



The Peppered Moth

Margaret Drabble

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In the early 1900s, Bessie Bawtry, a small child with big notions, lives in a South Yorkshire mining town in England. Precocious and refined in a land of little ambition and much mining grime, Bessie waits for the day she can escape the bleak, coarse existence her ancestors had seldom questioned.

Nearly a century later Bessie's granddaughter, Faro Gaulden, is listening to a lecture on genetic inheritance. She has returned to the depressed little town in which Bessie grew up and wonders at the families who never left. Confronted with what would have been her life had her grandmother stayed, she finds herself faced with difficult questions. Is she really so different from the South Yorkshire locals? As she soon learns, the past has a way of reasserting itself-not unlike the peppered moth that was once thought to be nearing extinction but is now enjoying a sudden unexplained resurgence.

The Peppered Moth is a brilliant novel, full of irony, sadness, and humor.

The Peppered Moth Details

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Joan Colby says

Initially I felt I might not like this book based on some reviews that I read; however as an admirer of Drabble I decided to forge on and I am glad that I did. The book is based in part on the life of Drabble's mother with whom she had a volatile relationship. It is always a danger to write about one's relatives as it can be tough to maintain any objectivity. Regardless, the book as with most of Drabble's work is very well written and absorbing.

Yve-Anne says

Who wouldn't give this Margaret Drabble book 5 out of 5 stars? It is a great book written by one of our finest authors which charts the lives of three generations of women from the early twentieth century up until the near present day. By no means a quick read, you will find this absorbing and compelling and you will be left thinking about the characters long after you have finished the book.

Hyades8 says

I could not get through this book. Had to give it up

Laurel-Rain says

Margaret Drabble's "The Peppered Moth" is a fascinating exploration of family, heredity, genetics, and the history that links family members.

In the beginning, we meet a group of people interested in learning about their heritage. A scientist heads up the meeting, and is prepared to take DNA samples of the various participants.

We then move back and forth, between the past and present, exploring the primary characters from their childhoods to adulthood...and beyond.

Bessie Bawtry escaped her ordinary background—for a time, anyway—when she earned a Cambridge scholarship. She struggles to free herself from the family she left behind. However, she does end up marrying her hometown boyfriend Joe Barron. The reader has to wonder about this choice...is she really trying to escape her beginnings? And will she escape her family history or is she destined to repeat it?

After their marriage, her husband goes to war, leaving her to care for their two children all alone. When he returns, their differences become very apparent. Their troubled marriage must make each of them wonder about their choices.

Years later, though, their granddaughter Faro Gaulden, is amongst those seeking answers to their heritage. It

would seem that things have come full circle, as she is trying to understand the very issues that plagued her grandmother. And she, too, struggles with choices that seemingly fly in the face of what she needs.

As I read this tale, I sometimes found myself bogged down...even confused, at times; sometimes the details bored me, as I wondered what was the point of it all.

But then toward the end, I regained my interest and the story moved more smoothly. Even the book's title made sense at one point, as one of the characters has an "internal monologue" about a moth species that has "darkened" with mutations; the "peppered moth"—almost an analogy for the genetic programming of the human characters.

Despite the fact that the book seemed to "drag" for me, at times, it was definitely a worthwhile read, which is why I'm granting it 4 stars. Probably 4.5.

Lisabet Sarai says

From her earliest days, Bessie Bawtry knows she does not belong in the dreary, polluted coal mining town of Breaseborough. She is better than her dour, unemotional mother Ellen, her distant father Burt, her ploddingly dull sister Dora. She is destined for something great. South Yorkshire is a prison which she is determined to escape.

As the protégée of a teacher with “modern” ideas, Bessie studies hard and wins a scholarship to Cambridge. She marries a man of means and makes a home in lovely Derbyshire. Freeing oneself from the past is more difficult than it would appear, though. Even with beauty, brains and ambition, Bessie finds it difficult to build a satisfying life.

Nearly a century later, Bessie’s scientist granddaughter Faro returns to Breaseborough for a seminar on her family’s genetic roots. She tries to solve the puzzle of why some people stay put and simply adapt to their environment, no matter how difficult or dark, while others manage to relocate and thrive.

I picked up this novel at a used book sale because I’d never read anything by this respected literary author. It’s an intriguing story, mixing a multi-generational family saga with some serious meditations on love, biology, luck and fate. The narrative voice is mostly third party omniscient, a stylistic decision I found annoying at times. In particular, the author has a tendency to ask sly rhetorical questions when of course she knows the answers.

