



The Dogs of Babel

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Paul Iverson's life changes in an instant. He returns home one day to find that his wife, Lexy, has died under strange circumstances. The only witness was their dog, Lorelei, whose anguished barking brought help to the scene - but too late. In the days and weeks that follow, Paul begins to notice strange "clues" in their home: books rearranged on their shelves, a mysterious phone call, and other suggestions that nothing about Lexy's last afternoon was quite what it seemed. Reeling from grief, Paul is determined to decipher this evidence and unlock the mystery of her death. But he can't do it alone; he needs Lorelei's help. A linguist by training, Paul embarks on an impossible endeavor: a series of experiments designed to teach Lorelei to communicate what she knows. Perhaps behind her wise and earnest eyes lies the key to what really happened to the woman he loved. As Paul's investigation leads him in unexpected and even perilous directions, he revisits the pivotal moments of his life with Lexy, the brilliant, enigmatic woman whose sparkling passion for life and dark, troubled past he embraced equally.

The Dogs of Babel Details

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Author : Carolyn Parkhurst

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From Reader Review The Dogs of Babel for online ebook

Jennifer (aka EM) says

The Art of Racing in the Rain meets The Time Traveller's Wife. An exploration of marriage, communication, love, loss, grief. Kind of sidles up to canine-human communication as a metaphor for the difficulty of knowing someone else, understanding who they are, what they're saying, what it means as a relationship begins and develops. Going in, I thought this was the central theme but it evolved differently than I expected.

The book is manipulative, there's no getting around it, in the same way as RITR and TTTW. And, the writing starts off kind of clunky, but then that fades into the background as the characterization (quite good) takes hold, and the plot takes off. There's quite a bit of subtlety here in theme and imagery that pulls it up from 3-star territory for me.

So yeah, it made me cry and made me a little mad that it did -- not, surprisingly, because of anything to do with the doggie. Ok, well maybe a little. And, although that bit of it presents quite an odd plot twist near the end - (view spoiler) - it also is a catalyst and symbol for Paul's journey through grief. Which is really what what the tear-jerker side of this is all about, so kudos to Ms. Parkhurst for not taking the easy way out and writing what, I have to admit, is quite a nuanced look at grief and loss.

A worthwhile way to spend a Saturday afternoon.

ETA: dropped to a 3 because well, it doesn't fit with my 4s.

Will Byrnes says

**** spoiler alert ****

Suicide is just a moment...For just a moment it doesn't matter that you've got people who love you and the sun is shining and there's a movie coming out this weekend that you've been dying to see. It hits you all of a sudden that nothing is ever going to be okay, ever, and you kind of dare yourself: Is this it? You start thinking that you've known this was coming all along, but you don't know if today's going to be the day. And if you think about it too much, it's probably not. But you dare yourself. You pick up a knife and press it gently to your skin, you look out a nineteenth story window and you think, I could just do it. And most of the time, you look at the height and you get scared, or you think about the poor people on the sidewalk below—what if there are kids coming home from school and they have to spend the rest of their lives trying to forget this terrible thing you're going to make them see? And the moment over.

Paul Iverson returns home one day to find his wife, Lexy Ransome, dead, apparently fallen from a tree in their back yard. Their dog, Lorelei, was the only witness. Bereft at the loss of his beloved, Paul tries to learn the story of her death from the only witness to the event. He takes a sabbatical from his teaching position,

determined to teach Lorelei to communicate. His life becomes an obsession.

Carolyn Parkhurst - from her FB pages

Parkhurst reveals, in flashback, Paul and Lexy's relationship, showing the signs of trouble as well as the moments of splendor. Paul finds clues and tries to see what they tell him. Was her death an accident or not? He goes too far, beginning to fall apart, his home becoming a shocking hovel, his mind willing to speak with unspeakable people in his search for answers. We learn of Lorelei's origins as well as Lexy's end.

This is a sad, quirky and beautiful novel, offering a gentle and understanding look at some of the dark seams that fit, spoon-like, right up against our more luminous selves.

