



The Chess Garden

Brooks Hansen , Miles Hyman (Illustrator)

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In the fall of 1900, Dr. Gustav Uytterhoeven left the chess garden that he and his wife, Sonja, had created together in Dayton, Ohio, and journeyed to South Africa to serve as a doctor in the British concentration camps of the Boer War. Over the next ten months he sent twelve chess pieces and twelve letters back to Sonja. She set out her husband's gifts as they arrived and welcomed all the most faithful guests of the garden to come and hear what he had written - letters which told nothing of his experience of the camps but described an imagined land called the Antipodes, where all the game pieces that cluttered the sets and drawers of the garden collection came to life to guide the doctor through his fateful and wondrous last adventure.

Brooks Hansen offers a tale of spiritual progress disguised in the most exotic visions of the imagination. And yet *The Chess Garden* encompasses a very real world, too. Alongside the doctor's visions of the Antipodes, the story of his life gradually unfolds as well. History and allegory are expertly woven until finally both lead back to the chess garden itself, a place where ideas give way to vision, reason meets faith, and fact and figment are finally reconciled.

The Chess Garden Details

Date : Published November 1st 1996 by Riverhead Trade (first published 1995)

ISBN : 9781573225632

Author : Brooks Hansen , Miles Hyman (Illustrator)

Format : Paperback 480 pages

Genre : Fiction, Fantasy, Historical, Historical Fiction, Literature, Games, Chess

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From Reader Review The Chess Garden for online ebook

Marci says

I was immediately drawn to this book by the title, the illustration, and the summary. Unfortunately as I read "In the tradition of J.R.R Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, Brooks Hansen offers a tale of spiritual progress disguised in the most exotic visions of the imagination", I had automatically set ridiculously high hopes for this book.

The book is divided into the parts that switch between Dr. Uytterhoeven's letters which are amazing, and the other parts which are more science filled and less fantasy. I do enjoy the style that this book was written in but got distracted by so much scientific terminology and lack of connection to those who aren't necessarily scientist or whom have not studied the sciences in detailed.

The first part was breathtakingly beautiful and with gusto allowed me to dive into the second but coming out of the second put a damper on my enjoyment. It took me a really long time, weeks in fact, of picking the book up reading a few pages and setting it down. I am glad however that I did not put the book down because the end sections are quite lovely.

Wendy Wax says

This is one of my favorite books. I always recommend it and, still, no one I know has read it. It's amazingly abstract, visual, humorous, poignant--read it and let me know what you think.

William1.2 says

Second reading. It is a novel, as all good novels must in part be, of subtle and beautiful patterning. There are two storylines. One is told in a series of twelve letters the good doctor Gustav Uytterhoeven's sends home during the year 1900 from a British-run refugee camp for displaced Boer women and children in South Africa. These letters, written for the children back home in Dayton Ohio, are fantasies about the doctor's travels in a magical land of games called The Antipodes. A second storyline is of the life and times of the Uytterhoevens themselves. Their history, courtship, marriage, the doctor's religious conversion as a young man, his thoughts on the great Christian activist and thinker Emanuel Swedenborg through the letter readings of 1900. The subtle patterning I mentioned before is shared by both storylines. It's the glue that ties the book together.

The prose reminds me of Thomas Mann in some ways. It is not that strenuous but there is a certain manner in which the narrative unwinds that puts me in mind of *Buddenbrooks* and parts of *The Magic Mountain*. It's easygoing opening slowly takes on rigor and greater philosophical density as it moves forward. One cannot call its movement or drive propulsive in any sense, it is more ruminative or, better, contemplative. Dr. Uytterhoeven, enters into a research partnership with two colleagues in the 1850s, the team later discovers cell division. For Dr Uytterhoeven "life is somewhere in the chaos, untraceable, like heat in fire." To my mind this echoes William Paley's enthusiasms earlier in the nineteenth century. The good doctor is searching for nothing less than the what might be called an animating spiritual principle. Yet he is not saying so yet. The word god never passes his lips. He fears the soulless rigor of his fellows at the laboratory where he

works.

Then we're hit with the opaque cause and effect chapter, entitled "The Friedrich Wilhem Institute." I see what Hansen wants here. The movement from a crystalline clarity and simplicity at the start of the novel to this passage of intellectual rigor. However, on second reading I found the chapter an absolute slog. My impulse was to skip to letters four through seven coming up. I think if Hansen wants to address issues of epistemology in his novel then he has to define his terms. Like most people, I was not a philosophy major. I don't want to google concepts when reading novels like I do when reading nonfiction. That's because fiction is supposed to be the dream which bears us along. By introducing such an erudite, turgid chapter Hansen throws cold water on the dreamer. Narrative pleasure goes out the window.

