



Garbo Laughs

Elizabeth Hay

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A funny, sad-eyed, deliciously entertaining novel about a woman caught in a tug of war between real life and the films of the past.

Inflamed by the movies she was deprived of as a child, Harriet Browning forms a Friday-night movie club with three companions-of-the-screen: a boy who loves Frank Sinatra, a girl with Bette Davis eyes, and an earthy sidekick named after Dinah Shore.

Into this idiosyncratic world, in time with the devastating ice storm of 1998, come two refugees from Hollywood: Harriet's Aunt Leah, the jaded widow of a screenwriter blacklisted in the 1950s, and her sardonic, often overbearing stepson, Jack. They bring harsh reality and illuminate the pull of family and friendship, the sting of infidelity and revenge, the shock of illness and sudden loss.

Poignant, brilliant, and delightfully droll, *Garbo Laughs* reveals how the dramas of everyday life are sometimes the most astonishing of all.

Garbo Laughs Details

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From Reader Review Garbo Laughs for online ebook

John Whaley says

Garbo Laughs written by Elizabeth hay is a unique novel about the life of a fifty something year old women named Harriet Browning. Harriet is the voice of the novel who finds herself on the constant retreat to her world of old movies when she finds life doesn't live up to her standards. She comes close to being addicted to watching old movies which puts a strain on her marriage and fogs her outlook on life.

What I find original about this novel is that Hay centres the plot on Harriet's intrapersonal struggles while ignoring issues in her life that authors usually choose to emphasize. For Example, when Hay introduces things like death and terminal illness to the story line, she includes very little detail and writes them off to be insignificant to Harriet's life. Rather, Hay highlights issues in Harriet's life pertaining to her relationships and feelings. I found this plot focus interesting at times but for the most part boring and for that reason I had to read this novel in small portions at a time. The one thing I liked about this approach was how I could connect to the way that Harriet's problems in marriage, friendship and family outweighed her physical problems. I found it easy to relate to how people sometimes get lost in a world of fantasy and expect too much and at the same time not enough from their life. I liked the way Hay explored Harriet's relationships with her family as well as her relationship with movies and actors; Hay treated actors as characters in Harriet's life. But, many times when Hay referenced to these actors I had no idea what she was talking about. Regardless, I found Harriet's struggle to rediscover love in her marriage and her inseparable connection with her son very well approached and is ultimately that's what lead me to stay hooked long enough to finish the novel.

Being a seventeen year old boy, I definitely wasn't the audience Hay was writing too. I say this because many times while reading the book I felt lost in the parts where Hay references to actors and movies from the 1920's. This was distracting to the overall theme of Harriet's struggle being happy in her own life because I couldn't relate and understand what she was feeling. If you are a potential reader that is familiar with cinema from the twenty's, you probably will get more out of this book then I did. Also, anyone looking for a book written to entertain the reader, this won't be the best fit as it takes a fair bit of patience to read.

Overall I give Garbo Laughs a 3/5 stars because I did enjoy parts of the novel and think Hay provided an interesting perspective on one's outlook of life. I'd rate it higher but there were too many references I didn't understand and parts where I felt lost and isolated from the text. These points aside, I believe this book has many positives and has the potential to offer a lot for the appropriate reader.

Sheila says

Two and a half stars. I did finish this book but only because none of my other holds were in at the library. A story of a sad pathetic woman Harriet - a journalist - her two children Kenny and Jane and long suffering husband Lew and a handful of friends and relatives thrown in. Harriet is OBSESSED by movies, old and new and lives her life through movies and movie stars. Her lifestyle has rubbed off on her two children who are equally doomed to suffer a life engrossed in make-believe. Did it start because Harriet's own parents refused to allow her to watch any film that wasn't educational? Her friends are around but I never got a clear picture of their character or thoughts. Dinah was equally movie obsessed (and Lew really likes her too) but develops lung cancer and her illness/treatment becomes an afterthought or an incidental. Was her illness brought in to make her seem more normal? In the end Dinah survives and it is Harriet who dies.

I think to really enjoy this book you have to be a movie buff complete with encyclopedic knowledge of phrases and actions. I did finish but found myself glossing over parts trying to overcome boredom. I felt like an outsider throughout, not engaged but still reading.

Wysteria says

Reading this book feels like being invited to tea with two old friends, who you don't really know all that well and who don't take the time to really get to know you, or to let you into their circle. It's like being the outsider in a conversation that never provides you an opportunity to join in. There is no way to become really involved in what is going on because everyone is too busy, too involved in their own lives, their own versions of their lives rather, that I can't really feel bad for them when bad things happen or things don't go the way they want. It is filled with references that I just don't get and stories that I'm not allowed to fully understand. The main characters are so flat and uninspiring that I can't distinguish between them most of the time. There is no true action, no advancement of characters. Everyone is flat and fickle and while I realize that this is pretty much the epitome of real life, it's just not something I want to read about. Not my idea of entertainment at all.