Published – June 7, 2004

Read – November 2005

Review Posted – November 2008

=====EXTRA STUFF

Links to the author's personal, Twitter and FB pages

Kassi says

Above and beyond any opinions formed, Carolyn Parkhurst takes an incredible risk in her debut novel: a series of risks that in and of itself sets this book apart from others, in this reader's experience. And while the risks the author took worked for my reading preferences, for some they won't. While this book is by no means a difficult read as far as word choice and literature goes, even the most sensitive of readers upon turning the last page will have missed at least one thing that makes this book so beautiful. I say this not to insult anyone, but only because this book respects its subjects, characters, and devices so earnestly that the full spectrum of just how delicately each aspect of its organization is created can not be fully reached in just one read. And yet, despite this (or perhaps because of it), the book is deeply satisfying and whole if the reader chooses to visit it once.

After scanning the first page of reviews, I find it vastly important to address how a book can be received so well by some and shunned by others. The best way I know how to put it is approach. Those who have been spared the struggle of deep grief, or have never felt so deeply about something to find rationality in the irrational, or have been taught that the world of mental illness is a lesson in histrionics and manipulation rather than a physiological complication that can not be cured but managed ... well, they would find this book almost childish and even repulsive. And what I find tragic about that is that the very essence and substance of the novel told through its bulls-eye messages some just simply not *wont* hear but can't.

And is that a failure for that person? Absolutely not. There is no innate personality or intellectual problem with the readers who hit the one star.

But for those lucky (and unfortunately simultaneously unlucky) readers who are able to humbly give this 5 stars, this is the signature of a person who can not imagine giving it anything less. Simply because it's that

good. I couldn't possibly know for sure, but I'd guess maybe they were wowed by the simple poetry of the writing, the use of symbolism pulled off, the careful decisions to make the experience not too heavy in emotion for the reader but not so intellectual that it's flat. Or maybe they will be amazed by the author's uncanny ability to pull off first person POV in a way that doesn't even seem to read as first person. Or maybe it's the nuances of the characters, how they develop and why they must develop and how naked and vulnerable they are in their humanity or how true to life even the simplest thing they do is. Or maybe the light, and at some times profound layers upon layers that this book offers will delight a reader who loves to read between the lines for hidden truths, at times more profound than the ones that are right in front of them in the story.

There is another theory - perhaps people will simply love this book because they will catch a subtle (or not so subtle) glimpse at themselves in the characters. And yet, some may be repulsed by this notion: we don't want these characters to be real. We beg that they aren't because there's a bit of them in us, too. We are breakable and strong. We are all joined together by this ridiculous and hideous and miraculous thing we call "life" and its horrors and dreams and beauty. And we wish that this book could be something else; perhaps something that promises that we can escape our humanity some how. But this book will not waiver in speaking its truth no matter how much we might not want to face it. No, it will grab the reader by the shoulders, show them strange haunting suffering of its characters and command the reader to become a little bit more aware of what it means to exist in this world.

Lastly, I do not take it upon myself to review this book simply because I read it. I must review it instead because (and I say this with the upmost respect and honesty) it is the most brilliant piece of work I've ever read. Enjoyable, tragically beautiful and real and strangely compelling and hauntingly familiar. The brightest gem I've read and one that I'd recommend to anyone.

Carmen says

This book was NOT what I thought it would be. And that's a compliment.

Paul's wife Lexy is dead. She fell out of an apple tree. The police have ruled it an accident. Paul is devastated. He's in mourning. Why was she in the apple tree anyway?

Soon, he starts noticing strange circumstances surrounding her death. An empty frying pan on the floor and a steak missing. All their books have been rearranged. What does it mean?

The only witness to Lexy's death is her dog, Lorelei, an 8-year-old Rhodesian Ridgeback that she'd had before even meeting Paul. Paul is a professor of linguistics. Can he get a dog to talk? Can he teach Lorelei a way of communicating and finally get to the bottom of his wife's death?

When I first heard about this book and it's premise, I was expecting something a bit lighter. A man was grieving, but perhaps a bit of comedy interspersed with the mourning, and then in the end coming to some sort of understanding of it all, la-dee-dah (a la GOOD GRIEF by Lolly Winston). NO. This book was dark, scary, and full of turns that I didn't see coming. I was anxious while reading it, wondering where it was going, and questioning everything I thought I knew about the characters. In this way it reminded me of GONE GIRL.