...So I have elected not to finish the second reading. I'm stopping at p. 210. Apparently my tastes have changed since I first read this novel sixteen years ago. I find I have less patience with it now. I find that it is not delivering the sort of narrative joy I crave these days. I'm going to leave the rating at 4, however, since that was my response to the text on first reading. One wants, I suppose, to be true to one's younger, more naïve self.

mark monday says

4 STARS AND NO REVIEW! good grief, mark, get with the program! you loved this book and you want other people to read this book too. you want them to share your excitement, right? well, write a review. share that enthusiasm, you can do it mark!

Ruth says

This is a shining example of how the English language should be used. Reading this book was totally awe-inspiring from a grammatical point of view. The story is quite interesting, as well, in that the main character tells many stories, some of which have their main character telling stories – so there are multiple levels of stories going on all at the same time. I have read other books by this same author, but this is by far his finest.

Al says

I wanted to like this book. Philosophy meets historical fact meets fantasy? That is usually just my style--but The Chess Garden fell flat. Those three aspects didn't come together into a unified whole and simply dropped you off of a cliff without any transition. The flow was poor to non-existent and characters and story were distant and non-engaging. There were interesting thoughts and ideas, but they were buried under unnecessary tedium that could have been presented in a much fresher and integrated way.

liza says

the whole point of the book didn't hit me until about fifteen seconds after i closed the back cover. this almost never happens to me.

you can read this book and peel away layers like it's an onion.

i am SO going to grow my own chess garden!

Scott says

"The Chess Garden" by Brooks Hansen showed up for quite awhile in my recommendations at Amazon. Every time I read the description, I grew more and more interested, finally obtaining this trade paperback edition from a trading sit. (The hardcover edition of the book was subtitled "The Twilight Letter of Gustav Uytterhoeven".)

Here is a quick description to help me from Amazon.Com and Publishers Weekly:

... set in 19th-century Dayton, Ohio, in Europe and South Africa during the Boer War and on an imaginary island, the Antipodes. During his journey to the heart of the war, where he has volunteered to serve in a British-run concentration camp for forcibly displaced Boers, Dr. Gustav Uytterhoeven sends 12 letters to his wife, Sonja, in Dayton. The letters, fabulist explorations in the manner of Poe, Chesterton and Borges, describe a world where chess pieces, including a queen trapped in a tree, live, die, love, battle and philosophize. Uytterhoeven is a remarkable character, dapper yet heartbroken, civilized, swinging his cane, journeying through sundry marvels with an air of concern and wonder that the reader comes to share. Meanwhile, back in Dayton, the reading of each new letter becomes an event; and, mysteriously, chess pieces mentioned in the letters begin to appear in the Uytterhoevens' garden.

The first thing that grabbed me with this book was Hansen's writing style and prose. I have read very little Poe, and nothing by Chesterton and Borges at the time of reading it (I have since read some of the works of Borges). But from the descriptions I had read of Poe and Borges, Hansen captures them. The character of Dr. Uytterhoeven is also influence greatly by philosopher / scientist / theologist Emmanuel Swedenborg, or at least in his stories in the 12 letters are since he reads Swedenborg's work late in his life. Unfortunately I am unfamiliar with his works, so any influences were lost on me.

Dr. Uytterhoeven is one of the leading pathologists of his time in the middle and late 19th-century. Pathology at the time was a new science. For sections of the book that go into Uytterhoeven's earlier life, there is much philosophy and questions of the direction of the science. He "argues" his beliefs, which differ from others in the field, particularly those of fellow faculty of the school he teaches at in Berlin. Quite frankly all the discussion between the parties was lost on me and made those sections quite boring at times, though it did do a great deal in developing his character, as well as his colleagues who become close friends.

The book seems like two different books at the same time. There are the 12 letters of his journey to find and within the Antipodes, and then the part of the book that is Uytterhoeven's and his wife's life. He writes the letters during his time in South Africa. You find as the book goes on that they are mirroring what he is going through. As one character puts it, he feels useless by just watching over his chess garden in Dayton, so he volunteers to serve. But he knows that his life is drawing to an end. His letters reflect this, though it wasn't easy for me to pick out until these revelations are made.

