



The Sundial

Shirley Jackson

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Aunt Fanny knows when the world will end....

Aunt Fanny has always been somewhat peculiar. No one is surprised that while the Halloran clan gathers at the crumbling old mansion for a funeral she wanders off to the secret garden. But when she reports the vision she had there, the family is engulfed in fear, violence, and madness. For Aunt Fanny's long-dead father has given her the precise date of the final cataclysm!

The Sundial Details

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From Reader Review The Sundial for online ebook

Tez says

Having read The Bird's Nest last month, I expected another quality read from Shirley Jackson. Unfortunately, The Sundial failed to grab me. It should have been intriguing: Aunt Fanny's brother dies, but his ghost appears to her with warnings of an upcoming apocalypse, in which only the people inside the family mansion will survive.

OK, this was written decades ago, but the family believes the warning so quickly that it doesn't feel right. Someone does try to skip out, but after she's assaulted she's rescued and brought back to the mansion. Meanwhile, the family tries to recruit people to join them, should the need for repopulating the earth arise - this bit is kind of comical.

And at the end, we're not told if everyone outside the house dies or not. Might be interesting to read a follow-up. If you wholeheartedly believe that apocalypse will come on a certain date, and you plan and live and everything, and it doesn't happen...what will you do in the aftermath of the non-event? There are a lot of pre- and post-apocalyptic stories, but I'm not sure if this angle has been as frequently explored in fiction. Something to think about.

But yes, this did not hold my attention at all, and is very much a let-down in comparison to the author's other works.

Maureen says

this is among my favourite novels. every time i read it i am just as struck by its harmonious discord as i was the first time. this story is, to me, a perversely uneven amalgam of apocalypse, drawing room comedy, and creepy, gothic haunted-house tale. i think i only like the book more for the fact that the pieces don't quite fit together, and the scene that scares me the most isn't the one i'd expect; though there are several claustrophobic and uncomfortable moments in the sundial, and i always smile at the dialogue in this novel, for me, some of shirley's wittiest writing. it almost feels like oscar wilde briefly inhabited her mind when she wrote this book because the characters are so pert, and alive, that even when they are cruel, or shallow, or stupid, i am fond of them. the drunk villagers are a joy each time, and i am as foolishly in love with essex as ever i was, though i know he is a cad.

people i have loaned it to never seem to like this book as much as i do; perhaps it is because i am a crooked and misbegotten as it is. several found fault with the ending which makes me perfectly content -- the ending they want i think would have to be a whole other book. i find everything i want in a book here: poetry, and confusion, loneliness, and fear, and the waiting for something bigger than yourself, so that you don't have to think about yourself, or what the point is, anymore.

thank you shirley, for leaving me stories that understand me so well.

Gala says

Podés leer esta y otras reseñas también en mi blog:

<http://ceresplaneta.blogspot.com.ar/2012/09/la-casa-de-los-halloran.html>

En medio de tensiones familiares, situaciones inquietantes, hechos sobrenaturales y personajes conflictivos los Halloran esperan el fin del mundo atrincherados en su mansión.

Antes de esta novela había leído *Siempre hemos vivido en el castillo*, de la misma autora; quizás, su obra más famosa, porque representa a la perfección lo que Shirley Jackson quiere mostrar en su obra literaria. Si bien ese libro que menciono me gustó un poco más que *El reloj de sol*, pienso que esta historia sigue mostrando excelentemente la esencia de esta particular autora. Ambientes siniestros, personajes perversos y situaciones casi sobrenaturales son los condimentos más interesantes de este texto, cuya autora es, para mí anteriormente desconocida, sin lugar a dudas uno de los mejores descubrimientos del año.

Al igual que en *Siempre hemos vivido en el castillo* en *El reloj de sol* hay una cuestión muy importante que rige durante toda el libro: la figura de la casa. En esta historia la mansión de los Halloran cumple una función, podríamos decir, doble; por un lado, es un símbolo de protección a los embistes del fin del mundo que se está acercando, pero por otro lado, es también el lugar en donde se desarrollan los momentos, y también los personajes, más opresivos de la trama. Lo que de alguna forma es algo destinado a proteger a los Halloran es al mismo tiempo lo que hace relucir sus peores miserias. De hecho, el único ambiente importante para el argumento de esta novela es la casa, más allá de que en algún momento alguno de los personajes decida salir y la narración nos lo haga saber. De esta forma, el terror en esta historia se vuelve cotidiano, en la medida en que este se desarrolla en el ambiente familiar.

