



## The Odd Woman

*Gail Godwin*

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## **The Odd Woman** Gail Godwin

Professor Jane Clifford is in her early thirties, smart, and attractive. A popular teacher at a midwestern college, she appears to be going somewhere. But Jane knows better. After a lifetime habit of looking to books for the answers to life's mysteries, she seems to be finding only more questions.

Then her beloved grandmother suddenly dies, and Jane returns home for the funeral, where she is faced with the little dramas and fictions of both the past she has lived and the past she has only been told about. In the midst of it all, she is considering breaking off a long-term, long-distance affair, but like the family stories she tries to make sense of, she cannot seem to find a reason to claim a life of her own.

## **The Odd Woman Details**

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Author : Gail Godwin

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## From Reader Review *The Odd Woman* for online ebook

### Rebecca Wilkins says

This book was on my shelf and I previously read it in 1986. I don't have a clue what I thought about it then, there are few underlined places. I am going to suppose that I felt the same as now. It was long and boring and hard to understand a woman who cheats with another woman's husband. I kept reading trying to understand but only come up with how needy and self-centered Jane was. I didn't like her but I have a long hatred for the "other woman" since one of that breed broke up my parents' marriage. Oh I know that the man is just as much to blame. However rejection of the mother is rejection of the daughters. When a child can't trust a parent to be true, it is a big blow and a time for growing up. The great irony is that the birthday card for the other woman, who will be 93 this week is lying on my desk right now. Both my parents are dead. Does life move on? Yes but I still didn't like this character.

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### Alison says

I read this right after "The Odd Women," by George Gissing, at the suggestion of Nancy Pearl in Book Lust.

The Odd Woman is set in the 70s, and focuses on Jane Clifford, a mid-30s, single professor of English Lit. The connection to "The Odd Women," is that Jane is reading that novel in order to prep for a class in which she is going to teach it; I believe she is supposed to be seen as a modern equivalent of Rhoda.

Much like the Odd Women, there are several other major female characters in the book, all of whom serve as examples for the various downfalls of married life, with one woman who manages to "have it all" (happy marriage, career, kids, etc., though she only has it after a divorce & remarriage). It was interesting to read this book while thinking about Gissing's novel, but I'm not sure I'd recommend it otherwise.

I also found it difficult to get into the novel, partially because of the tone/setting -- apparently I either read 19th century novels or those that are more contemporary.

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### Kimberly Ann says

This book contains BRILLIANT depictions of interior life, and for that itself deserves five stars. But for other reasons, only four. It seemed to tie some too-neat bows for me at the end, one too many coincidences that made the reading of the book enjoyable, but perhaps took away from its power.

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### Alison says

I would actually give this 3.5 stars. Godwin was able to make almost all the characters come alive (Jane's married lover, Gabriel, was one of the exceptions). But I identified with Jane, a 35-year-old professor of literature from a Southern family who wonders if she'll ever find "her best life" and meanwhile is having an affair with a married man. Well, I didn't actually identify with that last part, but Godwin allowed me to

understand Jane's dilemma even though I'm married with children. One thing that occurred to me: though the novel is set in the late seventies, women have the same problems with trying to "have it all" that the women in this novel experience. Maybe we haven't come such a long way, baby.

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### **Elliedakota says**

What a bizarre book. I was preschool age when it was published in 1974 so can't fully put it into context. It's like she was trying to write what she thought a feminist manifesto should be, complete with an over the top strange fantasy life. I was tediously bored with most of it, but some of the academic challenges were interesting in that they haven't changed much in 40+ years. That's rather disheartening.

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### **Sally Kenney says**

I read this book on the recommendation of Emily Toth. Although it is an academic novel with a woman protagonist, it's really about her obsession over her relationship with a married man. Shades of *The Golden Notebook*. No joy whatsoever in academic work. Interesting narration of women's relationships, mother, daughter, grandmother, colleague, friend.

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### **Sarah Bliss says**

I'm giving this two stars, but 2.5 would probably be more accurate (between "it was ok" and "liked it"). In general it was quite readable - I liked the quality of writing, the settings and the storyline - but my enjoyment really came and went throughout the book. There were scenes that I enjoyed, particularly those with other characters and some plot movement. Then there were long stretches of inner turmoil and existential angst that I quickly tired of - not because they weren't genuine, or useful to character development, but because they were too long and repetitive (and because my own inner debates are quite enough, thank you). I also didn't quite see Jane (main character) as a real person. Despite the long narratives of her psyche, she seemed somewhat flat. I couldn't picture her, and actually thought she got less real as the book went on. And then the book stopped more than it ended; a good ending might have been redemptive.

So... not terrible, but not great.

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### **Rachel says**

This might have been a four were I a Baby Boomer, but as a straddler of the Gen-X/Gen-Y lines, I found this read a bit tedious. Jane Clifford, the main character, is an academic stuck in her own head, who often compares her life to the Victorian novels she studies. Clifford has an affair with another academic. Gabriel Weeks, an art-historian fascinated by the Pre-Raphaelites, uses their art as the basis of a study on categories of human love, a study which the reader is left to believe likely won't lead to much. If this sounds rather like the vain attempts of Mr. Causabon to unlock the key to all mythologies, Godwin means it to. In fact, Clifford agonizes over this very similarity, although she seems to miss other ways in which Weeks resembles the aging scholar of *Middlemarch*. Clifford also draws parallels between her own life and the lives of the

characters in *The Odd Women*, a truly bleak story about the narrow possibilities for women at the end of the 19th century. (Seriously, I read it in my early 20s when I was living in Austin and was convinced I was going to end up an old, lonely alcoholic crone--no matter all the changes to women's political and social status in the intervening 100 years.)