Neither Paul nor Lexy were that likeable. I found Paul to be wishy-washy, desperate for Lexy's love and

approval. He was rather spineless and acted like a child frequently. And Lexy was another story. Paul's drawn in by her spontaneity, creativity, and imagination. It's only slowly, bit by bit, that he and we (the readers) figure out that she is (view spoiler)

At various points in the book I was convinced of different theories: that Lexy had killed herself, that she had been murdered, even that the dog, Lorelei, had killed her. My mind ran wild with all the possibilities. I really enjoyed this, and the book was a mystery of sorts - you and Paul are trying to "solve" Lexy's death. You know that there are clues, you just don't know how to piece them together or what they really mean.

This book also really goes into some dark places regarding animal abuse, specifically the abuse of dogs. Paul is a decent guy - he loves Lorelei and doesn't abuse her. But there is a rather cultish group of men in this book who are obsessed with getting dogs to talk. They kidnap dogs and get them from the pound, and then take them to the soundproofed basement of their "institute" and do Nazi-like surgeries and experiments on them. It's really, truly horrifying and since I love animals I was very upset and anxious reading about this. Parkhurst doesn't go into gruesome details, but it's very disturbing - especially when Paul talks to the members and you see inside their dark and cruel minds.

Dogs talking was another concept that really interested me in this book. Parkhurst puts enough "perhaps this is possible" hints to make you almost believe that Paul can achieve his goal of communicating with Lorelei. In the book, Paul discusses other experiments in communicating with dogs, and I was thinking that perhaps Parkhurst was going to introduce some sort of fantasy element into the novel. Because, of course, in real life, you have no chance in heck of this actually working. She keeps you guessing, and I really enjoyed it.

In short, this is a suspenseful, edge-of-your-seat book. I thought it was intense, well-thought-out, and captivating. Even though it dealt with some scary issues such as (view spoiler) I felt it was overall just the right amount of scary. Also, it didn't cross into depressing. The book's message wasn't "doom, doom, all humans are evil and just hurt each other" like it is in so many other books. I wasn't left feeling sad after reading it, but instead satisfied that the mystery was (relatively) solved. The book isn't a happy, feel-good book - but it isn't depressing either.

Even though it's dark and good, it's not as dark or as good as *GONE GIRL*. It will never be a classic or a favorite of mine. I imagine a re-reading would not be as emotional once you know the outcome of the book. But it was very interesting and entertaining while it lasted. I recommend it to anyone intrigued by the premise BUT you must be able to stomach the dog abuse in this novel.

Erin says

This book, in a word, stinks. And now I shall tell you why.

The main character marries a woman named Lexy. Lexy is terribly mysterious, and vibrant, and creative, and such and so on. Okay, whatever, she dies by falling out of an apple tree. Now that I have been browbeaten with the symbolism, let's go to a flashback so Parkhurst can work up some sympathy for this dead chick. By having her suggest that they take a spur of the moment trip to Disneyland! Which I hate! Which should be firebombed! While Mickey screams in agony! Seriously, Disneyland? And then she has a fit when someone cuts the line at "It's a Small World?" I hate this woman.

Lexy is an artist. She paints death masks for grieving people. She pulled all her own hair out then had

Medusa's snakes tattooed on her scalp. She never wants to have children because she thinks she will be a bad mother. She makes her husband have sex with her while she wears someone else's death mask. Can we guess what really happened in the tree? The apple tree? Hey isn't there an apple tree in some other book? And snakes? What?

Let's cut to the chase here. The only worthwhile character in this book is the dog. When the narrator managed to put this dog in mortal danger by being a complete idiot, I kept reading just to see what happened to it. Plus, I was more than halfway through. Plus, my brain had just died from reading Ghost Wars (it was so hard). Don't read this book.

Michelle says

I picked this book up in a bookstore last summer, and I began reading it while waiting for my companions. While I've read many mystery novels, this one seemed unique and stuck in my mind even after replacing it on the shelf just a few pages in.

I was surprised when I finally purchased this book nearly a year later to find that it is a lot more than a mystery novel and more than just a story (albeit a great one) about grief and loss. It is also a story about romance, mental illness, fear of bringing a child into the world, marriage, science, animals, animal abuse, suicide, linguistics, art, dreams...

