



A Scots Quair: Sunset Song, Cloud Howe, Grey Granite

Lewis Grassie Gibbon , Ian Campbell (Editor)

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A Scots Quair is revolutionary—innovative in its form, deft and humorous in its use of the Scots language, courageous in its characterization and politics. Central to the trilogy is Chris Guthrie, one of the most remarkable female characters in modern literature. In *Sunset Song*, Gibbon's finest achievement, the reader follows Chris through her girlhood in a tight-knit Scottish farming community: the seasons, the weddings, the funerals, the grind of work, the gossip. As the Great War takes its toll, machines replace the old way of life. *Cloud Howe* and *Grey Granite* take Chris from her rural homeland to life in an industrial Scotland and the desperate years of the Depression. The trilogy as a whole is a major achievement, a picture of a society undergoing traumatic and far-reaching transformation. Always readable, never sentimental, *A Scots Quair* is one of the most important works of modern Scottish literature.

A Scots Quair: Sunset Song, Cloud Howe, Grey Granite Details

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Margaret says

Remember loving this trilogy when I read it at school. Happy to have found a copy so I can delve into it once again.

George Hebenton says

I've read the trilogy three times I think (rather appropriately), seen the stage play, listened to a musical setting of it in Glasgow Cathedral, seen the BBC version of it from the 1970s (now available on dvd at last hallelujah). I guess that constitutes me being a fan of the book! What's the attraction? The humour, the dialect, the evocation of the time and place, before the "Great" War changed the pace of life forever. The first couple of times I tried to read the book, the first part of Sunset Song bogged me down a little, with the history of the area, etc. but persevere if you find it hard going, it's ultimately a very rewarding trilogy, A Scots Quair is truly a Scots classic!

P.S. I'd recommend his short stories too, especially "Smeddum"!

Jill says

Dealing with the death of the Scottish crofter society, A Scots Quair is composed of three parts: Sunset Song, Cloud Howe, and Grey Granite. Sunset Song introduces Chris Guthrie, a daughter of crofters, as she moves to the Mearns, meets the love of her life, starts out her married life on the croft, to see it all change with the beginning of the First World War. The story continues in the second book as Chris leaves the croft to move into a local village with her second husband and the young son of her first marriage. However, the changes brought to rural Scotland continue to mark the lives of villagers. In the third book, Grey Granite, Chris and her son have moved to the city, a dis-spirited, unforgiving hole. Here they confront the final changes in 1930's era Scotland as industrialization and communist idealism collide. I have loved these books for years and go back to them to read and read regularly.

Laura says

A gift from my dear friend Bettie!!

This trilogy is composed by the following books:

4* Sunset Song, see [My review here](#).

3* Cloud Howe, see [My review here](#).

In this last book, Grey Granite, there are four sections which are called after different constituents of granite:

Epidote (a greenish silicate of calcium, aluminum, and iron), Sphene (whose crystals are wedge-shaped and which contains the element titanium - strong, light, corrosion-resistant), Apatite (consisting of calcium phosphate and fluoride), and Zircon (a tetragonal mineral, of which jacinth and jargon are varieties - jacinth is reddish orange, and jargoon brilliant and colorless).

Tom Wintringham (editor of *Left Review*), he termed this last book as "the best novel written this side the Channel since Hardy stopped writing".

Shona A. says

My absolute favourite of all time - Chrissie's story is a social history of Scotland, description of the Howe, the red tilled earth of the fields in the Mearns and how Chrissie's story progresses through a time of great change in Scotland.

Lasting memory is of her kindness to conscientious objector, the image of him sitting on doorstep forlorn and wondering if his convictions right. The changing of the landscape as trees are chopped down for war effort, changing farming forever in the area. I loved living in this area, thought of Chrissy on my own wedding day when I got married on the church on the hill, with fields of wheat, sea beyond it and the boat suspended from the inside of the roof in the church.

Chrissy defied convention and can easily say Grassie Gibbon gave me strength and conviction through what was effectively my first feminist reading.

Marianne says

This is a fabulous trilogy, and I think would resonate with readers of Willa Cather (plains = bleak Scottish fields). I adored this book as a teenager.

