



For The Term Of His Natural Life

Marcus Clarke

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The classic novel of convict Australia, *For the Term of His Natural Life* is a narrative of enormous power, but also great suffering and inhumanity. There is no attempt made to soften the truth of degradation and cruelty of the convict existence, yet the novel is filled with life and peopled with unforgettable characters: Frere, the magnificent barbarian; Sarah Purfoy, aglow with colour and vitality, attracting men as moths to light; John Rex, the consummate villain. And woven through the story is the gold thread spun from the faith and hope of Sylvia, the innocent child who loves the luckless Rufus Dawes, condemned to transportation for life for a crime he did not commit.

For The Term Of His Natural Life Details

Date : Published July 1st 2004 by Neeland Media LLC (first published 1874)

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Author : Marcus Clarke

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From Reader Review For The Term Of His Natural Life for online ebook

Louise says

Sadly, I must report that I found this Australian classic tedious and melodramatic and as such, a major disappointment.

Lisa says

It was good fun reading this Aussie Classic with a bunch of mostly American readers in the Yahoo 19th century reading group. As I was leading the discussion, I had to start by clearing up some assumptions about this strange land of ours downunder. People overseas usually think of Australia as blue skies and sunshine, but for the purposes of this book, the hot and arid landscapes of Australia are irrelevant. Our smallest and most southerly island state is nothing like that. On the contrary, it's the perfect setting for what has come to be known as Tasmanian Gothic.

To read my review, please visit <http://anzlitlovers.com/2012/01/18/fo...> and also see the guest review by Dr Lurline Stuart who edited the critical edition at <http://anzlitlovers.com/2011/12/27/fo...>

K. says

So apparently I never reviewed this last year? Whoops.

This book is basically the story of a guy who finds out something scandalous about his family, is then falsely accused of murder, convicted, and sent to the colonies. He spends the next millenty years of his life being falsely accused of more crimes and being punished accordingly. Basically, he's Jean Valjean minus the singing and the bread.

The first part of this story was completely action packed and I loved it. The second part featured a lot of Tasmanian convict history, and details of the establishment of the various penal colonies, which zzzzzz. Especially if you have any background in Tasmanian history, which I do. Basically, that section was super dry and read like non-fiction.

So on the whole, I really enjoyed this one. Except for the romance, which was pretty squicky at times.

Tien says

This is the first Australian historical fiction dealing with convicts that I've read (as far as I can remember anyway) and I was truly looking forward to it. It's a classic written in the late 19th century so I guess it was contemporary fiction when it was first written.

Basically, the story follows an intrinsically good man who has a run of ‘bad luck’ throughout the book for a period of 20 years of his life. It is amazing just how much ‘bad luck’ a person can have and yet despite the harshness of a convict’s life, he has managed to preserve his humanity though there are periods where, understandably, he fell into the pits of despair and misery.

I continued to read and hope for a better luck – something to turn around his present misery right to the last page! And the end... Oh, the end...!!! I will leave you to read for yourself.

Marianne says

“We convicts have the advantage over you gentlemen. You are afraid of death; we pray for it. It is the best thing that can happen to us. Die! They were going to hang me once. I wish they had. My God, I wish they had!”

For *The Term Of His Natural Life* is the best-known novel by Australian author, Marcus Clarke. It was first published in 1874, although it began as a serialised novel titled *His Natural Life*, published in the *Australian Journal*. Text Publishing have produced a handsome volume under their Text Classics banner.

There are significant differences in the plot between the original (unabridged) edition and later editions of this novel; the first book has been reduced to a prologue; the text has been condensed into a much more readable form, and much of the (frankly, boring and often unimportant) detail has been omitted; and the ending is completely different. Thus, for example, in excess of 150 pages of book 2 of the original edition are reduced to a much more manageable 75 pages in this edition.

Clarke managed to pack a lot into his novel: perhaps as it began in serialised form, each episode needed some drama: a parental estrangement, a very rich will, a secret identity, a wrongful conviction, transport on a convict ship, a mutiny, another wrongful conviction, flogging, suicide attempts, multiple escape attempts (at least one involving cannibalism), another mutiny, abandonment on a deserted shore, the construction of a coracle, yet another wrongful conviction, many years of penal servitude, the claiming of an inheritance by an imposter, quite a few confessions and a shipwreck.

