. I bought this for the mother of a one year old without reading it on the strength of how much I like AM Homes. It was not a good book for the mother of a one year old to read. It's not David Peace exactly, but don't read it if you're not 100%.

Ed

Sarah Smith says

OH MY GOD is exactly what I said to my empty living room when I finished reading this novel by A.M. Homes. After Revolutionary Road and Little Children this is the third successive novel i've read dealing with suburban life in America. Paul and Elaine this time are the unhappy couple and a little bit crazy, certainly depressed, completely selfish, mostly unlikeable and somehow and i've no idea how but Homes makes you care about these two strangely believable characters. The story starts when they burn down their house on a whim, seemingly just for the craic by kicking over the barbeque. The house isn't completely destroyed just some superficial damage and a hole in the dining room wall. They end up staying at Pat and Georges house, Pat being the stereotypical stepford housewife who isn't as most people aren't, all that she seems (it is very funny and very weird when that little plot thread comes to a head) and their two kids Sammy and Daniel are shipped off to two friends house (Sammy staying with Nate the son of Mrs Apple, one of the women Paul is having an affair with, and Daniel with the Meaders who are the traditionally normal family but seem kind of odd against the cacophony of strange characters we meet). The rest of the story then deals with this anything but normal family attempting to get back to normal, to rebuild and improve their house and well lives too. I think this novel is about how people are never who they portray on the surface and that really everyone is a little bit crazy but even if it's about nothing but an entertaining story then that's more than enough. Homes writes the kind of things other people are afraid to say out loud and she writes it well. I have a sad little confession, when I read a book I write down the sentences/quotes I particularly like. I couldn't do that with this novel, because I pretty much particularly liked every line in it. It's very funny, it's very dark, it's very twisted and it's very excellent. It may not be to everyones liking however, I imagine a good barometer would be if you like American Beauty then this you will love.

Finally, I wished more books had endings like this one, she's some writer. If the one advantage of being dark and twisty is getting to love novels like this then I say embrace the dark and twisty, it's occasionally worth it.

Tammy says

It was very difficult for me to assign a rating to this book.

On one hand - it is very well written. That is usually enough to earn 4 stars from me. I do love a well-turned phrase.

On the other hand - it was very difficult to read. The characters - straight across the board - are very unlikeable. It was hard for me to care about what happened to them. To make matters worse, every now and then I would see a little glimpse of myself or of other people I love. Never enough to make me think that I - or they - was/were 'just like' that character - far from it - but enough to make me uncomfortable.

Uncomfortable. That is the one word I would choose if I had to write a one-word review.

The story revolves around a suburban couple in their 40's. Dissatisfaction with their lives prompts them to make a rash decision which sets the events of the rest of the book in motion. Said events are over the top, but only just slightly so - making it not exactly realistic, but not exactly madly fantastic, either.

Without spoiling anything, the ending is shocking - and worse than even these unlikeable characters deserve.

Valerie says

One of the worst books I've ever read. If a book could be written in a minor key, this would be the result. This could be beautiful, but there's no character development, the editing is disappointing with inconsistent details all over the place, and the ending? The ending is ridiculous - it's as if the author came up against deadline and needed to end it. I wish I would have bailed on this book in the first chapter, like I'd originally wanted.

Auguste says

Few writers are as incisive and savagely funny as Homes when it comes to dissecting that dysfunctional beast that is family. I just love her.

Η τ?πισσα πρ?πει να μεταφραστε? στα ελληνικ? ΧΤΕΣ. Ε?ναι απ?λαυση σκ?τη.

M says

I can't in good conscience give this fewer than three stars, because it held my attention, was at times strikingly funny and/or insightful, and was a definite show of talent - but so many times I wanted to throw it across the room and/or give it one star, so, I am settling for three with misgivings.

Let's start by saying that I am a realist. I like my fiction as unfictiony as possible. What I can't handle is fiction via fun house mirrors, ie, scenarios and people so outlandish they cannot be real or relatable yet the storyline and overall writing is acting as if it's real. Sort of like watching the Simpsons (which I love) but with real people, not cartoons. Suddenly, not so funny anymore.

