



## The Lie of the Land

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## **The Lie of the Land** Amanda Craig

Quentin and Lottie Bredin, like many modern couples, can't afford to divorce. Having lost their jobs in the recession, they can't afford to go on living in London; instead, they must downsize and move their three children to a house in a remote part of Devon. Arrogant and adulterous, Quentin can't understand why Lottie is so angry; devastated and humiliated, Lottie feels herself to have been intolerably wounded.

Mud, mice and quarrels are one thing - but why is their rent so low? What is the mystery surrounding their unappealing new home? The beauty of the landscape is ravishing, yet it conceals a dark side involving poverty, revenge, abuse and violence which will rise up to threaten them.

Sally Verity, happily married but unhappily childless knows a different side to country life, as both a Health Visitor and a sheep farmer's wife; and when Lottie's innocent teenage son Xan gets a zero-hours contract at a local pie factory, he sees yet another. At the end of their year, the lives of all will be changed for ever.

A suspenseful black comedy, this is a rich, compassionate and enthralling novel in its depiction of the English countryside, and the potentially lethal interplay between money and marriage.

## **The Lie of the Land Details**

Date : Published June 15th 2017 by Little, Brown Book Group

ISBN :

Author : Amanda Craig

Format : Kindle Edition 432 pages

Genre : Fiction, Mystery, European Literature, British Literature, Literary Fiction, Novels

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## From Reader Review The Lie of the Land for online ebook

### **Maya Panika says**

An extraordinarily readable, engaging and gripping tale, but less for its plot than its brilliantly observed and executed look at Britain today. Ostensibly, this is a mystery surrounding a Devon farmhouse - a secret every local knows, but not the once-well-off London family who find themselves living there when hard times strike and they can no longer afford to stay in London - or divorce. Lottie has to stay with her serially unfaithful husband Quentin because they simply cannot afford the inevitable split in assets and income divorce will impose.

The plot is nicely done, with twists and mysteries emerging as the tale develops - enough to keep the reader interested. But though it's the plot that ties everything together and give the tale its purpose, for me, the real story - where all the page-turny interest lies - is in this snapshot of a certain kind of person (liberal, soft-left, middle-class, London), coming from that secure and well-heeled, comfortable world, so secure in its opinions and certainty (dare one say 'smug'?) in the righteousness of its opinions, suddenly thrust into a altogether different place. A rural idyll that is (of course) nothing of the kind; where people are forced to work horrible shifts on zero hours contracts and find their wages forced downwards wherever the Poles are in town. The Poles get short shrift too; diligent, prudent and hard working they may be, but they ghettoise themselves, holding themselves apart, deeply contemptuous of the native population and culture and other immigrant groups (as is always the case). Lottie's son Xan knows his mixed race status makes him an object of local curiosity (but rarely contempt). He sometimes misses London, but in many ways, he is quickest to find his feet in his strange new Devon world. Working long shifts in the pie factory, moving in with a Polish girl, Xan finds his attitudes shifting. He knows why people here voted Leave; he even considers voting UKIP. There's nothing clumsy in this adjusting of attitudes, to becoming 'local' - it happens slowly, organically, with great skill. It is a beautifully written book, it truly makes one think and see that there truly are two sides to every coin and both may be correct; it's all a matter of perspective, depending on what side of the coin you're living on. It's all down to the writing, which is subtle and clever without ever being difficult. It is this clever craftsmanship melding sociology, attitudes and the questions these things raise - this clever snapshot of modern Britain - that I found most compelling and entertaining.

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### **Sam says**

This is a surprise of a book, it begins with the disintegration of a marriage and the need to move from London to Devon for financial reasons, and then surprisingly turns into a mystery. The plot weaves together well, and the characters are vivid, and varied. By the end of this book you will feel like you personally know the characters. It does; however, start slowly which may put some off. Overall, an enjoyable, well written book. The character construction is the star here.

