



Dunbar

Edward St. Aubyn

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'I really did have an empire, you know,' said Dunbar. 'Have I ever told you the story of how it was stolen from me?'

Henry Dunbar, the once all-powerful head of a global corporation, is not having a good day. In his dotage he handed over care of the family firm to his two eldest daughters, Abby and Megan. But relations quickly soured, leaving him doubting the wisdom of past decisions...

Now imprisoned in a care home in the Lake District with only a demented alcoholic comedian as company, Dunbar starts planning his escape. As he flees into the hills, his family is hot on his heels. But who will find him first, his beloved youngest daughter, Florence, or the tigresses Abby and Megan, so keen to divest him of his estate?

Edward St Aubyn is renowned for his masterwork, the five Melrose novels, which dissect with savage and beautiful precision the agonies of family life. His take on *King Lear*, Shakespeare's most devastating family story, is an excoriating novel for and of our times – an examination of power, money and the value of forgiveness.

Dunbar Details

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From Reader Review Dunbar for online ebook

Victoria says

A novel of righteous indignation, cruel betrayal and twisted family dynamics all rendered with clever, precise writing.

This is the first of the Hogarth series I've read (if you discount Nutshell which was not 'official') and I thought it was splendidly done. Despite having studied many of Shakespeare's plays, King Lear was never on the curriculum so I went into this telling with a fresh perspective knowing only the basics and was impressed with St. Aubyn's adaptation--it felt very modern and original--and even more awed by his writing.

These Dunbar girls were arrogant, imperious, and tough, but toughness was not strength, imperiousness not authority, and their arrogance was an unearned pride born of an unearned income.

With an economy of words, yet prose that felt dense and portentous, he is able to conjure moments of brilliance that left this reader dazed. This is what landed this in four-star category because the story, if you're familiar, is utterly depressing and I can now see why for hundreds of years the ending was altered. St. Aubyn does not give us that break opting instead to remain faithful to the original in its conclusion, if not its telling.

If you're a fan of Julian Barnes' and Ian McEwan's writing, then I think you'll appreciate this author's talent.

Joseph says

Dunbar is a modern retelling of Shakespeare's King Lear. It's been quite a long time since I read Lear as an undergraduate and I wondered how much of what I remembered would affect what I read. To a casual reader, it is easy to see how Lear makes the skeleton that the book is built on. Dunbar ruler of an empire divides his corporation between his daughters to avoid taxes and in the process, the daughter's plot against him with the help of Dr. Bob. Dunbar finds himself medicated and trapped in a mental health facility. His only friend is a depressed, alcoholic comedian who helps him escape.

Dunbar has three daughters. Two daughters, Abigail and Megan, are plotting to manipulate the corporation's leadership and standing in order to make a huge profit. Their ally, Doctor Bob, has his own plans and entertains the reader with his self-medication and affairs with the two sisters. They are despicable characters but with enough backstory to make them interesting. The third daughter, Florence, is more attached to her father as a person than his riches. She wants no part of the empire. Florence is environmentally conscious -- does not want to fly in the corporate jet, lives in Wyoming, worries about her carbon footprint.

This is a book where the evil characters seem to be more likable and definitely more interesting than the good. Florence although only wants to do good seems boring when compared to her sisters. Dunbar has rage issues, is power hungry, and his life had been his empire and nothing else. There are plenty of similarities between Dunbar and King Lear to keep a Shakespeare fan interested in matching plot and the characters. For those who have not read Lear, it is a modern tycoon story that fits in well with American politics and business today.

This book was received from bloggingforbooks.com in exchange for a review.

Doug H says

Purely my initial reaction:

Loved/hated it. Mostly admired it from a cool distance. Best of the new fall releases I've yet read, at any rate. Smart as hell, possibly too smart. Definitely much smarter than me. Currently googling "Dunbar Numbers" and wondering if I'm insane. My only consolation is the thought that the actually insane never wonder if they're insane...