Leonie says

Something I really liked about this trilogy is the way each book builds on the last. They're all related and the last two books do things they couldn't do if it hadn't been for the last book, but they're all different. The big theme of the trilogy is, on a personal level, gaining experience and what it does to you, and, more generally, the inevitability of change.

Sunset Song, the first novel, is a bildungsroman, really. Chris Guthrie is the teenage daughter of a crofter in 1911 Scotland. She's torn between identifying as the "English" Chris, who finds reality in the pages of books and wants to be a teacher and as the "Scottish" Chris whose self is always, inescapably, tied up with the land. A big theme of the trilogy is how ephemeral people are compared to the land, which almost negates time. In this first book characters occasionally catch glimpses of figures from another time. In later books there's a character that's into archaeology, which speaks of the same need to find the people who are gone in the landscape which is shared with those living. Chris becomes a sexual being, gets married and has a baby. Then WWI happens. It's nothing much at first, but it changes everything forever. This book is the seeing out of a way of life. Chris's experiences here are synthesise the archetypal and the personal. I felt it was one of

those books that has been done many times but, not least because it was written before it had been done so often, almost fools you into feeling like it's a first time. Which is how that archetypal/personal experience thing should work. The writing style reminded me of *Esther Waters* by George Moore, though only in the sense that that novel seemed poised between the Victorians and modernism. This has that same sense of new suffusing the old, and of something preparing to take flight and change into something else. People seem to like this first book the best. It has the most joy and lyricism and sense of timelessness, and the war, though it destroys what the book is about, gives it a good sense of narrative. It has an ending.

The other two books are about what happens after the end. They expand outwards from the small community of Kinraddie where *Sunset Song* is set. In *Cloud Howe* Chris marries again and moves to Segget, a larger community. Her husband is the minister and this is a difficult position for both him and Chris, as it places them a little outside their class and community. Robert is an idealist, where Chris is a realist, though her realism is not everyone's. There is a sense of desperate need for positive change in this book. The central paradox of the trilogy is that this is seen as a doomed mission but one it is vital to embark on. Or at least, Chris's husband and son find it so. Chris is the real grown-up of the trilogy, able to face reality without placebos like religion and politics. This could be a bit of a tiresome stereotype, shutting women out from the important things while, as consolation prize, suggesting that they're the more mature for this exclusion. Chris isn't a boring grown-up to the more interesting men, though. We enter into both mindsets but Chris is the centre. This book is where I decided that I loved the trilogy, because Gibbon is committed. He wants a solution but he doesn't pretend there is one. The biggest flaw in the trilogy is the presentation of the political ignorance and callousness of the majority. It's too two-dimensional. In another book it would be a big problem for me but it's surrounded by enough that's real.

In *Grey Granite* Gibbon moves Chris and her son Ewan to a city and really goes for the political stuff. Ewan is not unlikeable but chillingly distant from everyday emotional concerns. When he becomes a Communist it's a way of becoming human for him, in a way, as he finally identifies as one of everyone else, but we soon see that he's just as distant as ever really. The flaws of social reform and political ideals are clear here. With Ewan's quest for justice and equality we have a sense of passion for something even he knows is hopeless. His politics are, apparently, the author's, but one doesn't feel these can have provided Gibbon with much consolation. Chris has lost her ability to invest in anyone romantically, to feel really close to anyone. To experience others is important but ultimately one is alone. In a way her life is over in this book, but in another way it's about how life goes on even when your life is over. There is no real end.

I think this is a book you have to be willing to commit to despite its flaws. Otherwise it would probably seem torrid. But I felt like the author committed to it and that meant a lot. This trilogy creates an impressive sense of progressive experience that comes from that commitment.

Col says

In some ways I feel it does a dis-service to these books by reviewing them together for each part of the trilogy is brilliant.

A Scots Quair is actually three books, *Sunset Song*, *Cloud Howe* and *Grey Granite*, that tell the story of Chris Guthrie, a young woman in the North East of Scotland, moving from the hard, rural life of her adolescence to adulthood and marriage.

It's a wonderful depiction of rural Scotland at the beginning of the 20th century and describes the

development of the working class of Scotland up to, through and beyond the horrors of the 14-18 War.

There's such a strong socialist feel to much of the books and this is hardly surprising for Gibbon (real name James Leslie Mitchell) was a committed Marxist. But for all the politics and social commentary in the books, Chris is simply a wonderful heroine.