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### **John says**

A very busy novel with lots going on and a book of many themes. It's been dubbed the first Brexit novel, I believe? but that is by no means its central theme. Marginalization? : Yes and as such the UK Brexit vote should have come as no surprise after reading this. On the subject of themes: women v men, town v country, racism, child abuse, all appear here. Good story line(s) and the book generally qualifies for me as a page

turner.

Quentin, something of a ‘ginger tom’, strays from home once too often and Lottie, his hard working, controlling wife, who has right on her side but rather milks it to death, shows him the door, metaphorically at least, only he doesn’t go away....When they both lose their jobs in London they up sticks with their family to Devon.

This is a long book, too long in by view by around 150 pages. As I neared the end, with so much happening the pace of the writing seemed to accelerate, and it felt as though the author had ran out of time. It left me feeling unsatisfied and a bit deflated, for the author as much as for myself: there is so much here which is brilliant but it seems to disperse in a Devon cloudburst. The ending was such that a sequel seemed to be lurking in the wings but do I want to make the effort second time around? Perhaps.

I heard Amanda Craig say recently that she’d had some good advice given to her as a young author. The advice was to include a murder into your story, unsolved throughout the bulk of the pages, your readership will then largely be a captive audience. That’s a pretty insightful comment as far as *The Lie of the Land* is concerned.

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### **Rebecca Foster says**

**(3.5)** A funny and insightful state-of-the-nation novel set in post-Brexit England. It’s in the same vein as Jonathan Coe’s *Number 11*, Laura Kaye’s *English Animals* and Rose Tremain’s *The Road Home*, and some of the characters (the journalist father, especially) reminded me of ones in Francesca Hornak’s *Seven Days of Us*. The central couple, Quentin and Lottie Bredin, want to divorce but can’t afford to, so they rent out their London home and move into a suspiciously cheap place in a Devon village, where their oldest son Xan goes to work in the “Humble Pie” factory to pass the time until he can try applying to universities again.

The book turns on a lot of dichotomies – city vs. country, manual labor vs. artistic careers, cruelty vs. charity – and mostly handles them in a sophisticated manner, not resorting to easy stereotypes. There are affecting pictures of a number of secondary characters, including Hugh, Quentin’s dying father, and Sally, a health visitor and farmer’s wife who’s desperate for a child. A few too many subplots mean that the book is overlong, and the final 60 pages or so get pretty silly due to a murder and its ramifications. The mesh between issues book and plotty mystery is not perfect, but on the whole I still enjoyed this very much.

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### **Kirsty &#x1f4da;&#x1f4d6;❤? says**

The book felt so much longer than it actually is without ever feeling like a lot of happening. Then you get near the end and realise you are completely wrong. It really does sneak up on you. There are so many layers to it with various points of view as told by the characters stories but also the viewpoints of city life versus country life.

Downsizing after the collapse of their marriage but like many modern day couples unable to afford to actually split up due to housing crisis and rising costs. They have to learn to be together as incomers to the country while dealing with unemployment, money worries, bringing up children, the impact of infidelity and

so much more. Quinten refuses to accept his actions and any wrong doing until a tragic loss. Lottie is trying to rebuild her life. Son Xan is trying to find his place in the world learning about how the other half live with his immigrant girlfriend and 12 hour shifts in the pie factory. He has a learning curve that ultimately makes him a better person.

I really wasn't sure about Sally's story. All her chapters seem to say the same thing and while her ending played apart in all the big reveal I think a lot of her story could have been dropped.

There's a lot of love for these characters and some of them appear in Craig's other works. You can really see how much the author cares for them. They're so loving described and created. It's a really beautiful piece of work.

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### **Lady R says**

Whaaaaat!!!! Seriously what just happened.... I HATE it when authors/editors do that.

This was a seriously good read - a voice that was very fresh and original dealing sensitively (whilst at the same time being a page-turner) with family relationships, love, marriage & modern-day Britain.

It was definitely a solid 4 or even 4.5 stars.

Then the last 70 pages descended into a farce with everything thrown at the plot and requires some ridiculous far-fetched stretches of the imagination.