Jane Glen says

I don't know why I continue to read books by this author other than the fact that she writes well and is an award winner. Really quite a depressing book; a woman who is dissatisfied with her marriage. One of the reasons is "he smiles too much." I know there are underlying reasons for her attitude, but losing herself in romances in old movies does not help her sense of reality.

Bethany says

I am torn.

Did I actually like this book or not? I'm not even sure.

While reading, I was never bored, though the story didn't really seem to go anywhere. One thing I noticed is that all the heavy things that happened (such as death) happened without notice. All the sudden a character was dead/diagnosed with a disease and I, as the reader, would blink rapidly, mouth agape, and wonder if my inattentiveness was to blame. I don't think it was, though.

I wanted less of the main character, Harriet. I liked her to some extent, and while she didn't annoy me, I did wish she would change *something!* (I couldn't decide: were her unsent letters Pauline Kael endearing... or just creepy?)

I wanted more of Kenny (Harriet's son), Lew (her husband), and Dinah (her friend). I wouldn't have minded a deletion of Jack Frame, though I suppose he did help move the plot along. Again, not that the plot ever really went anywhere.

Being a fan of old films, I did like how saturated this book was in references. I don't care if it did read as contrived, I still liked them. The way Kenny was always asking people to make "Top 5 favourite..." lists

reminded me of my brothers and I.

The writing was wonderful, but I already knew Elizabeth Hay was a talented writer. Though, as mentioned above, the way she chose to tell some events was confusing. But other than that, this book was full of quotes I wanted to underline.

So... on the high end of 3 stars, I think? Or a 3.5, I suppose that would be.

Tina Siegel says

I was really disappointed in this - I loved Hay's 'Late Nights on Air', so I was really looking forward to *Garbo Laughs*. Very disappointing. Disjointed, unfocused and the ending was jarringly abrupt. Not recommended at all.

Ben Babcock says

Oh, man, when I fall into the CanLit tree, sometimes I manage to hit every branch on the way down. I say I like character-driven stories, but *Garbo Laughs* is a harsh reminder of how important plot is even when your character drives things. Because in this case, Elizabeth Hay's characters *aren't* driving the story, so much as sitting around while a narrative just kind of tumbles desultorily around them, tugging at them occasionally in vain attempts to get their attention. They steadfastly refuse to engage with it, however, so it eventually passes them by (but not before raining revengeful death upon some of them!).

As the title and cover copy promise, this book is inextricably tied up in “old” movies and Harriet’s love, bordering on obsession, for them. I don’t know enough about early cinema to understand all the allusions or the ins-and-outs of these conversations. I’m aware of the names Sinatra, Astaire, Kelly, Brando, etc. I’ve seen *The Godfather* (which I don’t actually consider an “old” movie). The oldest movie I’ve probably watched is the restored *Metropolis*, but that doesn’t really intersect with American cinema. I don’t know what the oldest American movie I’ve watched is—maybe *Casablanca*. Anyway, while I don’t share Harriet’s fascination, I do understand her passion. Thanks to the way Hay describes it, I can liken it to my own love for books. Where Harriet loves snuggling up with an old movie, I love snuggling up with an old book. There is nothing like it and nothing better.

Surrounding Harriet are a panoply of characters who together might form an ensemble cast, *if* this book needed a cast. What it really needs is more conflict than the nebulous antipathy between Harriet and Leah or Harriet’s own internal struggle with her inability to write comedy. Hay even throws in the spectre of a possible affair, whether it’s Harriet’s unwanted attraction to Jack or Lew’s easygoing friendship with Dinah. These are strong beginnings, great characters. But Hay doesn’t give them quite enough leeway, doesn’t spool out quite enough leash, and so their conflicts don’t actually go anywhere.

In particular, Harriet’s children are important characters in relation to *her*, but their development is stunted. Kenny is adorable and precocious, and he does get a subplot about being bullied for his oddball movie passions inherited from mom. Jane, while happy enough to respond to inquiries, is a less known quantity, and I wish that we heard more from her. Unfortunately, the narration sticks pretty tightly to Harriet, so your mileage with this book is greatly influenced by your tolerance for her particular neuroses.

I say that glibly but don't mean to make light of them. For some people I can see this being an excellent work. I'm sure Harriet will strike a chord with many. Hay's choice to portray a marriage that is *not* broken or dysfunctional yet still abjectly unsatisfying is a good one. Harriet and Lew love each other in a way, but neither seems to have the key to making the other one happy. They just kind of putter along, except they aren't quite old enough for that old married couple stereotype to kick in. It's interesting the few times that Hay shows them having sex, because it tends to happen out of the blue and Harriet seems to indicate she enjoys it—but I guess her emotional needs aren't being met. She wants someone who is a little more combative, hence the attraction to Jack, or even the little thrill she gets from being so annoyed by Leah's manipulations.