Still, I enjoyed *The Peppered Moth*, partly because of its vivid descriptions and elegant prose but mostly due to its memorable characters. Bessie’s self-centeredness and her tendency to sabotage her own happiness make her pretty unappealing, but Faro and her mother Chrissie are both strong, complex women with whom I could identify. I particularly loved the description of the intense, ultimately tragic love between Chrissie and Nick Gaulden, Faro’s father. Somehow the author descends from her omniscience down to the earth when describing their youthful passion.

Faro is intriguing and complex, at least partially because she is a descendant of all these varied individuals—Bessie, brilliant and perpetually dissatisfied; Aunt Dora, patient and nurturing; Chrissie, practical and (after her betrayal by her first love) unromantic; and the rakish and irresistible Nick.

Although *The Peppered Moth* is a dark story at times, it ends on a note of hope. Faro is the future; you want her to escape from the negative forces in her genetic background and to flourish. By the time you close the book, you are fairly convinced that she will.

Wendy says

This book dragged and didn't have much to say in the end. Seemed to be the author trying to say something nice (in a novel format) about her evil mother (real life), but it doesn't end up saying much at all. Couldn't stop in the middle, but felt like it!

Mommalibrarian says

Margaret Drabble set herself a very difficult task in this book and she probably did as good a job as anyone could with that plan. She based the main character on her mother, who she admits is a very, very unsympathetic character. She attempts to follow the combination of nurture and nature through four generations. Of her mother she said, "She was not funny. She was a highly intelligent, angry, deeply disappointed and manipulative woman." p.367 Of her own life, she said, "If I try very hard, I can induce in myself a brief, unconvincing, unsustainable trance of happy memory." p.369

I was ready to give up multiple times but the amount of overtime I was working did not allow me to get to the library to pick out something new. Therefore I finished the book. One prime stopping point occurred on p.198 when she wrote, "What are we to do about these dreadful people? Is there any point in trying to make any sense of their affectless, unnatural, subnormal behavior? Shall we just forget they ever existed, bury them, and get as far away from them as possible?"

Nicole says

Either this was better than the other Drabble I've read, or I was more in a Drabble mood when I read it. Hard to say.

Either way, the narrator has an acerbic yet self-critical tone that creeps in via direct addresses to the reader, an impatience that she tries to tamp down, which is appealing and then, once you've read the afterword, also very interesting.

Asta says

I really enjoyed it. The story spans three generations, but is mainly about Margaret Drabble's mother, who was obviously not an easy woman to live with. Although many of the themes are not what you might call uplifting, the wry sense of humor and the shift from the characters' to the author's point of view as well as the chronological jumps manage to keep the book very readable and entertaining. I was really impressed at how everything flowed smoothly - all this back and forth might have been confusing, but in this case it works

perfectly. This was the first book I ever read by MD, and I look forward to reading more of her work - I only wish I had discovered her sooner!

Valerie says

Another wonderful Drabble book.

Victoria says

I'm not very good at summing up a work in a few sentences, so I'll just say that *The Peppered Moth* is about the legacy a mother leaves her daughters and the daughters of her daughters and so on. I related so very much to this story and reading Drabble's afterword about how she was actually writing about her mother when she wrote about Bessie, just endeared me to Drabble all the more. And even though the author and I have more than thirty years between our ages, I think she and I have much in common in the mother department. This novel is one that I would like to own. Even though I am trying very hard to weed out my collection, this one I would take on and cherish. It is one of those books that I would reread, that I would dip into every once in a while to relive or re-find a page or a moment. There are very few books that I cherish so.

Mary says

This multigenerational saga about a young woman (Bessie Bawtry) who leaves a dirty Yorkshire coal town for a better life at Cambridge sounded promising to me. After I read, early in the book, about Bessie's strenuous efforts to get away from her home town, I was eager to see how her relationships with her family changed after she started her new life. She was so eager to make something different of herself; would she be able to stay close to the people she left behind as she changed? Her story took a very different turn, though; she returned to Yorkshire, married someone from her home town, and raised a small family.

The thing that bothered me about this is that I didn't feel like I understood why she basically put her hard-earned education to one side and turned into a bitter, unsatisfied woman who was very difficult to live with. I felt like I was in her head as she was studying for the exams that would win her the Cambridge scholarship, and during her early time there, but then all of a sudden, she's turned into this shrewish housewife. She couldn't get a job right out of college so had to settle for a teaching job back in Yorkshire, and I know women didn't have the career options then that they do now. Still, I would have liked to know what was going on in her mind as her life took this dramatic turn. And then something about the story of the following two generations, represented by her daughter Chrissie and granddaughter Faro, didn't seem to hold together well. The last third of the book in particular was a bit of a slog.

All became clearer when I got to the afterword, in which Margaret Drabble said that the novel was about her mother. The following two generations were made up, but Bessie's story is essentially her mother's story. This explained some initially confusing authorial asides in the part of the novel about Bessie's transformation from young scholar to wife and mother; once you know what's going on, you see that Drabble's mother never

spoke to her about that time period.