More rational review to follow at a later date. (So he says to himself.)

Lisa says

This book worked better for me when I stopped comparing it to King Lear.

The author has taken certain aspects of the original play and brought them to the modern day but left a lot behind.

I thought the characters were interesting although not deeply explored and the story took a bit of a backseat to the thoughts and feelings swarming the pages - mostly of regret and anger. The main setting in the Lake District in England made for an excellent bleak and austere atmosphere that really brought the feeling of being lost to life.

This book is highly emotional and being a quick read it's a bit like a blast in the face with a hairdryer that abruptly cuts off leaving your hair a bit damp and left to dry on it's own.

I enjoyed it as a summary of (some of) the characters from King Lear and as an emotional snapshot of an epiphany that leads to regret, anger, love and hate in the extreme.

This is not a re-telling or a re-imagining of King Lear but a story that has risen from it's heart; a story of shame and the desire for forgiveness amongst the devastating consequences of a power crazed life.

Paromjit says

I first read King Lear when I studied it at school, it is my favourite Shakespeare play despite its deep darkness. It is an epic tale and tragedy, a traumatic, troubling, and gruesome story of a man more sinned against than sinning. Edward St. Aubyn has a monumental task in writing a contemporary reinterpretation that can match how I feel about the original and its emotional place in my heart. The truth is he cannot do that, but he has captured distinct elements from the original and weaved a different beast, beautifully written, imbued with the darkest of humour, and which cannot fail to enthrall. It has a Canadian Media Mogul in his eighties, Henry Dunbar, a flawed man, used to being in a position of command, whose rage and temper has him disinheriting his beloved youngest daughter Florence in favour of his ambitious and greedy older daughters, Abigail and Megan, with their instinct to flatter and ability to be disingenuous. Aided by Dr Bob, Dunbar's physician, Abigail and Megan betray their father, divesting him of all power and have conspired to have him hidden and medicated in a psychiatric/care facility, Meadowmeade, in the Lake District.

St. Aubyn's most masterful creation in this novel is the raging alcoholic and depressed comedian, Peter Walker, the fool to Dunbar, a man from whom insights tumble out, and who never once plays his own authentic self in his efforts to escape from himself. He is busy being a myriad of other characters, such as John Wayne and a Nazi. Peter hatches an escape plan which they manage to put into action. Dunbar has a fragile sense of self, he wants his old life and position back. He ends up alone, he feels an aching need to be solitary, to meet himself for the first time as he is. He is metaphorically naked, frozen amidst an icy snowstorm. He becomes conscious of his misdeeds and sin, his part in shaping his eldest daughters and his shame in his corporate actions. He is undone by his catastrophic errors in the sacking of his close friend and advisor Wilson and his unbearable betrayal of Florence, the two people who really cared about him. In the meantime, Abigail and Megan call on their vast resources to locate Dunbar to ensure he is no threat to their future plans. Florence is determined to find her father first.

This is a terrific reinterpretation which I thoroughly enjoyed reading. It is dark, intelligent, comic and funny, particularly when it dwells on the twisted sexual proclivities of Megan and Abigail, and Dr Bob, their sexual plaything. It captures the heinous actions that often go into the building of the modern corporations, just how Dunbar came to be who he is, his dawning horror that he is the architect of his own desperate misfortune. I think there will be those who will not like this reinterpretation, but I don't compare it with the original, I see it as a work of art in its own right, and the author has done a great job using King Lear as the source of inspiration. Brilliant and highly recommended! Many thanks to Random House Vintage.

Phryne says

This is the sixth book in the Hogarth Shakespeare series that I have read. It is a retelling of King Lear.

It is many years since I read King Lear and it never was one of my favourites out of Shakespeare's plays. However Edward St Aubyn does a good job of making it into a very readable book. Really he takes the bare bones of the original and builds his own story but there are enough similarities in the action and in the characters to see where his ideas came from.