I read her first as a young man, not long after I read *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, which I loved. For me Chris Guthrie was, and remains in my head, the Scottish Tess! Although she's not as lost or as vulnerable as Tess she still made me feel that all I'd want to do would be to wrap her up and protect her!

Generally the first book, *Sunset Song*, has long been regarded as a classic of Scottish literature but for me *Cloud Howe* was the best of the three - and together they are wonderful!

I chose *A Scots Quair* as one of ten books that represent my country Scotland. If you would like to read about the others you can find them at <http://theonlywayisreading.com/2013/1...>

Don says

Beautiful but often abstruse story of the Chris Guthrie, born into a crofting family around the turn of the last century and living her life up to the the mid century, through a period which saw the end of the small farming way of life and the rise of political radicalism amongst the subaltern classes.

Grassic (realname James Leslie Mitchell) tells the story through an almost impressionistic lens, where the landscape of the Mearns area of East Scotland evokes the moods which dominate ther lifes of the main characters in Chris's life. Many of the descriptive passages are heartbreakingly beautiful, with images of race clouds across hills, the sense of the storms building up over the North Sea a few miles to the east and weather systems that range across snow and sodden rain storms, and brief periods of idyllic summer.

This tale of the life of a girl caught up in the drama of her life in the villages, but sensing that there is a world beyond it to which she was also connected. The trilogy sees Chris grow from a child to her adolescent years in a family dominated by a moody, unfathomable father and a mother wracked by fears from his expectations that she would produce an unlimited number of children for him. Ewan Tavendale arrives on the scene as her first love and their marriage produces anothe Ewan, their son. The Greart War emerges as the background for strains in the relationship, with Chris being left on her own with her noticeable introverted young son,

The second novel is dominated by Chris's marriage to the Rev. Robert Colquohoun and their lives together in the small industrial town of Segget. Chris and Robert live through the turbulent years of the 1920s, siding with the rural proletariat as it struggled to form unions and change its conditions of life. The failure of the General Strike breaks Roberts faith in reformist socialism and, being a man who needs faith, also breaks his heart. On their own again, Chris and Ewan move to the town of Duncairn where she runs a boarding house in partnership with another woman. Ewan's absorption in books and history is transferred to his apprenticeship in an engineering plant. By a convoluted route, and despite his lack of synmpathy with real people, he is drawn into radical socialists politics and plays a role as a strike leader.

Chris meanwhile continues to meet adversity and the death of her business partner obliges her to enter into yet another marriage - on her part loveless - to keep her boarding house business. Ewan shows himself to have much of the taciturn, even cruel streak of Chris's father, being drawn to a vision of communism

cynically realistic about the working class, but seeing it as an agent of abstract historical progress towards an ultimate great destiny. Callous in all his relationships, his mother also falls from his outlook on life as he leads hunger marches down to a London which will absorb his energies as a communist organiser.

Chris's fate is to end her days back in the Mearns, where she was born and grew to adulthood, irrevocably alone but emotionally numbed beyond the point of suffering. As she fades towards her own end back in the beauty of the Scottish countryside, the feeling is that we have heard a sad story of the end of a Scottish way of life, told from the standpoint of a great life, but ultimately lost in successive waves of bitter disappointment.

Alethea Bothwell says

I was expecting to really really love this. Alas. There are some interesting stylistic choices, for those who like that sort of thing - bits written in the second person! - but there was a bit too much lecturing, in the form of the thoughts and feelings of the characters.

Also I was terribly disappointed at how mean-spirited and, yes, stupid, a lot of the people were. Sorry.

Ka says

This is supposed to be the greatest Scottish novel ever written. So, I like Scotland, I like reading -- should be great. However, when you already hate a book on page 1 of nearly 700, that's not very encouraging. It might be the greatest novel in the same sense that Moby Dick is a great novel -- OK, but it's totally boring. Or maybe I'm so traumatized from slogging through Freedom that I'll never enjoy reading again.

Anyway, I put it down. Now I have to decide what shelf to move it to. I think I will move the actual book to Alex, let him try it.

Update 11/22. I created a new shelf called rejected. This book is the sole occupant but there are other deserving candidates. I can't figure out a way to make it neither read, to-read, or currently reading, so it will have to remain as 'read'. I did read it . . . a few pages.

