



Barren Ground

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Set in Virginia, this novel evokes the irony of change in the rural South. Dorinda Oakley is a passionate, intelligent, and independent young woman struggling to define herself.

Barren Ground Details

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Author : Ellen Glasgow

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From Reader Review Barren Ground for online ebook

Lindsey says

An ambitious (if overwrought) philosophical novel that asks the big question, How should we live our lives? We watch Dorinda Oakley embrace love and hope, then fall into existential despair, and then embrace a stoic and unforgiving life of hardship, only to have a big realization in the final three pages.

I imagine a lot of people would find this book intolerable: the constant philosophizing, the melodramatic voice, the repetition of themes, the heavy use of metaphor! But I thought it was lovely.

Reading some critical analysis of this novel, it seems there is a lot of disagreement over what Glasglow is trying to say. Is she a bitter, cynical woman who agrees with Dorinda's choice to shut herself off from love and affection? Did she think Southern economy forced a woman to choose between independence or love? Or is this book a sad and ironic look about the danger of putting dignity and the esteem of others above "happiness-hunting"? I think the latter.

Early in the book, when Dorinda falls in love with love, she has this realization: "All around her people were pretending that insignificant things were the only important things. The eternal gestures of milking and cooking, of sowing and reaping! ...all these persons whom she saw daily were engaged in this strange conspiracy of dissimulation. Not one of them had ever betrayed to her this hidden knowledge of life."

Then of course, she finds existential despair: "I'm dried up at the core, and yet, I've got to go on pretending that I'm alive, that I'm like other people." And next, her period of hard work and self-denial: "Hearts may be broken, men may live and die, but the cows must be milked!"

There are clues throughout, however, that the earliest realization may be the right one. And I think the fact that Glasglow was a Nietzsche fan negates the idea that she is celebrating materialism. Anyways, I'll definitely read more Glasglow.

BLRBrazil says

It's really a 3.5 for me; certainly much better than a standard 3 but not outstanding enough to fully justify a 4 on my scale.

The book is nicely written and will probably touch women of all ages a lot more deeply, since the theme is growing up in a woman's body and the thought processes that entails.

The context is rural Virginia, USA over a period that covers the late 19thC, early 20thC, WWI and the post-war period and the book provides a fascinating insight into the hard rural life of those times and the creeping advances in technology.

But most of all, this book is about character, the basic ingredients that seem to come so naturally to some, have to be worked at so hard by others and appear to elude others altogether.

I kept thinking that Richard Burch would suddenly reappear and bring Dorinda the love she so richly deserved, but there is no place for sentimentality in this book - it deals with real love, of the kind Jesus talked about. Although I confess that until the last few pages I feared Dorinda herself would miss that point, even though it is what had sustained her all through those 30+ years, both in the giving and the receiving.

It is a very profound description of the period (when the Civil War and slavery were still in people's

memories) and, although times are very different today, I think there are valuable lessons here for many to benefit by and gain inspiration from.

Ruth says

"a wonderful, if somewhat sombre, agrarian and, for Glasgow, feminist novel. It's a study of a farm girl who refuses to bow to her misfortunes and through the force of will establishes herself as a prosperous dairy farmer. It dramatized gifted women attempting to surmount the claustrophobic, traditional southern code of domesticity, piety, and dependence for women. Main character, Dorinda Oakley is "universal. She exists wherever a human has learned to live without joy, wherever the spirit of fortitude has triumphed over the sense of futility." -"character is fate" "Important literature has meaning which transcends its local origins." ? - "deals with a relationship between hero, nature, and lover that enables the mature hero to use her power over nature to punish an unsuitable mate. Dorinda Oakley loves Jason Greylock, a young doctor returned to the Virginia countryside to care for his alcoholic father. After she discovers that Jason has married another, Dorinda's self-determination grows. The green world ceases to be a retreat and becomes something to master. After a difficult period in New York City, Dorinda achieves a crucial green-world vision at a concert. She perceives the music and the Elizabeth County landscape as guides leading her down into her buried self, where she makes her decision to return to the land. Dorinda returns to her land, applies new methods of farming to the broomsedge, becomes economically independent, and buys all of Jason's property. At the denouement her relationship to nature prevails as the ultimate reality in her life." Annis Pratt w/some of my notes

