



We Think the World of You

J.R. Ackerley , P.N. Furbank (Introduction)

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We Think the World of You combines acute social realism and dark fantasy, and was described by J.R. Ackerley as “a fairy tale for adults.” Frank, the narrator, is a middle-aged civil servant, intelligent, acerbic, self-righteous, angry. He is in love with Johnny, a young, married, working-class man with a sweetly easygoing nature. When Johnny is sent to prison for committing a petty theft, Frank gets caught up in a struggle with Johnny’s wife and parents for access to him. Their struggle finds a strange focus in Johnny’s dog—a beautiful but neglected German shepherd named Evie. And it is she, in the end, who becomes the improbable and undeniable guardian of Frank’s inner world.

We Think the World of You Details

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Author : J.R. Ackerley , P.N. Furbank (Introduction)

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Bill says

Simultaneously comic and tragic, this book does an excellent job of capturing that emotion (is there a name for it?) when we are jealous of the attention of others -- especially those with a natural charm, like Johnny, the working class everyman whose stint in prison forces his sometime lover Frank to vie for limited contact and attention with Johnny's family and pregnant wife.

Johnny's dog, Evie -- who he barely gets to know before his trip to prison -- becomes a surrogate for many of the conflicting emotions, and for the things that can't be directly said or talked about. She becomes an object of neglect, compassion, cruelty, and obsession, reflecting the other characters emotions towards Johnny or each other.

Other readers might find it hard to process Frank's bitterness and nastiness throughout the whole affair, and indeed his indifference towards so many elements of Johnny's life (other than his dog) is both hilarious and disturbing. But it also feels genuine -- an example of the irrational behavior we sometimes find ourselves engaging in, when having our emotions returned by the object of our affection becomes our only priority.

I can also forgive some of Frank's bitterness, since he dreams of a domestic life that he could never have in that time and place in history -- the bed he purchased to fit both himself and his lover, or his dreams of running away with him and his dog and living in the country. Reading it now in 2015, it's a reminder the freedom we take for granted in modern day America is not something that always existed, nor something that everyone in the world shares.

Liam says

I don't know what the other reviewers find "droll" or "amusing" about this book. A lonely middle aged gay man agonizes for the entire length of the story over the mistreatment of a dog belonging to a working class man he's in love with. Absolutely everyone in the story is ugly or stupid and try their best to prevent him from being happy. In the end he gets the dog but it becomes so territorial of him he is no longer able to socialize. It is especially sad knowing that the story is so very closely related to Ackerley's own life and dog, after the death of which he considered suicide but instead drank himself to death with "oceanic quantities of gin". Interesting mostly for it's descriptions of class in England after the war, for being written by an openly gay author at a time when few were, and for being the longest portrait of an animal I've ever read.

David says

I had some problems with *We Think the World of You*—some of which aren't exactly J.R. Ackerley's fault. For one, this is a novel depicting low-class British scum who neglect and sometimes abuse a wonderful German shepherd named Evie. Anyone who knows me even a little will realize I will be bothered by this, even though Ackerley himself and his narrator both love, champion, and celebrate dogs, particularly Evie. Ackerley was a misanthrope devoted to his own dog in real life, apparently, so there is a strong affinity in that respect, but I have to lay my predisposition out on the table: in general, I don't want to read books about

imperiled or suffering animals—even if the writing is good (as it is here), even if the point of the work is the defense or celebration of animals, and even if it ends happily ever after (view spoiler). This aversion will necessarily color my appreciation of this book.

We Think the World of You tells the story of Frank, an irritable gay man, in a longterm relationship with a married working class man named Johnny, who has just been put in prison at the outset of the novel for theft. Johnny needs someone to take care of his puppy Evie while he's in prison, but Frank, peevishly, refuses. The responsibility then falls to Johnny's parents Millie (a blithe dingbat) and Tom (a cruel old grouch). Also saddled with one of Johnny's kids, Millie and Tom take little interest in Evie—keeping her shut inside all day with little or no attention or love. After Evie charms Frank during a visit, he becomes obsessed with the plight of the dog, trying to rescue her from her fate, but he is regularly blocked in his efforts by Millie, Tom, Johnny's jealous wife Megan, and—to some circumstantial extent—by Johnny himself. Evie is, of course, a barking, put-upon symbol in the lives of these characters, and as such she must suffer neglect, loneliness, and the effects of superfluity in the lives of her 'family' while the ever persistent Frank works for her salvation—and, in so doing, his own.

