



The Insistent Garden

Rosie Chard

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Edith Stoker's father is building a wall in their backyard. A very, very high wall--a brick bulwark in his obsessive war against their hated neighbour Edward Black.

It is 1969, and far away, preparations are being made for man to walk upon the moon. Meanwhile, in the Stokers' shabby home in the East Midlands, Edith remains a virtual prisoner, with occasional visits from her grotesque and demanding Aunt Vivian serving as the only break in the routine.

But when shy, sheltered Edith begins to quietly cultivate a garden in the shadow of her father's wall, she sets in motion events that might gain her independence... and bring her face to face with the mysterious Edward Black.

Rosie Chard's followup to her award-winning debut "Seal Intestine Raincoat" unfolds like a grown-up take on "The Secret Garden," an engrossing, often mordantly funny portrait of a young woman who miraculously finds her own pathway to freedom within the most stifling of environs.

The Insistent Garden Details

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Author : Rosie Chard

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From Reader Review *The Insistent Garden* for online ebook

Denise says

This started a little slow, but snowballed into something intriguing and pleasing. I'm glad I stayed with it.

Prabh says

The book starts off slow, but blossoms into something beautiful and unique. Edith's relationships with Archie, Dotty, Jean, and Una, and Jean's letters to her friend were my favorite parts of the story. I wish we could've seen more of the aftermath, but other than that this book was a great read.

Kim says

I received this as part of Goodreads First Reads program. I don't want to relegate this book as just being "cute", because it has far too much depth to it.

We don't know much about Edith, because she doesn't know much about herself. Her father and her aunt (who has no redeeming qualities) are obsessed about building a wall to keep "evil Edward Black" out, and aren't accommodating to questions. How this started, we don't know until the very end, and revealing how it started will reveal how it ends.

I like a book with a mystery that isn't necessarily a detective novel. We learn as Edith learns. Extra bits of information comes from letters from a recent inhabitant of East Midlands to her friend Gillian. As the book unfolds, so does the truth.

Characters such as Edith fall in the trap of self-martyrdom. They're stuck in this rut and refuse to let themselves out. Edith is not one of those. There's a genuineness with her naivety and her desire to become more than she is. I enjoyed watching her grow in strength and confidence.

The only complaint I have (and it's a complimentary complaint) is that I wanted to know more. I appreciate the ending, and think it's a great one, but I wasn't ready to say good-bye.

Rick (from Another Book Vlog) says

With Rosie Chard's *The Insistent Garden*, reviewers will inevitably hang upon some of the novel's broader concepts: familial strife, mental illness, the death of a loved one, gothic mysteries, rebellion, and the list goes on. This is the stuff readers can really attach themselves to, these are those catchy words and phrases that sell books. *The Insistent Garden* has all of these elements and more—each one of them worth your price of admission—but for me, the novel's selling point is a small, quiet moment during the novel's crescendo, when its heroine, Edith Stoker, says, "Something was happening. But I did not know what it was."

This passage is emblematic of the novel's central theme, the coming of age, and with it, an uncompromising sense of self. For most of the novel, though, Edith not only doesn't know what's happening to her, but she doesn't even realize anything is happening at all. Change, we learn, is the result of a series of small, seemingly insignificant events. The effects of those changes, however, can be quite volatile.

The novel is set in the small English town of East Midlands. 18-year-old Edith Stoker lives alone with her father and her often-present-but-technically-visiting aunt Vivian. The year is 1969, and while the rest of the world is dreaming about going to the moon, Edith's dreams rarely take her out of her front yard. Her father has sheltered her for most of her life, raising her in fear of the big bad wolf next door, Edward Black.

In order to ward against him, Edith's father has built a wall in their back yard. More than eight feet tall, the imposing barrier has kept Black from ever laying eyes on Stoker's daughter (and vice versa). Who Edward Black is, and what he has done, Edith has no idea. But through a seemingly insignificant brush with a gardening magazine—a photo of the most beautiful flowers Edith has ever seen—events are set in motion that threaten to dismantle her father's hold on her, his fragile mental state, and the towering wall itself.

Edith begins to grow a garden of her own in, quite literally, her father's shadow. While he patches his wall, Edith is starting her own quiet rebellion in the soil at his feet. As literature teaches us, gardens are never really just gardens, and for Edith this collection of flowers and trees comes to represent how she, herself, is blooming. But Vivian will be damned if she allows it to happen under her watch.