One unexpected delight was the humour. Dunbar's fellow inmate, Peter, is very funny as is their rackets escape from the institution they find themselves in. It is also quite a short book which seemed to finish almost as soon as it had begun. However having just finished a row of lengthy tomes, one of which bored my socks off, I was very happy with something short, sharp and snappy.

If you enjoy this kind of retelling of classics then try this series. It is excellent.

Roger Brunyate says

What's the Point?

By what criteria are we to judge the novels in the Hogarth Shakespeare Series? This is the sixth to be published, and the question only gets more puzzling with each one. Famous authors are asked to write fiction based on a Shakespeare play. It would not be fair to call them straight retellings, as almost all the writers have felt free to go off in their own directions. Think of them rather as riffs on a theme. But for what purpose: to parallel the Shakespeare original, or to be strong novels in their own right? On those criteria, I

would say that all of them fail; there is not a single one that comes close, even as a translation of Shakespeare, and all would surely be considered relatively minor works in their authors' oeuvre.*

So the best one can hope, I think, is for some kind of compromise: that the modern writer illuminates the Shakespeare in some way, or that the Shakespeare parallel brings out the special qualities of the chosen author. Only one of the six, I believe, says anything valuable about Shakespeare, and that is Margaret Atwood's *Hag-Seed*, her riff on *The Tempest*. This works, I think, because Atwood centers her novel around a production of the play itself, and the metafiction rhymes surprisingly well with Shakespeare's farewell fantasy. My enjoyment of many of the others has mostly had to do with what the subject reveals about the author. While Howard Jacobson makes a mess of retelling *The Merchant of Venice* in *Shylock is My Name*, his focus on the Shylock character to explore Judaism in a Gentile world is as strong as anything else in his work. Anne Tyler's *Vinegar Girl* is an ingenious light-hearted take on a comedy, *The Taming of the Shrew*, but it is nice to see the author letting her hair down. Jeanette Winterson's *The Gap of Time* takes on a problem play, *The Winter's Tale*; narratively, it too is a mess, but the author reveals personal connections with the subject that nonetheless give it authenticity of feeling. Only Tracy Chevalier's *New Boy* is a total failure, saying nothing significant about its model, *Othello*, and having little redeeming value of its own; it only confirms my growing suspicion that Chevalier is not the author that *Girl With a Pearl Earring* might have led us to expect.

But the two comedies and even the two late plays are the easier ones. With *Othello*, Tracy Chevalier was faced with one of the four great central tragedies. Two of the others are scheduled as the next ones up: Jo Nesbø on *Macbeth* in 2018 and Gillian Flynn on *Hamlet* in 2021. It is interesting that both these are mystery authors (and very good ones) rather than writers of literary fiction; it may be that the gross mismatch between genres actually produces something rather exciting. Meanwhile, here is Edward St. Aubyn, who surely *would* consider himself a literary novelist, faced with what I would consider the greatest Shakespeare tragedy of the lot, *King Lear*.

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!
You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
Till you have drench'd our steeples, drown'd the cocks!
You sulphurous and thought-executing fires,
Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,
Smite flat the thick rotundity o' the world!
Crack nature's moulds, all germens spill at once,
That make ingrateful man!

All right, by quoting one of Shakespeare's greatest speeches, I am setting the bar impossibly high. St. Aubyn's Dunbar, the Canadian media mogul, has just declared himself "non-executive chairman" of the mighty Dunbar Trust and handed over control to his daughters. Who have promptly put him into a psychiatric facility in the English Lake District. And it is there that we first meet him, telling his story to an alcoholic fellow-inmate, a professional comedian called Peter Walker. Peter is a splendid creation, absolutely in the mould of Lear's Fool; hearing his stream of one-liners in many voices made me hope that St. Aubyn might have found a close kinship with the original. Peter helps Dunbar to escape, but soon leaves him, leaving the old man to trudge alone over a mountain pass in a winter storm:

He hauled himself up and straightened his body one more time and brought back both his fists
against his chest, inviting that child-devouring sky-god to do his worst, to rain down
information from his satellites, to stream his audiovisual hell of white noise and burning bodies
into Dunbar's fragile brain, to try to split its hemispheres, if he could, to try to strangle him

with a word-noose, if he dared.

