



Dusty Answer

Rosamond Lehmann , Jonathan Coe (Introduction)

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Dusty Answer is Judith Earle's story—her solitary childhood spent in the seclusion of her riverside house, her awkward, intense experiences at Cambridge rounded with passion and disillusionment, and her travels abroad with her elegant, socialite mother. Above all, this novel is about Judith's consuming relationship with the Fyfe family, who each fall in love with Judith, transforming her young womanhood.

Dusty Answer Details

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From Reader Review Dusty Answer for online ebook

Leonie says

Outside, where the gentle dusk glimmered on rain-wet branches, the bird-calls were like sudden pale jets of light, coming aching to the mind; and all at once the sun, like a bell, struck out a poignant richness, a long dark-golden evening note with tears in it, searching all the land with its fullness and dying slowly into a obscurer twilight. The tree-tops were quiet against the sky. There was no leaf upon them: yet, in that liquid mauve air, they stirred in her a sudden soft pang, a beating of the heart, and were, for a moment, the whole of the still hidden spring.

There's a lot of this lilac nature description. I don't think the things described tend to be very happy. Trembling, overwhelmed with their own realisation, at best. It suits the kind of emotional cornucopia this book is, full of deliciously melancholy excess of emotion. It's a juicily archetypal book about youth, in a very feminine way.

Judith is one of those lonely only children in love with a family, four boys and a girl. The family flutters in and out of her life without warning. I liked the descriptions of the painful jarring it is to have someone who has become a comfortable occupant of your mind appear in reality. Lehmann later described Judith as "a revolting character really, soppy." This is true enough. She's about as wet as they come. But I'm a sucker for a wanter. In childhood she has a crush on tempestuous golden boy Charlie, though reliable plodding Martin has a crush on her. After he's killed in WWI she quite deliberately transfers her affections to the slightly odd, distant Roddy, while having the odd moment of camaraderie with prickly, pretentious Julian.

Nothing really happens. There's no actual romance in this book. Judith goes off to Cambridge without getting to consummate any of her feelings. There she has a passionate friendship with Jennifer, a charismatic girl full of golden life, who breaks her heart by running off to be a lesbian amid great drama. Roddy occasionally visits her. She thinks they have a moments, though it's hard for her to be sure. Martin occasionally visits her, but she finds it hard to let him pine, even though she values him for his connection to Roddy.

Finally she offers herself to Roddy and finds he's not that into her. I did wish Judith had acknowledged that she deliberately decided to be in love with Roddy, so as to be in love. Everyone is in love with someone who's in love with someone else. The book ends with the dustiest answer Lehmann can devise, the classic ending of this variant of the bildungsroman. Everything Judith has invested in has disappeared. She will have to somehow create something new, but this book is all tragedy and doomed glorious youth. Like I said, I like wanting and this book is all about wanting.

Bryn (Plus Others) says

Memory is a strange thing. I read this book once perhaps fifteen years ago, more or less, and in my memory Judith's childhood & her fascination with her neighbours during it was the bulk of the book, and the time at Cambridge just a little piece at the end. Reading it again now, I find that is not how it is structured at all; perhaps the first third is the flashback to her childhood, and then a very long part at Cambridge, and then another section afterwards. And of course, as I am older, I read Judith differently as well; there was a time when I took for granted her (view spoiler)

This is not to say that she is a terrible person; I do not think she is, just young and without any grounding -- she has some rules to get by on, but no idea what the rules are for, what it is that they are supposed to be guiding her towards and protecting her (and others) from.

And then, the lesbianism -- which Lehmann claimed was not there, but that she did so fascinates me. For I found it impossible to read (view spoiler)

The more I write about this, the more I realise how much power this book has -- I simply cannot treat these characters as anything other than actual people, and I understand in a way I am not certain I have words for how Lehmann could insist there was no lesbianism in the book and yet be wrong -- she wrote what she saw and knew, very accurately, and the words for those things have changed, there are ideas about people and relationship now that she did not really have access to. I am very glad I reread it with adult eyes, and I think I will read more Lehmann; this is her first novel, and I wonder how they changed with her own adulthood.

