



The Magnificent Spinster

May Sarton

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The “magnificent spinster” is Jane Reid, a teacher who became not only a revered role model but a dear friend to Cam, the narrator of this novel within a novel. After Jane’s death, the accidental discovery of poems written by Cam in her youth to Jane prompts a flood of recollections—and frees Cam to imagine in fiction Jane’s passionately vibrant life.

The Magnificent Spinster Details

Date : Published February 17th 1988 by W. W. Norton Company (first published 1985)

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Author : May Sarton

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From Reader Review The Magnificent Spinster for online ebook

Carol says

The Hook - It' hard to remember exactly but I think The Magnificent Spinster by May Sarton is a favorite of Thomas Otto, one half of the podcast team at The Readers. I believe he recommended this at Booktopia Petoskey 2015. I promised myself I would read it and I finally have.

The Line(s) - "Alzheimers! And really, "she went on half to herself, "one trouble with all the statistics and all the generalities is that old age is as singular an experience for each person as childhood is. "

The Sinker - Turn back the hands of time, find a comfy chair and let this story take you back to another era. Originally published in the mid-eighties, it seems somehow older, a book of times and mores passed. Cam, the narrator tells us quite early that she wished to write a memoir about her former teacher and now dear friend, Jane Reid but that wasn't going to work. Cam decides instead to tell Jane Reid's life story through fiction, allowing her more license with the telling. Cam claims it will be Jane's story but to tell it she must include her own story too, so as to give it perspective. Though she tries hard to keep herself as a low-key character, Cam becomes as much a protagonist as is Jane.

I knew nothing about Sarton other than her name before reading The Magnificent Spinster. Born in Belgium in 1912, the unrest of the First World War brought her to our shores (Boston) in 1915. This explains her knowledge and ability to bring to life Cambridge and its surrounding environs.

The Magnificent Spinster is a story of the full life of these two women, Jane and Cam, their friendship, romantic attachments, passions, birth and death, joys and sorrows, love and loss. It does justice to Cam's intent to write an accounting of her friend's life. I can't help think some of this is autobiographical. Lovely language and a gentle read.

Tiah says

– It is odd that, on the whole, novelists speak little of friendship between opposite sexes, and especially these days, when sexual encounters dominate everything else in most fictional characters. –

– She made me see that my tendency to talk a lot in class sometimes prevented shyer students from contributing. –

– Anger is so close to grief. –

– What I could not know was that death brings with it a thousand errands and responsibilities, and the bereaved are too busy to mourn or even to think. –

– A funeral is after all a ritual that takes place in the theatre of a church. –

Carol says

A fictional biography of a fictional woman narrated by a fictional long time friend. On the one hand, the characters are not complex enough to be real. On the other hand, it is real enough to remind me of people I have known: Women born at the beginning of the 20th century who are strong and gentle and centered in their human values, having lived through 2 world wars, woman's suffrage, the great depression, and the technology revolution.... Women of that era had a quality which is difficult to find anymore. Also of some younger women who have an overflowing love of life and people which transcends romantic love.

Kate says

I won this book from the lovely Thomas of The Readers while we were attending Booktopia Petoskey. It is a quiet, beautiful story of a life, that of a woman who chose service to others over her own needs. Told as a novel by one of her former students, we see Jane Reed's life from her privileged childhood, through her career as a teacher, then as a volunteer in post World War II Germany and finally as an older person, enjoying her family and her summer home. Throughout, May Sarton writes of a life filled with purpose and love for all those drawn into her orbit. While Jane sees herself as an ordinary person, those who are privileged to know her understand how special and generous Jane is and what she means to others. It is a book about the mid twentieth century, and I feel like there are less magnificent spinsters around today, it was nonetheless a very enjoyable, worthwhile read.

Karen Klein says

Enjoyable read for the most part. Cam has just come from the funeral of one of her oldest and dearest friends, Jane Reid. As she thinks about Jane and her life she becomes sad, knowing that no one will know about the extraordinary life that Jane Reid led. Cam now feels compelled to write Jane's biography so that the world will know how wonderful her friend truly was. She realizes that there are big chunks of Jane's life that she knows nothing about. She begins to seek out old friends and acquaintances that she thinks can help. Some provide helpful information, others not so much so Cam just fabricates the parts that she has no knowledge of.

As she's writing this biography she begins to realize that she is also writing her autobiography. She's not happy about that but realizes that it must be included because it's part of Jane's life.

It's a good read and nicely written. There are some parts where it got a little slow going so I just skimmed over those, didn't really lose anything from the plot either.

Mystica says

I am indebted to the blogger who introduced this author to me and for the life of me I cannot remember who it was. Thank you.

I loved the style of writing of this wonderful story. A memoir of a life but first starting at seventy and then going back to seventh grade and then gradually unraveling a life which was so full of vitality, energy, love and kindness that I felt totally inadequate at the end of the story feeling very much so that I have not done enough with my life!