'Come on,' whispered Dunbar hoarsely. 'Come on, you bastard.'

If you know the original, you may find some amusement in the echoes. But you will also recognize the fatal flaw, that the quality that surely gives *King Lear* its supreme status—its moral scale—is entirely absent. There is a quality of excess everywhere in *Lear*: the King's capriciousness, the madness that consumes him, the wildness of the setting, the violence and cruelty, and the Gothic malevolence of his two daughters, Goneril and Regan. Though St. Aubyn may fall short of the more existential qualities, he goes to town on the evil sisters; dysfunctional families, after all, are what he does. His Melrose novels may contain more than their share of familial horror, but here he uses Shakespeare as permission to go over the top. But without a balancing scale in *all* aspects of the drama, the wanton violence and sexual perversity becomes merely nauseating.

All right, forget Shakespeare's original, does *Dunbar* work as a novel in its own right? Not for me. For one thing, St. Aubyn's delight in satiric cleverness (and he *is* clever) gives the book a comic tone that ill-suits its subject, unless he were to have gone all the way and given it a similarly satiric ending. For another, it is simply confusing; there are too many characters, with all too forgettable names: Abby, Megan, Mark, Chris, Peter, Jim, Simon, Wilson, Kevin, and the despicable Dr. Bob. And most of all, because the novel is set in the world of high finance, with hostile takeovers, voting blocks, side deals, and insider trading. Perhaps someone more familiar with it—even St. Aubyn's core fans—might fare better, but for me it made one side of the plot virtually incomprehensible. Even the faithful youngest daughter, Florence, has been raised in this world, and must use its mechanisms to achieve justice for her father. While I saw St. Aubyn at least trying for some of the radiant simplicity that makes Shakespeare's Cordelia so heartbreaking at the end, his Florence never really won my sympathy, except in comparison to her terrible half-sisters.

So a novel that has nothing to say about its original and does not hold together in its own right: two stars, or two and a half? Only St. Aubyn's ingenuity and fount of wicked wit persuades me to raise it to three.

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*A fellow reader has pointed out in a comment that Ian McEwan's *Nutshell* may be the best of the lot. Although not part of the Hogarth series, it so fits its concept and scope that it is hard to believe there is no connection. And with the daring to go *way* outside the box, by having it narrated by Hamlet as a *fetus in utero*, McEwan both gives himself permission a comic masterpiece at least the equal of his previous comedy *Solar*, and casts some quite interesting light on Shakespeare's original by shining it at such an unusual angle.

Amalia Gavea says

“I must tell my story...Oh God, let me not go mad!”

I won't lie. I am a sworn Shakespeare purist and there is nothing that can alter my mind. My opinion on the Hogarth Shakespeare series is somehow divided. I adored “Vinegar Girl” and I look forward to Nesbo's “Macbeth”, while “Hag-Seed” will find a place in my wintry reads. “King Lear” is one of those plays that have haunted me ever since I read it, some 15-odd years ago. I haven't had the chance to attend a live performance yet, but Shakespeare's words and the figure of this highly troubling and troubled, tormented man are so powerful that spring alive from the page. Now, with this in mind, I can tell you that “Dunbar” seemed to me an uneven retelling. Naturally, no writer is Shakespeare and it is more than apparent in most of

the retellings. With this novel, I venture to say that the readers who have not yet read "King Lear" are likely to enjoy it and appreciate it even more. I couldn't...

Henry Dunbar is a mass media mogul. A widower with three daughters, Abigail, Megan and Florence (... as in Goneril, Regan and Cordelia...) Having practically disinherited Florence for being unwilling to dedicate herself to the company, Abby and Megan are given her own share of the fortune. And what do they do? They "imprison" him in an asylum in Manchester. What happens next would be easy to guess if you read "King Lear".