Mary says

I loved this book of young love.
Judith Earle has always been in love with each of her four cousins.
Summers spent playing outside in the countryside.
All will change when Judith goes to Cambridge college and meets Jennifer!
A coming of age novel where one learns who to love and trust.
It's hard to believe this was Rosamond's first novel.
I will be looking out for more of her wonderful books.

Tzatziki says

Mi sono trovato per sbaglio in un lesbodramma psicologico in cui tutti giocano a far male a qualcuno solo perché qualcun altro ha fatto soffrire loro.
Praticamente una manica di imbecilli che giocano a far fuori chi è più debole, fragile o ingenuo.
Non fosse per le belle descrizioni di alberi, fiori, giardini, profumi, fiumi, salotti e verande, sarebbe assolutamente evitabile.

Bettie? says

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00thwrr>

Description: *Rosamund Lehmann's first novel Dusty Answer records the education of Judith Earle, the only child of an academic father and socialite mother. Judith grew up in the seclusion of a large riverside house in the Thames Valley. The house next door is occupied from time to time by the Fyfe family whose children - cousins Charlie, Roddy, Julian and Martin drift in and out of her life.*

Part One sees Judith reminiscing about her childhood where the seeds of her strong friendship with the

cousins are laid. Many years have passed and the cousins return in adolescence for an atmospheric day of skating on the pond.

Part Two. Judith realises the Fyfe cousins have returned to the house next door during a midnight swim in the river which joins both gardens . After days spent dancing, playing the piano and getting to know her neighbours again an unexpected telegram arrives from her mother in Paris.

Part Three. Judith arrives in Cambridge and can't find her room. She wonders how she will settle down but soon meets fellow student Jennifer who is to become a great friend. During the winter snow, Roddy comes to visit ...

Part Four Judith is invited to a picnic with Julian and Martin, and Roddy takes her for a trip in a canoe. Romance rears its head ...but which of the cousins is it to be ?

Part Five. Whilst travelling in France with her mother, Judith meets up with Julian. They enjoy the French heat together until his sudden departure. Jennifer steps back into her life...

Pas de bas

Dosi do

Change your partner

There you go!

- Bettie

A book based on a square dance that comes full circle, penned contemporary to Bloomsbury Set, that circle who lived in squares and loved in triangles.

DUSTY ANSWER by Rosamund Lehmann dramatised by Lavinia Greenlaw

Narrator Julia Hills

Judith Rosina Carbone

Charlie Jack Farthing

Martin Oliver Gomm

Julian Tom Ferguson

Gardener Stephen Tomlin

TR The Weather in the Streets

4* The Echoing Grove

3* Dusty Answer

TR Rosamond Lehmann by Selina Hastings

Roman Clodia says

(I'm currently reading My Brilliant Friend and it's recalling 1930s women writers like Lehmann and Antonia White so even though I read this in 2006, I'm posting the review here now)

A haunting evocation of the loss of innocence

Judith, sensitive, lonely and secretive, meets the family of cousins who move in next door and falls in love with all of them. This exquisite novel follows her relationships, the disappointments, the joys and the ultimate heartbreak that she experiences as she engages with life and grows from an innocent girl to a woman.

Brilliantly written, evocative and passionate, this is, for me, Lehmann's best novel.

Margot says

There is some books, stories or even characters that you put in the corner of your mind, in the corner of your heart and they follow you everywhere you go. Judith and Roddy follow me everywhere. Rosamond Lehmann isn't well-known here (not for the common readers at least) and I discovered the book thanks to "Atonement" by Ian McEwan (who mentions the book in the novel when a journalist compares Briony's story to "Dusty Answer"). I was curious and chased down the book. There was no more publications of this book and I had to wait almost six months to finally read it. I was so ecstatic the day I got it in my hands...

The atmosphere reminds me of "Atonement" in many ways. Early 1900's England, the burden of the war and all the lost it has created. Judith is both a fascinated and fascinating character. We discover her in her early childhood when she was playing with the next-door family, The Fyfe, a group of cousins who came in the English countryside for the holiday. She is really fascinated by all of them: but little by little she becomes more and more attracted by Roddy Fyfe, the artistic and tortured soul. Time passes and one day, Judith is almost an adult. The war has affected the Fyfe family who finally comes back to their grand-mother's house. The reunion between Judith and The Fyfe is really strong and invites all of them to remember their childhood and the feelings they share. There is a twist in the story because when she was a little girl, Judith was fascinated by the Fyfe family but now that she is a grown-up, they are fascinated by her. The power of beauty, the power of mystery... The death of the older member of the family will cause many changes.