Postscript: I've just been reading reviews of J.R. Ackerley's *My Dog Tulip*, an autobiographical novel about his own relationship with his German shepherd. According to multiple reviewers, Ackerley becomes obsessed with breeding his dog (twice) and then both times considers drowning the puppies. Fuck you, J.R. Ackerley. If there is a hell, I hope you're in it, you miserable crank.

Austin says

I read this book today while taking public transportation and I still feel like I'm reeling from it. J.R. Ackerly's "We Think The World Of You" is an intensely touching and also terribly cruel, even brutal in its humor. It's also pretty short. If you have a day or two, I suggest taking it on.

Iva says

Ackerley used this, his only novel, as a foundation for his non-fiction book (and an excellent animated movie BTW), *My Dog Tulip*. As a writer of non-fiction, he is brilliant. He entertains, creates fabulous characters who happen to have existed, and has strong (or strange) relationships/obsessions with dogs. This, however, doesn't work as a novel, but shows his talent for understanding the working class--there is a lot of wonderful dialogue--and of course, dogs. I am so sorry to have read all Ackerley's books because I just might have to re-read them. I'll start with *Hindoo Holiday*. He is a find.

Alison says

I'm not a huge fan of dog stories (or for that matter novels about pets in general), but this extended tale of canine-custody is exceptionally funny and slightly sinister. Good stuff.

Nicolas Chinardet says

What an odd little book this is - the rather melodramatic story of the infatuation between a man and a dog.

This feels more like an episode in a wider narrative of which the reader isn't told. We know nothing about the narrator and the nature of his relationship with Johnny, which is the cause of the events described in the book, is only very vaguely hinted at: we assume that they are lovers but it's not clear. In any case none of the characters involved, not even the dog, are likable.

It is a quick and easy read, though, so no harm done.

David says

First published in 1960, this book is a delicious souffle, which J. R. Ackerley has whipped to perfection. It tells the hilarious story of the love triangle involving Frank, a buttoned-down civil servant, Johnny, the working class guy he's in love with, and the beautiful, headstrong, Evie. As the story opens, Johnny has been sentenced to a year in jail for breaking and entering, and Frank is worried that this will give Johnny's pregnant wife, Megan, the chance to freeze him out of Johnny's life altogether.

But in the end it's the beautiful Evie that precipitates the final crisis, forcing Frank to go through some painful self-discovery along the way.

Did I mention that Evie is a German shepherd?

Pascale says

What a pity Ackerley only wrote 4 books, since the 2 I've read are among my absolute favorites. I'll give most of the stuff in the NYRB classics series a chance, and this looked like one of their typical quirky picks. There's obvious comic potential in a story that revolves around disputes over the care and ownership of a dog. On the one hand you have the narrator, an educated homosexual who is a bit of a fusspot, and on the other his charming young lover with his working class family. When the young man is sent to gaol, his dog ends up with his mother and step-father. But soon enough his lover, who had initially refused to look after the dog, becomes obsessed with its welfare and puts himself out to make alternative arrangements for Evie. Much haggling and wrangling ensues, and things don't get any simpler once the none-too-bright owner comes out of prison. There's plenty of excellent social satire in this book, and Ackerley does a great job of exposing the condescension of his narrator towards his working class "friends". But that's not the half of it. What Ackerley does brilliantly is to show how blindly we follow our prejudices and passions without any real grasp of our motivations. The paradox of the narrator is that although he is acutely self-conscious and self-aware, he constantly misunderstands what he wants and how he affects others. Of course the dog becomes a substitute for his lover, who is in fact much married and mostly sees him for financial gain. The narrator almost becomes a tragic figure because his quest for love is so obviously doomed to failure, and he

knows it. And yet he fights on, valiantly and foolishly, to connect, to engage, to do what, by his lights, is the right thing. Beyond the particulars of his awkward case, Ackerley really illuminates the human condition.

Barry Pierce says

At the beginning of *We Think the World of You*, Frank, our queer middle-aged narrator, is faced with the reality that his young lover Johnny is being sentenced to a year in Wormwood Scrubs. Johnny is, however, also married and has a child. His 'vile' wife Megan is aware of Johnny's friendship with Frank but doesn't think any more of it. Johnny's family think the world of Frank. Whilst in prison, Frank is ordered to take care of Johnny's dog, Evie. At first he's incredibly apprehensive, but eventually Evie becomes an object of obsession to our narrator.