Cam is our narrator and she does a wonderful job of detailing Jane Reid's life from the time of an idyllic childhood, one of five sisters and two loving parents, a nanny who was a surrogate mother to Jane and then detailing her school life, her holidays, her eventual growing up and rebelling by deciding to join the college of her choice, and not one deemed fit by her parents (at that time considered very unusual). Her final choice of career as a teacher and then joining the Warren School which became a lifetime commitment and her work with the oppressed, black community in Cambridge itself, her work with orphans in France and finally her decision very late in life to go back to Germany to work for people there were all trail blazing. For a young woman who was almost the closest you could get to American aristocracy - Jane Reid was different and you wanted to get to know more and more about this most generous hearted, simple woman.

Brilliantly written, this is only partly a memoir and part a recollection of a life wonderfully lived and beautifully narrated.

Kerry says

I really enjoy reading May Sarton. She has such a way of making her characters feel like they are people you know or want to know. The privileged Cambridge location of this book is the back drop for a memoir, if you will, of a woman who devotes her life to giving to others. The giving of herself and her resources are done so beautifully as to make you think about all the 'random acts of kindness' you could be doing. Smile. In the background is the very interesting dynamic of the women from Vassar. For a novel in 1985 to be primarily about women's relationships is not in and of itself unusual it's the unspoken way and undercurrent of the book that makes you say 'hum'. Lot's to learn from this book and one I plan to revisit for inspiration.

Leaflet says

I picked this one off the freebie shelf at the library. I don't know what to think of this book...there were parts I liked very well and some parts seemed rambling and pointless. Is it fiction? Biography? Biographical fiction? It's an odd book. Though I liked the emphasis on the strength of lifelong friendships, I have to say I was getting pretty weary of reading how wonderful Jane Reid was by the time I reached the end. I do give the author half a point though for mentioning The Hobbit a couple of times.

Mary Etta says

From my Bozeman book group.

A story within a story.

Some quotes:

"There is always a discrepancy between what we see of a person, especially one at a certain distance, and what has been actually happening to that person."

". . . How much planning went into life that seemed to saunter along unplanned! Somewhere Jung has noted: 'We must not forget that only a very few people are artists in life; that the art of life is the most distinguished and rarest of all the arts. Whoever succeeded in draining the whole cup with grace.'

Mandy says

The magnificent spinster of the title is Jane Reid, a paragon of all the virtues who receives adulation from all who know her. The story of her life is narrated by her devoted friend Cam who reflects on the influence Jane had on so many other people. There's a lot to enjoy about this biographical novel as it paints a portrait of a group of women who survive very well without men. Many of them are lesbians but not all, and more than romantic attachment the driving force of their lives is friendship – and independence. Covering a period from the late 1890s onwards, this is a time when women weren't supposed to be independent and it's intriguing to read about these particular women who go on to get an education and careers and happily forgo marriage and families. It's an often tender tale of love and friendship but oh my, I did get fed-up with the virtuous Jane. Enough with the goodness already – could anyone really be that perfect? The book meanders and rambles and repeats itself rather too much but as an early feminist text it has a lot going for it. I just wish Jane hadn't been quite so irritatingly wonderful.

Kim says

If I was pressed into a corner and HAD to pick a favorite book, this would be it. Maine and Massachusetts, teachers, living full while being single, lasting influence... oh sigh!! I re-read it at least once a year when it calls to me.

Ruth says

The title is dumb, but it does tell you what the book is about...

Jane Reid is a wonderful, interesting woman who was Cam's, teacher in grade seven. Cam is now in her seventies, is attempting to write a novel about Jane's life. Jane was a mentor and friend to Cam, who just cannot imagine people not knowing her friend, and what an amazing person she was.

The story is actually a novel within a novel, Cam's telling about her quest to write the story, and the story itself. Jane is very very rich, but she is a dedicated teacher who, like most teachers, works long hours. She also spends time helping European refugees, and running the family vacation compound on an island in Maine...

Cam's own story is compelling as well. She becomes a teacher herself, and has a loving partnership with a woman named Ruth, who dies early on. I have read enough Sarton to know she resists the lesbian angle in general, finding it too limiting. So, Cam does not delve into Jane's intimate friendships with women, but this

is counter balanced by the quiet honesty of her own relationship.

I am a Sarton fan, so am indulgent, but admit there is a sloppiness, a lack of focus or rigor that made things a bit rambling in this book. Still, it has a positive and open-hearted celebration of women. Women who teach, mothers who work full time teaching, aunts and sisters. Women who follow the news, women who build houses. I am going on a mini vacation soon, and am going to read more of Ms. Sarton, I will keep you posted.

Russell says

see my review and inkandpaperblog.com

Maryjoamani says

I love May Sarton but my goodness, she missed the boat on this one. A biography with no subtlety or insight--and it all seems to be pointing toward her. Pedantic and repetitive. Oh well. I don't recommend this one unless you are an aficionado and want to learn more about Sarton by her attempt to write an autobiography with poor concealments. There is sweetness in the book--her one dimensional characterization of female friends does shed some light on the times (pre and post WWI and II) that provide some insight into the difficult choices women made regarding work and relationships.

Jean Sheldon says

Nearly every Sarton book offers memorable characters, *The Magnificent Spinster* is no exception. Simple yet elegant writing, enduring characters, and a story well told—for me, it doesn't get much better.