It's as if Craig got towards the end of this novel but wasn't sure how to wrap it up and someone else came in who hadn't read the rest of the book and finished it off - I actually threw the book across the room at the end!!!

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### **Canadian Reader says**

Craig's new novel starts out relatively strong, appearing to be a meditation on marriage, Brexit, and the differences between urban and rural living. Sadly, it devolves into a messy melange: part potboiler, part mystery, and part soap opera, with a modicum of moralizing along the way. Lottie, an architect at a large London firm, and Quentin, a well-known journalist, have both lost their jobs. Not only that, their marriage has come apart because Quentin has been unfaithful. No longer able to afford their upscale London home and faced with the unlikelihood of its selling at a good price now, the two decide to rent it out until the real estate market improves. In the meantime, they and their young daughters—Stella, 8, and Rosie, 6, (along with Lottie's biracial teenaged son, Xan) will retreat to Devon where they can live inexpensively. The goal is to sell the London house in a year's time at a price that will provide each partner with sufficient capital to acquire more suitable housing. For now, Quentin and Lottie's relationship is a purely economic one. Forged

out of necessity, it ripples with barely contained resentment.

Craig asks the reader very early on to accept that her previously upwardly mobile pair, the Bredins—who recently lived high off the hog and could once afford to send their children to pricey private schools—now have few options beyond continuing to live together in the bitter wake of infidelity. Lottie feels betrayed and aggrieved; Quentin believes she's making too much of his multiple affairs, which to him meant and mean nothing, being mere scratchings of a midlife itch. Okay. . . somewhat reluctantly I accepted Craig's premise. The Bredins move to a damp farmhouse in rural Devon, discovering soon enough why the rent is so cheap: the previous tenant—a gentle, well-regarded music teacher—was recently murdered in a particularly grisly manner.

At this point in the narrative, the author develops Xan's story. Having failed to gain acceptance into Cambridge, he gets a job at a food processing plant, which requires long hours for a pittance of a wage. A good son who recognizes his mother's dire financial straits, he hands over a substantial portion of his earnings so that Lottie can pay the bills, even as she watches out for architectural work. Craig writes skillfully about Xan's experiences on the factory floor. She explores the attitudes and limited prospects of the rural poor, introducing a couple of credible characters who live hand to mouth. She also explores the anti-immigration and anti-government sentiments of people left behind by the central government's commitment to Europe and the forces of globalization. Craig even provides Xan with a sexy, Polish girlfriend, Katya, who also works at the pie factory. Through her, Craig is able to highlight some aspects of the culture, work ethic, and essential pragmatism of this sometimes resented group of foreigners.

Xan's commitment to the family makes Quentin's entitlement, laziness, and self-centredness stand out all the more. Quentin contributes little to the the running of the house, using some of his limited funds to pay an apparently deranged housekeeper to do his share of the cleaning and chores. His journalistic prospects have shrunk considerably; his only reliable work is a regular weekly column about life among the country bumpkins, which he writes under a pseudonym. (No one can know just how far he has fallen.) However, Quentin's allotted word count gradually contracts as his observations about the backwardness and general nastiness of rural life become increasingly bitter.

Other characters with more than bit parts in the novel are Lottie's cultured, German musician mother and Quentin's aging parents: his dying father, the philandering Hugh (a Ted-Hughes-like poet) and the wise, long-suffering Naomi, who has endured Hugh's bullying and belittling over the years because, well, . . . marriage is something you're in "for the long haul" and Hugh apparently has made her laugh. Quentin seethes with resentment towards his self-centred father, even as the elderly man rages against the dying of the light. In time, though, he recognizes his similarity to the older man.

