



Before Lunch

Angela Thirkell

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Middle-aged Catherine Middleton, married to an obtuse but endearing older man, is the still center of a swirl of two generations of gentry on the brink of WW II. The activities of youngsters and contemporaries go on around her and it is only gradually that one sees how, without conscious manipulation, nothing happens without her. The characters are subtly and humorously drawn--keep an eye on the hypochondriac and self-absorbed Miss Starter who displays a shrewd gift for defining the essentials and deflating the fatuous. At the end, youngsters and oldsters are properly sorted out and paired off, mostly as expected, after several false starts. Alistair, the older man who sets off after the 'ing nue' is nudged back into place with Catherine's sister-in-law (his contemporary). She, in turn, sees 'her young man' off to seek his dream, leaving her bereft of the companions of her mind and heart -- duty and honor intact, with the notion of 'self-fulfillment at all costs' decades away.

Before Lunch Details

Date : Published May 1st 2009 by Moyer Bell (first published 1939)

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Author : Angela Thirkell

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From Reader Review Before Lunch for online ebook

Leslie says

4.5*

Wanda McCaddon does a marvelous narration.

Rebekah says

FINALLY finished **Before Lunch** by Angela Thirkell. There were many reasons it took me so long. First was that I was listening to it on a platform (Hoopla) that made it difficult to just turn on whenever I wanted. Usually this would be on my walks (weather's been too cold) and in the car on my way to and from work. Secondly, the book did not keep my interest most of the way through. It is a little disconcerting to me how similar all 4 of the books I have read by her have been. The characters have all been very much the same, and also the plot points. Young callow man, in love with a considerably older married woman and young and old partnered with the wrong people that eventually get sorted out by the end. The end of this one was a little bittersweet and a tad melancholy for one couple.

Before Lunch features many mentions and brief appearances of several characters from the other 2 novels I have read by her. This would normally charm and interest me, but I couldn't remember the revisited characters well enough to care much. I probably could have stayed engaged better if this has not been an audio book. For me, it really didn't pick up until about halfway through. I still had some chuckles over Thirkell's wry observations and witty turns of phrase, but I think I am going to take a little break from her for awhile. Too many books, so little time, and all that. Also, I would have to pay for anymore I read: I think I've exhausted all of the titles my library has available.

Miriam says

These Carol & Graf reprints had much better editing than the more recent editions.

Ann says

Angela Thirkell's pre-WW II novel explores the strange undercurrents that can exist between even the most civilized and reserved Britshers.

Mr. Middleton, a loquacious architect who likes to imagine himself a country squire in the weekend, is having his widowed sister and her two stepchildren Daphne and Denis as renters in the neighboring house. Mr. Middleton's long-term business associate, Mr. Cameron, is a frequent guest. Before long, all of them are deeply involved in county business, especially the vexing question of some upstart planning to build houses on a beloved field. Denis, fragile, artistic, perhaps a little overprotected by his doting step-mother, develops an attachment to the quiet Mrs. Middleton, even though nothing is ever said between them. Daphne seems to waffle between the attentions of young Mr. Bond, son of Lord and Lady Bond, and those of Mr. Cameron.

Mrs. Middleton and Lilion Stonor watch all these fluctuating attachments without saying much but while feeling all the more. Daphne gets briefly engaged to the wrong man, the imperious Lady Bond is subtly outmanoeuvered, and Denis gets to realize a professional dream. Mrs. Middleton, who loves her husband but is not blind to his faults, suffers in silence as the two friends who are dearest to her must inevitably detach themselves a little. In the end, disaster is averted, two couples get engaged, the endangered field is miraculously salvaged, and the prize heifer delivers a beautiful calf. And all that before lunch!

Anna_schtr says

One of the best, and saddest Angela Thirkell's. A bit of a midlife crisis, lots of stiff upper lip. And gentle humor. And that special brand of rather resigned love. This time the author goes just a bit deeper and perhaps reveals a little more about herself than in any other of her books.

Mela says

Yes. It is extraordinary how many things can happen before lunch.

This book had/was:

- > **British charm**
- > **witty dialogues**
- > **wise, observant eye of Angela Thirkell**
- > **smart and funny satire of British society living in countryside**
- > **perfectly chosen and described characters**
- > **unusual, original love stories** (I mean, Mrs. Thirkell connected people who most writers wouldn't have connected).

These (mentioned above) things you can find in her other books. In this one, they created an almost perfect novel. I really appreciate that Thirkell's characters had a real job. That they had an ordinary life.