It's an odd plot. The novel, first published in 1960, is viewed as something of a forgotten queer classic, or at least it's being marketed that way. However, this isn't really a queer novel. Yes, Frank and Johnny are lovers, but that really seems beside the point. The novel isn't *about* queerness. Which in many ways makes it more subversive.

The novel overall is a sometimes comic, sometimes tragic tale of a man and his lover's dog. A strange chapter in British queer fiction. But I must say that I enjoyed it, and its myriad of quirks.

Richard Jespers says

Several years ago (I'm always behind in my reading and follow-up) in *The New Yorker*, I became acquainted with writer J. R. Ackerley for the first time. From the same generation as my grandparents, as F. Scott Fitzgerald, he was a British man who published only four books in his life. Seems that it took him a long time in between to develop each one. This novel is about Frank, a young man in London, in love with a man named Johnny, Johnny's wife, Megan, and Evie, Johnny's German Shepherd pup.

We Think the World of You is built somewhat around the motif of the cliché embodied in the title. No less than seventeen times does Ackerley employ a form of it to demonstrate the offhand way the characters have of treating one another and Evie. And though the reader notices the repetition, it becomes an acceptable motif.

While we were talking about [Johnny, who is in prison], the scullery door was pushed open and a dog came in.

"Hullo, Evie," said Millie.

I had forgotten all about Johnny's dog.

"So this is the creature he wanted me to take?"

"Yes, he couldn't get no one to mind her, so I had to have her in the end. Not that I wanted her, the scamp."

She was certainly a pretty bitch, a few months old, rather large and long-legged, and lavishly affectionate in the fawning, insinuating way puppies have (22).

Evie continues to insinuate her way into Frank's life, at least, while everyone else seems to shove her away. She's destructive, probably because she is not exercised properly.

How she loved running, using her muscles, her strong young limbs! If Tom or the rebuffed boy took her out every day on the lead round these mean streets what use would that be to her? She ought to be bounding a daily ten miles over grass. She ought to be in the country (59).

There is some wrangling between Frank and Johnny's wife and sister over the care of Evie, though they "think the world of her." After Johnny is released from prison, Johnny spends some time with Frank and brings Evie with him. He is stunned how much she prefers Frank's company to his. There is an extremely tender love scene that, oddly enough, transpires with the three of them.

It was now, as the rest of our garments followed, that Evie began to exhibit an increasing perturbation as though whatever was happening before her eyes was having, upon the confidence she had hitherto shown in the distinctness of our identities, a confusing effect. Uttering little quavering cries of doubt and concern, she sat first upon our mingled clothes, gazing at us with wild surmise, then upon our mingled bodies, excitedly licking our faces as though she would solve her perplexing problem either by cementing them together with her saliva or by forcing them apart. She lay with us throughout the afternoon, her fur against our flesh, and we talked of her most of the time (177).

Throughout this trim novel, Frank is put in charge of Evie for short periods of time. Once, he even keeps her past a deadline, thinking that he will just keep her, to save her from the ineptitude of the others in her life. Finally, he promises Johnny he will pay him forty pounds for the dog.

"Did you mean what you said about the forty quid?"

"Of course."

"Give it to me," said he roughly.

In this way Evie became my dog.

In some way it seems a painful price; in other ways not. Forty pounds means little to Frank, who has some means. At the same time, it demonstrates how little Johnny thinks of Evie, to let her go for any price, and rather easily at that. After that Evie and Frank live peaceably for many years, yet for such peace, Frank pays a price.

Advancing age has only intensified her jealousy. I have lost all my old friends, they fear her

and look at me with pity or contempt. We live entirely alone. Unless with her I can never go away. I can scarcely call my soul my own. Not that I am complaining, oh no; yet sometimes as we sit and my mind wanders back to the past, to my youthful ambitions and the freedom and independence I used to enjoy, I wonder what in the world has happened to me and how it all came about But that leads me into deep waters, too deep for fathoming; it leads me into the darkness of my own mind (209).

Anyone looking for a superficial and sentimental sort of dog story will be disappointed. *We Think the World of You* is so much more.

Coffeeboss says

The goofy book may seem like the story of a middle-aged man's obsession with a scrappy young man (who spends the majority of the story in prison), but it is actually more of a love story between a man and a dog. Pet people should love this, as the dog is as richly characterized as any of the humans. It is a fast read, almost like a short story. It is witty and fun, and a tad pompous.

Frederico says

I love this book!

Sohum says

I thought I was fully aware of the tropes of the cruel British novel, but I was bemused by the ending to this one. I liked this book more than expected.