The plot can be a little too much to swallow at times, but there are things in here that will stick with me for a while.

"I touched her and it felt like coming home. What more is there to say?"

"I suppose everyone is a skeptic until they have a reason to believe."

"We never know, do we, what our neighbors might be doing behind their fences, what love affairs and bloody rituals might be taking place right next door? The world is a far more interesting place than we ever think."

"It's gratifying to know that you've appeared in someone else's dream. It's proof that you exist, in a way, proof that you have substance and value outside the walls of your own mind."

"It's not the content of our dreams that give our second heart its dark color; it's the thoughts that go through our heads in those wakeful moments when sleep won't come. And those are the things we never tell anyone at all."

"We would walk through our days together, and the shadow we would cast on the ground would be tall, the shadow of two adults walking together, not the familiar H of adult-child-adult walking hand in hand... There would still be the two of us, and the bright sky of our love. I could do this for her."

Joseph Soltero says

Ah, where do I begin reviewing this book? Let me start by saying that this book is not about what it's promoted to be. It's marketed as a book about a grieving widower who tries to teach his dog, the sole witness to his late wife's death, to talk. And yes, this book is about that, but it is not solely about that.

This novel is an intense exploration of one man's profound and painful experience of grief - especially when it's over a mysterious death. Did she die accidentally or did she kill herself? And why? It's haunting, heart-wrenching, suspenseful, and bitter-sweet, but also warm, and romantic.

Paul and Lexy are almost quite opposites of each other. He is very reserved and conservative; she is spontaneous and quirky. The two of them genuinely fall in love, but Paul learns soon that Lexy's spontaneity has its dark side. And then one day, he returns home to discover his wife has died after falling from a tree.

The plot is an intricately and meticulously woven narrative that culminates in a superficially shocking conclusion. I say 'superficially' because its conclusion reminds me a lot of the film, *The Sixth Sense*. Many viewers were wowed by the stunning revelation at the end, but when you look at the film a second time, all the clues to solve the mystery were in plain sight all along. Every single apparently insignificant detail played a part, and this role was right on the surface for us to see. This, however, does not detract from the power of its ending, and the meaning that this holds for Paul, and how he will now have to go on with his life.

I recommend this wonderful book to anyone who is prepared to go on a journey of the innermost expressions of the soul. You will not regret it. Another reviewer said this is the kind of book that stays with you, and it's true. I encourage you to discover why.

Meredith says

This book is a really beautiful and rather gentle portrait of grief. It's about a linguistics professor whose wife falls to her death out of their apple tree in their backyard, with only their dog as a witness. In the year following her loss, the professor copes by trying to teach his dog to speak - knowing full well that it's a little nuts - in the hopes of learning if she really fell, or let herself fall. He's not crazy, nor is the story cheesy, but as complex and difficult as real life and loss are. In the process of unraveling the mystery of small clues she left on the morning of her death, he retells the story of how they fell in love, and slowly learns to live without her. It's more focused on appreciating the time you had instead of the times you lost; it won't depress you, but it might make you cry a little. I've reread it twice in a year. Highly recommended.

Jennifer says

Okay,

a) I identify with the longing for a lost love that becomes a tangible being in and of itself, for the yearning, the way that loss and the bitter want fills your mouth and your hands and every part of you. BUT

b) NOTHING, FUCKING NOTHING, NOT ART OR GRIEF OR WHAT THE HELL HAVE YOU, IS AN

EXCUSE FOR TORTURING A DOG. EVEN A GODDAMNED FICTIONAL ONE. This is one of the major issues I had with Watchmen (aside from, you know, the epic slaughter and rape and all that) - dude, it's not the damn dogs' fault; leave the dogs alone. AND

c) DUDE, I GET THE GODDAMNED SYMBOLOGY; STOP BEATING ME OVER THE HEAD WITH THE APPLES AND THE SNAKES AND THE FUCKING WEARING OTHER PEOPLE'S DEATH MASKS. CHRIST ON A BIKE.

Ugh.

