



An Episode of Sparrows

Rumer Godden

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A much-loved English novel reminiscent of *The Secret Garden*

Someone has dug up the private garden in the square and taken buckets of dirt, and Miss Angela Chesney of the Garden Committee is sure that a gang of boys from run-down Catford Street must be to blame. But Angela's sister Olivia isn't so sure. Olivia wonders why the neighborhood children—the “sparrows” she sometimes watches from the window of her house —have to be locked out of the garden. Don't they have a right to enjoy the place, too? But neither Angela nor Olivia has any idea what sent the neighborhood waif Lovejoy Mason and her few friends in search of “good, garden earth.” Still less do they imagine where their investigation of the incident will lead them—to a struggling restaurant, a bombed-out church, and at the heart of it all, a hidden garden.

An Episode of Sparrows Details

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Author : Rumer Godden

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From Reader Review An Episode of Sparrows for online ebook

Elizabeth says

I read this book very early in my writing career and loved the way the author moved through time. "As Jenny was to find out later...." was a sentence I never forgot. Sets the narrator apart from the character in one way, but draws the reader in. It's as if the author is whispering secrets in the reader's ear, but never with malicious intent. I love authors who love their characters, despite their faults, and Rumer Godden always does.

Theresa says

When my daughters and I found a used bookstore in an out of the way village, I picked up a few of Rumer Godden's hardcovers. Now I wish I had gotten all of her titles!

"An Episode of Sparrows" is just one episode in the aftermath of the London bombing from the life of a young child, Lovejoy Mason, that will eventually have a huge impact upon Olivia, an older woman living in her sister Angela's shadow. If put in simple terms, this novel is about Lovejoy's wish to have a garden of her own, but this novel is anything but simple. Drawing the reader into the everyday lives of London characters, "An Episode of Sparrows" examines human pretensions, survival, resilience, law and order and what constitutes real compassion versus true justice, and whether we are going to live as an 'Angela' or an 'Olivia'.

Lovejoy comes across a packet of seeds, and her imagination is sparked.

"I want a garden," said Lovejoy. If she had wanted the moon or a diamond tiara it would have been as easy to get in Catford Street."

Aided by Tip Malone, a street gang boy, she finds a small place behind a bombed church that is almost inaccessible to the public and totally private. But how to get the necessary materials, a spade (small trowel), a digging fork, and seeds? Because Lovejoy for all intents and purposes seems to have been abandoned by her mother and given into the care of her landlady, Mrs. Combie.

"It was queer to think of people in Catford Street owning gardens. Lovejoy had lived there all these years but she had not seen what she saw now, the flowers – but they must always have been there, thought Lovejoy. Now, in almost every window, she saw pots with plants growing in them; pots of red and pink flowers, of yellow ones, daffodils – she knew them – and hyacinths, as well as green things, ferns, palms, rubber plants; Sparkey's mother grew fuchsias in her flat window."

Growing up in the streets of London has, if nothing else, made Lovejoy resilient, tough and creative. With Tip to help her and Sparkey, a small hero-worshipper of Tip's, Lovejoy begins the difficult task of fulfilling her dream.

What a poignant story. I wanted to take Lovejoy in, give her new dresses and shoes and a new coat (she has grown out of her clothes and the written pleas to her absent mother garner no help). I wanted to give Lovejoy's mother a good scolding (at the very least), and buy a gardening apron, tools and flats of pansies for Lovejoy. I wanted to send customers to Vincent's restaurant. Vincent who is kind to Lovejoy and takes her for Sunday walks, is struggling and fighting his own battles to subsidize his restaurant. I wanted to

encourage Olivia to stand up to her (bossy) sister Angela, and I wanted to slap Cassie!

"It's not old fashioned to say God is good. Remember, not one sparrow can fall to the ground –"

"But they fall all the time," said Olivia. "We knock them down. We knock them, crush them – carelessly or carefully, it doesn't matter which, and they fall. That's what humans do to humans, so don't talk to me about God."