MFT takes on the ever popular and painfully cliched topic of Les Suburbs, seemingly nice families and homes that are riddled with unrest, affairs, and quiet desperation. This is suburbs on crack, and everyone is

beyond the realm of real, be they too unlikable or too perfect or too troubled. Overall you feel like the characters (if not the author herself) are on crack and therefore nothing actually seems upsetting, or it's all upsetting, because it all falls short of seeming actual.

The basic premise is a rather clever one - unhappy Elaine and Paul (who are always flirting with macabre in their unhappiness - we first meet them washing up in the kitchen, and Elaine holds a knife to Paul's neck and grazes it. Mm yup that is unhappy, certainly, and all the odder that it doesn't strike either of them as particularly worrisome, or change the tenor of their marriage) decide whilst barbecuing one early summer evening to tilt the grill (after pouring lighter fluid on the house) and have the whole thing burn down. I like this as a symbol - indeed, the houses we build are often traps and represent our own undoing - but the book split off in to too many odd parts after that, so that even if you could go along for the ride (and admittedly this is difficult for me, as Homes seems to want me to feel bad for people who seem to only feel bad for themselves, and anyway they all seem like morbid puppets so why should I care??) there are too many twists and turns to really stay with you as a story. So, anyway, they burn the house, but instead of feeling better they end up further messing up their marriage and children and whatever else.

I wonder about the following. First, is there a value to shock value, by which I mean, so many times I hear, "This was disturbing" or "This evoked a strong reaction so s/he gets credit for that" and I wonder if this is really true, like, is Homes a celebrated writer because she can really gross me out and perplex me with her unfeeling and mildly creepy characters? But shouldn't I like the people, or care, or root for them? I mean, what is talent? Is it making you feel, period, or is it making you feel something you like feeling?

The other thing is, this book made me reflect on the writers I love, specifically John Irving. What I love about John Irving, aside from his wit and literary prowess and beautiful language and you know everything else, is that he presents a fascinating world that is ALMOST entirely real except when it isn't. He gives us a slanted world that is quirky and strange yet oddly believable. Well, doesn't Homes do that, and yet Homes kind of disgusts me while John Irving makes me happy to be literate. So I guess it's not just the ability to "tell the truth but tell it slant" as much as it's... I don't know, still having something pulsing in your story that is human, rather than destroying everything that is? Or something?

This review (such as it is - thank you, Homes) would not be complete without saying what the bleep to the ending. Yeah. Really. What was that??? So if nothing else grabbed you, that ought to at least make you curious. I know I read through to the end in small part because of that.

Kusaimamekirai says

This is my first book of 2017 and I can't imagine anything that follows it will be quite the same.

This is the story of Paul and Elaine. They are profoundly and irreparably unhappy with just about every facet of their lives. Early in the story they are BBQing in their backyard yard when they decide to spray their house with lighter fluid, tip the grill over, and torch their house. They have no reason or overriding goal other than simple and complete nihilism.

That their house doesn't actually burn is a metaphor for everything else that is incomplete and unfinished in their lives. What it does accomplish however is a setting in motion of profound consequences and misery. As you can guess, this is a pretty dark story. One of the darker books I've read in a long time (and I like dark stories).

I was struck in particular by just how miserable these characters are and how hopeless they feel. They are extremely unloveable human beings and yet one can't help feeling sympathy for them. As Elaine says to Paul, "we're all we have, and we're not enough".

That is truly who these characters are.

Alone even in the presence of each other.

Sarah says

I hated this book and everyone in it. If it wasn't for a class I wouldn't have finished it. When I was done reading it I literally threw it at the wall. I will never be able to hurt that book the way it hurt me.

Snotchocheez says

My second shot with A.M. Homes' brand of familial dysfunction was much better than my first (the decidedly one-note short story collection *Things You Should Know*). This one, a particularly more ferocious novel *Music for Torching* is, at its finer moments, as good as anything written by a few of her East Coast-based Pulitzer-winning kings of dysfunction fiction predecessors (John Updike and John Cheever immediately come to mind), though refreshingly with a female-centric perspective. While I generally loathe books that feature relationships wracked by infidelity (c'mon authors, there are other ways of portraying familial dysfunction without racing to the obvious) there's something with this couple, Paul and Elaine, that beg a little deeper examination.