Si bien es cierto que el terror *empieza* con algo sobrenatural (que podríamos identificar en la aparición del padre de la tía Fanny, el cual le advierte del fin del mundo) no podría asegurar con total firmeza que el mismo se desarrolle pura y exclusivamente con este hecho. Por el contrario, el terror que acecha por todas y cada una de las páginas se presenta de una forma cotidiana, como algo de todos los días. ¿De qué forma? Básicamente, a partir de la construcción de los personajes. Por ejemplo, en el inicio de la novela sabemos que un miembro de la familia, Lionel, hijo de Richard Halloran y nieto del primer señor Halloran, padre de este último, ha muerto. Luego del velorio se establecen distintos diálogos entre los familiares, y en uno de ellos nos enteramos de que, por boca de la pequeña (y perversa) Fancy, hija de Lionel, su padre murió en manos de su abuela Orianna, esposa de Richard. En ese descubrimiento tenemos dos cuestiones interesantes por analizar: por un lado, el propio acto de la abuela de matar a Lionel y, por el otro, el hecho del aparente “encubrimiento” del mismo a cargo de los familiares. La única que parece sacarlo a la luz y la que efectivamente *habla* de él es Fancy, aunque tampoco parece muy *afectada* por la muerte de su padre. Es de esta forma, mediante diálogos y conversaciones, que uno como lector va enterándose de la esencia de los personajes.

El mayor logro de este libro está en cómo Jackson logra combinar de gran manera este ambiente opresivo y bastante inquietante y perverso con muchos momentos satíricos y de humor (muy negro, por cierto, como era de esperarse). La autora construye un grandísimo abanico de personajes muy bien desarrollados; cada uno tiene sus características particulares que los hacen ser fácilmente reconocibles uno de otros. Algo complejo de conseguir, porque además la historia no solo versa sobre los Halloran como familia, sino que también incluye a los criados y amigos de familiares que van apareciendo a medida que avanza la novela.

Luego de haber terminado el texto uno podría decir que en *El reloj de sol* no ocurren demasiadas cosas. Es más, si tuviéramos que contar los hechos “importantes” que van pasando podríamos hacerlo con los dedos de una mano. Pero lo interesante de esto es que la novela sigue siendo, a pesar de esto, sumamente intrigante. Y esto es, en gran medida, gracias a la capacidad de la autora para generar estos personajes, y los ambientes en los que estos se mueven, que impulsan al lector a seguir leyendo constantemente a la expectativa de saber qué ocurrirá. *El reloj de sol* es una libro que puede leerse rápidamente pero no por el hecho de que su narrativa sea superficial o algo por el estilo, sino que, por el contrario, es la *calidad* de la prosa de la autora la que permite que la trama avance con fluidez y, al mismo tiempo, consiga generar en el lector una sensación casi compulsiva por saber qué pasará después, qué ocurrirá con los personajes y con la trama en general.

El reloj de sol está estructurada en su mayoría por diálogos, lo que también posibilita la rápida lectura de la misma. Es gracias a estas conversaciones que se establecen entre los personajes que podemos dilucidar cómo es que efectivamente son. Siempre es más fácil creernos su personalidad si los vemos en acción o si, en su defecto, vemos cómo piensan. Y eso se logra, en esta novela, a partir de las cosas que estos le dicen o cuentan a otros personajes o, también, a la hora de ver cómo se dirigen hacia los demás miembros de la familia en determinadas situaciones. Ahí es cuando realmente se ponen sobre la mesa las características de la personalidad de cada uno, en la forma en que se expresan o reaccionan ante cierto hecho. En este punto la autora tiene una importancia vital: además de que es ella la que los pone en esas situaciones también es ella la encargada de mostrarnos, a través de estos diálogos, las formas que ellos tienen de pensar, actuar y reaccionar. Estas conversaciones, como para hacerlas aun más interesantes, están cargadas de un humor muy particular, que en muchas ocasiones deja en ridículo a los personajes y, a pesar de la gravedad de algunos de los hechos que van ocurriendo, la forma en que están narrados los hace ver cómicos, satíricos y hasta paródicos.

