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ELIZABETH STODDARD

*The Morgesons*

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*Elizabeth Stoddard, Lawrence Buell (Introduction)*

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## **The Morgesons** Elizabeth Stoddard , Lawrence Buell (Introduction)

Elizabeth Stoddard combines the narrative style of the popular nineteenth-century male-centered bildungsroman with the conventions of women's romantic fiction in this revolutionary exploration of the conflict between a woman's instinct, passion, and will, and the social taboos, family allegiances, and traditional New England restraint that inhibit her. Set in a small seaport town (1862), *The Morgesons* is the dramatic story of Cassandra Morgeson's fight against social and religious norms in a quest for sexual, spiritual, and economic autonomy. An indomitable heroine, Cassandra not only achieves an equal and complete love with her husband and ownership of her family's property, but also masters the skills and accomplishments expected of women. Counterpointed with the stultified lives of her aunt, mother, and sister, Cassandra's success is a striking and radical affirmation of women's power to shape their own destinies. Embodying the convergence of the melodrama and sexual undercurrents of gothic romance and Victorian social realism, **The Morgesons** marks an important transition in the development of the novel and evoked comparisons during Stoddard's lifetime with such masters as Balzac, Tolstoy, Eliot, the Brontes, and Hawthorne.

## **The Morgesons Details**

Date : Published September 1st 1997 by Penguin Classics (first published 1862)

ISBN : 9780140436518

Author : Elizabeth Stoddard , Lawrence Buell (Introduction)

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## From Reader Review The Morgesons for online ebook

### Dana Loo says

Una sorpresa questo romanzo della letteratura americana caduto nell'oblio per più di 100 anni. Uno stile narrativo assolutamente moderno, originale, poetico, surreale, con una forte personalità, come quella della sua autrice, difficile da classificare o incasellare.

Romanzo di formazione ricco di simbolismi (gli specchi, il mare) narra la storia di Cassandra, una giovane donna che già dalla prima infanzia si distingue per un forte desiderio di conoscenza e ricerca di sé; una ragazzina irrequieta, istintiva, conscia della propria diversità, in rapporto alla mentalità e ai comportamenti delle altre figure femminile che la circondano, e del desiderio di auto definirsi in una società che vede statica e quindi molto in contrasto con la sua personalità alquanto dinamica. Sicuramente non di facile lettura per via dello stile a tratti immaginifico, tocca anche diversi temi che ne fanno un romanzo "rivoluzionario": sessualità, possesso, ereditarietà, emancipazione femminile, rapporto genitore/figli che ti stupisce per l'attualità di certe considerazioni. Un viaggio di crescita attraverso esperienze, anche dolorose, che la formeranno...

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### Sarah says

A strange book, and one I'm surprised isn't more widely read. Not even 50 ratings on goodreads? It's definitely worthy of more attention.

I saw it compared to Bronte and Gaskell, and while it definitely has structural similarities to *Jane Eyre* and shares some of Gaskell's interests, it's also very American and of-Massachusetts.

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### kel says

This is a wonderful, strange, and radical novel. Enchanting and perplexing, yet full of little details that create a feeling akin to realism, especially for a modern reader, as Cassandra and her family almost seem to have been stolen from the future. I do not understand reviews calling it dull, for me it was riveting. However, as an older sister with a dissimilar younger sister and a penchant for acting out when I was younger, I perhaps related to the book more than the average reader would.

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### Zoey says

The Morgesons, probably one of the dullest books that I have ever read. Like most fiction of the period it was extremely hard going and lengthy. There isn't much excitement, and if I'm honest, I wasn't entirely sure that I wanted to carry on reading it. However, the social and historical significance of this novel cannot be ignored. As a reflection of early Nineteenth Century American society, it an extremely rebellious novel. Through the character of Cassandra, Stoddard contests many social concepts and values, most prominently

that of The Cult of True Womanhood and domesticity. It takes the form of a Female Bildungsroman, as the characters Cassandra and her sister Veronica come of age, they oppose and deflect the qualities that at the time were believed to be sacred and womanly. Women were considered to be pious and were supposed to be located within the home, or domestic sphere. However all of these ideals are contested in Stoddard's novel - giving the novel an eccentric and liberal air. It could, in fact be considered as one of the earliest Feminist writings. Not only are these important concepts contested, they are also explored through the character of Alice. Alice undoubtedly is the embodiment of the 'true woman', she is a devoted mother and though is a participant in a loveless marriage, she maintains her duties as a wife. However, Alice is portrayed as a sad, trapped character - which ultimately reflects Stoddard's own views on marriage and the domestic sphere. Though the novel itself is difficult, if a reader is interested in early feminism, the separate spheres and the role on women within the home, it is definitely worth the strive.