In "Before lunch" I loved especially:

- > young Bond's witty tongue,
- > the way Daphne's confidence and character stability crumbled because of love,
- > relationship between Mrs. and Mr. Middleton and between Mrs. Middleton and Denis,
- > the bittersweet note that was hanging in the story.

I admit also that there was (as for me) a bit too much talking about cows, arrangements for the meeting and food. But I can forgive it. ;-)

So, in summary, I still value a bit more Wild Strawberries and High Rising than Before Lunch. But, I think also that I will remember all Thirkell's books for a long time, at least some aspects of each of them.

Teri-K says

I'll admit up front that I sometimes complain about books that don't have enough going on. Most novels require a fair amount of plot, I think, and some are very lacking. I wouldn't make that complaint about a Thirkell novel, however. In her novels not much happens, slowly, with humor and insight and great delight.

Take this book, for instance. The locals are upset about the proposed development of a certain plot of land, so they plan to protest. First they need to hold a meeting to organize the meeting where they will discuss the problem. Half way through the book they are just holding the first get-together. What happens at it?

Absolutely nothing. Did I find myself grumbling about not enough going on? Absolutely not. I'm having too much fun with clueless husbands who natter on about how they can never get a word in edgewise, the local dairy cow rivalry, and generally wondering exactly who is falling for whom and how it will all work out.

It's not easy to lampoon people's frailties without coming across as sour or judgmental, but she succeeds. And I get a kick out of books where the men fall hopelessly in love but the women are often more interested in livestock, or dogs, or gardening. (It's refreshing after so many modern books where the girls act like they can't live without a man.)

Also in this book the author shows her ability to portray life's sadness and shortcomings without melodrama. Her books are full of characters who are in love, but they still manage to let down or hurt each other. Thirkell clearly realized that marriage isn't all happiness and love isn't without sadness, disappointment or pain. I think the Middleton's relationship shows this really well. But it's not the only one here that does. I like this approach so much more than writers who beat you over the head with life's sorrows.

This may be one of the best Barchester novels, and would be a good one for a first-time reader to try. There's a lovely balance of description and plot, humor and pathos. Thirkell was a genius. :)

cloudyskye says

Not my favourite Thirkell, but still sweet and funny. I love Daphne and Cedric, Denis, Lilian, Cameron, even Lady Bond.

But poor Catherine Middleton!

(Never thought I'd ever write those words! ;))

Deb says

Poor Mrs Middleton....

Emily says

2.5

My least favorite of the Thirkells I've read thus far, and indeed I found most of the book crushingly boring. It had some charm (I liked the youthful composer of modern music so good naturally playing Gilbert and

Sullivan to old Lord Bond by the hour), but really, *so* little happened, even by Thirkell's standards. Also, I was further disgruntled on coming on the goodreads to rate the book, to see that I inadvertently jumped two books ahead in the (admittedly, rather loose) series. This is not this book's fault, but then who ever said life was fair.

Mary says

A delightful read.
Told with wit and charm.
If you ever need cheering up this one is perfect.
Who will end up with who I wonder?
I loved it!

Dana Loo says

Troppi carini questi romanzi della Thirkell, ambientati in deliziose contee inglesi, ricchi di personaggi eccentrici, pittoreschi, british fino al midollo, vivaci e comiche schermaglie verbali, vicende amorose. Insomma letture godibilissime per chi ama calarsi in atmosfere tipicamente inglesi ed estraniarsi un po' dalla realtà...

Alisha says

Mr. Middleton's sister Lilian Stonor and her stepchildren Daphne and Denis are coming to live next door for the summer.

Daphne soon finds herself the object of attentions from two men. C.W. Bond is a neighbor, a young man with extremely suitable prospects in life and good family. Alister Cameron is a much older man who nonetheless finds himself completely taken by Daphne. Stepmother Lilian frets over the situation, certain that Alister is going to get his heart broken. The fact that he is actually closer to her own age and that they are very sympathetic friends has *nothing* to do with it.

Then there is Denis, a sickly young man with musical talent and a dream of writing a new ballet, but no money to produce it. His kindness to Lord Bond, a slightly henpecked gentleman with a fondness for Gilbert & Sullivan, may just open up some new possibilities for Denis' future. Denis also develops a friendship with Mrs. Middleton, the weary but sympathetic wife of his stepmother's brother. This friendship is a vaguely unsettling vibe in the book, but it is allowed to drop at the end.