I love Rosamond Lehmann's writing. It's like a delicate hand which invites you to enter a world of imagination. At the same time, everything seems so real: the scents, the presence of Roddy next to Judith, the trouble she is feeling when he is near to her. The strength of Judith's feeling almost breaks my heart and the climax of the book is just perfect. You can't have expected anything else between the two characters. The end of a book is really important for me. And the end of "Dusty answer" is just perfect for me. It leaves a taste of nostalgia, a taste of regrets for the things you didn't do or didn't have the courage to tempt at least. It emphasizes the loneliness of all the characters of the novel, like all the pain and all the years didn't have change anything, just as if time couldn't have any impact on the destiny of men. You just try to hang out on something, or someone, and one day you suddenly realize that it's gone away and you didn't even notice. Maybe a dream must remain a dream. George Bernard Shaw writes in "Man and superman", Act 4 (1903): "There is two tragedies in life. One is not to get your heart's desire. The other is to get it". I think that it's a good way to express my state of mind after the last page of the book.

The ties between all the characters, the tragedy of resignation and fear (the fear of opening your heart to anybody), the burden of untelling feelings and desires, the weight of death and memories, make this book one of the greatest I have ever read.

Denis says

A forgotten British classic that for some reasons has always been popular in some parts of Europe - it seems never to have been out of print in France. -The prose is exquisite, Lehmann's gift with the English language is amazing and you want to remember most of her sentences for their sheer beauty and the emotions they convey. It's also one of the most beautiful, tender, and melancholic books ever written about adolescence and loss, and it captures the fleeting, elusive complexities of this time in life like few novels have been able to do. If only for this book, Lehmann remains of the great British writers of her time.

Jennie Rogers says

Bits reminded me of my loves *Brideshead Revisited* & *The Great Gatsby* & *The Secret History* but the narrator is more level with her longed for objects of desire: her family is well off, she's clever & pretty & has smart clothes & when she is heartbroken she gets to escape to France & have a love affair yet it isn't good enough for her still.

This book is muddled because everyone longs for someone who isn't around & they lead people on who love them. No one is ever good enough. Everyone is rotten in this book.

The prose is beautiful though & parts I adored. Reading more Lehmann soon.

Margaret says

This was Lehmann's first novel, published in 1927 when she was just 26. Sales were initially slow, and not much critical notice was taken of the book until Alfred Noyes gave it a glowing review in the *Sunday Times*, making *Dusty Answer* a bestseller almost overnight.

Its heroine, Judith Earle, is an intelligent, earnest girl who becomes entangled in the lives of five cousins who have occasionally visited at the house next door to Judith's; Judith played with them as a child, and years later, comes to know them again as she enters adulthood. When they reenter her life, she falls desperately in love with one of them.

There's also a very powerful relationship between Judith and a fellow student at Girton, which scandalized reviewers who saw in it lesbian undertones. (Lehmann indignantly denied this, and unfortunately, the character in the book who's more clearly meant to be a lesbian is unattractively portrayed.)

Dusty Answer often lacks narrative drive (especially in the rather uncertain, diffuse ending), but its intense, often idyllic, and impassioned style is compelling, a foretaste of things to come.

Margot says

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not set [edit]

Aug 06, 2010

Mariel says

"You don't," she said petulantly. "Because you've never troubled to find out what I'm really like. It's never occurred to you there might be anything more than what you see. That's so like a man.... Lord, how stupid! Everybody dismissed with a little label. Everybody taken for granted once they've passed a few idiotic conventional tests...."