This novel has been described as the Australian Count of Monte Cristo and while it is considered an Australian Classic, as historical fiction, it is not really up to the standard of Dumas’s writing. The most exciting chapters, by far, are those detailing the escape from Port of Arthur of convict, John Rex. It is filled with improbable coincidences, and while he draws on many real occurrences in Tasmania’s history, Clarke’s emphasis is on the cruelty of convict life. Rufus Dawes is one very unlucky man!

This book will appeal to those who enjoy Australian historical fiction written from the closer perspective of fifty years as opposed to almost one hundred and fifty. A map of the relevant parts would have been helpful, but Wikipedia serves equally, these days. Text Classics include an introduction by author, Rohan Wilson and an evocative cover by the talented WH Chong. A beautiful edition of an Aussie Classic.

Banafsheh Serov says

Poignant and tender, Marcus Clarke's novel depicts both the ugliness and resilience of man. Its depiction of the harsh realities during early settlement, has ensured its status as an important Australian classic.

Accused of a crime he did not commit, Richard Devine- an English aristocrat, is sentenced to life imprisonment at the penal colony of Tasmania. Taking on a new identity (to save his mother grief and shame), the now Rufus Dawes sails to Van Diemen's Land on board a convict ship. What he discovers upon arrival, he encounters a penal system entrenched in treachery, savagery and cruelty.

This book polarised our small book group. Whilst some debated the circumstances which conspired to convict Dawes, I argued in favour of Clarke's writing. Whilst the dense layout of text irritated some of our readers, I applauded the content and prose. And whilst they thought the relationships were highly improbable, I again stood my ground and pointed out its merits.

In truth, I forgive the book's follies because I enjoyed the imagery and took great pleasure in the structure of the sentences. I sighed longingly at my inability to match Clark's skill. Had Clarke been a lesser writer, then I may have been less forgiving. But since he's not, I continue to argue in his favour.

Bryn Hammond says

Glad to see other reviewers mention *The Count of Monte Cristo*. I felt strong influence from that, and from *Les Mis* -- no worse for it, but rather an argument for unabashed influence. It was also an argument for pulp fiction, because it puts its pulp to great uses. A cracking read (I pinched that adjective from another review, but it's exactly right).

This Penguin edition entitles itself just *His Natural Life*, which restores an original irony. It has a confused publishing history, but this, edited by Stephen Murray-Smith, copyright 1970, 900+ fully-printed pages, claims to be 'the complete original text' which 'differs radically' from the 'common, popular' (and 'mutilated') version usually titled *For the Term of His Natural Life*. Beware cheap imitations.

To-read-again.

Kelv says

While I thought the prose was a bit dated and slow to follow in some parts, the chapter order chopped and changed regularly, and also it was hard to time and date passages, which contributed to not being able to determine the duration of some events. While all of the above, this is brilliant piece of work which reminded me of Ken Follet's *Pillars of the Earth* i.e. down and out champion who hangs in there by a thread only divide and conquer - not quite, as he never had revenge on those who unjustly sentenced him, but he did achieve freedom in a way with the woman he loved.

The characters, were rich in flavour with many aspects which were relatable - there were the good and the bad, but each fitted the story excellently. The story was believable and interesting - a mutiny on an typhoid ridden ship - why not, what choice do you have?! Some of the escape or ship wrecked scenes reminded me from other well know books and I could not help make the connection i.e. *Robinson Crusoe* (mentioned in the book), *Treasure Island*, *Coral Island* etc.

The ending - John Rex - what a twist he gave the book. Did not see the blood relationship to Dawes until I had read well past his confession... The lucky escape from Norfolk only to be lost at sea after 20 odd years of being a prisoner. The ending could have been left open in that Dawes and Sylvia would be known as assumed dead rather than the epilogue confirming it so.