White Plains NY-adjacent, 2.3 children-bearing Paul and Elaine are utterly average, the perfect middle class, cocktail- and dinner-party-throwing paradigm,, but are completely bankrupt in feelings for each other. (Ok, that's not true: they despise each other. Elaine hates Paul for his all but overt line-up of neighborhood vajayjay, Paul hates Elaine for moralizing and overall bitchitude). They ate completely stymied and seemingly running headlong into divorce-land when they come up with the ridiculously bizarre idea to shake up the marital stasis: burn the house down while barbecuing.

Paul and Elaine are loathsome creatures (Paul, of course, quite a bit more loathsome than Elaine), but Ms. Homes gives them just enough humanity that you actually care they are trying something, *anything* to save their marriage, even as it becomes increasingly clear their actions are futile.

This book just about got 4 stars from me, but the ending (which ordinarily I'd applaud for depicting karmic comeuppance for characters behaving badly, was just too WTF, too ugh-eliciting to embrace. Still (not counting the crud ending) Ms. Homes travels down a well-beaten path that I rarely enjoy traveling down, and succeeded in keeping me in it to the end.

Theacrob says

Just started. Not sure if it's great literature or total crap.

Update. Total crap CONFIRMED.

This book is desperate to be DeLillo's *White Noise*, but it fails with such misery that I'm surprised I haven't gouged out my eyes and accidentally had lesbian intercourse. Not necessarily in that order.

Take my advise and read *White Noise* if you are looking for modern Americana.

Nico Blackheart says

I saw this book on a recommendation list and figured I would give it a try since I like quirky dark humor in the spirit of *Running With Scissors*. Homes' style is dry, witty, and leaves nothing to the imagination. Where most other authors in this genre of starkly depressing humor use flowery language to skirt around the issues presented, Homes uses very simple English to get her points across, and most of the time it makes for a refreshingly human read with minimal pretense. Despite the fact that not much actually happens in the book, it's fast paced and constantly keeps you wondering just what will happen next.

This is very "slice of life". It's simply a series of terrible events in a family's life that aren't too far fetched from things that could really happen. A few scenes are over the top and definitely reserved for fiction, but overall this is a believable and touching book, even when it's crass and disturbing. The ending leaves more to be desired, it's left on an uncomfortable cliffhanger, but so are many moments in real life. In real life no one's story is wrapped up happily at the end to make up for all the bad, so I guess the omission of an epilogue works for **Music For Torching**.

(view spoiler) I'll give Homes the benefit of the doubt, not everything in life is picture perfect, despite how we all try. This is especially evident in the character Pat, someone striving for perfection who ends up losing herself to her pent up desires before the eyes of the dysfunctional family she's taken into her home after the "accidental" fire that sets up the events of the book.

I'd recommend it to others who are fans of the likes of Augusten Burroughs and David Sedaris. It's a bit less poetic and sentimental than the works of those authors, but what it lacks in verbose language it makes up for in gritty relatable honesty.

Makenzie Schultz says

I'm really torn in my opinion of this book. As more time goes by since I've finished it, as I think about it more, I like it better than I did when I had first finished it. When I first finished this book I was absolutely shocked by the outcome, I put the book down and was incredibly confused, and really upset. But I knew that I didn't dislike the book, I hadn't been able to put it down. A.M. Homes' style of writing is mesmerizing, and the characters are all just so terrible and so lifelike in their bad qualities, everything is so descriptive and real. I had really liked the book throughout reading it. It was only in the last few pages that my opinion started to turn, the ending didn't feel like it fit in this book. Even though, looking back, there were some hints that something might happen, some event at least similar in intensity to what happened. But nothing felt wrapped up to me, and I don't mean to say that every book needs a clear and concise ending, but when I say that nothing felt wrapped up I really mean that absolutely nothing was finished when the book ended. So I'm torn. Throughout the majority of reading I liked the book, and then I was really upset by the ending. I feel like it needed more, like the characters need to learn from the ending rather than having the book finish in the middle of the events. I'd like to read more about these characters, to see if this event changed them in any way like nothing else seemed to.