Drabble mentioned in the afterword that maybe she should have written a memoir, and I think if she had, she might have made a more satisfying book. She didn't seem to feel comfortable with (or capable of) inventing her mother/character's thoughts and feelings so that her readers could more fully see and understand Bessie, and to me this seems to leave such a gap in the novel that a memoir might have been better. It's hard to criticize another writer's decision about what to do with her material, though, and plenty of people have loved the book, so maybe this appears to be a flaw only to a certain type of reader.

That said, the book is well-written on the sentence level and offers some good insights. One sentence in particular, about how Bessie's children viewed her and her attitude toward them, rang so true that by paraphrasing it only slightly, I could make it fit my own situation with one of my parents. When I learned that the book was about Drabble's mother, I remembered that sentence, which then struck me as a very emotionally honest statement about her own life. It's a gift to find that kind of emotional immediacy in a novel, although I think it would have been just as great a gift in a memoir, without the baggage of the made-up succeeding generations. I'm not sorry I read the book, because it gave me some things to think about regarding fiction and memoir, which have been on my mind lately. As novels go, though, I found it lacking.

Katriona says

A very intricate, intelligent book. I found it hard to break into the story, the characters were almost unforgiving in their unlikeable personalities, but one sleepless night I started reading and could not stop. Margaret Drabble's tale has heavy doses of her own family history and her own family members and the epilogue at the end of the book shows how she struggled to reconcile with the ghost of her difficult mother, Bessie Bawtry in the story. How much is your genetic & familial history a part of who you are and can you escape it? Or is it just some people that, instead of escaping, adapt to awful conditions and stay, like the Peppered Moth of the Northern industrial towns.

This didn't make me happy but I was so interested and involved and has made me think and that's the 4 stars.

Jules says

After reading the first third of this book, I was left feeling quite angry and patronised about a narrative fictional account of working class life in South Yorkshire, England. As Yorkshire (and South Yorkshire itself) is my birthplace and former neck of the woods, I felt angry that lives, be they working class and difficult, should be portrayed on paper so dismally and without hope. I was also angry that these lives were being implicitly compared, contrasted and ultimately lambasted against academic life in Cambridge. Well, it's chalk and cheese or black and white and DAMN, I thought, more English class stereotypes being paraded and abused on paper. DAMN, I thought again closing the pages in rage. Maybe though, this was Drabble's point and intention all along. Maybe this was the social commentary she wanted to make to keep us on the ball.

After the first third or so, Drabble continues a disjointed narrative over characters and timeframes and explores overriding themes of womanhood, birthright and emotional inheritance spanning over a total of four generations and explores loosely yet constructively the question of even if you leave your hometown and

social background, do they or can they ever leave you? I say a 'disjointed' narrative but this is weirdly something that ends up as a positive writing feature. The journey that Drabble takes you on may be fairly rollercoaster and a little bumpy in places but the sights that you see from the window are tremendous. By the end of the journey, I felt that Drabble has made me ask many questions of my own route in life and I could empathise with the three female protagonists – grandmother, daughter and granddaughter – thus.

Drabble's writing is extremely fluid and easy to follow and she uses subtle humour as well as light and heavy sarcasm to illustrate life's little ironies. Towards the end of the book, I was jubilant to see that, through time, my home county had been painted more prosperously and that life's simple pleasures - nature, innocence and even romance - could be found within her boundaries. Time had moved her from stifling to inviting by the time the novel had run its course and the shift from 'soot to suitable' certainly suited me fine. Drabble is a brave writer with characterisation and I would say she knows her subjects well. She writes in something of a feminist tone and most of her ladies are formidable if only quietly, independently and subtly to themselves. Almost certainly, all of them are influenced with the idea of escape and very few choose to stay rooted or stagnant for very long.

I would recommend this book to any lover of well-written and clever 'thinking' fiction. Those who seek message and inference through their reading will not be disappointed. Reading the first part of this book certainly did it no justice at all but, by me plodding on, I found this book turned itself around and was certainly worth sticking with right until the end. Even better than that, it delighted me and I fully look forward to reading some more of Drabble again. May the moth fly once more and remember, as they say in the white rose county of Yorkshire, "where there's muck there's brass".