Kathryn says

If you are looking for a Thomas Hardy-like read head straight to Ellen Glasgow..the detail, the characters, the story (ironic and sad like Hardy), it's all there and set in Virginia USA. I decided to read this book as the author was named a top favorite by Jonathan Yardley as he left the Washington Post after writing 3000 book reviews over 30 years. I didn't always agree with his reviews but this recommendation was no disappointment.

Here's his final column if you want to know more:

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinion...>

Laura says

What a magnificent novel by Ellen Glasgow.

This is the story of Dorinda Oakley's life in a Virginian farmland during the period of 1890 to 1920.

After a love disillusion case, she decides to move to a big city, and only by chance, she goes to New York City. The course of her life changes since then as a neurosurgeon and his wife show new directions that can take her own destination during her way back home.

Even with some mild traces of racism throughout her narrative, the author manages to captivate the reader

with the constant struggle for Dorinda's survival in the fields of Virginia.

Thanks Bettie and Wanda for this book's recommendation, I really loved so much this book.

K. A. O'Neil says

One of my favourite books ever.

Elizabeth Sulzby says

A hard, bleak read but very memorable. As an Alabamian and oft-times Virginian, I love all of Glasgow's books that I've read. I thought I had read them all but have come to realize that I haven't even read half of them. Glasgow is taught, I am told, in Womens Studies classes which is a real way to kill an author but hasn't done that to Flannery O'Connor or Eudora Welty. Maybe we'll have a "groundswell" for Glasgow from the literary cultures; I support that.

Laura says

Ugh. After 80 pages of character descriptions I don't feel like going forward. I mean, seriously: how long can you describe one girl walking down a road and how she wants a boyfriend, basically, with absolutely no plot and no connection between the reader and the character? Glasgow tells us all about how Dorinda looks, but we don't really know anything about her beyond that. And descriptions of her hair, skin, mouth, etc. abound as do descriptions of her family. Ironically, despite these plentiful descriptions of crisp winds and hair blowing and character-defining features (like a sad mouth and limp hair), Glasgow has yet to establish any true *character*; I know Dorinda has black hair and has the hots for the local boy, but I know nothing about who she is. And I would expect an author to get these ideas across at least within the first 100 pages! To me, this illustrates (in comparison) how brilliant an author like Edith Wharton was, who could tell us more about a character with a single word or action (and often inaction) than this novel attempts to do with plentiful character descriptions. In fact, I found many similarities between this novel and Edith Wharton's *Summer*; however, the reason *Summer* is a masterpiece and this book is dull is because of character. Charity fascinates us from the beginning because Wharton establishes conflict immediately; *Barren Ground* describes the land and the characters' looks before getting to any kind of conflict, and conflict is the basis for *any* story.

I have more meaningful books to read. I'll probably read this again when I'm more in the mood to trudge on despite any lack of pathos for 100 pages. Perhaps I'll like it better then (that seems to happen to me all the time). We'll see if I have to eat my words....

ALLEN says

If not for a quirk of local politics, it is unlikely that we fifteen-year-olds in Mrs. Riddle's high-school lit class

would have been exposed to Ellen Glasgow's novel BARREN GROUND. Published in 1925 but set a few years earlier, the novel relates the life of Dorinda Oakley, a poorish young woman from a traditionally poor region of Virginia, the Southside. Having lost her fickle fiance to a wealthier woman, Dorinda moves to New York City in order to make something of herself. This she eventually does, but the price is high. All this is told in a naturalistic style that does not omit the protagonist's own passion.