Another character, Sally Verity, a visiting home midwife in her early forties, allows Craig a further route into the personal lives of people in this small section of Devon. Sally guides young women of limited education through pregnancy and helps them out of postnatal depression, confronting poverty, domestic and child abuse along the way. Married to sheep farmer, Peter, a taciturn, hardworking salt-of-the earth type, Sally participates in many of the farm's day to day activities, and has a particularly important role during the annual lambing. Sally's situation allows the author to provide convincing snapshots of farmers' hard lot in modern Britain. However, the midwife is ironically unable to bear children of her own. Rather than leaving well enough alone, Craig hovers in an almost maudlin manner over her childless character, who so badly wants a baby. Eventually, like a good fairy or a benevolent fertility goddess, the author forcefully steers her plot in ridiculous directions to give Sally what she wants and deserves.

So far, so good—or, at least, an acceptable enough story. However, in its last quarter, *The Lie of the Land*

goes entirely off the rails as Craig attempts to resolve her murder-mystery subplot. The disturbed dark fury, Janet Pigeon (aka “Maleficent” by some of the Bredins)—whom Quentin has hired to do his share of the housework—also works for the Bredins’ landlord, the famous septuagenarian rock star, Gore Tore, and his family. Janet lives in the gatehouse of Tore’s sprawling, gothic-revival estate, with her overweight slug of a daughter, Dawn. Dawn often accompanies Janet to the Bredin home, where Xan glimpses the ghost of beauty under the young girl’s fat and learns that she is an exceptionally gifted pianist. He recognizes something is very wrong with Dawn and plays a critical role in uncovering what that is.

Some may find Craig’s action-packed conclusion satisfying. I did not. It was too much, too late: a final descent into soap-opera-ish melodrama, which ruined what might otherwise have been a reasonably well written piece of social and domestic fiction. I couldn’t hurtle through the novel’s big climax or the concluding sentimental drivel fast enough. I doubt I will read Craig again. I admired her earlier novel *Hearts and Minds*, but this novel and another of hers I read in the spring have been really disappointing.

My rating of this book stayed at a fairly steady 3 or 3.5 stars for more than half of the book, but it took a steep nosedive into “2” territory at the end. I honestly felt I had wasted my time—a lot of it—because this is a BIG book.

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### **Jill's Book Cafe says**

A year in the life - but what a year! On the face of it, the story of Quentin and Lottie as they, and their family, come to terms with their marriage breakdown and how to cope with their change in fortunes. Both out of a job and unable to afford a divorce, they rent out their London house and downsize to the Devon, not far from Quentin's aging parents.

The move proves to be less than idyllic for Quentin, who still likes to bask in his now fading if not absent glory as a columnist and is now reduced to writing scathing pieces about country life. Meanwhile Lottie draws on reserves of patience and resilience built up over the years of living with the arrogant and adulterous Quentin.

The children, as children do, adapt - even Xan - Lottie's mixed race son, who having failed to secure a place at Cambridge sulkily drifts along believing, nowhere else is worth considering. His move to the country, is a coming of age as he really has his eyes opened to the real world after living his rather gilded existence in London. As well as the family drama that ebbs and flows there is also a mystery - the murdered previous tenant of their new-found home. Why was he murdered and as the culprit is still at large, who did it?

It's an interesting and engaging plot that in its telling also serves to hold up a mirror to modern British society, it's extremes, it's contrasts and it's shortcomings. It shines a light on the darker side of the rural idyll with a reliance on immigrant workers, the realities of factory farming and the failings of zero hours contracts. A far cry for Lottie and Quentin from the London chattering class they've left behind (somewhat reluctantly in Quentin's case). Though it's not just the countryside under scrutiny, the universal problems of caring for an aging population, the challenges of the housing market (especially in London), infidelity and infertility are also covered. In general it cleverly highlights the town versus country debate as well as the prevailing political, social and economic divisions that in the past couple of years has been increasing bubbling up to the surface and look set to continue to do so.

While it starts slowly, it draws you in as you get to know the initial cast of characters and follow them on their journey, along with the wider circle of friends and neighbours that we meet on the way. It's a year that sees assumptions, beliefs, perceptions and relationships challenged in a way that none of them would have foreseen. It's very much a character driven plot with an ending that I doubt anyone saw coming. A thoroughly enjoyable read that I happily recommend.