Dusty Answer is a black pot calling another black pot black situation. Little girl Judith romanticizes the four teens living with their grandmother during holidays. I never found out why none of these people ever find other people. Martin, Mariella, Julian and Roddy are freaking related to each other. Charlie dies young so I guess I can forgive him for marrying his cousin Mariella and dying soon after the birth of their first child. He's horny and it happens. But come on, they go away to schools where you don't have to study or anything. No one has to do anything except attend parties with other glamorous people in England. World war doesn't even stop these kids. I lost it when Julian appears after another absence (nothing happens in this book except

absences where people return more glamorous than they were before. Do you remember me? I could never forget you! We are all so pretty!) an international tennis star. Of course he is! Why not, he's perfect at music and art. All he needs is a girl younger than him to suggest how brilliant he naturally is to pick up another hidden talent. Judith had a crush on Charlie because he's beautiful. I pictured everyone to look like pretty people in a swinging episode of Poirot. Sadly, this didn't get anyone murdered. I tried. Roddy appears less and pays her the least amount of attention so she picks him to obsess over throughout adolescence. There's a girl in her school, Jennifer, she carries on a relationship of platitudes and you're not giving me enough attention drama. The book jacket swears this is a romantic relationship. They don't do anything other than be possessive. That's all anyone does in *Dusty Answer*. Judith may as well have stayed the little girl day dreaming about the kids next door. She never forgets any of their birthdays, never a detail about that house. Mariella can't stand Judith. I suspect she knew that if these boys interacted with other females she wouldn't be worshiped any longer. Her whole appeal is that Judith knows from the mysterious psychic place that she doesn't like her. If she could win over Mariella than everything would be better. She loves Julian because he likes her the least out of her romantic pool of relatives. Mariella's personality is that she doesn't have one. I must have been a no personality cockroach in a past life. My punishment in this one is to keep reading books about glamour girls who laugh a lot and flatter the men in their lives with just the right laugh at just the right time. She stares at Julian a lot and he pokes and prods at every body else to tell him the fears he harbors deep down are unfounded. You know, the person who likes you if you magically put all their shit into terms that make them feel like super stars of the universe. Tell me what I don't know myself! I hate this kind of person but whatever gets them in their naughty parts, I guess. Martin kinda follows Judith, Mariella and Roddy around. Everyone ignored Martin so Martin had to be in love with everyone. The book jacket suggests that Roddy was gay and this was why he never returns Judith's obsession. I got more that another young man, Tony, was in love with Roddy and Roddy doesn't care what happens as long as someone is around to make moony faces at him. (I waited for someone to be indifferent to Roddy so he would join the love geometry shape too.) He doesn't bother to correct Judith when she takes this shit seriously. If *Dusty Answer* was half as long as it was and dropped the self righteous pot kettle stuff it could have been almost good. It is at least too good at the stuff when you're young and the looks in the eyes of others seem to confirm every thing you're afraid is true about yourself. It's wrong that it says something about you what someone else wants. If I were indifferent to this book more it would be in love with me. I liked Lehmann's other books better (especially *Weather in the Streets*). I remember reading that she was like this in her own life. Putting other people on pedestals and then falling hard when the only thing they wanted from you was to be a reflection of how hot they wanted to be. Yeah, okay, but what is different about Judith? Sure she thinks at the end she's over this shit now and only needs herself. I wish she could have been honest about anything and then I could have believed it. What was missing in her life? It is glossed over when her dad dies except for Judith to be said that Mariella doesn't write her a personal note. What was she making these neighbors EVERYTHING for? I feel like the point in wanting anything at all was completely missed and that my life is over when I keep choosing the wrong books to read. Judith should want herself more than she wants them but there's something empty in life anyway. She hides in them her whole life and then some fog lifts and it is Judith sailing here on out? Really?

Bob says

This is Lehmann's first novel, from 1927. I didn't realize it is her most famous, a "succès de scandale" for its "sensitive treatment of homosexuality" (in 1970s jacket copy, the "treatment" is always either "sensitive" or "frank").

Judith, an intelligent only child of well-to-do but emotionally distant parents, educated at home, becomes infatuated with the neighboring children, who are siblings and cousins all living with one grandmother (for a

variety of reasons - they are not orphaned). She sees them off and on over a decade and by young adulthood goes through a series of entanglements with three of the young men, always one-sided and ill-fated and overhung by her torrid Cambridge relationship with the elusive Jennifer.