These analogies, while important for understanding Clifford's worldview, bog down the narrative down appear to be erudite grandstanding on Godwin's part. She gets mired in quotes and literary discussions, and her modest plotlines suffer as a result. Although Clifford is wrapped up in the drama of her affair (and the heroines that might offer clues for her own fate), the real drama, of course, is whether Clifford or her uber-feminist, politicized friend, Gerda Mulvaney, offer the superior example of actualized womanhood. Who will be better off? The meek academic who seems to be content with a part-time lover and a rich fantasy life? Or the assertive editor who publishes a bombastic newspaper meant to highlight the atrocities of the men that she and her fellow writers have renounced? While it's interesting to ask these questions forty years after the book was written, it's hard to sympathize with either Mulvaney or Clifford. In her attempt to counter the cynical "Zimmers" of the day, Godwin created an overwrought and rather dreary read about her contemporary odd women. A little levity or a little more action might have made this a more timeless story.

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### **Melody says**

If you're interested in slow-moving portrayals of 1970s female academics (and incidentally, it's very much a product of the 1970s, which may be why I didn't fully understand it) involved in stagnant affairs with married men ... If you're interested in dysfunctional and static relationships between mothers and daughters ... If you can put up with unlikable and petulant characters (who have odd sexual fantasies), then you might like this book.

I on the other hand, am now 1.5 for 3 on Gail Godwin. I liked *The Good Husband*, loved *The Queen of the Underworld*, and really did not like *The Odd Woman*. I found it difficult to finish, and only really liked one character, who showed up for about 15 pages near the end of the novel but had some interesting things to say about the nature of villainy. Beyond that, I don't think Godwin had matured to her best when she wrote this book, so I'll keep trying her work, but if you've never read her, this is NOT the one to start with.

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### **Cathy Wilcox says**

A memory just prompted me to look back at my journal/diary. I was thinking about my 1990 train trip to Oregon and wondering what I had written about my overnight in New Orleans. What did I discover a few pages later? An entry saying that I was reading this book! 27 years ago. I was 32 at the time. I wrote: The story is about a 32 year old single Gemini (ring any bells?) It's great. Here's a quote: "The self is what is left of us, what can't be destroyed, what is there after all the impurities have been burned away." I see the Holy Spirit!

Today - in 2017 - I do not remember reading it at all. I do remember and see in my notes how tortured I was at the time. I felt I was not on the right path, but couldn't find my way.

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## **Sophie Ratcliffe says**

Rather loved this - tender account of what it's like to figure out one's relationship to life/love/others - played out against a general campus novel background. Elegant prose, reminded me of Lurie and Shields. Astoundingly good final sentence.

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## **Maurita Kling says**

This is the 2nd of her books I have failed to finish. When I was younger I enjoyed her novels, but both this one & 'Flora' I could not finish. Too Negative with regards to Flora- I didn't like the character at all. And this one was 'way too introspective for me. Maybe at a younger age I would have liked it, but at 71 it doesn't do the trick....

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## **Patricia says**

I bought this this book this spring (2014) at the South Carolina Book Festival. I had read and enjoyed Flora. I attended her lecture where she spoke about her life and work. I was also fascinated watching the response to the lecture by Pat Conroy. (Yes, that Pat Conroy) He entered the hall just after the lecture started and sat near the back of the room in an isle seat just in front of me. He sat up straight, leaned slightly forward in his seat, and seemed to relish her every word. His obvious respect for her made me want to read more of her work.

The title appealed to me and I added it to the pile of books purchased that day that became part of my stash that I plan to read this winter. The book about a week in the life of Jane Clifford, a 30 year old professor who loses her beloved grandmother Edith, becomes close again with her mother, loses patience with her married lover, and quarrels with her college roommate in her physical life. In her inner life, she relives nearly every minute of her past life that point and builds a fantasy life of scenarios of what might have happened if...one detail might have made a difference in her search for happiness. The book was a slog for me, but there was just enough to keep my interest. I'll give Godwin another try....maybe next winter!

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## **Pam Foster says**

Just couldn't finish although I got through 145 pages before giving up. I have read and loved at least 8 of Ms. Godwin's novels and as I was struggling through this one, I checked the publication date - ah, this was one of her earliest novels, right after Glass People, which I did finish but didn't really like. Characters were dull, tedious, not people you could care about. There was little plot, story didn't go anywhere. But after this book, it seems Ms. Godwin got her wings and the characters and stories bloomed.

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## **Elizabeth Moeller says**

At times I felt that this book reached into my head and read my thoughts. I think that any woman who has felt the pull between exploring your own path and doing what is expected of you will feel similarly.

The main character, Jane, is a thirty something academic who, over the course of a trip home to grieve her grandmother and to New York to meet her married lover, thinks in many different directions about what it means to be a single woman and what it means to live a life that is lived primarily in your mind. Some of the people Jane interacts with along her journey allow her to examine the small, quiet, but independent life she has chosen in contrast to others. Jane's mother used to write romance novels and had aspirations of becoming a more meaningful writer, but put those away to raise a family and cater to a domineering husband. Jane's friend Gerda has lived an exterior life, constantly taking actions and chances, and when Jane meets up with her on her return trip is running a feminist newspaper out of her basement. In addition, Jane makes a side trip to meet a man who has been characterized as a villain by her family her whole life, but who turns out to be quite different from what Jane expected.

This book was written in the 1970s and has some minor details which have not aged well, such as Jane's acute distaste for Gerda's swearing or the necessity of arranging long distance calls by calling an operator. However, the important parts, which are Jane's interior investigations, feel modern and interesting. One of my favorite devices the author uses is to have Jane often consider how the things she does will mutate as they move from her own experience to being a story told to others, filtered through those others' experiences. I often think about this and was interested to see it used in this book.

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