



The Train Now Departing

Martha Grimes

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Subtle and perceptive, atmospheric and lyrical, these two beautifully accomplished and thematically linked novellas are deceptively profound in their exploration of emotional isolation and identity within human relationships. Each story features a single middle-aged woman who to the outside world seems totally self-assured and content with their quiet and well-ordered lives. But each story features as well a man of seemingly no importance other than as a companion for the occasional meal or an outing in polite society. Reminiscent of Barbara Pym, yet told in Grimes's inimitable voice, they combine the singular characters and richly textured narrative that readers have grown to expect from this internationally bestselling storyteller.

The Train Now Departing Details

Date : Published May 8th 2000 by Viking Adult

ISBN : 9780670891542

Author : Martha Grimes

Format : Hardcover 192 pages

Genre : Mystery, Fiction, Short Stories



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Ralph says

Martha Grimes is at her best when working with strong characters, a definite sense of place, and a good supporting cast for the main character(s) to play off of. In both of these novellas, she has none of those things. There is no real suspense in either "The Train Now Departing" or "When the Mousetrap Closes," and a sense of apprehension does appear for a bit in the later story it is unfulfilled, like a long rambling joke told by a stranger on a journey but which never quite gets around to having a punchline.

In the first story, "The Train Now Departing," the main characters remain nameless ciphers, deconstructed at every turn by their own words and thoughts despite the best attempts by the author to delineate them. For all we are told about the people, they never become more than strangers observed at a distance.

In "When the Mousetrap Closes," a chance encounter between an introverted woman (who constantly asserts she has common sense, but does not) and an enigmatic actor seems to set up the trappings of menace, but none of the anxiety raised in the reader by the author ever come to fruition. Even the nuances or "clues" scattered by the author eventually just fall flat.

Any reader seeing the Martha Grimes name and the carefully culled reviews printed on and in the book would naturally expect a mystery, some suspense, if nothing else an engaging tale with a clever plot or character twist. That reader would be disappointed. A reader, male or female, suffering from self-doubt, dependence upon undependable people, or living through relationships of dubious value or enigmatic outcome might find these tales enthralling on a personal level, but readers seeking entrance into a world better than the one in which they dwell will be disappointed.

Estella says

A *huge* disappointment. Through the years, I have very much enjoyed reading Grimes' mystery series featuring Richard Jury, but her departure from the mystery genre into straight fiction falls flat, in my opinion. The two novellas which comprise this book are dark, depressing and dull. I actually didn't finish the second one, because reading it felt like I was slogging through mud—not my idea of fun. I'll stick to the Jury mysteries, thanks.

Lisa says

I found both stories to be rather monotonous, although I actually made it through the second one (unlike the first.)

Linda C says

Two novellas both featuring a middle-aged woman living alone after many years living with their mother

who is now deceased. Both women have routines and spend lots of time alone reflectively. In both stories they meet a male stranger and continue meeting weekly one for lunch, one for tea. In the first novella the woman feels like a place-holder for a travel writer who likes someone across the table but seems only to criticize her thoughts and lifestyle. In the second the conversation is more lively and the woman thinks a friendship is growing while the man refers to himself as acting at life and calculating. Both relationships come to an end at the end of the story. I enjoyed the second one more than the first.

Aria says

Well the 1st novella, which the book is titled after, was just kinda like, "Meh." In truth, it became tedious. After they discussed the planned river trip in the Amazon I had to skip to the end and see if what I expected to happen was indeed what happened, b/c I really could not get through reading anymore of that monotony. Well, what I expected did happen, so I scanned the final pages to see that I hadn't missed anything that would add to the tale. Nope, so I called it (thankfully) done and moved on.

The second novella, *When the Mousetrap Closes*, was better. I manage to finish it and found the characters more interesting, if still somewhat bland. The end left me kind of, "Meh," again, but it was still way better than the other novella.

Overall, I can't say I would recommend these tales to anyone. They might be better as verbal short stories when one is trying to kill time somewhere. That's how I think these tales would be best presented and received, anyway. To each their own.

Camille says

One of the best, underrated novellas I've read. Deserves more than just being put on sale or buried under stacks of unworthy other titles.