I had initially read "Kingfishers Catch Fire" by Godden and enjoyed it but it didn't have the impact this book had.

Ali says

I have seen An Episode of Sparrows referred to as a young adult or even a children's book, although Wikipedia lists it in amongst Rumer Godden's adult novels, and having read it I think it fits there more comfortably. To me it certainly doesn't read as a children's book (although nothing in the content would preclude a child reading it) but more, as a book for adults about children. As such it was chosen by the Librarything Virago group as one of the books for the childhood section of the Seven Ages of Women theme read. Rumer Godden's depiction of children and childhood is particularly good as I have found in other novels by her. She understands acutely the heartbreaks and frustrations of children, how so often adults misunderstand them, and let them down.

Full review: <https://heavenali.wordpress.com/2015/...>

Hana says

A deceptively simple story set in London in the early 1950s. "Mortimer Square, gracious and imposing, with its big houses, stood, like many other London Squares, on the edge of a huddle of much poorer streets." Catford Street is the one that quiet, reflective Olivia Chesney thinks about as she gazes out of her window, comparing the quiet square with the bustling life on the nearest of the poorer streets.

"It was always Catford Street she saw in contrast to the square...but nowadays neither was as rich or poor as Olivia thought. The Square had gone down, its big houses were mostly divided into flats....while the poor streets had come up; Catford Street though drab and shabby with children playing in the street, an open air market at the river end on Saturdays, and the Canal Works behind it, was proud and respectable. That did not prevent those same children from being a small plague in the Square."

Olivia lives in the shadow of her endlessly energetic sister, Angela--*de facto*, albeit self-appointed, ruler of the Square and the Square's garden committee.

The worlds of Catford Street and the Square begin to intersect when one neglected but feisty little girl named Lovejoy steals a packet of cornflower seeds and becomes determined to plant a garden in a bombed out lot on Catford Street. Lovejoy makes garden plans and finds allies among the children and grownups of Catford Street and gradually, through her eyes, we learn the dreams and struggles of life in this little neighborhood.

There are so many wonderful characters--a whole glorious world of them. The adults: Mr. Isbister, the taciturn old man who lives in a basement flat and grows sweet peas; Mrs. Cleary and Miss Arnot who keep feral cats happy on fish heads; Father Lambert, pastor of Our Lady of Sion, who knows how to really *see*; and Vincent Combie, the chef who dreams of bringing fine Italian cuisine to Catford Street and knows how to listen and to hope.

And then there are the children, each with a distinctive voice and personality--something few authors can do well. Little Sparkey, who hero-worships the boy-gangs who play in the bomb rubble; Tip Malone, the boy-gang leader who befriends Lovejoy; and Lovjoy herself whose cocky attitude and pride cover longing for a mother who has abandoned her.

The story is full of life and humor, small miracles and sudden tears and--when the world of Catford Street collides with the world of the Square and the formidable Angela--the story grows dark with potential tragedy. Then, in the story's final act, quiet, perennially overlooked Olivia becomes a catalyst.

Content rating G: a clean read.

Mary says

What a lovely book.

Lovejoy finds some seeds which she sows in the bombed ruins of post war London.

The gang destroy it but Lovejoy finds the ruins of a church where she then grows her garden with the help of Tip and Sparkey.

Beautifully written and reminds me of The Secret Garden.

Thannasset says

What I learned from this book--how very much can be said, how much 'mood' conveyed, without overwriting. This author will never look as if she was paid by the word. I found most of her stories moving, well-written, true to the era and culture they were set in. She sometimes has her books classified as children's books because she often writes about children...which just gives me one more reason to hate categorizing books as children's books.

This was the first book I read by Rumer Godden. The best was probably Thursday's Children--I'll have to go find that ISBN so I can get it on the site.

