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Gwendoline Riley

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Carmel McKisco is wry, volatile and full of longing: a twenty-year-old girl working nights in a Manchester dive bar. Cut off from her family, and from Tony, her carefree ex, she forges strange alliances with her customers, and daydreams, half-heartedly, about escaping to Cornwall.

Cold Water is a poignant picaresque of barmaids and barflies; eccentric individuals all somehow tethered to their past - not least Carmel herself, who is nurturing mordant fixations on both her lost love, Tony, and her washed-up adolescent hero: a singer from Macclesfield. As she spins out the days and nights of an unrelentingly rainy winter she finds herself compelled to confront her romantic preoccupations, for better or worse.

Cold Water Details

Date : Published May 1st 2003 by Vintage (first published 2002)

ISBN : 9780099437154

Author : Gwendoline Riley

Format : Paperback 160 pages

Genre : Fiction, Contemporary, Realistic Fiction

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From Reader Review *Cold Water* for online ebook

Blair says

Gwendoline Riley's first novel - incidentally, a book I came to be interested in through a mention in Nicholas Royle's *First Novel* - is one of the shortest books I have ever read. At 160 pages, it's extremely slim, and the type is quite large, with big margins on every page. Given this fact, you would expect it to be pretty powerful stuff - and in some ways, it is. It's a portrait of Carmel, a twenty-year-old who works as a barmaid in a Manchester dive bar and is mourning the end of a short-lived relationship, and it's quite obviously based heavily on the author's own life. Riley's observations are sharp, the language and imagery is at times quite poetic, and although I did feel that not a word in this book was wasted, I was left with a sense of disappointment and mild frustration at the end: the story just wasn't what I hoped it would be.

When I started reading this, I thought I couldn't fail to 'get' a story about a young woman who doesn't know where she's going or what she's doing in life, particularly as it's set in (and regularly mentions, in detail, various parts of) Manchester, where I went to university. However, I found I just couldn't relate to anything about Carmel; her occasional vulnerability was the only likeable thing about her, and the way she lived and behaved was a mystery to me. I couldn't really understand why she would spend any time around some of the characters she was drawn to, and the intricacies of her friendships were alien to me too. There was also something about the whole thing that felt oddly dated - so much so that when the prices of certain items were mentioned (£15 buying two paperbacks, for example) I was shocked because I kept thinking the story was taking place in a much earlier time period, early 1990s at the latest - although perhaps this was deliberate. (The author was around the same age as her protagonist when she wrote the book, so it doesn't make much sense otherwise.)

I wish I'd read this when I was 20 and living in Manchester myself. I don't think I would have related to Carmel any more than I did reading it now, but I would have looked at the story from a different perspective and probably found it more exciting. I had another book by Riley checked out of the library (*Sick Notes*) but after finishing this - and flicking through that one to find it seemed very similar indeed to *Cold Water* - I took it back without reading it. I have a feeling I don't really need to read anything else by the author to get the measure of her style, and since I wasn't enormously impressed by this book, I'm not going to investigate her oeuvre any further.

Alice Furse says

I read this very short book in a few hours. It's very economically told, and parts of it are poetic. Carmel is an interesting and intelligent narrator and the whole thing has a cold and desolate atmosphere from page 1.

To be critical, there's not enough of it! I like books with minimal plots, but this is more like reading a snapshot of someone's life than a novel: the ending is completely unsatisfying as it doesn't really go anywhere, and the narrator doesn't change at all. The writing is strong so I might forgive this if it wasn't coupled with a very bizarre moment that doesn't really make sense and is never properly explained.

A good read, but needs to go much further.

Rowena Newman says

This book might have been better if it was twice as long and the ideas in it were given room to develop. All-in-all I thought it was sentimental and shallow. It was kind of like reading one of your own diary entries.