Never in a million years would I have thought the novel described above would have captivated me the way it did. For me, gardens have been nothing but bee-infested death traps, and aunt Vivian bears a frightening resemblance to a few aunts of my own. But in sweet, doe-like Edith—one of the more timid and scared creatures I have ever had the pleasure of reading—I found an anchor, someone I could inhabit and cheer on. Her journey, while at a pace that would make a snail snort in derision, is a gripping mystery that had me on the edge of my seat. Her search for answers and, ultimately, a backbone, held my interest from the first page to the last.

And the payoff? It's probably not what you think, but it certainly clears the wall bar.

Perhaps the most fascinating part of the novel, though, is Wilf Stoker, Edith's father. In the wake of his wife's death, Wilf is a fraction of his former self. He appears to have suffered a mental break that causes him to live in hatred and fear of Edward Black, wallpaper his living room at least once a week, and treat Edith like she's a faberge egg that's too delicate to be touched by human hands.

At the same time, he's almost Darth Vader to Vivian's Palpatine. An intimidating man of few words, he is led like a dog by this snivelling, conniving little bridge troll. He seems to have given up making any decisions by himself, and bows to the whims of his unreasonably oppressive sister. Edith, playing a daintier Luke, is that shining light we hope can bring him back from the dark side. There's good in him, we can see, but whether Edith can break through is something else entirely.

Rosie Chard's novel is also peppered with a cast of likeable misfits that serve as Edith's buoys in a sea of change. There's Archie, her elderly neighbour who fosters her love of gardening and acts as her moral and emotional compass; Dotty, a spunky middle-aged woman whose sense of adventure and rebellion inspires Edith to break free of her own chains; and Johnny, the young postal worker who catches Edith's eye. Each has their own brand of charm, and the tiny town of East Midlands ends up having a heck of a lot of personality.

For fans of mystery, English period pieces, coming of age tales, feminism, and, well, just solid storytelling, I would certainly recommend Rosie Chard's *The Insistent Garden*. It's one of the better novels I've read this year, and enough of a testimonial to make me want to read Chard's first novel, *Seal Intestine Raincoat*.

Something was happening to me while reading this book, but I did not know what it was.

What it did was turn me into a fan.

*Disclosure: I received this book as a review copy from NeWest Press. I tried asking for bribe money as well, but they turned me down. Pfft. Honourable bastards.

Vanore says

One of the weirdest books I've read. I kept getting impatient with it - but couldn't abandon it, had to finish it - had to see how it ended. Glad I stuck it out. I think I will continue to think of this story for a while - which to me, is a mark of a worthy read.

Tan says

Reminiscent of *The Secret Garden*, this is a horticulturally themed coming of age story, featuring a rather disturbed family.

J says

I won this as an ARC from Goodreads.

An unusual story of the coming of age of a young girl who manages to grow up and find her own way in spite of her rather dysfunctional family.

Laura Frey (Reading in Bed) says

The Insistent Garden is, at first glance, a quiet, contained book, but it contains so much: Coming of age, sexual awakening, mental illness, poetry, and family secrets. Grab a blanket and a cup of tea – it's a perfect read for the colder days ahead.

Edith's life stalled when high school ended, and she lives in a household that seems to have stalled sometime in the 1940s – no TV, no washing machine, homemade clothes. While her friends move on to college, Edith is stuck at home caring for her father, who is obsessed with his next-door neighbour and spends all of his free time building a wall between their backyards. Her father's sister is an evil-stepmother character who ruins at least one of Edith's days each week with her overnight visits. Her father reads about the moon landing in the paper; the outside world may as well be the moon to Edith.

Edith is not literally stuck in the house. The door isn't locked. She's held back by fear: ostensibly of what might happen if her father were left to his own devices, but also of what might happen to her. This is all she knows and she's been taught to fear outsiders.

Read the rest of my review on Reading in Bed: <http://reading-in-bed.com/2013/09/20/...>

Indigo says

This is an amazing book and is clearly the frontrunner for my favorite book of the year. It showed what a long and difficult process it is for Edie to gain her sense of self back, or even to gain it for the first time, with the help of a number of extraordinary neighbors and friends.

The comparison to the garden which grew in the shadow of a very tall wall, showed how Edie was starting to grow and come forth, with what little light and nourishment there was to be had in her environment, and how she and her garden were crushed back a number of times, but still were strong and hearty enough to continue to grow.

I loved Edie and Archie, Jean, Una and especially Dotty.

It was a book I read slowly and with great enjoyment and appreciation and I want to read it all over again right away, but will save it to savor on another day.

Kelsey says

I enjoyed, so much, the strangeness of the mystery of this novel. I got really caught up in reading it and wanting to know how things were going to resolve themselves. Tons of interesting things--like how a romantic liaison is handled in a refreshing unconventional manner. For me the final resolution of the mystery was a bit of a let down--but that might be just because I enjoyed the mystery so much.