Kathleen says

Introspective, insightful, painfully honest, these two novellas depict the story of two middle-aged women living a self-imposed, solitary life. Their emotional isolation is interrupted by an accidental meeting with a stranger, a chance meeting that evolves into regular meetings over a period of time, life-changing, and with a personal cost.

The first woman, identified only by "she," meets for lengthy, late lunches with a travel writer. For pages, the reader observes the dance of their conversation with her pressing for meaning and substance, and him, avoiding. Food seemed to be a refuge of sorts to him, serving to excuse him from conversation. Conversations are filled with irony, "‘Opaque,’ he announced, ‘I sometimes wonder if (Wallace) Stevens was really talking about anything at all.’" So lonely is she that the travel writer's, avoidance of satisfying conversation, his ego, arrogance and sarcasm do not deter her from continuing their meetings. "He enjoyed

mouthing absurdities at her.”...“Trouble with you is, you’re one of those people who think trips are parables. Metaphors of discovery. Well, they aren’t.”

Spending hours alone in a railroad station café, she contemplates their “conversations,” the cook, the waitress, the occasional customer, and her own life of low expectations. “She had thought her life accidental; now she saw it was arranged: the same things done at the same time with scarcely any room for accident.” She acknowledged others might think her life “mean, meager.” “Her uneventful life made her close her eyes tightly and flush, momentarily with a sense of shame.”

Yet, her interior life is rich with substance (and left me cheering her on from the other side of the page)...What makes a courageous act?...What distinguishes sanity from madness?...”Beauty is momentary in the mind.”

The end, with much irony and drama, is her tearful epiphany about “nuances, the complexity of feelings, the shadowy atmosphere of friendship.”... “I thought I was immune.”

“When the Mousetrap Closes,” the second novella, features Edith Parenger, a woman, paralyzed by the death of her mother, postponing important life decisions until “after ‘The Mousetrap’ closes.” Her accidental meeting at Mrs. Dawson’s Tearoom with a much younger actor, Archie Marchbank, evolves into Wednesday meetings while his play is (secretly) in rehearsal. Unlike the characters in the first novella, Edith and Archie respectfully challenge each other’s thinking, and their conversations seem more substantial. Yet, while Edith views their relationship as friendship, Grimes foreshadows what lies ahead through Archie: “Do we like that? Being tricked?”... “Nothing really exists outside its role.”... “(I am) calculating.”

“She felt somehow shamed that her life was so narrow that it covered such a small territory, that if she raised the spyglass she would see nothing but blank gray matter.” (Both novellas are filled with this exquisite language, these thoughtful, soul-baring moments of candor.) When Archie announces the play is ready to open and the Wednesday meetings will end, Edith realizes how “ephemeral” or “unrooted” their relationship really was. So caught up in the play, the end of their meetings does not bother the egocentric Archie at all. Then, second guessing their relationship, “what if she...,” Edith realizes their meetings simply allowed him to pass through tedious afternoons. Later, watching the play, Edith further realizes she had been some sort of experiment for Archie but still wondered “how it all might have turned out if she’d read her lines right, if she’d been a better actress.” Edith predicts correctly the play will eventually fold into itself under “the weight of ambiguity and its pretentious solipsism,” a metaphor perhaps for the relationships in both novellas.

Mary says

This was a strange book and a bit boring. It has two main characters, a man and a woman. The man is a travel writer and goes to many foreign places. The young woman was left a large sum of money by her parents. She was a teacher and no longer saw the need to work. Each day she went to the local train depot to eat meals and chat with the waitress.

When her gentleman friend, the writer, returned home from his travels, they met for lunch. Their conversations were mostly about the restaurants and food served. The chapters rotated between her visits to the train station and dining with the writer.

Miriam says

Two odd self-reflective novellas. They start nowhere and go nowhere but inside the mind of the narrator exploring the deeply subjective and often deceptive nature of relationships. They are, oddly, both satisfying and not.

JZ says

Loved this. More in retrospection than while I was actually reading the two stories.

Because of time restraints, I read the second first. Now, I'm thinking that it has much to do with the plight of a woman who is a.) finally free of a domineering, unhappy mother and 2.) not having the experience to see what was coming from her tea room acquaintance. A middle-aged woman having her first special relationship with a man in her lifetime. Of course, it ends badly.