Andrew Smith says

I read An Episode of Sparrows when I was a child growing up in post-World War II Liverpool. It was first published in 1955 when I was eight-years-old. It's said you can't go back, but I'm convinced this book is as good as I remember it. I've ordered a copy and look forward to immersing myself in it as I did as the ten-year-old searching for a bright future among the bomb sites and food shortages of post-war U.K.

AFTER RE-READING

I couldn't have been more than ten-years-old when I first read 'An Episode of Sparrows', but I remembered with great fondness the feisty waif, Lovejoy, and her gargantuan efforts to make a secret flower garden in a hidden corner of a London bombsite in a downtrodden section of the British capital. I remembered her temporary guardian, Vincent, with his impractical ideas of running a "first-class restaurant" and his epic struggles to prevent it from sinking into bankruptcy in an area where people could barely afford a few pence to buy fish and chips wrapped in newspaper let alone pay for a three-course French dinner. I remembered the two wealthy unmarried sisters who lived in the posh square that lay at the border of Lovejoy's working-class neighbourhood. I remembered the clash of class and culture when the sisters' and Lovejoy's worlds collided. But I hadn't remembered the subtle sophistication of ideas flying off the pages concerning morality, religion, entrepreneurship, and social responsibility. Like all good novels — written for readers of any age — those issues are understated. I certainly can't remember being conscious of them as a ten-year-old. However, like any effective work of fiction, those underlying issues and ideas must certainly have made an impression. I obviously can't know for sure, but I couldn't help feeling as I re-read 'An Episode of Sparrows' some fifty years later that the book must have had a profound effect on me. I recognized in Rumer Godden's story my own abomination of class discrimination in any form and a derring-do style of determination that sometimes misfires and/or backfires. I think I must have related very closely to the children in the book because I was reminded of the misery of growing up poor, However I was also reminded of moments of intense joy in small events that made life seem not only worthwhile but wonderful.

Apart from lucid realism coupled with a sophistication of ideas in 'An Episode of Sparrows,' the book has a suspenseful plot that sweeps the reader along. Every one of the disparate characters is finely drawn, and the descriptions of post-war London — from rubble strewn bombed-out houses to the sparkling exclusive shops of Bond Street — bring the 1950s city vividly to life. The book is also a lesson in excellent writing, including vocabulary that might challenge some adults. Although written for children, 'An Episode of Sparrows' makes for an engaging and thought-provoking experience for everyone.

Margaret says

I do love Rumer Godden and wish she were better known. I hadn't read this before and was charmed by it: a lovely secret garden novel set in London, with spot-on characterization.

Preeta says

Even though this is classified as a children's book here -- and even though Rumer Godden is primarily known as a children's author (I don't know how popular she is in the States but Celeste had read her) -- I think this is actually a book *about* children that isn't intended *for* children. Not that there's anything racy in it, but it's much, much more subtle than her children's books (which I also love). Some people might find this a bit saccharine, but if you want to read a beautifully written but still very uplifting (eek -- I don't usually use that word!) novel peopled by very real children, here it is.

Julie Durnell says

I really did enjoy this book, although Lovejoy was quite unlovable for the most part. I do believe she was her

own worst enemy. Her life was extraordinarily hard and she tried to make things beautiful in her small world, she was determined and that saw her through many scrapes. Her friend Tip was endearing as he became so important to her, her life-line. Miss Olivia who saw these poor children as sparrows was a wise woman who needed to speak out for herself and stand up to her sister sooner.

booklady says

Whenever I read a book by Rumer Godden I'm reminded why I like her so much. She writes about ordinary life with the insight of a mystic. Her novels are the fictional counterpart of Caryll Houselander's inspirational prose.

An Episode for Sparrows took me a couple of tries to get into but I blame that on me rather than the book. I was mentally distracted at the time.

Sparrows may well be my favorite by Godden. It certainly contains one of the most memorable anti-heroines ever, impossible little Lovejoy, ironically named because she is unloved and without joy. Yet she is passionate and utterly endearing.