Mara Eastern says

Both epic and lyric, touching yet unsentimental.

Sarz says

I'd read Sunset Song already, and wanted to read the rest, so this was a good way to do that. I loved all of them, but was left with an abiding sense of melancholy at the end.

Jo Bennie says

Gibbon's trilogy traces the life of Chris Guthrie from girlhood to death at the beginning of the twentieth century. *Sunset Song* follows her from childhood moving to a farm in the Mearns through adolescence to marriage and the First World War, *Cloud Howe* her life as a minister's wife in the small town of Seggat, and *Grey Granite* her later years running a boarding house in the industrial east coast city of Duncairn.

Life is never easy for Chris, whether labouring a subsistence living on the land, enduring childbirth and gossips, or facing the existential terror of the finity of her life and those around her. Gibbon writes in English but with Mearns doric dialect and this particular edition came with a very useful dictionary. This dialect has more subtlety than English when it comes to describing the differences in land use, farming practices and the shifts in weather particular to this part of the world.

Gibbon engages with a socialist agenda throughout, though this is never forced. We are shown how wretched life is for tenant farmers, for factory workers and for women. This comes through most powerfully in *Grey Granite* when Chris' son engages with workers' rights, but is always there.

For me, *Sunset Song* is the most successful book because it has Chris as its core. Chris is there in the latter two books but is not the pivot that she is in the first book. *Sunset Song* has a lyrical sad quality which shows the beauty of this part of Scotland but never romanticises the hardship or the people. I read this first as an 18 year old student and am now 40, before I did not understand and appreciate the life of Chris. *Sunset Song* is often dismissed as kailyard sentimentalism, it isn't

Gregor Buchanan says

Probably the most influential book I have ever read. This trilogy has such a sweeping emotional and philosophical trajectory that is at once tragic and celebratory...it has since dominated my conscious mind and emotional self immediately after I read the natural and deeply honest text. The narrative will be difficult for those not used to hearing the Scots dialect from the north east of Scotland but I would implore a new reader to persevere as the story held within these pages is both universal and very Scottish, a novel written with the whole world in view but from a Scottish perspective. If you should read any story please try and read the warm intellectual mind concerned with the direction of human civilization.

Warwick says

A long, powerful, moving, and ultimately pitiless account of that generation in Scotland who lived (if they were lucky) through the First World War and saw the rural lives of the crofters swallowed up by a new urban society. The first book of the trilogy is the most astonishing – all the pleasures of a Bildungsroman combined with a very rich and involving portrait of life in a Scottish farming village where we get to know and care about almost every inhabitant. The coming-of-age element is the more remarkable because of how brilliantly Gibbon seems able to understand his female protagonist: Chris Guthrie is completely convincing. Even the many cool, introspective, observational scenes of her alone – which in less skilful hands could easily have seemed voyeuristic – have an air of genuine sympathy and truth to them.

But she saw herself then in her long green skirt, long under the knee, and her hair wound in its great fair plaits about her head, and her high cheek-bones that caught the light and her mouth

that was well enough, her figure was better still; and she knew for one wild passing moment herself both frightened and sorry she should be a woman, she'd never dream things again, she'd live them, the days of dreaming were by; and maybe they had been the best....

The language the novel is told in seemed so surprising to me at first that for a long time it simply didn't remind me of anyone. The narrative voice is a synthetic kind of Scottish English, in which the cadences and vocabulary of Scots are constantly bubbling under the surface. Often the English words only make sense if you take them to be codewords standing in for their Scots cognates, such as the way 'brave' is used to represent the Scots word 'braw'. At other times, especially in the dazzling opening sections of the book, there is a generous larding of terms that may have some readers south of the border, or overseas, grinning in bewilderment (if, like me, you enjoy that sort of thing):

Ellison had begun to think himself a gey man in Kinraddie, and maybe one of the gentry. But the bothy billies, the ploughmen and the orra men of the Mains, they'd never a care for gentry except to mock them and on the eve of Ellison's wedding they took him as he was going into his house and took off his breeks and tarred his doup and the soles of his feet [...] and at the term-time he had them sacked, the whole jing-bang of them, so sore affronted had he been.