The characters were the mightiest disappointment, in my opinion. Besides Dunbar and Florence, who are strong equivalents of their original versions, and Chris who somehow stands for the King of France, the rest are not good enough to support such an effort. Wilson, is a hybrid between Gloucester and Kent, but lacks the tragic nature of the Duke and the savviness of Kent and if Dr. Bob is Edmund, then I am Ophelia...He is not powerful enough to make for a convincing antagonist. Now, in my opinion, the characters of Abigail and Megan significantly lowered the quality of the entire novel. They had no strength of presence like Goneril and Regan, and they had no motive. They existed just to be evil and the writer tried too hard to make them appear as such. They had no personality, no evil maturity and menace like the villains in Shakespeare. They just swear, talk to each other while hallucinating and have sex with any male that crosses their path. There was too much emphasis on sex with these women, destroying any hint of a sinister atmosphere and all it accomplished was for them to be reduced to sex-crazed psychopaths, characters that escaped from those rubbish-quality paperbacks with the disgusting front covers.... I don't claim to know the writer's intentions, but it was cheap and disrespectful. The way I see it, he lacked the deep insight into the human nature.

"Who can tell me who I am? Who I really am?"

With Dunbar, the futility and remorse of Lear, is clearly and brilliantly depicted. The whole essence of his ordeal was faithful and respectful of its source. The agony to right the wrongs and to escape a world that demands you to be mad is tense and vivid. The scenes of Dunbar's time in hiding and his thoughts of remorse echo Lear's tribulations. Florence's fears for her father and her struggle to protect him from her sisters are well-depicted without being melodramatic. However, the dialogue was rather average and the fact that there were scattered quotes from "King Lear" throughout didn't help. It rather alienated me, to be honest. The overall writing isn't powerful enough to explore the complexity of the themes of identity and despair of "King Lear" and at times, the story became too action-driven and too family drama both of which aren't to my liking.

"No mercy. In this world or the next."

The problem is that Dunbar's words fall empty. The end, although it was to be expected, was no less bitter and shocking. However, it wasn't convincing enough. I found it to be abrupt and lacking in justice and resolution, the catharsis (however limited) that is communicated in the final Act of the masterpiece. Dunbar may call for no mercy, but there's no one to hear his words. Perhaps, you will claim that I should judge the book as a work on its own. You will be probably right and I'd still give it the rating I did. The thing is that it's not a work on its own. It's a retelling of Shakespeare's great tragedy and bound to be compared. It cannot stand the comparison, I'm afraid. The finest writers in the world could try to rewrite one of his plays and they would still fall short.

So, as it stands for me, the writer dropped the ball in certain important moments with momentary satisfying highlights. But merely "satisfying" doesn't do, in my opinion. There was no shattering moments, no dagger nailed into the heart when witnessing the characters' ordeal, because the writer doesn't allow us to

experience it fully and convincingly. Therefore, I believe that even the 3 stars may be too generous...

Many thanks to Penguin Random House and NetGalley for the ARC in exchange of an honest review.

My reviews can also be found on <https://theopinionatedreaderblog.wordpress.com>

Rebecca says

An underwhelming *King Lear* adaptation. Didn't Jane Smiley already give us a less caustic version of this daughters-fighting-over-the-family-business scenario (*A Thousand Acres*)? St. Aubyn's *Lear* stand-in is Henry Dunbar, an 80-year-old who peddled hate as a North American media mogul and whose two dastardly daughters have committed him to a sanatorium in the north of England. Here Dunbar communes with Peter Walker, the alcoholic comedian in the next room (the Fool figure) and spits out all his pills; he may have had a moment of madness out on Hampstead Heath, but he still has it all together and is determined to keep Abigail and Megan (Goneril and Regan) from privatizing the Dunbar Trust to their own profit. After he and Peter escape as far as the pub, Dunbar keeps going: out onto the snowy wastes of the Lake District, where he has a possibly hallucinatory meeting with a disgraced vicar (Chapter 11, the highlight of the book) and sleeps under a rock ledge.