It is a very deep book. It is a very well written book. For instance, the story of how the chess garden came to be is very late in the book, yet you still get a great sense throughout the whole book of what it meant to the people that the Uytterhoeven's hosted and what it meant to themselves. Unfortunately with some influences that I am not familiar with, and with philosophies and sciences that I am not familiar with, or too terribly interested in, it took some effort to read through many parts of this. His letters are captivating, though sometimes starting slow. I can understand why so many think highly of this book, but at the time I read it, it didn't reach me the way it probably should. This is a book ripe for a re-read someday.

Peter says

This book is why I read.

Jaspreet says

I began *The Chess Garden or the Twilight Letters of Gustav Uytterhoeven* by Brooks Hansen all the way back in May 2010; it was the second selection in the Natick book club I joined. While the member who selected the book was very enthusiastic and excited about the story, I had a very hard time getting into it. At our book club meeting in June, I loved her perspective so much that I was determined to finish the book. It took me almost a year to finish the book. I finally got into the story during my third attempt.

The process of reading the book also tested my commitment to the public libraries of MA, VA, and MD. All of the libraries have a two term renewal limit. I was super slow in reading, so I had a lot of pauses in my reading.

While I questioned my decision to finish the book several times, I am glad that I continued. In the end, I loved learning about the Doctor and his wife. His personal journey and the way he used to stories as a way to cope with the horrors he was witnessing in concentration camp. I liked the way the letters were a way for him to connect with his wife and also to continue the sense of community they had created in Ohio. I even cried a little towards the end of the book.

Natalie Hamilton says

I was a little afraid to reread this book after more than a decade, because I had such wonderful memories of my reading experience the first time around. I need not have worried. This book is absolutely remarkable in its emotional and imaginative scope. It is truly one of the best books I have ever read, and a cracking read to boot!

Toby says

Several stories are concurrently told about different times in one man's life. As each portion of his life unfolds, we begin to understand every important stage of his spiritual growth and only then can we appreciate the deeper spiritual meaning of the letters he has written home about his fantastic travels in the Antipodes.

This is among the very best books I have ever read. However, I don't expect that everyone who reads this book will get as much from it as I did, at least not without deep contemplation and possibly some further research into the works of Emanuel Swedenborg (a key influence in the spiritual life of Gustav Uytterhoeven).

Elizabeth says

Magical. Magical.

Stephanie says

I had never heard of this book before my stepdaughter mailed it to her sister along with several other books she'd read. I am so glad I was introduced to the Chess Garden--it was wonderful. I'm not going to get into any spoiler details here, but let me say that I am blown away by Brooks Hansen's mind. The creativity that went into this novel is just amazing--it is, after all, a tale heavy on fantasy. But it also qualifies as historical fiction, as a good percentage of the novel is set in turn-of-the-century Europe (Holland and Germany) and South Africa during the Boer Wars. Hansen manages to also create very believable, compelling characters in some clearly impossible situations. This is one of those novels that I didn't want to end. Love, love, love it.

Jim Maher says

An unusual novel. It's a fictional biography, an allegory of ten tales, a spiritual discourse, an end-of-life reflection, and a love story.

To me, it was unutterably sad.

Mind you, it IS well written. The voice is slightly archaic, befitting its setting in the late 19th century. The style is suitably moderate and well-paced for a work that could be presented as a spoken narrative. Quite descriptive prose paints clear images for the reader, but seldom overwhelms the storyline.

Of course, it is the characterization that sparks the emotional content. As a reader, I instantly identified with the protagonist, and found myself increasingly unable to break that binding tie. But I wanted to. The hero's perspective of remembrance, for me, engendered an uncomfortable melancholy, nearly to the point of regret. His philosophical development seemed too familiar; but here it is articulated, and that is unsettling.

I usually inhale books whole, especially novels. This one was consumed in bite-sized vignettes, over a five week period, chewing just a little at each sitting.

I will never re-read this, but it will live with me daily. I will never forget it.

refgoddess says

This is one of my great finds. Part fantasy, part family saga, part history of medicine, part religious awakening (Swedenborg-style), it is a compelling read. The descriptions and stories of the Antipodes Island of Games are fabulous, from the random tumbling of the dice to the lusciously gorgeous candletree, to the discovery of the Goods and the creation of Totem....it's a world that beats Oz for sheer imaginative virtuosity. And the writing is much deeper, of course. I find the representation of Swedenborg's philosophy to be convincingly persuasive, and the sense of time and place is perfect. I learn my history and religion best through fiction, and this is the perfect vehicle. I discovered it on the new book shelf in 1996, and have been re-reading it ever since. I find myself quoting it whenever deep thinking is happening, which is why I've pulled it out yet again. It makes a nice break from Morrison-Reed and Wallis' intense memoirs, but it keeps up a sort of connection with the musing they evoke.