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## Jonathan Pool says

\*\*\* update\*\*\*

Amanda Craig appeared in conversation with Meg Wolitzer at Charleston, May 2018

While the conversation was themed to examine feminism, Craig did expand on some wider ranging influences that inform *The Lie of The Land*:

> Craig hesitates to go along with the Brexit label that has been attached to the book:

“It’s not a Brexit novel- sound so boring”

Craig’s disclaimer wasn’t too convincing. Exclusively Brexit novel it may not be, but having re-read the novel *The ongoing Brexit divide in the UK* remains the most enduring and insightful part of the book to this reader.

> Craig claimed that no less than five friends whose husbands had recently had affairs. The portrayal of Quentin in the book (and in Craig’s other writing) seemingly draws on a wealth of original source material? Craig’s own self- acknowledged poor experiences with men (though she’s now very happily married) come through in her writing.

> We all live on a knife edge. The bubble that is London, and the rarified worlds of the high achieving middle classes must not make those people blind to the world beneath.

>Minor characters become major, and vice versa, and appear in multiple Craig novels.

A Craig feature that makes writing successive books easier. Good for the reader too, if those characters interest you.

> *The Lie of The Land* introduces the reader to an unresolved murder early on (page 3) as a deliberate backdrop to create a level of interest. Craig said that she drew from no less an author than Charles Dickens did it with a dead body **Our Mutual Friend**

I read this, my first Amanda Craig, having noticed that *The Lie of the Land* was being bracketed with recent literature described as post Brexit novels.

After due reflection, what are the reasons that explain the outcome of the June 2016 vote, dividing the UK?. I was very impressed with Craig's insights, expressed through fictionalised, but recognisable, urban and rural character studies.

In this specific respect (Brexit) I felt that Craig identified feelings that Ali Smith (in **Autumn**) and Anthony Cartwright in **The Cut** both failed to convey.

The contrast in Brexit response that Craig concentrates on is that of central London, and Devon. The two locations are those that reflect much of Craigs own personal life and experience.

Brexit aphorisms appear throughout the book:

“Devonians say that next election they’ll vote UKIP; because nobody else cares.(151)  
the sheen of superiority that encases London like an impenetrable bubble. (257)

*People here are so rooted in one place, through generations, that they might as well be trees. They hate London, the EU, politicians, newspapers- (267)*

*"All around her are Londoners unaffected by what is being called 'the current economic climate'"(20)*

The rest of the novel, family breakup as a consequence of marital infidelity, teenage search for identity, women covering for their weaker menfolk, is written in a lightly entertaining style.

The fictional story that wraps around the pithy observations of rural life is standard "whodunit" material, and not terribly satisfying.

All in all a book I'm pleased to have read, one with a number of recognisable real life characters, and one whose prose flows easily.

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### **Bookread2day says**

Quentin and Lottie can't afford to divorce. Lottie sees her redundancy as her husband's fault. Quentin never meant to hurt his wife, but adultery isn't acceptable, when you marry someone. I was shocked to read about both of their lives before they married. For Lottie explaining to the children that mum and dad are separating, is difficult she has to minimise the suffering of her children. With not being able to find the money for a divorce the only option is to rent their house out and move to Devon. Once they move to Devon the strangest of things happen. Although I enjoyed this book I did expect it to be a little bit more in depth about Quentin and Lottie's marriage crisis and not about the strange things that happen in Devon, but then again having said that the strange things that happen in Devon gave this book a different light.

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### **Margaret Duke-Wyer says**

The Lie of the Land by Amanda Craig

Actually I made a mistake with this book. I settled down to read this expecting a light-hearted tale relating the trials and tribulations of Quentin and Lottie Bredlin as they desert London and move to Devon in an effort to consolidate their finances and their divorce. I half-expected details of their efforts to settle into a rural community whilst attempting to replicate their lives in the city – dinner parties, community events, etc. However, I think that this book is so much more than that. I certainly didn't expect a mystery in the shape of an unsolved murder, or a secret in the shape of Dawn.