Then I read the first story, The Train Now Departing. Seems that she has the same problem. It's interesting that the woman in the story didn't even have a name. The importance of the man was emphasized by the numerous notices of his death. During their relationship, he treats her so badly that I wondered at her willingness to put up with it. Just as she starts to assert herself at their meal, he goes off for the last time. I was interested to see if the author would make him reluctant to dine with the woman, or whether he would disappear by other means. I certainly enjoyed his sticky end, but made me wonder if it had been suicide. The story certainly doesn't hand it to you on a platter. Did he or did he not know about the strychnine?

Both mothers were intent on appearances. The first illustrated by the incident with the little boy in the railway café. Her mother wouldn't let her get away with appearing willful in public. The second by her ability to stand and inspect needlework until she found the flaw in it, and teaching it to Edith. Noticing details is what led her to recognize the actor in the tearoom. Her rare ability is what got her the notice of Archie in the first place. Did he plan it? You can see that he gave the idea to the playwright and they developed it together. Didn't you just *know* when he said "I don't think you'll like it." I suspected when he had said that the ending wasn't known yet. Tsk.
Archie met with success from all this. Not fair.

But the travel writer from the first story is not so lucky. lol

Chrissie says

Yes, this is introspective and self-reflective and all the like things—especially the first of the two novellas of which this book is composed—but, man!, these are quite the pair of one-note chants disguised as stories.

While I hated neither story fully, they both were tedious to the point of wanting to toss the book aside. The characters of the titular novella, **The Train Now Departing**, were fully fleshed out in some aspects but in others they felt oddly flat and disjointed. Yes, this truly explored many facets of human nature and was relatable in bits and pieces, stops and starts, but this was as disconnected from being immersive as a bucket of cold water being dumped on you. I wanted to like the narrator, a middle-aged woman who (for reasons never really explained or explored) continues to have meals with this male travel writer. The two are clearly incompatible, and perhaps I was supposed to feel that she had latched on to him for companionship, but she felt too strongly against him and made very little excuses for his disinterested behavior and disconnected manner. I never felt that she misunderstood her own feelings about him, that she was feeling a connection when there assuredly was none, and she even seemed to understand his personality, too. I could make neither heads nor tails of the pair of them, and my irritation grew to the point of resentment. This story barely goes anywhere, and when it does I had lost the interest level necessary to even care.

The second novella, **When the Mousetrap Closes**, shorter than the first, was somehow even more bland and lifeless despite sporting much more dialogue and would-be relatable scenes. This one tried a bit too hard and was a bit too similar to the first to stand on its own. Just like the first novella, I very much felt the desire to be insightful and honed, but there was no balance struck with either story and both left me feeling indifferent and slightly irritated.

Susan Liston says

I read the four and five star reviews and I agreed, these are two beautifully crafted stories. I preferred the second one, *When The Mousetrap Closes*, but overall both were very sad and depressing to me. (When I read a mystery/crime author I would like some nice murder and mayhem to cheer me up, thank you.) So the two star rating in this case is purely personal taste.

Kay says

I have never read Martha Grimes and this book, while interesting, was not one to pull me in to read ore. Quirky. Stories are similar to Alan Bennett but not as developed. The namesake novella (*The Train Now Departing*) was so slow and the characters so un explained that I almost stopped reading. The second story redeemed the book slightly.

Judy says

Love all her writing. Author has the knack of bringing out all the inner workings of her characters.

Diane says

Two short stories about two different, but similar, women. Both are mature, lonely, quite-living but curious. Both meet mysterious men in a public place, strike up unlikely friendships, that unsurprisingly turn out to be one-sided. I related to these women in their frustrating but compelling friendships with aloof men more more than I would like. It was difficult to place the stories in period, until she let some little snippet drop about current events -- very tiny snippets, easily missed. I love Martha's narrative style, so that much was enjoyable. Both stories unfold (very slowly) over lunches or tea between the two characters, with waiters and waitresses making obligatory appearances. Nothing much *happens* until the very end. They both leave one feeling a bit hollow and unrequited.

A writing instructor I had in college said that if there is no love story, there is no story. He said there were too basic needs for your story to "work": love and conflict. I think that is what's missing from these stories. So, in a sense, they don't quite work.