Ally Armistead says

Enjoyed this book immensely, and finished in two days. It's a contemporary novel, lyrically written. It's a beautiful masterpiece of paper mache masks, linguistics, codes in book titles, incongruities at a crime scene, patterns in language, the love of a dog, canine speech, canine abuse, mental illness, fear of bringing children into the world, marriage, issues of openness and honesty, grief, mystery, and letting go. Ultimately, it's an exploration in how we go through the many stages of losing someone we've loved deeply--despair, analysis, depression, anger, and then ultimately and (hopefully) forgiveness. It really struck me, while reading this novel, that letting go is only fully possible after we've delved so deep into the pain, into the reasons why, into the bits and pieces that we may, in the end, only somewhat understand. It is this analysis that is necessary to releasing someone one--whether in death or in the demise of a relationship--and to reaching an enlightened, calm closure that eases the pain, helps us move on and love again.

Cassandra says

One of my favorite books ever. I don't know if any book I've read has hit me so hard in the chestal region as this one. I was so emotionally invested in this book, and when I re-read it again recently, it was no different. The entire last 30 or so pages of the book I was just crying, trying to read through my tears. For me, what this book is basically about is a man trying to cope with the death of his wife, and about putting the pieces together to figure out how and why exactly she died. I loved it.

But for a book I love so much, it pains me to say that there is one huge flaw here - the crazy 'underground talking dog group' subplot. When I think about this book and remember it, I don't even remember that whole scene as part of it. And that subplot is the only reason I can't give this book 5 stars, it just was too distracting and did not fit in with the rest of the feelings in the story.

There is so much of what was written here that really speaks to me, passages and paragraphs that I can remember almost exactly when I'm in the right mood, things I can identify with amazingly well. I will read anything else Carolyn Parkhurst ever will write.

Msmurphybylaw says

*****There may be some spoilers, but this review is not a synopsis*****

I'm not sure why I decided to make this my first written review on GR. Maybe it is because this story conflicts in defining mental illness, artists and Tarot cards so harshly that it sandpapered my brain, or maybe it's an easy way to get my feet wet. Recently I've shied away from reading best sellers and books with 'O' stickers on them for varied reasons. It's been a slow summer and I haven't been sleeping well so I thumbed through a stack of books my daughter brought home from library sale and this is the jewel I pulled from the stack.

I would have given it one star, but I understand grief and I understand suicide. Real suicide, not the apple tree tumbling suicide that fairy tales and talking dog stories are made of. Grief can make sane people do a number of inconceivably mad acts. I applaud the author's attempt of working her story through the husband's grief, so I added a star.

My biggest beef with the book is that it is entirely too contrived for my taste. All stories, for the most part, are planned and prepared, but I crave development that blossoms organically. Force feeding a baby bomb trick that the narrator knew from the beginning is not clever, it is just plain sneaky and bad writing. Weren't we in this story together? Cutting and gutting doggies to talk could have been an interesting tool that led to a fascinating window of something truly unique to peer into, instead it was used as a device to get the collar off the dog and an avenue for Paul to meet his new girlfriend. Isn't that kind of a cheap shot at Lexy?

Let's take a look at the inconsistencies of Lexy's character. She is supposed to be crazy, I guess. But her mental illness doesn't really add up from what I can gather in the story. She sort of behaves as an eccentric-borderline-bipolar would, but the author doesn't give us any medical history of mental illness. I am bothered that the author chose to make Lexy an artist and further stereotype the art community as wrist-cutters and capricious one-week Disney-daters. The history we do get is framed ever so sweetly in her husband's odd nostalgic dialog of her senior year in high school. Later when they are married, she has a few tantrums, but am I to believe that this character is suicidal and so utterly delusional that she sees apparitions? Some may argue that she is suicidal and that she has a dark side. I couldn't find it in the book or the character. It simply didn't jibe for me. I guess I must live in a much darker world than Paul or Lexy ever did. The query that racks my noggin the most though is why? Why wouldn't someone so mentally unstable for so many years get some sort of help. She'll talk to a psychic? Why not a psychiatrist?

In short I found the husband's character too often had a feminine voice. Altogether he irritated me, but he was grieving so I'll let it slide.

Finally this book had a lot of potential and if the author had taken the time to be more thorough in her research she could have written a very good book. There were some fine ingredients, but it lacked any real flavor and was terribly under-baked.