In fact this has a clever plot, neither trembling with intrigue nor fast-paced with building tension (well, alright a bit near the end relating to Xan) but more of a deliberately paced, seemingly sedate account revealed through the characters. Speaking of which – on reflection each character had a particular contribution to make (by which I mean they were not there just to pad out the text or add veracity but were intrinsic to the plot). Obviously the main characters are Quentin and Lottie together with their 3 children and they are the vehicle through which the plot unfolds. They are ably supported by a cast of characters ranging from the three sisters (a midwife, a Marie Curie nurse and a teacher), the aging rock star and his young wife and family, their housekeeper and her boyfriend, and her daughter; we also have Quintin's parents and Lottie's mother; a very diverse set of people all beautifully drawn, all believable.

In addition to all these fascinating strands we learn about the difficulties of being a sheep-farmer; we learn

about the production line in a pie factory and the zero-hours contracts of employment for minimum wage which the poor are forced to accept; we are informed about the horrors of slaughtering animals for meat. This is in counterpoint to the fancy lunches, and corporate hospitality of Quintin's London life-style of the past. Over and above all this we see two women (Lottie and Anne) who reflect on their lives and positions within their marriage and within Society, they are aware that theirs is a supporting role but each are conscious that they not only need, but are entitled to something more.

For me this is not a fantastic book, but it is enjoyable and has much more to offer than at first glance. It is not a book to be dismissed as it is multi-layered and a credit to the author.

Thank you to the publishers and NetGalley for providing an ARC via my Kindle in return for an honest

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### **Gumble's Yard says**

*Waking with fortitude, living with compromise and sleeping with stress is normal for an architect in Britain. Even during the best of times, Lottie has spent weeks drawing up plans for prospects over which clients have then backtracked, changed their minds and cancelled.*

*Experience has taught her that nothing is ever built without compromise, and yet she expected better from marriage. For just as we expect sweetness from the milk we first drink, so the child born to a happy union is wholly unprepared for disharmony. Lottie had failed to understand what she risked when marrying Quentin; but then waking with optimism, living with laxity and sleeping without self-reproach is normal for a journalist*

Lottie and Quentin's marriage is on the verge of dissolution, due to irreconcilable differences, principally that Lottie will not accept Quentin's continuous affairs. However with Lottie being made redundant from her architectural firm and Quentin's journalistic and TV career as a commentator and columnist almost stopped (the number of enemies his combative style made on the way up, ensuring he receives almost no help on the way down) – they are struggling financially. The central conceit of the novel is that, while they wait for the London market to pick up enough to enable them to sell their house and raise enough funds for a house each, they let their home and move out to a, strangely cheap even if run-down, farm house in Devon, living off the rental differential.

The cast of characters includes: Quentin's parents – his long suffering mother and dying father (an ex-teacher at a local private school, a minor poet infamous for his affairs with ex-pupils and for his bad temper and tyrannical parenting style); Xan – Lottie's mixed-race child from a one-off encounter when she was younger, struggling to accept his rejection from Cambridge; the Polish girlfriend he meets at the local pie factory – the only real source of local employment but dominated by immigrants due to its poor environment and zero-hours, minimum wage contracts; Lottie's German mother – still living in her run-down but ridiculously valuable house in London; Lottie and Quentin's two younger daughters; their landlord – an ageing pop star and his family living in luxury in the nearby country mansion house; is housekeeper Janet (with an odd daughter Dawn – seemingly once pretty and intelligent, now neither) living in the gatehouse and used as cleaner by Quentin; a local health visitor, tormented by her inability to have children with her small holding sheep farmer husband.

*Quentin had bought colour, humour and fun into her life, just as she bought order, calm and seriousness into his. They shared many interests, and were both the children of teachers. Yet the differences between them have made it clear that no reconciliation is possible.*

Differences, and how, if at all, they can be reconciled is a key theme to the novel – between people but also between London and the country, with the Brexit vote ever present in the background and the book serving as an examination in particular of rural alienation.