***El reloj de sol* es una novela muy interesante. En ella, Shirley Jackson logra plasmar muy bien los temas que evidentemente le importa incluir en su obra, tales como el humor negro, el terror cotidiano y personajes psicológicamente complejos que, en este caso, son intercalados con situaciones sobrenaturales. Un libro (y una autora) a tener muy en cuenta, sumamente entretenido y que tiene, además, un notable valor literario.**

Edward says

Foreword, by Victor LaValle

--The Sundial

Rebecca McNutt says

This enduring and timeless horror classic is absolutely amazing, filled with imagination and a foreboding sense of dread.

Lotte says

"Aunt Fanny knows when the world will end... Aunt Fanny has always been somewhat peculiar. No one is

surprised that while the Halloran clan gathers at the crumbling old mansion for a funeral she wanders off to the secret garden. But when she reports the vision she had there, the family is engulfed in fear, violence, and madness. For Aunt Fanny's long-dead father has given her the precise date of the final cataclysm!"

It took some time for me to get into this book, but after the story took some awesome twists and turns, I ended up highly enjoying it! I think that if you liked one of Shirley Jackson's other works, you'll definitely enjoy this! There are a lot of themes that reoccur in Jackson's writing (e.g. the setting in a big isolated mansion, a large number of characters that aren't particularly likeable, and so on...) It's twisted, absurd at times, super creepy, ((view spoiler)), and also pretty freaking hilarious. Definitely recommend!

Jeff Jackson says

Aunt Shirley's "The Sundial" is not in the same class as later masterworks such as "The Haunting of Hill House" and especially the perfect "We Have Always Lived in the Castle," but it still takes the prize for the bitchiest apocalyptic novel. There's a good dose of Oscar Wilde and Evelyn Waugh in the scathingly funny dialogue, with some supernatural "Wicker Man" antics thrown in for good measure. The ending is nothing short of sublime and lifts the entire novel, forcing you to re-evaluate your view of the story, its trajectory, and highly ambiguous message.

Paula says

2.5 stars. I love Shirley Jackson but this was just ok for me. There were some memorable moments but for the most part this story was a bit too predictable and a bit too exaggerated to be genuinely creepy or funny.

Carla Remy says

I wrote in my previous review (when i didn't finish it) that this book epitomizes Shirley Jackson's Gothic Psychedelia.

Aunt Fanny, having a surreal psychotic episode (probably a seizure) sees her father's ghost, who tells her the world will end and all will die but the inhabitants of their family mansion. And everyone there believes her and acts accordingly. This novel is funny and weird and adorably dark and surreal. I find it a heavy book, strange, deep and abstract. I loved the part when Julia gets lost in the fog at night. Also the dollhouse and the shrubbery maze.

Amanda says

WHAT IS THIS WORLD. Acerbic, mean, modern, and surprisingly funny. Shirley Jackson was a goddamn genius and I want everyone to read this book and then talk to me about it. One of my favorites this year.

Krok Zero says

Shirley Jackson was such a kooky genius. Emphasis on genius. Also, emphasis on kooky.

I'm learning that there is a whole world of Shirleyana beyond that one story which shall remain nameless because everyone read it in high school.

The premise of this one is simple but also highly bizarre. A wealthy family, plus assorted hangers-on, waits around in a big old house for what they believe to be the imminent apocalypse. Most of the family members are pretty awful in one way or another, and they mostly hate each other. The novel chronicles their interactions as they wait for a premonition to come true and plan for the paradisiacal new world that supposedly awaits them.

Also, it's funny.

The neat irony at the center of Jackson's style here is how all the characters comport themselves with extreme decorum and refinement, yet at the same time are openly hostile toward each other. It makes for a lot of dryly hilarious dialogue and devious plotting.

Another impressive thing Jackson does is to render irrelevant the question of whether the end of the world is "real" and whether the characters are crazy for believing in it. There is no authorial judgment of the characters; the point is that *they* believe in this thing, for various reasons, and it doesn't matter if *we* believe it. And they do have their reasons: leadership opportunities, spiritual connection with dead loved ones, fear of non-paradisiacal life lived as a failure, or the simple power of Pascal's wager.

Speaking of those characters, they are wonderfully drawn--especially for such a short novel. My favorite is the world-weary, self-deprecatingly witty Essex, who I could easily see being played by George Sanders. (In fact, almost all the characters come off as British--I guess mid-20th-century pseudo-aristocratic Americans acted rather Britishly). And it's impossible not to love the family's wicked matriarch Mrs. Halloran, who takes charge of the family's post-apocalyptic planning with extreme prejudice. (In one of the book's funniest details, Mrs. Halloran insists on wearing a crown during a party given at the house, and thereafter into the new world.)