So I'd be lying if I claimed nothing happens in this book. There are many interesting character dynamics. Hay has that easygoing, classically CanLit style of narration with smooth dialogue full of names of people I don't recognize because I was born after the Turner years. The point being: there is an audience for this book, and I'm not quite it, but I'm probably next door to the people who are it. *Garbo Laughs* is sincere in its attempt to blend humour, hubris, and humility into a kind of sharp and pointed look at modern married life through the lens of the golden oldies. It reminds me a bit of Georgian novels, but Hay's writing doesn't quite sing to me the way Austen's or Brontë's does.

Judy Mann says

I'm about 1/3 of the way thru this and I have to say that half the time I have no idea what she's talking about. Is she being witty, or sardonic ? Is she being ironic or is she just being completely incoherent?

I've read books like this in the past and I always feel like the author is glamping it up for the camera. Like you want to scream at her- will you just get your head out of the way-so I can see what's going on? It's like she- Elizabeth Hay is in there trying to razzle dazzle you with her wit and all she's really doing is irritating the crap out of you and blocking your view of the story.

Too bad, too because i've always been curious about Ottawa, but this book is just getting in my way.

Just plain irritating. At best.

JM

Okay I just finished this book and I will stand by what I said above. The first hundred pages are just airy fairy gobbleygoode BUT somewhere around pg 115 she -Elizabeth Hay-actually surrenders herself to a real plot and and the book takes off on its own momentum. Finally it's a readable STORY without all these strange esoteric references Okay that's it. I can rest my conscience now.

I also added one star.

Marsha says

This novel is filled with engaging, thought-provoking characters. Even the children capture the interest not being the cutesy, forgettable moppets they can become in other novels.

But the character or rather plot device that motivates, moves and overwhelms the characters are the movies that some of the central characters talk about to the point of obsession. These are lovers of old movies like "Casablanca", "Top Hat", "Christmas in July", "Horsefeathers", "Easter Parade", to name a few. They argue

about who is better in terms of acting, body movement and skill: Gene Kelly vs. Fred Astaire, Marlon Brando vs. Sean Connery.

But the human component seems curiously lacking. People die and are barely mourned by others. Nothing of weight or significance comes from the remaining characters. While the writing is poetic, gripping and page turning, it's rather light weight.

Jo-anne says

Not as good as previous books. Characters were caricatures rather than realistic and the actions of the "good friends" weren't how a really good friend would behave. Interesting if one likes old movies but hard to believe that anyone would actually live the life depicted.

Richard says

Didn't finish this as I found it annoying as the characters just kept referring everything back to films. I loved 'Alone in the Classroom' by Elizabeth Hay so a big disappointment.

Shari says

This book grew on me. The characters, especially the main character – Harriet Browning, a 40 something writer who lives her life through movies – a lot of movies is not likeable at all. She has a husband and a best friend you are supposed to like but the whole book is tainted by weird. Still, there is something to the writing and I liked the reference to one of the character's favorite pizza joint on Metcalfe Street (in Ottawa) – which was my favorite pizza place too when I lived in Ottawa.

Sarah says

Less lyrical than *A Student of Weather* but I do love Elizabeth Hay.

After the first blush of infatuation, love becomes something different: quieter and ripe with its own trials and intricacies. I liked the exploration of that. I thought the novel was very effective in conveying a sense of remove that hints at intense undercurrents just beneath the surface. I could see a lot of George and I in the two "romantic leads." So much so, it was a little eerie! Sometimes I'd swear my books are addressing me, directly!

The themes *could've* been brought into clearer focus, I think.

Ideally, a book is chiseled down to a precise, crystalline symmetry. I'm not sure this book achieved that. But what can I say? Like I said, I just love her!

Paula Dembeck says

Harriet Browning is a writer, living with her family in a quiet neighbourhood in Ottawa. Her husband Lew Gold is a bookish heritage architect, their two children ten year old Kenny and twelve year old Jane round out the family. Although Harriet has one published novel, the only writing she seems to do these days are the unending stream of letters to Pauline Kael the film critic, letters she never mails.

Harriet grew up in a family that was not allowed to watch movies, and now as a woman approaching her fifties she is making up for lost time. She enjoys immersing herself in all the drama and romance she feels she missed as a child. As someone prone to melancholy who also has difficulty sleeping, Harriet finds thinking about the movie stars in old classic films helps her get through those times. And she finds the lives depicted in films so much more exciting and meaningful than the one she experiences in her quiet little neighbourhood. When Harriet has a sleepless night, she can often be seen hunched over the TV, repeating a film she has already seen or fast-forwarding to the parts she loves.