I am making it sound like a bit of a soap opera but Lehmann is an elegant writer and creates complex characters - this is the 4th or 5th novel of hers I've read.

Her own life was quite storied - leaving her first husband (2nd Viscount) for a 2nd Baron (who, before acceding to his hereditary title, ran for the House of Commons as a Communist), left the latter for a 9-year affair with Cecil Day-Lewis - etc!

Ali says

Oh my I loved this novel. It is amazing to think that this novel first published in 1927 was Rosamund Lehmann's first novel. It is so beautifully written, passionate and finely observed. The voices of these young people resonate wonderfully. Their manner of speech could seem affected and odd in these modern times, and yet it serves to demonstrate and bring to life for us now, the times and emotional confusions of so many young people between the wars. This novel must have caused quite a stir upon its publication, as the naive Judith becomes enamoured first of Jennifer whilst at Cambridge, and then falls recklessly in love with Roddy, one member of the Fyfe family who had so mesmerised her as a child. The lives of Judith and the Fyfe family are dramatic, sad and sometimes hopeless.

Misha says

“Ah, what a dusty answer gets the soul/When hot for certainties in this our life!”—George Meredith

My father-in-law introduced me to Rosamond Lehmann. He sent me a copy of “The Heart of Me,” a film starring Paul Bettany, Olivia Williams and Helena Bonham Carter, a film based on Lehmann’s novel *The Echoing Grove*. Rosamond Lehmann was a British, 20th-century author who wrote incisively about women’s interior lives. Her writing is deft, accomplished, and, at times, a little melodramatic. Her characters live life large, their emotions strong and formidable, and they dream and love big even as reality thwarts and sometimes destroys them.

Lehmann’s first novel, *Dusty Answer*, published in 1927, delves into a young woman’s life and mind in an emotional coming-of-age story. It also explores the then taboo theme of homosexuality.

Judith Earle grows up in rural England with mostly indifferent parents who homeschool her. In the house next door, a group of cousins comes periodically to stay with their grandmother. The Fyfe children, Roddy, Julian, Charles, Martin and Mariella, absorb and enchant Judith’s life and daydreams, unbeknownst to them. The passages in the beginning of the novel float in a realm of memory and obsession:

She saw it all with the quivering overclear sense of exhaustion. It was too much. Roddy’s pale pace was all at once significant, even Charlie, floated away while she looked at him and loved him. And as she looked she saw the deep light falling on him and he seemed mingled with the whole mysterious goldenness of the evening, to be part of it; and she felt herself lost with him in a sudden dark poignant intimacy and merging,—a lifting flood, all come and gone in a timeless moment.

Judith idealizes the Fyfes, and it is this dance of knowing they do not reciprocate (until they do) and that she must hide it from them that makes and unmakes her. Judith is not a terribly likeable young woman at times, but Lehmann takes you into her mind and into her inexhaustible well of feelings and impressions and you cannot help but understand and empathize with her. When Judith goes to college and falls in with the magnetic Jennifer and is carried away into a friendship/affair with her, she almost escapes the mysterious, brooding Fyfes. But even Jennifer, who eventually leaves Judith for a more open lesbian affair (the lesbian themes are quite tame and veiled for today's readers), cannot curb Judith's love for the elusive Roddy.

Virago Press has been reprinting many of Rosamond Lehmann's books, as well as other books by women writers that might otherwise be forgotten. I own the Virago edition of *The Echoing Grove*, but my copy of *Dusty Answer* was an on Harvest/Harcourt copy whose glue was so brittle the entire book cracked apart as I read it. I taped the spine so I could keep reading it on the bus.

I can't say I loved this book, but I appreciated aspects of it. But what I find fascinating in today's world, where reading blogs and social networking sites abound, is that now you can read an out of print or semi-obscure book and find others in far flung places who are reading the very same things. I was delighted to find this blog, where I found my reading itinerary was taking some similar twists and turns.

It says something about this generation of readers that we can take Christopher Morley's mantra, "Read, every day, something no one else is reading," and then find other readers who are doing the same. Does this defeat the purpose, or take away the mystery of wondering who else out there might be discovering a book or author? Perhaps. But it also means that book discussions can happen in new and fascinating ways. Call it book groups without boundaries.

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