



Beyond the Glass

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Her brief marriage over, Clara retreats to her parental home. Seeing herself forever imprisoned behind a glass wall of guilt and repression, she both longs for and fears the world beyond. The love affair she seeks as an escape cracks her delicate sense of identity and Clara descends into madness.

Beyond the Glass Details

Date : Published February 1st 2001 by Virago Press (UK) (first published March 1954)

ISBN : 9780860680970

Author : Antonia White

Format : Hardcover 285 pages

Genre : Fiction, Classics, Health, Mental Health, Mental Illness, Literary Fiction, European Literature, British Literature

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From Reader Review Beyond the Glass for online ebook

Paul says

This is the final novel in White's quartet about her early life, covering her life when she was 22/23. The last book ended with Clara's marriage to Archie coming to an end and Clara returning to live with her parents. Moving back to her parents leads her to difficult times with her parents. Clara's relationship with her father and her religion are still central but the real heart of the book is Clara's increasing mental fragility and this is woven in with a doomed love affair.

White herself spent time in a public asylum, Bethlem (known as bedlam) and so the descriptions of Clara's breakdown, subsequent certification as insane and time in different parts of the asylum system are powerfully written and feel very personal:

"She lost herself again; this time completely. For months she was not even a human being; she was a horse. Ridden almost to death, beaten till she fell, she lay at last on the straw in her stable and waited for death. They buried her as lay on her side, with outstretched head and legs. A child came and sowed turquoises round the outline of her body in the ground, and she rose up again as a horse of magic with a golden mane, and galloped across the sky. Again she woke on the mattress in her cell. She looked and saw that she had human hands and feet again, but she knew she was a horse."

White does employ a good deal of imagery relating to glass and mirrors throughout Clara's breakdown, incarceration and gradual recovery and there are links to Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* to describe the world Clara enters. That world also involves force feeding, hot and cold baths and long periods of incarceration in padded rooms. Clara still has the stigmatizations of the day as indicated by the following quote from her time in the asylum:

"In vain Clara tried to explain the rules of croquet...But it was hopeless. No-one could understand. In the end she left them running gaily about the lawn, hitting any ball they saw and usually all playing at once...the next moment, it came to her. These women were mad. All the women she saw at mealtimes were mad. No wonder she could make no contact with them. She was imprisoned in a place full of mad people"

Clara's reliability as a narrator can also be questioned. Interestingly there is a certain sort of mentality that must follow the rules of a game and Clara with the religious structures that she lives within is of that ilk. The women she is with have the freedom to not follow the rules and to just enjoy the experience.

This is a good depiction of the asylum system in the 1920s and a fitting end to the quartet

Danielle Lentz says

What a great book- and such a brave thing for Ms. White to have written. Her description of her descent to madness is so real it's frightening- that it could actually happen and be so acutely remembered!

Liz says

Fairly-autobiographical novel set in the 1920s - a young woman leaving a loveless marriage, descending into depression, experiencing mania and finally a breakdown. It's very moving, and clearly a brilliant depiction of what we'd now call bipolar disorder. I was sad to learn this was the 4th and last in the series of novels Antonia White wrote based on her own life.

Anne says

Brava, Antonia White.

I'll admit that there were parts of this that got a little slow, and I did have to take breaks occasionally. But the description of Clara's madness at the end was just riveting, and it was an amazing culmination of the whole Clara Batchelor series (starting with *Frost in May*, in which her name is Nanda Grey). Fascinating, satisfying reads.

Canadian Reader says

Rating: 3.5

This unusual and absorbing autobiographical novel is set in the early 1920s. It focuses on 22-year-old Clara Batchelor, a self-described "fifth-rate" actor whose three-month-long, unconsummated marriage to Archie Hughes-Follett has quickly unravelled. Archie is also an actor, apparently only marginally more talented than his wife. The reader isn't explicitly told what's wrong with him. (This is the fourth in a quartet of linked works by White, and it's possible if I'd done the sensible thing and read the books in order, I might have a better idea.) Maybe it's a combination of things. He's a veteran of the Great War, and he may be psychologically scarred or physically injured. Quite possibly he is a closeted gay man. Whatever the case, he and Clara certainly love each other, but their relationship is not a sexual one.

Prior to Clara's break-up with Archie, her parents had noticed "a coarseness in her looks and manner." She'd gained weight and appeared haggard and prematurely aged. What they are unaware of is that she'd also thrown herself at a womanizing painter but then had physically fought him off when he responded to her encouragement. It was this episode that brought the marital problems to a head.