Sarah says

This was the second of her books I've read, & like the first (Sick Notes) I enjoyed it. I preferred Sick Notes, but Cold Water wasn't vastly different. There is not a lot of action in her novels, the narrator seems to always be fairly introspective & thoughtful, describing people & conversations rather than there being a detailed, linear plot. That's very much the case in Cold Water. I did find the characters a little too similar to Sick Notes in their attitudes & places in life. Her narrators always remind me of a friend I used to have - intelligent but drifting, wasting their lives by going nowhere & working in menial jobs just to enable them to pay the rent & drink in old dives. Still, I really do like her writing style & she does capture the characters & the city setting very well.

Ian Mapp says

This is a lightweight book that can be demolished in a day, which is a good job as it could have been a chore to carry on with it if it was any longer.

The book concentrates on the nocturnal world of a manchester barmaid carmel- 20 years old and already world weary and knowledgable. The story is slight, there is no real plot and the comings and goings of the manchester drinking class are recorded in a slightly poetic manner.

Lots of topical references of manchester "heroes" such as higgins and Mark E Smith and place names/street names brought back a sense of manchunian nostalgia.

Author is one to watch.

Lynn Fordred says

Shocking in places the girl is so young yet is so worldly and experience has made her old.

Mew says

Disappointing. Felt like it was too self-assured as a novel; knowingly clever.

Gerhard says

After reading this enthralling novel by Gwendoline Riley, I have no choice but to add my voice to the literary critics and authors praising this as one of the most impressive debut novels of 2002. Where do I start to do justice to this finely wrought tale of twenty-year-old Carmel McKisco, working the night shift at a Manchester pub as a barmaid? I'm not at all sure that I can ...

Suffice it to say that each and every page is shot through with scintillating imagery, unexpected and fresh observations concerning the regular clients frequenting the bar, and of course the mysterious inner life of one of the most beguiling and heroic narrators I have ever encountered in fiction. My heart was aching for Carmel, going on her cheerful and trusting way in a magnificently rendered Manchester in the relentless grip of a bleak and rainy winter. Recovering with pluck and forbearance from a romantic entanglement with Tony -- who seems to be so insouciantly uncommitted and laid back about the whole sorry business that he is later revealed as being convinced that Carmel was the instigator of the break-up when in fact it is the other way around -- she is also in the throes of a strange yearning for an obscure pop idol from her teenage years, now washed up and existing in a drug-induced twilight world. Carmel's observations on life and love and the way in which her indomitable disposition strives to make sense of the hand dealt to her by fate, are the elements that drive this wistful and beautifully written novel. Particularly poignant is her meeting with the young Texan Lucas, who is on the verge of returning to the USA after a two-week holiday. They spend his last night in England together, and their bittersweet union is tenderly described with an underlying refrain of unfulfilled potential and a definite sense of what could have been had circumstances been different. While in the process of wiping up spilled coffee grounds at the end of her subsequent shift at the pub, Carmel allows herself one vivid flash of erotic recollection from the time spent in Lucas' company. But dwelling on this is pointless. Life goes on inexorably. Nobody knows this better than Carmel ...

Her amiable friendships and relationships with co-workers Margi, Shelley and Irene, and with the expertly sketched clients in the pub are nuanced and detailed -- and rendered with the expertise and technical competence you'd expect from a seasoned and more mature novelist. That Riley was only twenty-two at the time of the first publication of this elegant and insightful novel is nothing short of astounding. I can't wait to acquaint myself with her subsequent works of fiction. They all sound marvelous. If they are even half as good as her debut, then I'm in for a rare treat.

Emily Critchley says

Love Gwendoline Riley. Such a great writer. First Love is extraordinary. Cold Water is sharp and funny.

Vivi says

look i can feel everything she describes in this little jewel!i can feel the cold freezing my toes in a pair of rotten converse and the urge to take yourself out of grey intoxicating routine...

Cara says

Painful to read. Full of high school poetry style sentences. Uninteresting and bland. I actually ripped up and recycled the copy I had so no one else could possibly have the misfortune to read it. Ugh.