It is Dunbar and his emotional awakening and reconciliation with Florence (Cordelia) that power the book. The other two sadistic, nymphomaniac daughters (they "require ever-escalating doses of perversion to stimulate their jaded appetites") and their henchmen are too thinly drawn and purposelessly evil to be believed. Florence is given a tiny bit of backstory via the son of her father's right-hand man to make her more interesting than just the goody-goody scapegoat. The Gloucester/Edmund/Edgar subplot is avoided entirely, although Wilson is a bit like Gloucester and Dr. Bob a bit like Edmund.

St. Aubyn uses some direct literary quotations ("sleep that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care" – *Macbeth*; "not born to sue but to command" – *Richard II*; "thou shouldst be living at this hour" – Wordsworth) and at least one very closely adapted one from *King Lear* itself ("who can tell me who I am, who I really am?") to good effect. Beyond that, though, there are only very occasional interesting lines ("That's all a sunset was: an exultation of dirt and dust"; "Being alive is falling, once you know that, it never stops"), with far too much business-speak and too many porn-lite sex scenes thanks to Abigail and Megan. A couple of extended metaphors felt excruciating: "Bloated on her father's love, she was like a grazing cow that wanders onto the railway tracks just as a high-speed train is coming round the bend" and "Like a swimmer blowing the water from his flooded snorkel before returning to the reassuring, amplified rhythm of his breathing, Dunbar threw off the weight of his dream."

I've felt this way with a few of the Hogarth Shakespeares now: what's the point when I could just go back and read the original? (Whereas Tyler, Chevalier and Atwood have written what are actually enjoyable novels in their own right.) I think I might just do that, actually, given that I only read *Lear* once, 14 years ago.

2.75-ish stars

James says

The Hogarth Shakespeare series of novels (6 now published and 2 more pending) are re-imaginings, re-positionings, rewrites, adaptations, inspired by, based on, the plays of William Shakespeare – call them what you will, are merely the latest addition to a centuries old tradition of translating, editing, changing, adapting and producing versions (in the loosest sense) of Shakespeare's works. In some cases these have been laudable, inspired and in others – merely futile savagings, maulings and hack butcherings – be they theatrical, cinematic, operatic, ballet, animation, puppetry, graphic novels, comics and as many other formats as you can possibly imagine – you name it, it has been done.

So, what Hogarth is doing is nothing new and I think approaching any adaptations of William Shakespeare's plays, including this one – 'Dunbar' by Edward St Aubyn, has to be from the fundamental standpoint, understanding and acceptance that however great such a novel might be, it can never display the genius of the original play upon which it is based. Once that basic premise has been acknowledged, then the novel can be read and appreciated in its own right. Hence any charges that Hogarth novels, such as this one by St Aubyn, as being superficial by comparison to the genius of William Shakespeare – are of course correct, but importantly have really missed the point.

What the Hogarth Shakespeare novels do with varying degrees of success is:

- a. Enhance our appreciation of the brilliance of the source material
- b. Encourage us to reconsider and revisit the original plays from perhaps a new or altered angle

What many reviewers of 'Dunbar' have referred to is 'A Thousand Acres' by Jane Smiley (another novel which uses 'King Lear' as its framework) – however as I haven't as yet read Smiley's book, I am unfortunately unable to add to this particular part of the debate.

What St Aubyn has done with 'King Lear' is to relocate and transpose the narrative into the world of a super-rich media mogul, the business empire, ostensibly the battle for the company, the legacy, for profit and share of the market – as opposed to the multi-layered battles delineated so brilliantly in 'King Lear'. 'Dunbar' does follow the story of 'King Lear' quite closely (although clearly in a somewhat more simplified form). A drawback here therefore, is that those of us familiar with the story of Shakespeare's 'King Lear' can therefore watch events unfold on St Aubyn's 'Dunbar' with a certain amount of predictability. Although it is fascinating to see how St Aubyn does this – and does it well.