Olivermagnus says

Linguistics professor Paul Iverson comes home one day to find his wife, Lexy, lying dead below the apple tree. The only witness is his Rhodesian Ridgeback, Lorelei. Did Lexy fall from the tree or did she commit

suicide? What was she even doing up in the apple tree? After the police rule it an accident, Paul sets out to try to teach Lorelei to speak so she can tell him what she witnessed that afternoon. During Paul's crusade to make Lorelei speak we see events from the past tell a story of how Paul and Lexy meet and fell in love. There are many beautifully written flashbacks, detailing Lexy and Paul relationship.

Paul is a pretty tragic character. You can see him working through his grief and it makes him change and do things he might not consider doing otherwise. For the most part, this is a story narrated by Paul and he and Lorelei are the main characters. There are other side characters in this book but Paul and Lorelei are the ones to tell the story. The whole plot was the mystery of Lexy's death, but I think that it also included the emotions and grieving process Paul was going through. It shows what a person devastated by grief might do to find out what happened, even trying to teach his dog to speak. Desperation makes people do strange things.

There are some tough subjects in this book including suicide, animal cruelty and violence. The writing was very emotional and a week after finishing it, I'm still thinking about it. In the end the mystery is solved. Paul understands the truth behind his wife's death and comes to terms with it but I continued to wonder if the real victim was Lorelei.

I thought the story was beautiful and heartbreaking. It had an interesting concept and one I've never thought of before. It's part mystery and part love story and the author entwines both of them in a very convincing way. The story explores relationships at their best and often worst moments. More than a love story between Paul and his wife, it's also a story about a man in the depths of despair and the comfort he gets from his only confidant, the family pet.

Adrienne says

I read this very quickly not because it was bad but because I wanted to find out 'what happened' and after I'd got over the doginess parts (I'm a cat person) and appreciated them for what they were the story just streamed through my mind.

Paul and Lexy are seemingly happily married, everything is going well for them, then tragedy strikes and Lexy dies in an apparent accident, the only witness is Lorelei the couples dog, and of course she can't tell.

In his grief Paul slips slowly into a dark world, he's desperate to find out the truth behind Lexy's death and is convinced Lorelei can tell him, so he embarks on various projects to try to get his dog to talk....wacky I know, but Paul is tormented and given his state of mind you can forgive him, plus this enables the author to create a little doggy story of her (Lorelei's) own. You see Paul thinks he knows the truth and really just needs to have it confirmed.

The story is written in 1st person narrative and flashes backwards to explain Paul and Lexy's relationship, how they met, how they lived their day to day lives and their hopes and aspirations. The 'present' story follows the decline in Paul's mental health and it's important to remember this if you decide to read the story because to be honest at the first mention of a talking dog I was prepared to give up. Anyway I felt it was a deeply moving story, the truth about Lexy's death is hard to read but Paul knows all along he just needed to find out in his own way. The ending brings closure for Paul and the reader as the purpose of the story is fulfilled and you not left wondering about anything.

An unusual story, and one which I'll probably read again, it seems odd to say that I enjoyed a story which is predominately about death , but I did because I enjoy being encouraged to think occasionally

Erin says

"We're getting nearer, We're nearing the end, of course you've known that, you've known that since the beginning, from the very first sentence I spoke. I'm tensing up as we get closer, I can feel myself wanting to slow down and and speed up at the same time."

This is a quote from the next to last chapter of this book - and I feel these words capture my exact feeling toward the end of this emotional book. I picked this book up, because in the 30 seconds it took me to peruse the back of the paperback, it sounded like it might be interesting.

It proved to be wonderful, emotional, lovely and sad, all at the same time. It proved to me, that other people must feel the same way that I do, and fight the same battles with themselves, that I do, on a daily basis. What terrified and comforted me, were that from page 280 "What's it like, Lexy?" to page 283 "and you fall." truly captures how most of my days feel. Which - - is a bit messed up, but at least it is the truth. It is truthful.

I loved this book, maybe because I do find myself relating closely to Lexy, but also because I feel that there is "hope" interlaced through the story and, well, in life itself.