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### **Wanda says**

Free at Project Gutenberg-- <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/12347>

21 AUG 2015 - I am both intrigued and frustrated by this book. So much happens off-the-page. I wish we, the readers, were included in more of this action.

23 AUG 2015 - There are chapters where I feel as though I have somehow missed the point. I honestly put this to the style of writing Ms Stoddard chose for this novel. Her vague narrative style of writing (where we are told the story from Cassy's point of view yet are not informed of all the events in detail) is frustrating to me. I enjoy knowing all the dark secrets together with the day-to-day storytelling. How about you?

30 AUG 2015 - Done! While the writing style frustrated me to no-end, when I learned Ms Stoddard most likely intentionally wrote in this stilted narrative, I got past the style and enjoyed the read. Not a must-read; but, rather, read this as time allows and just go with it. More to follow.

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### **Sara says**

3.5 slightly confused stars.

This novel is a rarity, in that it is an American novel of the Victorian era written by a woman. It is full of New England whale-oil financed lifestyles, and paints a fascinating female perspective of the time.

In the beginning, it felt like this was destined to be just a group of vignettes of life as seen through the eyes of an upper-class girl, but it evolved into something much deeper than that. I could not shake the feeling, however, that there were too many things Stoddard wanted to say but felt she could not. Her attempts to lay things between the lines were sometimes successful and sometimes perplexing. I suffered several times from a feeling that I had missed some significant event, but a re-read of the chapter would offer no enlightenment.

I did find parallels to Jane Austen in the romantic aspects of the novel. There was so much that remained unsaid between men and women, and social standing and ancestral claims were such a huge influence on

which couples and families might be allowed to form alliances. The main heroine, Cassandra Morgeson, was a bit of a maverick, which was often distressing to the ladies and always appealing to the men; her sister Veronica was much harder to fathom for me. I don't think I have ever encountered a character (or a real person) who was quite like Veronica.

I did like Stoddard's writing style. Her story swept me along, and even when the plot seemed a bit thin in the beginning, the writing was gorgeous and the descriptive passages were enough to keep me interested.

One passage which I found very moving was this one:

*There were intervals now when all my grief for mother returned, and I sat in my darkened chamber, recalling with a sad persistence her gestures, her motions, the tones of her voice, through all my past remembrance. The places she inhabited, her opinions and her actions I commented on with a minuteness that allowed no detail to escape. When my thoughts turned from her, it seemed as if she were newly lost in the vast and wandering Universe of the Dead, which I had brought her.*

I have felt similar sentiments regarding my own mother, and the words had a great deal of impact for me.

I think that, had Stoddard been allowed a freer expression of her ideas, she might have written a four or even five star book. As it is, while I liked the book, enjoyed it and am happy to have read it, it missed something essential that I could not put an exact finger on. It was, in the end, a bit too nebulous in expression to suit me well.

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### **Kubra says**

I was looking for an untypical nineteenth century novel and *The Morgesons* satisfied me to a great degree. Especially the first half of the book, where a lot more action was happening, characters were quite unconventional and conversations witty. After that it gets a bit dull. As some reviewers mentioned, I felt like some important details were left nebulous. The end felt hurried. I can't make much of Desmond. Nevertheless, it was a fresh breath of air.

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### **Cheryl says**

It took me three attempts to finish reading this book. The writing style is not my favorite, but the story itself was interesting. It's a more modern take (for the time in which it was written) on following the life of a woman, from childhood to adulthood. I didn't always like the things that Cassie did, but she was always interesting to follow.

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### **Bettie? says**

Description: *Set in a small seaport town (1862), The Morgesons is the dramatic story of Cassandra Morgeson's fight against social and religious norms in a quest for sexual, spiritual, and economic autonomy. An indomitable heroine, Cassandra not only achieves an equal and complete love with her husband and*

*ownership of her family's property, but also masters the skills and accomplishments expected of women. Counterpointed with the stultified lives of her aunt, mother, and sister, Cassandra's success is a striking and radical affirmation of women's power to shape their own destinies.*

Opening: "That child," said my aunt Mercy, looking at me with indigo-colored eyes, "is possessed."

When my aunt said this I was climbing a chest of drawers, by its knobs, in order to reach the book-shelves above it, where my favorite work, "The Northern Regions," was kept, together with "Baxter's Saints' Rest," and other volumes of that sort, belonging to my mother; and those my father bought for his own reading, and which I liked, though I only caught a glimpse of their meaning by strenuous study. To this day Sheridan's Comedies, Sterne's Sentimental Journey, and Captain Cook's Voyages are so mixed up in my remembrance that I am still uncertain whether it was Sterne who ate baked dog with Maria, or Sheridan who wept over a dead ass in the Sandwich Islands.