Nathalie says

Don't put this book down!! You won't see it at first, but It is truely a beautiful novel layered with characters, meaning, expertise and perspectives.

I SAW THE MAGIFICIENCE OF THE BOOK WHEN I REALIZED :

1. the author has amazing command of the story and unveils it at his pace. It may not be the time for you to get it.
2. Moments, insights and parallels are subtle. they wont bang you over the head but suddenly you'll see something in a new way or on another level.
3. The last 19 pages put it all in perspective. Just when you think you not figured it out, you realize "it" is not a clear thing. I would describe the book as layers of stories and plots that express a mans life. almost a eulogy about a man told through the evolution of the things that mattered to him - love, faith, community. science and chess.

MY EXPERIENCE OF READING IT:

I'd been looking forward to reading this for a while now as I love magical realism like 100 years of solitude and everything is illuminated. I expected to be wowed and "get it" within the first 150 pages. i saw hints of parallels, metaphors of deeper meaning, but they were fleeting. I couldn't quite put them together and the imaginative stories from the letters were beautiful images the author painted, but at first I was disappointed. As i got more insight into his life, a was more Intrigued but still not much further in determining what the author's intentions were for me. And I didn't get the whole chess thing and didn't like that it was set with chess piece. But I read on.

I'd say around page 250 I got my first aha. Very subtly written, I was beginning to see something new and elegant but still couldn't grasp the whole. And I wondered how many other clues did I (or will I miss).

The 'aha' moments become increasingly request as you get to the end , like layers being taken away. by the last 20 pages I was a part of it and could see the artistry and restraint of the writing. I know there is more beauty in it that I missed and will one day re-read it. But a bigger idea came through at the end and it wasn't some epic 'aha' but instead so... Human...

. This book accomplished effortlessly what others work too hard to be - touching, personal,imaginative, unique and complex.

Velvetink says

In Ohio at the turn of this century, the wife of Dr Uytterhoeven receives a series of strange letters from her husband, who reports being shipwrecked on his way to South Africa, and landing in a fantastical country inhabited by chess pieces, dominoes and dice.

Intercut with these letters, the story of his life unfolds: his youth and marriage in Holland, his troubled scientific career in Berlin, the genesis of his unusual philosophy and of the chess garden. History and allegory are expertly interwoven in this tale of spiritual progress, a novel of dazzling imagination.

A wonderfully bewitching compendium of stories told in a lucid prose that is free of any stylistic gimmickry. A highly absorbing and endlessly inventive antipodean adventure.

*note to self. Copy from A.

Shelton TRL says

This book reminded me of Th Wizard of Oz books, as well as Wicked by Gregory MaGuire. It is a fascinating study of how a sensitive physician copes with the horrors he experiences in wartime, by use of his love of chess.

"In the fall of 1900, Dr. Gustav Uytterhoeven left the chess garden that he and his wife, Sonja, had created together in Dayton, Ohio, and journeyed to South Africa to serve as a doctor in the British concentration camps of the Boer War. Over the next ten months he sent twelve chess pieces and twelve letters back to Sonja. She set out her husband's gifts as they arrived and welcomed all the most faithful guests of the garden to come and hear what he had written - letters which told nothing of his experience of the camps but described an imagined land called the Antipodes, where all the game pieces that cluttered the sets and drawers of the garden collection came to life to guide the doctor through his fateful and wondrous last adventure. Brooks Hansen offers a tale of spiritual progress disguised in the most exotic visions of the imagination. And yet The Chess Garden encompasses a very real world, too. Alongside the doctor's visions

of the Antipodes, the story of his life gradually unfolds as well. History and allegory are expertly woven until finally both lead back to the chess garden itself, a place where ideas give way to vision, reason meets faith, and fact and figment are finally reconciled."

Joshua says

Another great book. It has some sad overtones, but uniquely explains Platonic philosophy using the imaginative land of The Antipodes. Again, all of the interesting characters are pieces from different kinds of chess sets. I thoroughly enjoyed this book.