Clara's hard-working schoolmaster father, Claude, converted to Catholicism when Clara was a young girl, and she is unusually close to him. Having psychologically invested a good deal in his daughter's union with Archie, a scion of a well-to-do, old Catholic family, Claude is loath to give up his "Catholic" dream about his only child. His wife, Isabel, is far more pragmatic. As far as she is concerned, Archie is a "wretched boy" and the "ghastly marriage" is better ended. She rejoices when she learns an annulment is possible, though it is a lengthy ordeal that involves both ecclesiastical and legal proceedings. One requirement is that Clara submit to a humiliating physical exam by two separate doctors to determine if she's "intact".

Once re-installed in her childhood home, Clara is apathetic and depressed. Though her marriage is certainly over, until the church and the law declare it so, she is expected to conduct herself discreetly and with decorum. She finds herself lying to her father about an impromptu dinner she has with Clive Heron, an eccentric friend, whom she'd bumped into on the street one afternoon. Even though he has met Clive before, Claude is horrified that Clara should have been alone with this harmless man in his private rooms. Through Clive, Clara meets her great love, Richard Crayshaw, a career soldier, who is on a month's leave. The two experience an immediate spark and telepathic connection. There is no question that they will marry.

Over the course of the month that Richard is with her, Clara experiences problems with sleep and appetite.

She becomes increasingly “absent-minded”, somewhat grandiose, and then, quite suddenly, delusional, psychotic, and violent. She ultimately ends up in a padded cell in “Nazareth”—an asylum the author has modelled on London’s famous Bethlem Royal Hospital (“Bedlam”), where White herself was committed in her twenties. During her institutionalization, Clara believes herself at various times to be a horse, a salmon, a mouse, an imp, a dog, and a flower. She is at the mercy of her hallucinations—some of which read like dark scenes from the Brothers Grimm or Russian fairy tales—and the rough hospital staff who handle her aggressively, forcefully administer medication and food using a nasogastric tube, and confine her in a straitjacket. Some of the descriptions are quite harrowing.

Clara spends nine months in a world “beyond the looking-glass,” the details of her identity and history entirely forgotten. Words lack meaning, she forgets how to write, daily events do not unfold consecutively or cohere in any sort of logical way. Clara’s return to the world on “this side of the glass” requires a “tremendous, absorbing effort of willing herself back to consciousness.” When she is released from the asylum for a two-week trial, the important thing is for her to know the truth about Richard. The author handles this well. (This section reminded me of the old Natalie Wood/Warren Beatty film, *Splendor in the Grass*.)

Although I’ve been aware of Antonia White for years, this is the first of her books I’ve read. I’m impressed by her portrait (based on her own experience) of a young woman’s sudden descent into and effortful re-emergence from madness. White provides enough detail about the disorientation and distress of her protagonist to help readers understand what psychosis feels like. She shows how mental illness takes fragments of the patient’s former life story and kaleidoscopically rearranges and distorts them to create strange new narratives about identity in the patient’s mind. However, White’s depiction of Clara’s parents and their relationship is a little less satisfying. Some of the dialogue between the two seems wooden and melodramatic. For one thing, there are just too many interjections of “Darling” and “Dearest”. Maybe people really did speak to each other like this once, but it doesn’t translate well across the years. Telepathic communications between lovers likewise weaken the realistic feel of the novel. Having said that, I still found *Beyond the Glass* a compelling and rewarding read.

Judith says

I wavered between 2 and 3 stars for this one, as I thought the first part of the book fascinating, about questions of support and challenges that the characters experience from their Roman Catholic faith and the bonds of family. Then it devolved into a treacly love story and then descended (literally) into madness. It felt like thinly-veiled autobiography combined with adolescent romanticism, and I couldn’t wait for the last part to be over. I kept hoping for a return to sanity not only for the character, but for the author and her editor.

Julia says

Clara Batchelor is a well-brought-up, upper class, Catholic girl from a highly respected family and recently got married to a charming young man of just as high a social stature. There’s only one problem; Archie can’t have children. The newlyweds decide quickly that the only way for either of them to be happy is to get the marriage annulled. Clara’s family doesn’t agree quite as much as she’d hoped but the church will agree to an annulment and that’s all that matters. Clara is then left to move back into her old life with her parents in her childhood London home.

As Clara become aware of the hole she has fallen into, trapped within the walls she had been so eager to leave, she begins to go completely mad. Slowly at first but with the precipitous interruption and additional complication that is Richard, she falls further and further into insanity.

The twists and turns that her thoughts take are startling and give us a basic and harrowing understanding of the make-up of the human mind and the boundaries that it invariably has.

The third and final story in a trilogy, *Beyond the Glass* is a fascinating examination of a mind falling apart at the seams. Told with easy to follow sequence and clarity of understanding this book was a rather curious insight into what a mind goes through with such added stress and the utter ease in which it all will crumble. The pace of the story was somewhat irregular with the beginning stretching out and the ending rushing in far too quickly. The final chapters also leave you wondering if *Beyond the Glass* really is the last volume in the series.