I was reminded, in some ways, of John Lanchester's *Capital* – although there is a stronger link between the characters here with Quentin and Lottie and their family completely central to the book, rather than a true multi-narrator approach.

What however really lets the book down is the plot constructed around it – Lottie and Quentin learn early on (although later than a vaguely attentive reader) that the previous inhabitant of their house was decapitated in an unsolved murder. Disappointingly this storyline dominates and spoils the end of the book – with a rather ridiculous series of melodramatic confrontations and unlikely revelations.

I could only help but draw a contrast with the wonderful *Reservoir 13* – another novel of a rural community – and one which in my experience much better captures the dynamics of such a community. There a dramatic event (the disappearance of a missing girl) is, very cleverly and very unexpectedly for the reader, not resolved, and instead over time its impact fades while never quite disappearing; here by contrast we have an event which could have simply served as some local colour, but whose resolution is effectively forced on the reader against their wishes.

As a result – two books, what could have been a good (if not brilliant) examination of differences and reconciliation; and what could have been an entertaining but throwaway rural mystery; are combined into an unsatisfactory mix.

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### **Beth Bonini says**

*'Inside a great novel, or poem, or play,' he told Xan, 'there is no time, only a place of joy where readers may meet and embrace each other. To share a love of reading is to share the best love of all, because there is no democracy of taste, there is one of feeling.'*

One sign of how engaged I am with a novel is how quickly I read it - and I read this one (415 pages) in two days. Another sign is how many quotations I write down as I am reading - and for this book, I have pages of them. It was definitely the right book for me at the right time.

When I do read a contemporary novel, I appreciate that interplay between what's going on in the world (in this case, post-Brexit England) and how the novel's themes resonate with what's happening in my own life. I'm a huge admirer of Amanda Craig's writing, and I remember being similarly bowled over by her previous novel, *Hearts and Minds*, which is also set in London. Craig is a sympathetic observer of many strata of society; unlike Dickens, she is not overly sentimental, but she is a highly moral writer. She is equally aware of both the 'haves' and the 'have nots' of the world she describes. One of her main characters, Lottie - a mother, an architect and an unhappy wife - says at one point: 'I like people with a moral compass'. And I agree with her. I also like books with a moral compass; perhaps that's why I so enjoy 19th century novelists

like Elizabeth Gaskell and Anthony Trollope. (On his deathbed, the character of Hugh wants to have *The Small House of Allington* read to him. It's a book that I've recently enjoyed reading and for some reason that little detail delighted me.) Craig writes complicated, nuanced characters, but she never glorifies (or glories in) what is mean and ugly in human nature. For instance, Hugh (poet and father to Quentin) voices the opening quotation; he's so sensitive on one hand, and yet he has also been a selfish philanderer who has damaged his wife and children.

The primary storyline concerns Lottie and Quentin and the breakdown of their marriage. Quentin is a journalist and Lottie is an unemployed architect, and job losses and the general financial squeeze means that their only economic asset is their London house. In the short-term, the estranged couple and their three children - the oldest, Xan, being Lottie's son from a youthful one-night stand - are forced into renting their London house and moving to a ridiculously cheap house in Devon. One of the themes of the novel is city vs countryside. While London's citizens are described as house-rich (if they are so lucky to be home-owners) and time-poor, the Devon lifestyle affords different pleasures and restrictions. Various secondary characters add to the richness of the plot: Quentin's father Hugh and his mother Naomi have an important storyline, as does Lottie's mother Marta. For middle-aged readers, sandwiched as they are between the needs of their children and their parents, this aspect of the plot will definitely resonate.

There is the strong sense of how parents, and their own decisions and behaviour, affect and shape their children. A rich musician, 'Gore Tore', is a local Devon boy made good, but his indiscriminate womanising has left a trail of pain that impacts both past and present. Another important character is Sally, a health visitor, who is married to a local farmer and longing for a child of her own. Sally has one of those professions which allow her insight into the secrets of people's lives, no matter what their economic or social status, and she ends up being the bridge between various characters in the Devon community.