Molly Woods says

What I learned from this book? Don't marry a woman who creates artsy masks for a living because she will attempt and/or succeed at suicide. If someone who makes arty masks for a living doesn't at first succeed at suicide, he/she should try harder. I also learned: don't try and make your dog talk. Why? Because dogs can't talk. Even if you do terrible, terrible things to them, surgical-wise. Similarly, if someone attached a whale penis to you, you wouldn't be able to sex on a lady whale. You'd just be really sad and confused when you woke up. This situation is precisely analogous.

Rachel says

This is hands down my favorite novel, maybe not of all time, but definitely of anything I've read in the last few years (and that encompasses a fair amount of books). It is so moving and so well written. The language is beautiful. Every sentence made me think, "Damn. Wish I'd written that!" Very lovely, poetic, heartbreaking. I can't say enough good things about this book. Highly recommended. It's about a man's grief and attempts to learn what really happened after his wife's sudden death. Didn't really seem like anything I'd like--it was actually one of my mother-in-law's library books that I picked up while staying a weekend at her house. I couldn't put it down until I finished. I enjoy elements of magical realism, and this one had a bit of that, but focused a lot on the emotions of the characters which just seemed so well drawn, so raw and real. As someone who has battled depression most of my life, I appreciated this author's ability to convey not only the torment of the female character, but also the extreme selfishness--readers really get to see her from the inside and outside, giving a unique perspective on the situation. It's just so complicated and so human. Okay,

I've said enough. Just read it, seriously! :-)

Rebecca Foster says

A delicious debut novel intellectual enough to bypass labels like 'women's fiction' and 'mystery', though it has touches of both. One thing that sets it apart is how successfully Parkhurst writes from the perspective of a male narrator, Paul Iverson, who's been knocked for six by the sudden death of his wife Lexy, a mask designer. While he was at the university where he teaches linguistics, she climbed to the top of the apple tree in their backyard and – what? fell? or jumped? The only 'witness' was their Rhodesian Ridgeback, Lorelei, and in his grief Paul uses his sabbatical to research efforts to teach dogs to communicate, hoping one day Lorelei might tell all she knows. Meanwhile, he talks with psychics, tries to decode a message Lexy left in their rearranged books, and gets caught up with a macabre club that uses surgical methods to try to get dogs talking. Woven through are scenes from Paul and Lexy's courtship and marriage; though Lexy struggled with her mental health, their dialogue is fun and zippy, like you might hear on *The Gilmore Girls*. Starting with their first date – attending a masked wedding, followed by a spontaneous drive from Virginia to Disney World – you'll fall in love with this odd couple.

[I was reminded of *Unsaid* by Neil Abramson, *Swimming Lessons* by Claire Fuller, *Strange Heart Beating* by Eli Goldstone, and *What I Loved* by Siri Hustvedt (all of which I've reviewed here). Make of that unusual quartet what you will!]

I read this at Reagan and JFK airports and en route between the two on a brief layover while travelling back to the UK from the States.

Wormie says

The writing style is sweet and sensitive, the emotion real, and the story compelling. Dr. Paul Iverson, professor of linguistics, comes home from work one night to find his yard filled with police. His wife, Lexy, has fallen from the apple tree in their yard and died. The death was declared an accident and Paul, was left alone to nurse his grief.

In the days to follow, Paul notices some oddities around the house. Lorelei, the couple's Rhodesian Ridgeback, was the only witness to the accident. Paul decides that he must use his skill as a linguist to teach Lorelei to communicate so that she can tell him what she saw and solve the mystery of Lexy's death.

Parkhurst's novel is anything but a mystery. It is a story of love and of coping with loss. Paul narrates the novel bouncing back and forth from present to past. He shares the story of his and Lexy's romance. How they met and fell in love, and how her death left him broken.

Parkhurst descriptions are palpable. Paul and Lexy's love is sweet, at times nauseatingly so. Paul's grief is gut wrenching and often truly painful to experience. The novel will make the reader laugh and cry. It doesn't hammer us with plot detail; but slowly unwraps like a silky fabric releasing emotions from its soft folds.

Communication is a major theme in the book. Paul, as a linguist, favors the power of language; Lexy, an artist, is often better able to communicate through her art. Lexy's inability to communicate effectively

through language often leaves her frustrated and depressed. These differences in style often lead to misunderstandings in their relationship.