Ben Dutton says

What a delightful little novel this was! I expected little of the story of one man and the dog he cares for whilst his owner is serving time at a local prison, but with such a slim premise Ackerley managed to craft a story of such simple beauty, at times very funny, at others touchingly poignant, and ending with one of the finest last lines I've read, and for which it is justly famous.

As noted in my review of his *Hindoo Holiday* (1932), Ackerley was openly homosexual in an age where such sexuality was still taboo. *We Think the World of You* is another novel that deals with homosexuality without naming it. It is clear to a modern reader that Frank is in love with the crooked Johnny, and that Johnny is repressed in his feelings.

When Johnny is sent down he asks his friend (possible lover) Frank to take care of his dog Evie. At first Frank refuses but eventually relents and this dog begins to change his life. Ackerley called his tale a "fairy

tale for adults”, and like all fairy tales it is a dark heart that beats at the centre. It is a story of frustration and jealousy, and of unrequited love. Evie becomes the white knight that rescues Frank. But Ackerley is a cleverer writer than that. He asks the questions of what next? What happens when the white knight has come and you have been saved? Evie, being loved and cared for, begins to dominate Frank’s life, and Frank realises that what he thought he wanted might not be what he was after at all.

In the biography of Ackerley published by Peter Parker, we learn of Ackerley and how a dog called Queenie transformed his life. Queenie was given to him by his sometimes lover who was going down for burglary. We Think the World of You is therefore more autobiographical than Ackerley first admitted.

When Queenie died he said, “I would have immolated myself as a suttee when Queenie died. For no human would I ever have done such a thing, but by my love for Queenie I would have been irresistibly compelled.” We Think the World of You was not born out of his grief (Queenie died two years later) but the knowledge that this creature would not survive long infuses Ackerley’s work with an emotional depth. It turns We Think the World of You into a truer tale than Hindoo Holiday (which was supposed to be the true story). This book, I feel, is his true masterpiece.

arnulfo. says

funny. engaging.

did I like it more now that i'm the proud father of one toby, awesome jack-russell/beagle and all-around shithhead (but in that adorable, endearing, gets away with murder, kind of way)? probably.

would I have it liked it regardless? probably.

was this helpful? probably not.

Jennifer (aka EM) says

Three-ish - this was a quick and dirty read, and an indulgence. I *loved* Ackerley's deep understanding of the connection between man and dog, and his (very progressive, esp. for the time) ability to show that dogs have distinctive personalities - but at the same time, that animal behaviour is a direct result of a dog's treatment at the hands of humans, and not - as still to this day erroneously believed - a product of some kind of higher, "human-like" cognitive processing.

The book's central point, however, was the sublimation of Frank's unrequited passion for his (married) friend, Johnny, into his devotion to Johnny's dog, Evie. There was such a focus on Evie, and Frank's machinations to make her his own, that this second and in some ways equally important plot-line was given short-shrift. Not that I minded - since I'm all about the doggies, and this is a non-sentimental (and not too, too difficult to bear) story about quite a lovely one.

John says

a middle-aged gay man takes care of the irrepressible dog of his working-class lover who's in jail. around this droll premise, Acklery brilliantly exposes the pettiness of people, regardless (or precisely because) of their social standing. the dog, which is just as vividly alive as each of this novel's (bipedal) characters, is really only it's lovable catalyst. what makes this work astounding is how it slyly and assuredly it gets darker and funnier. a real snicker of a book.

Martin says

Interesting book. In some ways, it is courageous for the times. The main character is a bit maddening....he seems to be taken advantage of by people who are beneath him. He ultimately wins out in the end but the ending is quite unusual. It is well written and the passages involving the dog are quite lyrical. It was a fairly quick read.

Daniel Polansky says

Oooh. Ooo! Really excellent. Frank is an upper class Englishman in love with Joe, a married, working class laborer sent away for housebreaking in London in the 1960s. Through a peculiar series of events Frank becomes obsessed with Joe's dog, which he tries to look after while Joe is in prison. The novel tilts initially in a sloppy, melodramatic direction (my hackles get up in any book in which a dog is a major character), but this is a feint, and the book soon pivots in distinctly darker directions. It's not that there is a mystery to it exactly, but watching the way in which the small cast of characters develop is too much of a joy to spoil it by giving away much more. It's beautifully if simply written, and Acklery's understanding of the human psyche, of our strange jealousies, of the foul underside of love, is really masterful. Strong recommendation.