There is also a murder mystery 'buried' in the plot, and I had mixed feelings about this. I don't know if the novel really needed it, but I suspect that it might make the story more 'readable' or interesting for a larger group of readers. What interested me about it was the idea of inheritance: there is definitely a theme of 'the sins of the fathers' which runs through the novel. In the acknowledgements at the end of the book, Craig wants to make it clear that Quentin is in no way modelled on her own husband. Craig's husband may be a paragon among men, but I couldn't help but notice that men are often the source of frustration, pain and betrayal in this novel.

*'Men fail us, Sally thinks, because they mostly won't or can't communicate.'*

*'However, among men it's as if incuriosity is a badge of honour, with the result that they all go stumbling blindly around in a fog of unknowing.'*

*'... it's just that his love lacks the crucial ingredient of imaginative sympathy.'*

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### **Paromjit says**

In a low key way, this is a multilayered epic novel that gives us a window into modern contemporary Britain and how political and social issues impact the lives of ordinary people. We observe the urban and rural divide through London and Devon. Craig's talent opens up the interior lives of a wide range of characters that render them real and authentic. The disintegration of the marriage of the middle class couple, Quentin and Lottie Bredlin, is beautifully described amidst the straitened financial circumstances they find

themselves in, as both experience the loss of their jobs in the recession. This triggers the need to move to Devon for their three children. They experience a culture shock and struggle to adapt. Amidst all the personal turmoil, there is the mystery of why their house was so cheap. In the period of a year, great changes are heralded into the lives of the central characters.

The narcissistic Quentin has indulged in extramarital activities that endanger his marriage to Lottie, who feels betrayed and full of anger. They cannot afford to divorce and move to Devon. Lottie reflects on her role as the supportive wife and feels she has a right to so much more. The health visitor, Sally Verity, gives us a glimpse into the state of sheep farming and her desperation to have a child. She goes on to find a discarded baby. Lottie's young teenage son, Xan, finds employment at the local pie factory, a real eye opener. He sees the poverty of workers whilst experiencing minimum wage and zero hour contracts. The factory conditions leave much to be desired and include visceral descriptions of the killing of animals for meat. There are an array of characters, such as a teacher, a midwife, and the family and household of an aging rock star. With the added suspense of an unsolved murder, the family encounter the challenges of revenge, abuse, poverty and violence.

Amanda Craig is a talented author whose skills lie in the characters she creates and develops. I love the way she tunes into their personal thoughts, providing us with incisive and nuanced psychological insights into relationships as they undergo change, the breakdown of a marriage, and the family dynamics when there are three children. The novel pertinently compares and contrasts urban and rural life painting a picture of the divisions in Britain whilst providing an adept political and social commentary. The mystery aspects of the story are minor but lend suspense and tension to the novel. A wonderful read that I highly recommend. Thanks to Little, Brown for an ARC.

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## **Laura says**

*From BBC Radio 4 - Book at Bedtime:*

*Amanda Craig's new novel is a state-of-the-nation black comedy that highlights the growing disconnect between life in London and the rest of the country.*

*Quentin and Lottie Bredin, like many modern couples, can't afford to divorce. Having lost their jobs in the recession, they can't afford to go on living in London either; instead, they must downsize and move their three children to a house in a remote part of Devon. Arrogant and adulterous, Quentin can't understand why Lottie is so angry; devastated and humiliated, Lottie feels herself to have been intolerably wounded.*

*Ever practical, though, she rents out their London house for an extortionate sum in order to reap the city's ever-rising property market. The income covers the mortgage and allows them to rent a house in Devon (priced suspiciously low, even by rural standards).*

*Why is their rent so low? What is the mystery surrounding their unappealing new home? The beauty of the landscape is ravishing, yet it conceals a dark side involving poverty, revenge, abuse and violence which will rise up to threaten them all.*

*Reader: Amanda Lawrence*

*Writer: Amanda Craig*

*Abridger: Robin Brooks*

*Producer: Kirsteen Cameron.*

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08zb6rp>

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