I could mention the extreme reaction that Dorinda has upon hearing her first symphony concert, but can't go into details here lest I introduce a spoiler. Suffice it to say that it was something even today's fifteen-year-olds might want to be kept from, but Ellen Glasgow was a Virginian, as were we, so politics trumped "good taste" and in this case, I was pleased. Given the resurgence of American women's literature over the past thirty years, BARREN GROUND has come back into its own, and that's good too, I think. It should be read.

In my opinion BARREN GROUND is under-read, and under-appreciated.

Barb Knierim says

Good, sad

Bettie? says

A girl in an orange-coloured shawl stood at the window of Pedlar's store and looked, through the falling snow, at the deserted road.

Hard-hearted Hannah really does knock the frills off Scarlett O'Hara. brilliant.

NB - There is a small amount of mild racism in this story that one could feel uncomfortable with but please bear in mind the vicinity and the times.

Jackie Law says

"The transparent flakes...diffused in their steady flight an impression of evanescence (vanquish like vapor) and unreality" (10).

"...insubstantial as a pattern of frost on the grass" (10).

"It was as if the secret spirit of the land had traced an image of the flat surface, glimmering, remote, unapproachable (10-11).

"I wonder if everything has a soul?" (11).

"The passing trains had been part of that unexpected miracle, the something different in the future, to which she looked ahead over the tedious stretch of the present... There was adventure in the silver-blue of the distance" (11-12).

"At twenty, her imagination was tinctured by the romanticism which make a woman fall in love with a religion or an idea" (12).

Her nature, starved for emotional realities..." (12).

"She recognized love with the infallible certainty of intuition" (13).

unreality about her surroundings... delicious trance of unreality, of elusiveness, made it more precious" (13).

prosaic marriage - dull, ordinary, unimaginative p. 19

"Her mind...miles away in an enclosed garden of wonder and delight...but some casual part of her was still occupying her familiar place and living her old meaningless life" (22).

were the trivial things, after all, the important ones? p. 23

luminous stillness, which was so much deeper than stillness, within her heart

"She was caught up she was possessed by that flying rapture - by simply emptying her mind of impressions, she could bring back all the piercing sweetness of surrender." p. 27

Rita says

Another good, tho' depressing, book by Glasgow about living in extreme isolation in rural Virginia in the early 1900s. I try to imagine my grandpa growing up there, tho' he was in a more fertile, more populated part of the state.

Ambition in a woman is one of the themes of the book.

Tho' probably Glasgow had extremely progressive views for her time, her generalizations sprinkled throughout the book about "the negro" are a reminder of the nearly totally segregated lives of the white and black communities. Sorry to say it may be, in many parts of the country, that not much has changed since then.

Greg Leatherman says

It's a solid character study, with a flawed central character (Dorinda Oakley), but don't expect anything uplifting. For example, check out these themes: the pathos of life is worse than the tragedy; time avenges all; hard work is the comfort of the lonely; fate is cruel; weakness is a vice; character is destiny; etc.

Glasgow crafts naturalist prose and is at ease with symbolism, so much that the characters become products

of the landscape. Barren Ground is a metaphor as well as a description . . .

It is worth noting that one of Dorinda's flaws is her simplistic view of the descendants of slaves whom she employs. It may be an accurate representation of the time, but I had to remind myself that it is a character, not the author, thinking these prejudiced thoughts. Also, some of the inner monologue is tedious at times and the secondary characters range from archetypal (her mother and younger brother are pretty interesting), to animistic (Dorinda's view of men is that they are a mystery she can never understand), to thinly drawn (persons of color). This is a book about three things: the land, time, and Dorinda Oakley.

However, I still found Dorinda's story both compelling and believable. You can always picture her and understand why she reacts the way she does, which is no small feat. Insofar as the other characters serve this narrative, they work well. Overall, it was a good read and one I would recommend to anyone in search of a serious look at pre-WWI life in rural Virginia. If you have an interest in that particular theme, add a star to this review, because Barren Ground was very good in evoking an isolated place and time.