Anne says

"I don't think it's (a novel) to teach, but I don't think it's simply to entertain, either. It's to explore new territory. To extend one's knowledge of the world. And to illumine what one sees in it," said Drabble in an interview in *The Paris Review*. "The Peppered Moth" does all of the above and more. Some reviewers have found the mixture of novel and biography (Bessie is a less than flattering portrait of Drabble's mother" and the shifting from telling a story to the point-of-view of the narrator annoying and worse. Once I accepted the shifting perspectives and the slow build-up I was hooked. Drabble's characters and descriptive skills left an author I just read, Meg Wolitzer, look like a rank amateur. Drabble's characters, their striving to rise out of the gritty Yorkshire industrial life, their battles and their successes enrich all who will read them. The Epilogue sheds some insight into the book's eccentricities. I accept them all in the face of rich descriptive writing and multi-faceted characters.

Veronica says

By the time I got to page 70, I was already skim-reading. A bad sign. Ghastly mannered style, skipping from past to present tense in the same paragraph, an omniscient narrator using the royal We ... then I came across this on page 129 (of 389), after the inexplicable marriage of two of the characters:

If this story were merely a fiction, it would be possible to fill in these gaps with plausible incidents, but the narrator here has to admit to considerable difficulty, indeed to failure. I have tried -- and I apologise for that intrusive authorial "I", which I have done my best to avoid -- I

have tried to understand why Joe and Bessie married, and I have tried to invent some plausible dialogue for them that might explain it.

Well, as a reader, I slammed the book shut at this point.

I confess I always used to get Margaret Drabble and Margaret Forster confused -- similar names, ages, background, and subject matter. But now I won't. Forster is a good novelist and Drabble isn't.

Kasey Jueds says

I read so many Margaret Drabble novels right after I graduated from college, loved them all, and then, for some strange reason, stopped. So this is the first of her books I've finished in at least a decade. Not my very favorite, but still really really good. Her voice is wise and wry and the scope of this book is wonderfully broad; it's really a social history of Yorkshire and the culture of coal mining as well as a novel full of engaging (though not totally likable) characters. She's almost Dickensian in the way she can fit so much into her work.

Joyce says

The peppered moth of the title is a famous example of evolution at work in industrial England. My understanding from the book is that there were formerly two colors of moths in a particular moth family, a light and a dark (the peppered one). The original theory was that during the Industrial Revolution the light colored moths evolved darker colors to suit the dark air caused by smoke, coal soot etc. Over time this theory was discredited to be replaced by a more rigorous one: that the lighter moths were easier prey in the dark air and thus became fewer in number. The darker ones, who were more difficult for predators to catch, survived to pass on the dark color genes to future generations of moths. However, *The Peppered Moth* is not about moths, although it is about evolution, family and in particular, three generations of women whose origins lie in a small northern England coal mining town, one where almost the entire town has been undermined and there are frequent random cave-ins.

Two sisters are born here at the turn of the century, Bessie and Dora Bawtry, born into a coal mining family with few pretensions. Bessie is sickly, fair, slim, intelligent, yet disdainful of most people, especially her family. Dora is healthy, dark, round, conventional and adores her family. Our story intimately concerns Bessie's life and follows her through school, romance, university and marriage to her childhood sweetheart, Joe Barron. Marriage to Joe produces the second generation woman in our story, Chrissie Barron, a slightly wild, slightly willful daughter who dislikes her mother and adores her father. After leaving university to elope with gambling womanizer Nick Gaulden, Chrissie has her own daughter Faro, the third generation woman of our story. Faro is an intelligent, beautiful and successful science writer who now lives in London, remote from the dusty, dirty town of Bessie and Dora's youth. Our story opens when Great-aunt Dora and Faro attend a town meeting to contribute their DNA to a study undertaken to discover any local kinship to Cotterhall Man, an ancient skeleton recently unearthed in a nearby cave. Through Faro we are then led into her family's past: into Bessie's life, Chrissie's life and Faro's own life.

This description makes the book sound like an many-paged, multi-generational epic spanning the twentieth century and it could have been given all that happened in the twentieth century, but the book is remarkably

succinct and not very long, for which I was grateful. The dominant character, Bessie, is not really very likeable but in the prologue we read that the book was the author's attempt to understand and describe her own mother, never an easy task. Understanding and insight into one's own family is difficult at best and the compassion we award to others, who are not our family, is often lacking. In the end however, this compassionate novel about survival, renewal and re-evaluation of feelings, relationships, and even environmentally degraded towns, concludes with both sympathetic understanding and hope for the future.

Diana says

Very well written. A serious study of familial relationships.

Geni says

The Peppered Moth is a tale about three generations of a family from a small coal-mining town in Yorkshire. It had so much potential, but Drabble's style is very annoying in that she tells you what you just read after you read it. The plot doesn't develop; she tells the reader what they are supposed to observe. The beginning was so slow I almost quit. Example: "We now see the character shrug and turn away" rather than "Faro shrugged and turned away." The story improved a bit in the middle and end, but the pace never did quicken.