After I had made a dash at and captured my book, I seated myself with difficulty on the edge of the chest of drawers, and was soon lost in an Esquimaux hut. Presently, in crossing my feet, my shoes, which were large, dropped on the painted floor with a loud noise. I looked at my aunt; her regards were still fixed upon me, but they did not interfere with her occupation of knitting; neither did they interrupt her habit of chewing cloves, flagroot, or grains of rice. If these articles were not at hand, she chewed a small chip.

Project Gutenberg

Librivox

I picked this edition because of that cover picture, however, I listened on Librivox and Peter Pointer-ed in unison on P Gutenberg.

Does anyone have any idea about that picture?

Not enough going for it, there was no style to identify. A child of its time when others of that era were plunging us ahead into exciting avenues. Next.

ETA: Peregrination over on Booklikes has identified this cover pic: **'A print of this painting has been hanging in my living for the past 40 years. It is a painting by the Spanish painter Joaquin Sorolla (1863-1923) done in 1909. It hangs in the Museo Sorolla in Madrid -- my all time favorite small art museum.'**

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## Matthew says

The Morgesons starts out great. Stoddard's writing blew me away and seemed to be right on the cusp of a Modernist voice. This enthusiasm lasted for around half of the book, though, and started to become flat after Cassandra returns home from Charles and Alice's house. The last half of the book is exhausting to read, not because it is difficult, but because Stoddard lost some of the magic that she started out with.

The Morgesons reminds me a lot of a Jane Austen book with its emphasis on familial and romantic ties, but Stoddard adds in a gothic tint every so often that gives the novel a much more American feel.

I really enjoyed reading the 1901 preface that this edition comes with. Often I have read or heard authors say that they find themselves returning to the towns of their youth. In that sense, The Morgesons becomes something more personal than it otherwise would have been.

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It's definitely worth reading, because the beginning is so good. I only wish that Stoddard had kept the ship sailing throughout the entire narrative.

### **John Gillespie says**

Upon learning that Stoddard was a contemporary of Hawthorne and Melville, I wondered, "Have I ever read a novel by an American woman of the nineteenth century?" I've read scores of novels by British women of the time, but, aside from Kate Chopin and Harriet Beecher Stowe, where are the works of their American sisters? If you have similar questions, I recommend Elizabeth Stoddard's *The Morgesons*.

A good book lingers in the imagination, and I suspect several scenes from *The Morgesons* will haunt me for some time. Neither the narrative nor the dialogue are straight forward, but it's more than its oblique style that compels; its heroine fascinates. During this bildungsroman, Cassandra reflects, "I concealed nothing, the desires and emotions which are usually kept as a private fund I displayed and exhausted. My audacity shocked those who possessed this fund. My candor was called anything but truthfulness" (59). Cassandra's story is best compared with the Romantic heroines of the Brontes. If such attract you, *The Morgesons* will be worth your time.

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### **Steph, The Academic-Errant says**

Visit me at my blog: <http://bookingthroughgradschool.wordpress.com>

5 out of 5 stars

FAVORITE QUOTES: "Even drawn battles bring their scars." OR "I became a devourer of books which I could not digest, and their influence located in my mind curious and inconsistent relations between facts and ideas."

FOR READERS WHO: enjoy first-person narratives, like the poetry of Emily Dickinson, want a more mature coming-of-age story to add to classics like *Pride and Prejudice* and *Jane Eyre*

REVIEW: If Emily Dickinson would have written a novel, that novel would have been *The Morgesons*. Okay, that may be a bit of an overstatement. However, Elizabeth Stoddard's novel should be far less obscure than it is today; the novel's prose has a grace and a strength of emotion that mirrors that of her contemporary,

Dickinson.

Like Pride and Prejudice and Jane Eyre, The Morgesons is a 19th century coming-of-age novel. Many readers discover Austen and Bronte's novels when they are still quite young and they cherish them throughout their lives. Re-reading them brings a kind of nostalgia for a world of youth, romance, and idealism. The Morgesons is a coming-of-age novel for a new stage of life, when things have become more...complicated than you thought things would ever be at 14 (that was the age when I first read Pride and Prejudice).

The novel is a first person narrative written in the voice of Cassandra (Cassy) Morgeson. She lives on a coastal town near Boston with her parents and her sister Veronica (Verry). As she grows, she is sent away to live in different towns, first with her grandfather, a pious tyrant of a man, then with her cousin and his wife, and then with high society in the novel's fictional counterpart of Salem.