Joe Johnston says

Read this for a southern lit course in grad school. Uninspiring & tedious, with the discouraging theme of "life can be a drag--man up and tough it out." Feh.

Amy Gentry says

Written in 1925, reading it because I have to read popular American books from the twenties. The prose is purplish but the plot is unsentimental: a better, more brutal Gone With the Wind.

Michael Fischer says

I have changed my mind on this novel. At first, I thought it was a little too deterministic and overwrought...then I realized it's brilliant how Glasgow critiques a chauvinistic economic system. The common arguments about the problematic loss or sacrifice of Dorinda's sexuality (or sexual desire) seem to miss the mark and Glasgow's ironic intent. Also, while some argue that "Barren Ground" is on board with Allen Tate and the Agrarians, I'm not sure I see the relationship existing so smoothly: Glasgow seems to critique and thus complicate both sides of the Agrarian v. Industry debate.

"Barren Ground" should be on more college syllabi.

Dominic says

Barren Ground is a more troublesome novel to the 21st century reader than I first thought. While Dorinda Oakley is certainly a complex, extremely human and even triumphant version of the early 20th century female public self, her private self is undernourished, mangled and stagnant. While Dorinda breaks gender norms and is able to thrive without the help of men, she is forever plagued by one defining incident from her past and is never able to heal. She is unable to accept the impermanence in her life (and the impermanence in her relationships) and resolves that it is best to "depend upon nothing but herself and the land." To me, that is tragic.

While Dorinda surely had to make sacrifices in order to make her own version of happiness (we all do!), the image of Dorinda at the end of the novel is one that is in one sense beautiful but in three other senses fragmented, hard and incomplete because she never allowed herself to love. She *is* the barren ground.

Ellen Glasgow's novel may still exist as a feminist text for some readers, but ultimately it is not the brand of feminism I champion. Dorinda Oakley is not a role model for our daughters, but the narrator seems to ultimately try to present her as one. She is successful and as strong as pine, yes, but she is also trapped in a clinging illusion of supposed self-knowledge. Feminism is just as much about the health and wholeness of the private self as it is about the public self, and Dorinda doesn't satisfy the hungering of the 21st century feminist.

The Dorinda of *Barren Ground* is "grounded" solidly in her time. I had never heard about this novel before it appeared on this semester's class syllabus, and I now know why. Glasgow's novel does succeed as a well-written slice of Southern life at the turn of the century, but it also fails to become a timeless classic that would have put Dorinda in the company of great fictional American women like Janie Crawford, Hester Prynne and Edna Pontillier--women I know my ancestors (both women and men) will continue to read about and share my admiration and love.

Wealhtheow says

Described to me as "Glasgow's books have often been described as provincial, being as they focus on characters and settings in the early 20thC South (usually Virginia, and frequently rural), but she's as sharp a critic of social mores as Edith Wharton. And while her racial attitudes are disquietingly reflective of the norm for that time and place, she was also an outspoken feminist and that also comes through...[Barren Ground] is about a young woman from a poor family who is seduced, impregnated, then jilted by a wealthy man, but rather than wallow in her misfortune she goes north to study advanced farming techniques, then comes back home and becomes the wealthiest person in her community."

Sounds like it's worth a shot!

Bree (AnotherLookBook) says

A novel about a woman in turn-of-the-century Virginia who, after being jilted by her neighbor, must discover another means of making her life a success. 1925.

Full review (and other recommendations!) at [Another look book](#)

A wonderful read by an author who I'd never heard of until I found an entire shelf of her books in a local library. Beautiful writing to complement the kind of story you continue munching on long after you've closed the book. Not very light, but not too heavy either--just interesting and, at times, quite profound. If you enjoy reading rural stories of yesteryear featuring female protagonists (think Hardy, but American), or if you're interested in Virginian history, or just life in a small farming community around the turn of the 20th century, I think you'll eat this book up as wholeheartedly as I did.