The result is a language that – despite its being a kind of construction of Gibbon's – struck me as utterly authentic: I believe everything he says. It also allows for some subtle effects in the later books as the narrative voice becomes more fragmented and less idiosyncratically Scottish. What's more, that inherent textual tension between Englishness and Scottishness reflects a key point of the book – that Chris herself is constantly torn between what she thinks of as her 'Scottish' self, who loves the land and its people, and her 'English' self, who wants to get away from there and learn to speak 'properly'. (This is a false dichotomy many in Scotland may recognise even today.)

two Chrises there were that fought for her heart and tormented her. You hated the land and the coarse speak of the folk and learning was brave and fine one day; and the next you'd waken with the peewits crying across the hills, deep and deep, crying in the heart of you and the smell of the earth in your face, almost you'd cry for that, the beauty of it and the sweetness of the Scottish land and skies.

You can see here the interesting narrative technique of switching to the second-person, which happens frequently throughout all the books – a 'you' that is sometimes Chris, sometimes a vague townspeople, always drawing the reader deep inside the emotions of the novel. Here's another example, from *Cloud Howe*, during a virtuoso depiction of a town fête.

The teas were all finished and Melvin had opened up one of the tents for the selling of drams, folk took a bit dander up to the counter, had a dram, and spoke of the Show and looked out – at the board, the gloaming was green on the hills, purple on the acre-wide blow of heather. There was a little wind coming down, blowing in the hot, red faces of the dancers, you finished up

your dram and felt fair kittled up; and went out and made for the board like a hare, damn't! you might be old, but you still could dance, you hoped the mistress had already gone home.

You might already detect the dominant tone creeping in under these passages: bittersweet, nostalgic, somewhat disillusioned. This mood darkens across the trilogy into something you could eventually fairly call bleak. But in the first book, when Chris is still young, the bleakness is just a part of Scotland's beauty; and it's perfectly evoked with many accomplished descriptive passages.

...it came on Chris how strange was the sadness of Scotland's singing, made for the sadness of the land and the sky in dark autumn evenings, the crying of men and women of the land who had seen their lives and loves sink away in the years, things wept for beside the sheep-buchts, remembered at night and in twilight. The gladness and kindness had passed, lived and forgotten, it was Scotland of the mist and rain and the crying sea that made the songs – And Chae cried *Let's have another dance, then, it's nearly a quarter to twelve, we must all be off soon as midnight chaps.*

There are parts of *Sunset Song* that had me almost open-mouthed with admiration, long passages which can't be quoted because their power comes from a cumulative brilliance, pages and pages which left me scribbling uncharacteristically superlative notes in my paperback: *WOW! – how did he do this? – Is there ANYTHING to match this?* and so on. The wedding scene was one such; another was the eventual story of what happened to Ewan in France. It's also often very funny – much funnier than I've made it sound in this review.

It's a little unfair in some ways that the second and third books in the trilogy have been overshadowed by the first. They are sadder, and the scope is less focused, but in their own way I thought they were equally fascinating and well done. More to the point, *Sunset Song* depends for its power on the fact that we are reading about the last throes of a particular way of life, and it's essential to Gibbon's project that he sees that through and describes exactly what comes after. To me, the first book is strong precisely because it is followed by books which detail Chris's move to a town and then a city, so that we feel the nostalgia for her country upbringing just as she does. Similarly, the urban interplay and Socialist parables of the last book only work because they come after such a naturalistic evocation of traditional Scottish country life.

Cloud Howe and *Grey Granite* are increasingly political, and some reviewers have even criticised Gibbon for being somehow 'taken in' by Socialism, but I don't recognise that at all. Sure, the writing shows a deep sympathy with the workers – as it damn well should – but there is no sentimentality here. Socialism, like religion, is dismissed as just another ideology, and if this trilogy is anything, it's unideological. The overriding message is rather that nothing at all is certain except change – that nothing, including love, but also including pain, can last forever, and that this is life's greatest sadness as well as its greatest comfort.

But it's certainly true that while you can deeply admire books two and three, it's only the first one that you fall in love with. As you near the end of the three novels, you are desperately hoping that Gibbon will throw you something to hang on to at the finish, some hint of the 'cool kindness' he talks about elsewhere. But you know he's too good to be kind at the expense of authenticity. The very end of Chris's story is like Scotland itself – bleak but not cruel, sad and beautiful. I'm pretty sure this trilogy is a masterpiece.