Parkhurst makes all this work. She has an intriguing story. She writes poetically with feeling. She infuses symbolism in her writing: the biblical references to the Tower of Babel and the apple tree in the Garden of Eden, Lexy's masks which both hide and reveal truths, square eggs which alter the appearance but not the substance of a common item. She addresses fact and faith, honesty and deception, and love and resentment. I loved this book....until...

...

For some reason, in the middle of this wonderful novel, Parkhurst made a sharp turn and detoured into several chapters of a freakish, sci-fi storyline. This wonderful story of emotion and grief is replaced with an action-mystery about a secret society of men performing horrific experiments on dogs in the name of science. This side story was so out of place with the quiet beauty of the rest of the novel. It distracted me from the beauty of the novel, and I almost didn't want to finish the book.

Including this sub-plot in the book, in my opinion, was Parkhurst's fatal flaw. When I finished the novel, I was quite disappointed. I spent a few days trying to understand why this horrific sub-plot was included in the novel, and what it added to the story that otherwise would have been lacking. I came up blank. It was only in preparation to write a somewhat scathing review, that I realized that overall *The Dogs of Babel* is a beautiful novel. If I could have skipped several chapters as I read, I would have been raving about this novel and about Parkhurst's writing.

The inclusion of this bizarre sub-plot breaks the flow of the novel, and I must only give a 2 star rating to the book. However, for the most part I loved Parkhurst's style and sensitivity, and would like to give her and her writing four stars, perhaps five. So I find myself in the odd situation of recommending this book, even though I can't give it a better rating. I do think that Parkhurst's writing is wonderful and should be experienced, but I think that in this debut novel she became a bit too ambitious, and tried to pack a bit too much into the story.

Tiger Gray says

This book is beautiful. Its imagery is rich and captivating. Lexy, the main character's wife, makes masks for a living and this whole book is one long masquerade.

It also contains one of the most poignant and realistic treatments of mental illness I've ever read. I identified with Lexy very strongly and have been in her position many times. As she spirals further and further in to her inner nightmare she acts out impulsively, in rage, in sorrow, never truly comprehending her own actions. She is mercurial, childish, and desperately trying to carve something resembling a normal life from the featureless clay that is her own existence.

Lexy makes masks, fantasy creatures, celestial bodies, larger than life animals not, perhaps, in order to act in service to some trite literary device (don't you see, we all wear masks or some such nonsense) but in order to gain control over the chaos. If she can look at the world as an endless carnival, then it loses its teeth and she can feel as if she's imposed some order, taken away the fear, shed light in the dark corners. When we're children and we're afraid of the bad guy in a movie, our parents often tell us, don't worry it's just a mask.

Paul, the husband Lexy leaves behind after falling to her death, is a sympathetic character. His struggle with grief is authentic, including his increasingly bizarre fixation on getting the family dog, Lorelei, to talk. What I like the most about his narration is that it shows what it is like for the relatively sane partner to live with someone who is seriously mentally ill, and going without treatment for that mental illness. His exhaustion and his anger are communicated well, and yet I always understood why he and Lexy were together.

The other aspect that I enjoyed is that Lexy is, in the beginning, presented as the Manic Pixie Dreamgirl archetype, but the rest of the book is all about the dark side of that archetype. Instead of their lives playing out like a movie where the quirky girl helps the stick in the mud to lighten up, it turns out that such spontaneity and changeableness often comes with a price, that it grows from something dark that invades every part of a person's being and life. Rather than Lexy just existing to whirl through Paul's life, fixing his problems, Lexy is her own person with her own problems.

The mystery such as it is, isn't really the point of the story in that you could never call this a detective novel or anything of the sort. Still, when Paul figures out the "incongruities" of Lexy's death, it makes sense and it's satisfying to know how it all plays out in the end. For example I loved when (view spoiler)

The only part I feel ambivalent about is (view spoiler) I thought it was almost too weird for the story as told up to that point. However, looking back on some of the opening images in this novel, I think ultimately it does fit in contrast to some of the nigh divine things from when he and Lexy first meet and go on their week long date. (view spoiler)