Amid all this there is at least one nail-biting suspense set piece, involving a character's attempted escape from the house. Since the rest of the book is relatively uneventful, plotwise, that one sequence really sticks out as a tour-de-force. There's also one really funny sequence involving another group of eschaton-hopefuls, whose belief system hinges on salvation courtesy little green men from outer space.

I don't think it's too spoiler-y to say that the book ends on a note of ambiguity. My immediate reaction to this was annoyance, but after some thought I realized the ending is perfect. As Maureen put it in her lovely review, the ending one might crave would have to be a whole other book. It's so much more tantalizing and frightening to imagine the possibilities that Jackson leaves open.

I'm holding back on five stars because there is one exposition-y section earlyish in the book that is, as far as I can tell, completely extraneous on both a narrative and a thematic level. I kept thinking it was gonna pay off, and it never did. But that's really a nitpick. Call it 4.75 stars. Regardless, it's an unclassifiable, largely unheralded work that really deserves to be back in print. Check your local libraries, folks.

Kusaimamekirai says

Many years ago as a junior high school student, I remember reading Shirley Jackson's short story "The Lottery" in class and being taken aback with just how....wicked it was. It's been many years since I've come back to her writing but I'm so glad I did. If "The Lottery" was wicked, "The Sundial" is wickedness covered in evil, smothered in a secret sauce of sarcasm and black, black humor. These are some seriously messed up and self important people and yet, I can't count how many times I laughed out loud at just how horribly they treated each other.

In short, this is the story of the 3rd generation of the Halloran family. They live in a massive stone house surrounded by an impenetrable wall. They are more than happy to have no contact with the outside world as they've constructed their own fantasyland where everyone on the outside is beneath them and beneath even thinking about. That is until a member of the family, Aunt Fanny, has a vision from her dead father claiming that the world will soon be wiped out. Naturally, the Halloran clan are the ones who deserve to survive so they begin preparations for the apocalypse amidst constant and gloriously funny sniping at each other. And of course, not telling anyone on the outside they're about to be vaporised.

I can't even begin to say how much I loved this book and its deliriously self involved characters. It's full of dark humor, satire, and think veiled social criticism of those who build walls around themselves. Perhaps Jackson was critiquing how the wealthy use that wealth to build metaphorical and physical walls from their fellow human beings? Perhaps she was critiquing how we, rich or poor, sometimes are afraid to venture far from our carefully cloistered and "safe" castles for fear of the unknown? Jackson's characters here often think about venturing outside the walls but rarely do so because they believe they have everything they need already and it's "safer" on the inside. Perhaps Jackson wants us to think about taking some risks in our lives. I wonder what Jackson would think of America in 2017 and the social media age where people's circles arguably have become even smaller and everyone retreats to their corners with little interaction with anyone outside of it. How many of us are living in Jackson's castle now?

These are just some things that occurred to me while reading. Forgetting the social issues she may or may not have been writing about, "The Sundial" just as a damn good and deliciously dark story is well worth the read.

Paul says

What a wonderfully weird, creepy, funny book, with such an oddball cast of characters. The plot is pretty simple: an aristocratic family believes the world is going to end on August 30th, and only people within the Halloran family homestead will survive the apocalypse and be reborn to paradise. Mrs. Halloran, the controlling, overbearing matriarch is the star of the novel. Her wit, cruelty, and vulnerability shines on every page. Can't say I've ever read a book quite like The Sundial.

Fabian says

Like a sort of compassionate Oscar Wilde, this romp among the tombstones and all types of Gothic macabre can be experienced like a full-out play. There is an impressive group of characters--eh, automatons--and enough lines of dialogue to tickle anyone's fancy. This is the third Jackson novel I've delved into; the third novel deserving a 5-star rating. Jackson is the quintessential lost-and-found writer, the fountainhead of so much of the stuff the genre has to offer. In short, an indispensable author whom, if you have not read yet, you most definitely should. It's almost religious, this bond formed between us two.

Anyway, the theme here is charlatanism. The seance & its ministrations are at the forefront (along with story faves such as family curses, a limboesque arena for the wind-up toys to snap at each other in, creepy children and naive adults); you see, Shirley J. writes about this solely because she herself is its inverse. She's the real deal.

This is like Edward Gorey f***ing the Addams family! The magic is derived from the fact that characters are added & subtracted with so much freakish frequency that it all seems as in a feverish dream.