(Jan 2013)

Fiona says

I read this in 6th year of high school and it has stayed with me ever since. It's one of the most beautifully written, moving books I have ever read.

Caroline says

This is not an easy book to read. It's written in a kind of pseudo-Scots. But once you get your 'ear' in so to speak, it is the most beautiful read. It tells the story of Chris Guthrie, the daughter of a crofter who later marries a farm labourer. It's broken into the seasons of the year, so we follow her from Winter to Spring to Summer and Autumn (I have to admit this may be wrong it's about 20 years since I last read it).

Chris has a desperately hard life but when she marries she finds happiness with her husband and they have a baby. Unfortunately war breaks out and her husband is sent away to fight in France.

There's no more evocative telling of the Scottish crofting life and it is a Scottish classic for a good reason.

Roger Norman says

I've read this twice, neither time recently, but it's not a book (three books actually) you forget. A most beautiful love story set in the most remote and appealing landscape imaginable and peopled with larger-than-life characters. Who could be larger (or longer) than Long John o' the Mill? There's no answer to that.

Suzie says

Already read *Sunset Song*, probably going to give it a quick reread then tackle the rest.

Excellent. Just excellent. Review to follow.

EDIT: now I can't remember any of the great stuff I had to say about this book, goddamnit. Essentially, I think this is the best female character I have ever seen written in a book, and it was written by a man. What that should tell you I don't know. Too often I feel women are written in broad brush strokes, far more so than men - they're either decidedly within the traditional feminine stereotype, or an over-the-top caricature of what is seen as being opposite from feminine. It's late, my words are not of the good kind. Chris Guthrie is realistic - she is warm and kind and eminently sensible and rational, and sometimes cool, and sometimes stupid, and sometimes weak, but she is ALWAYS real.

I also love the language. I'm Scottish, and in some ways it feels completely alien to me. That's part of what I find beautiful about it.

The texture of the book, its root in the land, as it were, is sometimes a little hard to swallow, but for the most

part it's a good anchor to keep the story feeling cohesive, given the dramatic changes that take place between *Sunset Song* and *Cloud Howe*, and *Cloud Howe* and *Grey Granite*.

Sunset Song is by far the best of the three novels. It has the best characters and provided the only actual tearing up moment for me - the deaths of Chae Strachan and Long Rob of the Mill, plus OH GOD EUAN SR BREAK MY HEART YOU GIT. The secondary characters are so rich that you are really absorbed by the world of Blaewearie. *Cloud Howe* was equally easily my least favourite book - the secondary characters were pretty much universally unlikeable, and while I know that was the point, I missed having someone to "root" for as it were. Dalziel of the Meiklebogs was absolutely excellently slimey, but I missed having someone like Long Rob to temper things. *Grey Granite* is wonderful solely for Euan Jr's character development and the awesome *woman who owned the guest house with Chris and whose name I have completely forgotten, sigh*.

Anyway, nothing endures, as well we know, but thank god this book has, at least for a while. I beg every Scottish person I know to read it if they want an understanding of what has happened to their country over the last hundred years, and I beg every feminist I know to read it, because this is an important portrayal of a woman's life.

I want to say more about this, but I can't. It's a bit the opposite of my PopCo review: I actively stopped myself from rambling in it but I could have gone for absolute days about what is, ultimately, though a very good book, not anywhere near the level of this. ASQ is one of those rare "six star" books - where PopCo means something *right now*, ASQ will still mean something in fifty years, or a hundred years. I think if I break this down book-by-book then it might make things easier.

Sunset Song:

The most important, and beautiful, thing about *Sunset Song* is the character crafting. The setting is, inevitably, important, given the background of the struggle between agricultural survival against industrialisation, and, as I said earlier, the "rooting" of the book in the land - Chris's constant return to the standing stones, particularly at times of distress, is obviously not accidental, and is used to structure the whole book. The structure is maybe the only thing I could nitpick with, to be honest - eight shorter chapters in place of the four longer ones would maybe have worked better, but I am REALLY nitpicking. I tend to prefer shorter chapters anyway, so it's maybe just that - a preference. ANYWAY, the characterisation. Oh good lord, I was so on the side of these... I'm going to finish this in the morning or next week, I have to sleep now or I may faint.