Perseus Q says

Should one suffer the gravest of injustices based solely on a coincidence, and it results in one unfairly punished and imprisoned for life, there's a novel in it. Rufus Dawes suffers eight of them... Which is just stupid, and as each coincidental injustice occurred I groaned. Just the first would have done. It's a shame because the book was an exciting adventure yarn, and Clarke did not need to keep adding in all these injustices to make the book exciting... These narrative twists actually took away from the book. What could have been a credulous super-adventure became a groan-inducing average adventure. Also, the bad guy, Frere, was too bad to be believable.

I still gave it three stars though because the side-tale of Sarah Purfoy & John Rex, plus the drunken North and the cannibal Gambett were quite entertaining. And I liked his writing style. Oh, and I happened to be in North West Tassie when I read it, close to Sarah Island and Hell's Gates... I could smell the story!

Christopher Rex says

This book was incredible. Fans of "The Count of Monte Cristo" and "Crime and Punishment" take note. Any fan of the "prison novel" or "prison movie" will likely enjoy this book immensely. The lead jailer - Maurice Frere - could easily have been the inspiration for the sadistic wardens of "Shawshank Redemption" and "Cool Hand Luke" respectively.

Brief summary: The book surrounds the 19thC Penal Colony of Australia and the various "island prisons" that were set up there. The inhumanity of that experience is exposed full-force and how it warps both prisoner and jailer alike. In the midst of all of this is a tale of improper conviction, con-artists, deception, attempted redemption and "love" all existing in the inhospitable world of 19thC Australia.

The writing is far ahead of it's time (19thC), the storyline is incredibly engaging, the descriptiveness of prison life in the penal colony is brutally honest, the characters are deep and rich in every way. The ending is fantastic.

Best book I've read in the past year (perhaps more).

Highly recommended.

Suzannah says

Review to come at Vintage Novels. :)

Lisa says

I read this cause it's an Australian classic but it was painful for me to read. Very Victorian—like Dickens without the humor. Still, a vivid picture of convict life that I'm sure some people needed to see at the time it was written.

Thom Swennes says

Warning! This book is not for the faint hearted. Marcus Clarke wrote a story that would rightfully take the same place in Australian and British history as Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin took in that of the United States. Most people (especially history buffs) know that Australia was originally used as a penal colony and a great majority of the original European inhabitants were convicts. In Britain deportation was deemed more humane and every much as definite and hanging at Tyburn. At the start of the 19th Century, children were punished by the same standard as adults and it wasn't uncommon for a ten year old child to be put to death for stealing bread.

This was the beginning of the industrial revolution and public senses were changing; slowly. Deportation to a penal colony in Australia for life was, for all intents and purposes, a death penalty; without a body. The horrors and nightmare of life in these colonies was of little interest to the British public. Happy in their ignorance this same public silently condoned horrors surpassing slavery that was prevalent at that time in the southern states of the United States. This story could not fail to sway public opinion.

If you want a memorable romance this story would fall short of the desired mark. If you are interested in how life really was at that time in the Australian colony, this is the book for you.

Shanelle Kennedy says

Every chapter made me cry.. It's going to take me a year to get over this terrible and beautiful story

Estelle Borrey says

I find this book very powerful and compelling, with well drawn characters and memorable scenes. I have to say that it is the first book, which, in my experience, has made me physically sick, with its account of the inhumane flogging meted out to poor Kirkland. It is one of those books that have the power to really make you pass through wonderful and terrible emotions, and question what makes a human, weak, strong wonderful. It questions social distinctions, and had me cheering for the underdog. Although I have not finished to get, I hope to God, that Rufus Dawes, the protagonist finds some measure of peace. But I think it is a little hard blame only the perpetrators of the great wrongs committed on this story, without appreciating the context in which they live, and the system to which they have become accustomed. Whilst the individuals who support and validate cruel and barbaric treatment of the convicts, and that therefore partially to blame, I think it would be a mistake to condemn them out of hand. That's what I took away from it anyway. Also I have to admit, I am much attracted to the strong character of Rufus Dawes, and the reflections on life and

death, as well as moral questions of import which are raised in his narrative. The wedge between convict and respectable man becomes thinner, to such a degree that it separating or dividing line becomes at times almost indistinguishable and invisible.