As her devoted Reader Lovejoy captured my heart as was undoubtedly Godden's intent. Perhaps I should qualify my statement about Lovejoy too. She has been left by her mother with a Mrs. Combie and her horrid sister, Cassie. Yet Mrs. Combie is not without *some* concern for her young charge, although the interest tends more toward economic than filial. Mrs. Combie's flighty husband, George/Vincent (which *is* real name?)—who leaves us constantly wondering at his sanity—a sometime restaurateur, shows the most genuine affection for Lovejoy but who knows if this is a good thing?

Some of the rest of the cast include: the spinster sisters, Angela and Olivia; the ever vigilant Sparkey (who watches everything happening on Catford Street) and his mother; Tip Malone and the large family of Irish Malones and Father Lambert, the local pastor. Tip also befriends Lovejoy, an even more unlikely association, yet how can this friendship do either miscreant any good, especially since their motives are at such cross-purposes?

The 'sparrows' in the title refer to the street children. As the story opens some 'earth' has been stolen. Can one 'steal' 'earth'? Well yes, if by 'earth' you mean the soil from the village green. The suspects are the village urchins or children. The Misses Angela and Olivia refer to the street children as 'sparrows' but mean very different things in their use of the term. To Miss Angela it is derogatory. When Miss Olivia thinks of it, she means as it is used by Jesus; each sparrow that falls to the earth is precious in the eyes of the Lord.

Rumer has done it again. The characters are vivid and real. The strength of the plot is its simplicity. Her *An Episode for Sparrows* will stay with me. It has been a long time since I have enjoyed a story this much! I'd give it 5.5 stars if I could.

An added bonus was learning how Godden was inspired to write the story. It came about due to a minor misfortune in her own life, which is always one of the best inspirations. Oh! Then there is the significance of the cover, which is Lovejoy, of course. The full meaning will only be revealed if you read the story.

Nancy says

I would have said that I'm not sure that this is really a children's book. I did read it as a child, though, and really loved it. The main plot is about a young girl growing up in post-Blitz London, who almost by chance, decides to make a garden in one of the bombed-out sections in her neighborhood. There are a few other subplots, but the book's theme is that of making something beautiful out of imperfect beginnings. One of my favorite books ever.

Jeanette says

This was a reread. It's a simple and yet deeply described tale of just post-WWII London's children in the ruins. Such a difference between "trouble" for urban kids now to then. It's similar to The Secret Garden and it would be a delightful youth read, IMHO.

Starry says

This is a gritty, post-WW2 version of The Secret Garden. It deals with tough social issues, like abandoned children, mothers who sleep around, and gangs -- so may not be appropriate for some younger children (under 12 years old?).

The story centers on the residents of a neighborhood in London. Following WW2, the rich people on the square no longer have an iron fence to "protect" their lovely garden from the poor children. The poor children play in the street and in the rubble of bomb ruins where buildings were destroyed and have not been replaced.

Lovejoy Mason, a young girl left in the care of a poor restauranteur and his wife while her mother follows a stage career, is tough. She steals when she doesn't get what she wants, and she only cares about her distant mother and herself. However, after grabbing a fallen pack of seeds from a sick little boy, Lovejoy discovers gardening and, over time, how to care about people as well as plants. Her life intersects with other neighbors -- rich and poor alike -- and they all are changed.

Rumer Godden not only has a great name but also has a beautiful writing style. I love that this book, unlike Secret Garden (but like many post-WW2 books), does not have a sickly sweet all-better fairytale ending. People die, gardens are bulldozed, dreams end in disaster, kids get hurt -- and yet goodness prevails in a way that makes you feel more as if you grew up while hearing the story than that you got a quick, artificial fix.

kp says

I read and loved this book when I was thirteen, and picked it up again because my daughter is reading it. I loved it even more this time. It's a wry, compassionate, and wholly beautiful book that uses a seemingly

simple "episode" (a desire for a garden) to explore the beauty of hope in environments hostile to the imagination and the potential that human relationships have when we set aside our prejudices and open ourselves to each other.