The Hogarth Shakespeare series is a great (if not new) concept and has produced some fine works. The paradox and challenge is that yes, such novels will always and inevitably suffer by comparison to the original plays – but if we look beyond that, if we look at how the Hogarth novels shed a different light on the genius, the brilliance that was and always will be William Shakespeare.

What St Aubyn has here therefore is the particularly hard and unenviable task of writing something 'based on / inspired by' etc William Shakespeare's 'King Lear' – arguably the greatest play by the greatest playwright in the English (or possibly any other) language ever – it's a tall order to say the least. For the most part St Aubyn is successful, he has produced a gripping, thought provoking thriller which has an undeniable power of its own – an impressive novel. If what St Aubyn has managed to do is to even hint or convey something of the genius, the profound and elemental power of Shakespeare's 'King Lear' – then he has been successful. 'Dunbar' is a welcome and impressive addition to the series, which continues to show us the everlasting brilliance of William Shakespeare.

Roman Clodia says

Was this the triumph of self-knowledge: to suffer more lucidly?

Apart from a misstep with *Othello*, the Hogarth Shakespeare series of modern re-engagements with the plays has been excellent to date, and this is no different. It's both faithful and yet iconoclastic, and while purists may hate it, St Aubyn has made some bold and audacious moves to re-imagine a modern Lear as a Canadian media mogul, incarcerated in a care home by his wicked daughters and making a bid for freedom with Peter Walker, an old comedian who speaks in many voices but rarely his own.

One of the things that this re-telling achieves is to bring out the latent comedy that always hovers beneath the surface of Lear but which modern performances tend to erase given its canonical status. This is Lear by way of Beckett - a bit Godot, perhaps more Endgame, a tragicomedy for sure, and one which made me laugh out loud at points (Megan, the Regan character, and her outrageous antics with Dr Bob, Kevin and J!). The laughter co-exists with the suffering, and stark moments ('Peter hanged himself in the shower early this morning'; Dunbar's acknowledgment of need and love: 'I think I can walk if you help me') take us straight back to the original.

A daring enterprise on St Aubyn's part, and one which has paid off very well. Purists may well hate this iconoclastic reinterpretation that is Lear via Beckett - I liked it very much.

Many thanks to Random House/Hogarth for an ARC via NetGalley.

Susan says

This is one of the Hogarth Press series of Shakespeare modern adaptations and, in this novel, we have Edward St Aubyn (best known for the Patrick Melrose novels) re-imagining "King Lear." Now, I must admit that St Aubyn is one of my favourite authors and so I am probably more inclined to enjoy this than those readers who are looking at it from the point of view of the original and how it has been portrayed. St Aubyn has to be in my top ten favourite authors and I never open a new novel by him without feeling a shiver of anticipation.

Here, we have Lear as Henry Dunbar, a Canadian media mogul, who has been sent for a 'lovely long rest,' at Meadowmeade, a care home in the wilds of the English countryside, where he is befriended by the alcoholic comedian, Peter Walker. Walker brings humour to this tragedy, as he encourages the befuddled Dunbar to escape. Having disinherited his beloved younger daughter, Florence, Dunbar has given the reins of power to his sadistic, vicious and spoilt daughters, Abigail and Megan. They are planning a coup to take total control, but their plans are thrown into disarray by Dunbar's sudden disappearance. Along with Dunbar's personal physician, 'Dr Bob,' they set off in pursuit, while Florence is intent on reaching him first and spirited him to safety.