A definite "must read" if you're looking into the human psyche, but otherwise *Beyond the Glass* is a little too tough of a story for the gently browsing type.

June Schwarz says

Unlike the first three volumes in this quartet, *The Lost Traveller* is a pillowy, self-overwrought read. I found it a major disappointment, especially the first half. It was like White couldn't remember what it was like to be mad and recreated it from children's books and the *London Illustrated News*.

Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

I kid you not. This is not my normal fair. I wouldn't say that it's outside my comfort zone because that would totally mischaracterize my comfort zone. But it is pretty standard lit fair I'd say. If you've had the stomach to endure all the religion through *Frost in May* you do get the consolation that religion takes a backseat throughout the trilogy=sequel (although it's still there) ; and if you've had the stomach for all the being in love stuff and the marriage travails (I don't much really) ;; and if you've had the stomach for the teenagey=angsty stuff (imagine *Catcher in the Rye* plus a trilogy of sequels!! (I dare you!)) ;;; then you'll be much rewarded with Clara's descent into madness and the spell she spent in a state asylum for those mentally not capable of caring for themselves. I say, mid=way through this volume I was beginning to groan ;; but then the madcap struck and really this one should be treasured along with that whole set of insanity=lit*.

* and for those who go for this kind of thing ; it actually happened, this being a nicely fictionalized fiction of White's own young=ladiehood life.

Zen Cho says

When I read *The Lost Traveller* I wasn't sure if it was actually a good book, or just a good bad book (i.e. a book I found it very easy to be interested in and enjoy reading). I think this, and *The Sugar House* (which I read together), are good books, though. Antonia White apparently thought *The Sugar House* the best of her novels; she might be right, but I found *Beyond the Glass* more interesting, because it was less depressing, if more tragic.

Hm, should be clearer. The Sugar House is about the main character Clara's marriage to a man she doesn't love, an alcoholic, and the breakdown of that marriage and her depression. In Beyond the Glass Clara has separated from her husband and is waiting for her marriage to be annulled; she has a weird telepathic love affair but then goes mad and is put in an asylum.

I'm not keen on the books' depiction of love or its gender politics -- there's rather a lot of unsubtle crushing to the chest by the male partner -- but they do contain the clearest depictions of mental illness that I've read in a while. I found The Sugar House depressing because I recognised the kind of aimless awfulness in it. Beyond the Glass was more interesting because it had more about what people think of as insanity, so it wasn't as close to my experience and had less of the personal effect.

Oh, I should say it has added impact because according to the preface, the novels are basically autobiographical; Antonia White spent 10 months in an asylum (which is now the Imperial War Museum just down the road, talk about coincidences). And I guess that's what makes the books good rather than good-bad, really. The things I find interesting -- Clara's father's Catholicism and class issues, the way she approaches religion, her fraught relationship with her mother, the mother herself -- they're interesting precisely because they're not generic. When Clara's dad angsts about Catholicism, it's not to make a point about religion and its effect on a person's life; it's not a depiction of just any religious person's struggle -- it's a portrait of a specific human being and his personal relationship with God and the Church. So that's super interesting. I've always believed in story over metaphor, when it comes to writing novels.

At one point there's a paragraph about Clara at Mass and how she's never had trouble before telling herself, "This is the most important thing in the world," which I found so intriguing because it is so alien to me. I tried the question "what is the most important thing in the world to you personally?" on a couple of my friends and found you have to say "besides family and friends" when you are talking to non-religious people. Anyway they both said "social justice" and I said "art" (well, I said "writing", but I MEANT "art"). I am going to try the question on a Catholic person, that should be interesting.

Ali says

beyondtheglass

Beyond the Glass is the final novel in Antonia White's series of novels which explore the schooldays, girlhood and early married life of Clara Batchelor, the daughter of a Catholic convert. I have loved these books and had been looking forward for some time to this instalment. It didn't disappoint. Antonia White's writing is brave and evocative, and endlessly compelling. The third novel in the quartet; 'The Sugar House' concluded with Clara and her young husband Archie agreeing to separate, their relationship more like that of siblings playing house. 'Beyond the Glass' – written, following lots of appeals from her readers to provide a conclusion – takes up the story exactly where 'The Sugar House' left off.

"Now that the trap had been sprung, she felt a perverse desire to remain in it. Instead of going upstairs to pack, she began to tidy the dishevelled room. She paused in front of the armchair where her father had sat so upright on the orange cushion which concealed its broken springs. There was a dent where Archie's untidy red head had rested, less than twelve hours ago. Hesitating to smooth it out, she found herself suddenly confronted with her image in one of the mirrors artfully disposed to make the room seem larger. She was as startled as if she had discovered a stranger spying on her."