Angela Thirkell: I think I've said it before. She falls somewhere in between the traditional and the modern, and her books vary in how recommendable they are to people who love the traditional, old-fashioned stuff. Also she seems to have some stock characters that kind of get moved from one book to another. The vapid-but-ultimately-intelligent middle-aged woman is one. Also the young, idealistic man who respectfully worships from afar an older, unattainable woman. Also the boisterous, capable young woman who is enthusiastically interested in either A) cows, B) pigs, or C) severe injury and sickness.

Weird stock characters, no?

There are some real laugh-worthy lines in this one, though.

eghzarw says

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QNPoohBear says

Mrs. Stoner and her grown step-children, Denis and Daphne have come to spend the summer with Mrs. Stoner's brother, Mrs. Middleton. Mrs. Stoner and her sister-in-law, Catherine (Catherine Middleton!) soon become fast friends. Denis also befriends Mrs. Middleton, whom he believes to be long-suffering and also becomes close with Lord Bond, who IS long-suffering. Daphne makes new friends too: Mr. Cameron, the law partner of Mr. Middleton and C.W., the son of Lord and Lady Bond. She soon makes herself indispensable to the local gentry and falls in love... with cows. Lady Bond and Mr. Middleton are incensed that someone would build a garage on a historic piece of land and are determined to DO something about it. As the summer goes on, no one wants anything to change; but change must happen sooner or later.

This story is relatively simple for Angela Thirkell. It took a few pages to figure out all the characters but once I knew who they were, I got into it. The romantic plot is slightly more complicated than I expected. I dislike love triangles as a rule but this one was interesting and I wasn't sure who would end up with who. There is one romance that borders on emotional affair but it is never acted on.

The social satire of the novel centers around Mr. Middleton and isn't laugh out loud funny, but it is the sort of thing Jane Austen would have picked up on and made fun of in her novels. Angela Thirkell also skewered the gluten-free health craze. I know certain people CAN'T tolerate gluten but here we have a hypochondriac who can't eat starch or ice or anything else really. She has a special diet bread that she eats and makes her hosts track it down for her. Miss Starter would be right at home in Jane Austen's unfinished Sanditon.

I loved the bucolic countryside and the quirky people of the neighborhood, except Mr. Middleton. He's a prosy bore and completely self-centered-most of the time. Once in awhile he would surprise me by being very sweet. He's sort of a more intelligent Mr. Collins (Pride and Prejudice) while his wife is too kind and good to be married to such a man. They make it work somehow and are very fond of each other. I simply adored all the old men in this book. Lord Bond is especially sweet and I felt very sorry for him to first be lorded over by his mother and then his wife (at one point BOTH). He seems a very dear man who has few pleasures in life. Another funny character is Ed, who is a bit simple but knows everything about cars and naughty old folk songs. His driving made me cringe, want to be sick and laugh all at the same time. Mr. Pucken is also hilarious with his cows and his knowing eye.

The secondary women were also great characters. Lady Bond is frightening! Lu Pucken, the maid named for Lady Bond (Lucasta) is silly, romantic and clumsy but somehow endearing. I felt bad for her having to work under her mother's hyper-observant eye. Mrs. Pucken is pretty funny, unintentionally on her part. Flora the dog even manages to be funny despite her master's insistence on her devotion to him.

As for the main female characters, I wasn't crazy about any of them. I did not like Daphne at first. She seemed ditzy and sounded like she was going to be an annoying twit like Rose, the Dean's daughter. Daphne

surprised me. I loved the way she handled bullies. I grew to like her because of it and because of her fondness for the country (and cows). Mrs. Stoner (Lillian) is gentle and kind but kind of silly at times and her speeches were always rambling and incoherent. I wasn't crazy about the way she smothered Denis though she did what she felt was right. Her story ends in a surprising way. I didn't see that coming. Mrs. Middleton is in a tough spot but she went into her marriage as an adult and knew it wasn't ideal. She's the Charlotte Lucas character of this book. Catherine is kind and caring but her nerves wear down listening to her pompous idiot husband. I could not stand being married to him but she is fond of him in her own way and he of her.

The main male characters were not quite as appealing. Denis is a musician and also a semi-invalid. I wanted to tell him to throw away the doctor's medicine, eat healthy and exercise and he would be fine. He's not a hypochondriac, he's just been fussed over too much and made to believe he's sickly and sensitive. He's more astute than the rest of his family and a little more gentle and kind. Mr. Cameron is a nice enough chap but completely blind to anything except what he thinks he is feeling. C.W. is a wonder considering his mother. He is not at all spoiled or affected and will make a great lord of the manor someday- if he survives. I liked him best of the younger men.

This is a simple, sweet book. It's not quite Angela Thirkell's best but it's a very typically English countryside set novel. I plan to read more of the series.