Harriet shares her obsession with her son ten year old Kenny, a precocious youngster who has an incredible memory. Like Harriet, he loves to ponder important questions about these films, able to pull details and dialogue from movies seemingly at will. Every day Kenny and his mother question each other about what film has the best opening or the best ending, or they argue about who were the most memorable lovers. Harriet's best friend Dinah Bloom, a journalist who lives nearby, is often pulled into the dialogue. Discussions about Cary Grant, Sean Connery, Greta Garbo, Frank Sinatra and Audrey Hepburn seem to dominate Harriet's day, a distraction from her ordinary mundane life. It seems that film is the way she communicates with her entire world.

Jane, Kenny's sister is often pulled into the discussions but is a less enthusiastic participant. Harriet's husband Lew does not share their passion and is often baffled as he watches from the sideline or immerses himself in one of his many journals. He is a patient and caring husband who loves his wife dearly and so he tolerates her obsession .

The plot in this novel is thin and really, very little happens. However two events nudge the action along. The first is a letter from Harriet's annoying Aunt Leah, who Harriet has never liked. She is a self-centered, annoying bully and Harriet dreads her upcoming visit. Leah is her father's sister, who as a young girl ran off to Hollywood and married Lionel Frame, a very rich man. But he was friendly with the Hollywood Ten who were blacklisted and Lionel quickly moved from being a successful screenwriter to an unpublished alcoholic. Leah is writing a memoir of her marriage and wants Harriet's help. Her stepson Jack Frame, a novelist and part time film critic, is coming with her. He has an attraction to Harriet and also a terrible reputation with woman, having several wives littered in his past. Over the years, he has mailed Harriet manuscripts and asked her to read them, but Harriet simply ignored them and put them aside. Not many seem impressed by his writing skills and even Lew calls Jack a "self infatuated scribbler". Harriet is determined to tolerate their stay but can hardly wait for the two of them to move on.

The second event that affects this small group of people is the 1998 Great Ice Storm that blanketed eastern parts of Canada. During that time there was no power for several days and people were shut in their homes, unable to navigate the icy streets. It was also a dangerous time with huge trees mercilessly weighed down with ice, cracking and falling into the streets, crushing cars and sometimes unwary travelers. The storm forces this group into closer quarters as they try to stay warm, eat decently and stay safe.

There are a number of evolving relationships as the novel meanders along, the details of everyday life punctuated by continuing dialogue about the movies. There are the simmering tensions of something between Jack and Harriet, the guilty developing awareness of Dinah who finally acknowledges her feelings for Lew and the cursory relationships of people in the neighbourhood, who care about and watch out for one another.

Although this novel has a very slow start, the writing is superb, especially that covering the Great Ice Storm. The dialogue is authentic and often witty and the characters are well drawn. There are several parts that are very funny, including Harriet's comment on the two goldfinches that fly into the window who she calls "the dumb blondes of the bird world".

It took me awhile to get into this book, but I gradually warmed to it as Harriet came to understand what it was that drew her so powerfully to these old films. It is definitely not my favourite Hay novel, I enjoyed *A Student of Weather* (2000), *Late Nights on Air* (2007) and *Alone in the Classroom* (2011) much more, but I pushed my rating to three stars because of the writing, which is excellent.

Ruth Seeley says

Such a different novel from Elizabeth Hay, and very much a novel of Ottawa, my hometown to which I've recently returned. I loved how rooted this novel was in Ottawa. One of the character's parents (who make a brief appearance in the book), ran the Rialto Theatre on Bank Street (known when I was in high school as The Rat Hole) and the 1998 ice storm takes place during the novel's duration. (Someone said to me recently, 'Oh yeah, Ottawa didn't experience the ice storm, only Montreal did. Funny I had no heat or power for five days.')

Harriet is a melancholy character who has trouble counting her blessings and takes refuge in old movies. It's really only through discussion of these movies that she can relate to her children, and it's her husband's disinterest in the movies that may be responsible for her alienation from him. But as the novel progresses, she grows to appreciate her husband more. And just as she seems poised to finally embrace rather than tolerate life, there is a plot twist. To say more would activate the spoiler review feature. I continue to ponder the significance of the title. (Apparently when Melvyn Douglas finally succeeded in making Garbo laugh, there was no sound.)

Let me leave you with this great quote: "Two weeks more, and prim, conservative Ottawa took off its glasses and revealed its breathtaking summer face. Suddenly, it was lush, wild, profuse. Big bosoms of lilac barged forward, overmastering any sidewalk that stood in their way. Banks of honeysuckle sprang up on all sides, lilies of the valley perfumed the ground, Virginia creeper clambered up telephone poles and across the wires." Big bosoms of lilac barged forward - that's some powerful writing, that is.