Ziba says

3.5. The extra half is for Jackson. Will the Hallorans witness an apocalypse? Will the apocalypse spare the Hallorans like papa Halloran predicted? Read this and find out all the answers. When you have them, let me know.

Nandakishore Varma says

Shirley Jackson writes seriously weird fiction. I used to think of her as a horror writer, after reading *The Lottery* and reading about *The Haunting of Hill House* umpteen number of times (I have still not been able to lay my hands on the book). However, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* convinced me that her literary talents were much above that of the run-of-the-mill horror writer: the book under discussion has strengthened that belief. Shirley Jackson is a genius of the level of Franz Kafka - a genuine purveyor of nightmares. In *The Sundial*, we have Kafka meeting P. G. Wodehouse in an American manor house.

As with *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, the opening is abrupt and horrifying and hits us with the power of a sledgehammer. The Halloran family has just returned from the funeral of young Lionel Halloran, who has been killed by his mother by being pushed down the stairs. Orianna Halloran killed her only son so that the house would belong to her - at least, until young Fancy, Lionel's daughter, comes of age. Fancy is already dreaming of pushing her Grandma down the stairs, like she did her daddy.

And all this is mentioned in the first two pages: it's only a prelude to the story proper.

The Hallorans are a dysfunctional family. Apart from the murdereress Orianna, there is Maryjane, the weak wife of Lionel: Orianna's husband Richard who's paralysed from waist down and slowly sliding down the slippery slope of dementia: Fancy, who we shall see is as psychopathic as her grandmother: the governess Miss Ogilvie: Essex, a young gigolo who has attached himself to Orianna - and last but not least, Richard's sister Fanny ("Aunt Fanny"), who is skirting the thin line between eccentricity and insanity.

In fact, vintage Shirley.

The Halloran house, constructed by Fanny's father, is situated near a village which is a tourist attraction in its own right, due to a notorious murder where a young girl wiped off her whole family with a hammer. The house is huge and laid out symmetrically: as is the grounds and garden. Only the sundial stands off-centre, striking a jarring note, with the curious inscription: WHAT IS THIS WORLD? written on it.

Immediately after Lionel's death, Aunt Fanny loses her way during a morning ramble in the garden and apparently meets her long-dead father, who gives her the message of doom: the world is going to be destroyed.

"From the sky and from the ground and from the sea there is danger; tell them in the house. There will be black fire and red water and the earth turning and screaming; this will come."

"Father-Father-when?"

"The father comes to his children and tells them there is danger. There is danger. Within the father there is no fear; the father comes to his children. Tell them in the house."

"Please-"

"When the sky is fair again the children will be safe; the father comes to his children who will be saved. Tell them in the house that they will be saved. Do not let them leave the house; say to them: Do not fear, the father will guard the children. Go into your father's house and say these things. Tell them there is danger."

Fanny relays the message, and (here is where the novel starts to become pure Kafka) apparently the whole household buys into it - initially in a spirit of indulgence, but getting more serious as time goes on. The Halloran family picks up a few guests who become their fellow travellers on the road to Armageddon - Mrs. Willow and her daughters, Gloria, a cousin whose father is away on a game-hunting trip in Africa, and "the captain" - a young visitor to the village picked by Mrs. Halloran to add to her coterie. Together, they await the destruction of the old world and the birth of the new, and story moves slowly and surely to its destructive climax.

Shirley Jackson's writing is pure delight. I have always felt that humour and horror straddled a thin line: many horror scenes could become sources of belly-laughter if not managed properly, and many jokes would make good horror stories. Shirley does the tightrope act splendidly. Her characters are unpleasant and serious enough to inspire unease, but they show their ridiculous side (especially in the dialogue which is very Wodehousian in this novel) often enough to make us laugh.

One cannot miss out the religious undertones. The only son who is sacrificed: the father who plans to destroy the world and save only one family: The burning of the books: The matriarch who wears a crown (which looks "just like a substitute for a hat", to put in the ridiculous touch)(view spoiler): Gloria, the seer who can see the future in a mirror... the story could have slipped all the way into religious allegory, had not the author reined it in every time with expert hands.

The climactic party on the grounds of the Halloran house is a masterpiece of scene-setting. What starts as a rather formal affair slowly slides down into an orgy of eating, drinking, bawdy talk and sex. I was reminded of this painting by Bosch.

After this Armageddon is only to be expected.