St Aubyn uses all his dark wit in this novel, with an interesting cast of characters. Dunbar has a sense of betrayal, compounded by his own guilt and grief. Meanwhile, those he betrayed - Florence and Dunbar's long serving friend, and business ally, Wilson, who was summarily sacked by him, along with Wilson's son,

Chris, are the only ones who really care what happens. Even if you read this as a novel, without knowing about the Shakespeare connection, it works really well. It is truly modern; full of hostile takeovers, with everyone trying to stab everyone in the back, out for themselves, and with a real sense of family betrayal. I personally think St Aubyn does a good job of getting a sense of the original story and moving it to the present, but obviously this depends upon your own view of how well this is realised.

This is the first of the Hogarth Press Shakespeare novels that I have read, but I am now interested to read more in this series. I received a copy of this book from the publisher, via NetGalley, for review.

Briar's Reviews says

I love Shakespeare - anyone who knows me well can tell you that - so when I saw this book I knew I had to read it. But, sadly, it was under whelming and quite the disappointment. Perhaps I put too much pressure on this book before reading it?

I haven't read King Lear yet, but I have been meaning to. I made sure to read over the synopsis and read some of the more "famous" pieces from the story online to get a better feel for it before I picked up this book. I wanted to understand the source material and see what Edward St. Aubyn would do with it. While he got the base of the story and plot correct, it just wasn't as great as it could have been.

Henry Dunbar (our King Lear) the media mogul is our lead, who has three daughters (two of whom seem out of their right mind 99% of the time, I feel like they should have been in the psych ward, personally), is currently in what appears to be a psych ward with a not-so-funny comedian. He plans to escape and prevent the two psychotic daughters from running his company/getting his trust money.

The two psychotic daughters appear to be too evil - like it's obvious, but their reasoning for getting the trust money doesn't seem like a good enough reason to be crazy. I would have liked to see the craziness pulled back a bit to make it more realistic, or interesting. I just found them to pull away from the great story of Henry and Florence. While Florence does seem to be a little too goody-goody, their scenes are really beautiful and seem to be the best part of this entire story.

St. Aubyn uses a lot of Shakespeare quotes - which I loved! They were used in the correct context too. My issue within this, is sometimes it seemed like he was trying to write in iambic pentameter or using language from that era when it just didn't fit in. The first chapter when Henry and his comedian friend are telling stories seem to be edging towards that era, but it just wasn't funny. If anything, it made me more confused and bored. I had to keep re-reading what they were saying just to try to understand what they are doing (and I was an ace at Shakespeare in English, so how could I not understand normal English?...Geez).

My overall review - just read the original. There are some FANTASTIC adaptations out there that can wow your socks off and rival the original, and this one isn't it. It's a great story, and if it entered a contest it could potentially win, but it's not the best I've seen. I gave up a few chapters in just to force myself through the book.

Edward is a great author, and while this might not be his strongest novel I'm sure he is great in other areas. I definitely want to give him another shot in the future with a book that's an original story because I'm sure he could shine there.

Two out of five stars.

I received this book for free through Goodreads First Reads.

Sarah Jessica Parker says

From the Hogarth Shakespeare series. A wonderful read by Edward St. Aubyn!

Dannii Elle says

This is the most recent of the Hogarth Shakespeare series instalments, which rework one of the bard's infamous plays.

Dunbar is the reborn story of King Lear. The central character is, as in the original, also the title of the piece. Henry Dunbar resides in a nursing home with only the jovial yet nonsensical Peter for companionship. His enterprise and fortunes have made their way to his two greedy daughter's outstretched hands and he is seemingly unable to stop it, in his current predicament. He plans to escape and a mad dash ensues, in which it remains unclear who shall reach him first - the greed-driven and self-serving duo, or the one remaining daughter with love remaining for the father she thought lost?

I found this too true to the original story to make any suspenseful reading. This was, of course, the story's aim but others in this series, that I have read, have also imbibed some sense of their own personality. I found this to appear a more regulation retelling, in comparison. The modern-day scenario was a little too predictable but this still remained an entertaining read, if removed from the association with its basis.

I received a copy of this book in exchange for an honest review. Thank you to the author, Celeste Ng, and the publisher, Little Brown Book Group, for this opportunity.