Clara has a difficult time explaining her situation to her father whose approval she always sought – his often strict, unyielding attitude and Catholic certainty hard to live with. However Claude Batchelor's stubborn adoration of Archie, in the face of mounting evidence that the marriage was in trouble, make it doubly difficult. The truth is that Clara has grounds for a dissolution to her marriage, an annulment, the only kind recognised by the Catholic Church. For Clara's marriage was never consummated, not an easy conversation for a young woman in the early 1920's to have with her Catholic father. Claude takes Clara to Paget's Fold, the family home in the country, a small rural idyll, where Aunt Sophy and Aunt Leah live quietly and companionably, proudly caring for the place until such time as Claude requires it for himself. Clara has always loved her summer holidays at Paget's Fold adores her aunts and the life they live there. Claude, decrees that Sophy and Leah should not be told of Clara's separation, and persuades her and his wife Isabel to pretend that all is well and that Archie is merely off rehearsing a play and unable to join them. Clara has always had a difficult relationship with her mother, and when Isabel tries desperately to reach out to her daughter and talk honestly to her about her own relationships Clara is shocked at the revelation, and Isabel is left feeling she has given her daughter more ammunition against her.

Following the holiday, Clara finds herself living back in the parental home, almost as if she never left at all. As Clara embarks on the long and humiliating process that should lead to her marriage annulment, she meets Richard Crayshaw. Clara dives head first into this new highly passionate relationship, revelling in an extreme and all-consuming happiness. Clara's fragility and sense of identity cannot cope with this heady mix and suddenly and tragically descends into what in 1920's is termed "madness". This gradual slide into mental illness is brilliantly portrayed by White, as Clara becomes erratic with even the besotted Richard finding reason to worry about her behaviour. When Richard goes away for a week, Clara's final decline is terrifying and Claude and Isabel have no option but to seek help for their daughter. Clara is sent to a public asylum – where for almost a year she exists in a frightening and confused world – where she's not even sure who she is.

"She lost herself again; this time completely. For months she was not even a human being; she was a horse. Ridden almost to death, beaten till she fell, she lay at last on the straw in her stable and waited for death. They buried her as lay on her side, with outstretched head and legs. A child came and sowed turquoises round the outline of her body in the ground, and she rose up again as a horse of magic with a golden mane, and galloped across the sky. Again she woke on the mattress in her cell. She looked and saw that she had human hands and feet again, but she knew she was a horse."

Antonia White uses recurring images of glass and mirrors to portray Clara's growing mental instability, in this brave and ambitious novel about mental illness. Antonia White herself spent ten months in Bethlem Asylum in 1922-3, a time she apparently was able to later recall every moment of. Her quartet of novels is famously autobiographical, and certainly the second half of 'Beyond the Glass' feels very personal, intense and real. Clara's experiences are harrowing and very frightening, although surprisingly I found this section of the novel utterly compelling, after all it is so brilliantly written.

This was a wonderful conclusion to a brilliant quartet, Antonia White was a wonderful writer, who sadly produced too few books. I have a small volume of her short stories sitting here tbr – which I am certainly looking forward to.

Meg says

This is not a book one 'enjoys', given that a good part of it is taken up by the central character's descent into

madness. But I found it interesting. The descriptions of Bethlem are also interesting, and make me glad that care of the mentally ill has improved beyond recognition since those times - even if it still has far to go.

Roman Clodia says

The final end of a brilliant quartet of books, and Clara finally finds true love. But the experience of happiness is too much for her fragile sense of self and she descends into madness. This might sound depressing but ultimately this is a hopeful and uplifting book with a real sense of emotional catharsis at the end.

Clara's journey from Catholic girlhood (Frost in May) to tragedy and retreat (The Lost Traveller), from self-defensive burial in stifling safety (The Sugar House) to her final emergence as a woman in her own right is one of the most enthralling female journeys I have read. The novels are exquisitely written and true, with no cliches and no easy happy endings. This really deserves to be far better known than it is.

Gina says

Dark and haunting. a step into madness. Part 4, Chapter 1 was my favorite where she goes to the place of magic, hallucinations, madness and believes she is a horse. Very surreal. The end was haunting and lovely, though expected. This borders on magical realism but is in the tradition of Betty Smith and Barbara Comyns. I am so glad I read this. It competes with the dead white guys in the cannon but does not get the attention.

Chrystal says

3.5 stars

I enjoyed the first two books in the series a lot more than the last two. I thought the writer's descriptions of childhood and adolescence much more realistic than the ones of early adulthood. However, the episode in the mental hospital was unforgettable and startling, coming as it did from the author's own experiences. Overall I enjoyed this series and am intrigued with the way she blended fact and fiction in all four books.