The sundial, actually does not have much of a role in the story. (view spoiler). But we feel its sinister presence throughout. By being off-centre in a symmetric world, the sundial is questioning the reality of this world: this comfortable day-to-day world we are accustomed to.

Like Shirley Jackson's novels.

Repix says

El que menos me ha gustado, hasta ahora, de los libros de esta autora.

Nikki says

The pleasure of reading *The Sundial* is in the quality of Jackson's prose, the cleverness of the way she does character and plot through dialogue or limited narration, the way she can take almost any scene and infuse it with that little frisson of dread and foreboding. I'm not as much a fan of it as I am of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, though there are commonalities; most of the characters are detestable, which is not something I get along with, and all but one or two are quite weak personalities, which means they don't act much versus a single powerful character -- which makes that character repellently appealing, but makes the rest of them seem pretty insipid.

Overall, it's never clear whether this is meant to be horror, literary, fantasy/spec fic, whatever. It can be what you want it to be. What it is *really* is a story about people and the way they act and react, and how difficult it would be to find people who are really worthy of inheriting a new world. You don't have to accept that the world is really ending, only that the characters believe so.

As you'd expect, there's also a fine sense of place; the Hallorans' home is a character in the story too. There's a *lot* of description of it, which is all revealing of character and the history of the family, but if you don't have the patience for it, that might seem quite slow.

blakeR says

A fascinating, unique allegory about a dysfunctional family facing the Apocalypse. Jackson's writing is really good, perhaps not as much structurally but certainly lyrically and in service to her characters.

It took me a while to figure out that most of the dialogue and character interactions were supposed to be funny, I guess because I was expecting something darker and more sinister. But after being confused by character motives for the 1st quarter or so of the book it hit me: this is theater of the absurd! The humor was altogether unexpected and delightful. For example, after removing all of the books in the mansion's library in order to make room for their stockpile of food and supplies, one of the characters thinks, "A library is really

a very good place to store things. I had never realized it before."

And I mentioned theater -- it really did read like a play most of the time. The whole setting is isolated and insular. . . a limited cast interacting almost solely with themselves. The way they talked past each other or ignored each other's bizarre rantings reminded me a little of Beckett or Raymond Queneau even. The dialogue was fun, snappy and more authentic than most fiction from this era. The fact that nothing ends up really *happening* is another way it resembles absurdist theater. I don't personally happen to be a big fan of these sorts of uneventful narratives, but I appreciated this one more than most.

Overall I liked-it-didn't-love-it and am eager to experience more of Jackson's writing. Her mainly pessimistic attitude -- that even getting a chance to "reboot" with a clean slate after the Apocalypse we'll probably still manage to mess it up in the same exact ways -- fits right into my cynical wheelhouse. It is also surprisingly timely. Sure there are some etiquette quirks that date the characters a bit, but thematically it fits into whatever time period you want. Also, I loved the random, bizarre interpretation of the "Hansel & Gretel" fairy tale that Jackson inserts as Mrs. Halloran's dream sequence. Totally unexpected and equally delightful.

So pick it up because she's a well-respected classic sci-fi/horror author, but stick around because she was a better, edgier, less conventional writer than most of her male counterparts of the era. My search for edgy female authors is finally beginning to bear fruit! Imagine: I only needed to go back 60 years or so to find one. . .

Not Bad Reviews.

@blakerosser1

Michael says

This book is such a wicked pleasure. I give it four stars only to distinguish it from *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* and *The Haunting of Hill House*, which are really the pinnacle of Shirley Jackson's art. But the elements are all here, in *The Sundial*: the old house, the sense of decay and doom, family legends, oddball characters, the blurring of reality and magic, and a comedy of manners so black and biting that it makes you wince with pleasure and pain. The novel opens with a family returning to its estate after the funeral of Lionel Halloran, the heir to the fortune, who was pushed down the stairs by his own mother. The first words uttered by the mother? "It's over," Mrs. Halloran said. And then, to her husband, the young man's father: "He's gone, Richard," she said. "Everything went off beautifully."

Ouch. Soon one of the family gets a vision of the world ending, and the rest of the novel is spent busily preparing for this monumental happening, all lorded over by Mrs. Halloran, who grows into the role of leader of this small band of expected survivors. It's all so witty and dark, and then the end (which I won't reveal) serves to deepen the entire work, as in a way it circles back to its sad beginning. So while all the elements didn't come together quite as seamlessly as in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* or *The Haunting of Hill House*, this is still a magnificent work, and one that I will no doubt re-read with pleasure.