Cassy is smart and rebellious, and she is intelligent enough to be aware of the limitations of social conventions and gender norms. Like the sea near the coast where she grew up, her soul longs to be free from restraint. Cassy as a character is likable. The character of her sister Verry is the hardest to understand and place within the context of the novel. Verry is meant to represent the opposite of Cassy; her personality is like the endless and unchanging pastures while Cassy's is the ever-volatile sea. I am still thinking about how to process Verry because she is, well, Verry (yep, that's a pun) strange.

Like Cassy, Stoddard pushed the boundaries of her era by writing a novel not only about a young woman's intellectual and emotional maturation, but also about her sexual awakening. Keep in mind, the novel was published in 1862, so today's readers might not immediately pick up on subtle sexual symbolism: appetite and the sea. However, writing about love, not just as marriage but as desire, is a significant milestone in women's writing.

**VERDICT:** This is not what I would call an "easy" novel. Does this mean that you shouldn't read it? No, it means you should read it. Its ambiguity makes you think and these are often the best kinds of novels. As readers, we are often too used to being told exactly what is happening: what the scene looked like, what a character was thinking, what his best friend ate for dinner that night. I sometimes wonder if this is one reason some of us like the world of books so much: the only thing we really have to guess is the ending. The Morgesons will keep you guessing and it will make you think--not only about the characters, but also about yourself--long after you have finished turning the pages.

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### **Becky says**

"That child," said my aunt Mercy, looking at me with indigo-colored eyes, "is possessed."

Have you heard of Elizabeth Stoddard? I hadn't either. Not until I stumbled across this book while looking for Steinbeck. In the introduction, it explains a bit why this author fell into obscurity although during her lifetime she was compared with such greats as Balzac, Tolstoy, Eliot, the Brontes, and Hawthorne. (If your library doesn't have a copy, you can read it online [here](#).)

Is it an exciting read? a thrilling one? Not really. Not by today's standards. It's about one girl, Cassandra "Cassy" growing up, coming to age. We follow her roughly from the age of ten to twenty. We see her in various environments and situations--home, visiting relatives for extended periods of time, school, courting,

etc. She's not an easy narrator to love. She's more abrasive than that. There seems to be friction, tension, strife in almost all of her relationships. Perhaps because her whole family is 'difficult' to get along with. Perhaps because she's stubborn and makes no apologies. She's not meek or mild.

As a reader, I was never sure of Cassy. If she was the one disconnecting from her family...or if maybe her family were the ones disconnecting from her. There never seemed to be a bond between family members. Not with her mother. Not with her sister. And only slightly with her father. And this slight bond is only because he allows his daughter to go off on all these adventures away from home to visit family and friends, etc. He also keeps her well dressed. So I never was sure if she genuinely loved her father. Or if she just seemed to like him best because he was the one who was able to grant her desires. There seems to be a harsh distance, an emotional barrier that prevents Cassy from genuinely loving and being loved. As I said, I'm not sure who is to blame for this.

Cassy seems to attract some strange men to her. Especially true in the case of her cousin, Charles. Though married, though a father, he seems to find Cassandra irresistible. And though it is never out and out revealed, this attraction is mutual. Cassy, still a teen, maybe fifteen or sixteen?, finds herself in love with her cousin, inappropriate as it may be. See, she's come to live with her cousin and his wife, Alice. She's with this seemingly 'happy' family for a little over a year. And his wife, Alice, is aware that there is something going on between the two. But she's so busy being a good and perfect wife and mother that she pretends she doesn't know or doesn't care. What strikes me is one scene where Charles returns home from a business trip, I believe, and gives Cassandra a diamond ring to wear on her third finger. I don't remember if "good" little Alice gets a present as well, and if so, what it might have been. But there's a distinctly creepy vibe from this family.

Other men in Cassy's life are a pair of brothers, Ben and Desmond Somers. Both alcoholics. (They come from one crazy family!) One marries Cassandra. One marries Cassandra's sister, Veronica. Only one sister will get her happily ever after ending. But which one? Can a 'bad' boy ever turn good and mean it?

Though Cassandra seems a bit of an unnatural heroine, I am glad to have read this one. (After all, Scarlett O'Hara is plenty unnatural!)

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### **Laura says**

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### **Ella Stettner says**

Oh my word, this book. Uggghhh. I just can't even. Like, what exactly was the point of it? I didn't care about any of the characters, and even thought it was only 250 pages, it dragged on and on and on and had very little plot. The characters were strange and the writing unexceptional. Probably the worst thing I've read this year. Just, no.

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