Stef Rozitis says

I am not really sure why I loved this book so much and other such trivial, meandering books leave me cold. Perhaps it was the poetically sensitive quality of the descriptions, the bleak minimalism of the emotional terrain of the book (with a hint of real human hearts beating under the over-tired monotony of real life and boozy, smoke-filled encounters). There was something recognisable in the grittiness and contemporary, urban setting just as the tone of the book made it sound like writing about a bygone era. It romanticised the mundane and then scraped off the romantic patina to find it romantic again.

There is no big epiphany or resolution in this book (I hope that is not a spoiler) there are rays of light, points of possibility. Big changes might be possible, continuities might exist (though can be empty too). The reality is living and working and forming friendships in a far from perfect world. The poverty in the book (material and spiritual) is not abject, tragic poverty, it is the poverty of canvas shoes that let in water, of spending your dole on cheap alcohol because your pay is too low.

We can read these people as "young" and as not having yet found themselves. I think the banality they discover in life and the way they use culture as escapism and a place of meeting rings true to middle-aged me also. There is sex in the book (largely off-stage which detail I appreciate). It is as pointless as drinking cheap alcopop or listening to trite tunes.

But that's life.

Matthew Gaughan says

This isn't a novel, it's a novella. Just a series of sketches, with no real point to them, and without ever getting beneath surface impressions. (On the plus side, it did prompt me to download some Marion songs, which I haven't listened to since the mid-90s!)

Josie says

I sat down with this nice 165 pager this afternoon and was ready to be transported to 'home' as this book is set in Manchester which is very close to where I originate from.

Hmm it didn't happen.

Too many characters, none of which were effective enough for you to register them, so the whole thing just became confusing, and what exactly was the story line?

Not a fan!

Ursula says

Twenty-something Carmel is world-weary and guarded. When she is not pouring drinks behind the ‘dive bar’ she works at most nights, she appears to aimlessly drift through a wet and dreary Manchester. She reminisces about her ex-boyfriend Tony, fixates on a young musician from Macclesfield and daydreams of escaping to Cornwall.

Occasionally, she’ll hang out with her co-workers, mainly the much adored but troubled Margi, or eccentric regulars from the bar. But other people, including her family, exist only on the periphery of Carmel’s life, loosely drifting in and out of focus.

Nothing much happens. Carmel drinks, thinks and observes. She’s got a sharp eye and a dry wit, which could easily turn sarcastic or even bitter as time progresses. There’s still moments of teenage angst and plenty of youthful arrogance, but Carmel intuitively senses rather than knows that things are about to change—must change. She just hasn’t found her signature drink yet.

‘Cold Water’ is Riley’s debut novel, in which she demonstrates a keen eye for detail and a way with words. She also manages to create atmosphere, albeit an oppressive and slightly depressed one. Characterization and narrative; however, fall rather flat, and had it not been for the manageable number of pages, I would have struggled with getting to the end.

Sarah says

Even more meh.

Alan says

one of those books that I'm afraid I fall in love with the narrator (another is Morvern Callar), so even if she just describes the rain on her window I'm happy.

Oryx says

I have a crush.
I can't help it.

Beautifully melancholy.

Fourborne says

In this story Carmel McKisco works in a bar in Manchester, England. She thinks about her life as a young girl growing up with her family to her present day life. Carmel has recently broken up with her boyfriend Tony who she misses. In the mist of her refections about her life she spends it hanging out with her friends and acquaintances from the bar and getting drunk. Carmel has a quest that she sets out on of finding a singer from her favorite band, his name is Steven.

I thought from reading this book that it would be very poetic but it just seem like a bunch of ramblings. I had to force myself to finish reading it. There was no real cohesiveness. It was more of book written with short stories from the main characters life. The only story that I did like was her brief encounter with the American Lucas.

Ryan Williams says

Absolute cowpat of a book.
