



The Portrait

Iain Pears

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An art critic journeys to a remote island off Brittany to sit for a portrait painted by an old friend, a gifted but tormented artist living in self-imposed exile. The painter recalls their years of friendship, the gift of the critic's patronage, and his callous betrayals. As he struggles to capture the character of the man, as well as his image, on canvas, it becomes clear that there is much more than a portrait at stake...

The Portrait Details

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Tony says

Imagine *The Cask of Amontillado* but told in the narrative voice of a painter through a number of sittings with an art critic. We know this will not end well for the critic, but in what manner will the demise come and what is the cause of revenge? Brilliant idea. But Pears, the author of not one but two previous masterpieces, is in this instance, sadly, no Poe.

Mathew says

This is an extremely short book, but Pears twists its few pages into a gripping narrative. The story is told through a one-sided conversation. A man has come to have his portrait painted by an old friend. The entire story is the monologue of the painter recounting their history. You'll feel the wind howling through the twist at the end.

Nancy Oakes says

My advice to prospective readers: don't stop reading this book until the end. You may begin reading it, say "huh?" and want to put it down. But don't. The whole thing unravels the further you go and it is worth the wait.

The entire book is structured as a monologue on the part of the narrator, Henry MacAlpine. MacAlpine is a very much sought-after artist in early 1900s London; his work is mostly portraiture, well, at least the work that provides his living. His subject, visiting MacAlpine in his current home on a small island off the Brittany coast of France, is one William Naysmith, a highly-influential art critic who used to be one of MacAlpine's best friends. MacAlpine is now in a state of self-exile on this small island, but the reader does not find out why until the end. He has summoned Naysmith to his island to paint his portrait, and it is during the course of the sitting that the monologue occurs. As the sitting and the monologue go on, the readers learns about the history of these two individuals from MacAlpine's beginning as an artist through his self-imposed exile.

Trust me on this one. The book is extremely well written, and don't read it with getting to the end in mind. Enjoy the ride there...that's the crux of this book and it makes for a very unique reading experience. Recommended.

Holly says

Meh. I know, that isn't a good review but it sums up my experience with this book. Neither good nor bad. Not terribly memorable.

Connie says

"The painter without the critic is nothing. The good critic can make the mediocre famous, the great obscure. His power is limitless; the artist is his servant, and one day will recognize the fact." (107)

An important British art critic has traveled to the isolated Breton island of Houat to have his portrait painted by an acquaintance that he once mentored. In an interior monologue the artist looks back at the times they shared in London and Paris in the early 20th Century. The art critic has destroyed lives while remaining unscathed himself. The artist wants to show the true character of the man on the canvas. The novel is a psychological study of the two men, and how far one will go in revenge. Chilling!

Emily says

Η ενδιαφέρουσα αυτή ιστορία είναι βασιμμένη στη θυμώδη ροπή του λαού "η εκδίκηση είναι να πιεστο που τρέγεται κρέο".

Μεσα από το μονόλογο του πρώτα - ζωγράφου σχηματοποιούμε τα γεγονότα και παρακολουθούμε το θάνατο μιας σχέσης.

Η θεατρική σκηνή έχει μόνο 2 πρωταγωνιστές.

Ο ζωγράφος και το μοντέλο του. Δεν υπάρχει διάλογος, ο διάλογος συντάσσεται από τον μονόλογο του ζωγράφου.

Ο ζωγράφος τελεί σε μια εκόσμια απομύηση και απύρση σε ένα δυσπρόσιτο νησί στα παράλια της Βρετανίας, στην αιχμή μιας πολύ υποσχμένης καριέρας.

Το μοντέλο του πορτραίτου είναι πρώην φίλος και μντορας του ζωγράφου, διάσημος τεχνοκριτικός, πλοσίος και επιτυχημένος που εξακολουθεί να ζει στο Λονδίνο.

Αρχικά καταλαβαίνουμε ότι ο τεχνοκριτικός πηγαίνει να βρει το ζωγάφο, με σκοπό να του φτιάξει το πορτραίτο, να μπει τις λεπτομέρειες που τον έθησαν να εγκαταλείψει την καριέρα του και ενδεχομώς να τον μεταπέσει να επιστρέψει. Σταδιακά, ο αναγνώστης θα καταλάβει ότι πρόκειται για την κορυφή του παγιδεύου. Δεν είναι καθόλου έτσι τα πράγματα. Καθώς το πορτραίτο προχωρά, η μείλεια και παραιτημένη μορφή του ζωγράφου μεταλλάσσεται, για να εξελιχθεί προς στο τέλος σε έναν αμελίκτο κατγόρο και εκδικητή.

Βμα βμα ο συγγραφέας μας κνει κοινωνικές ισχυρές συναισθημάτων, πως είναι ο χωρός ανταπόκριση πρώτα, η απύριψη, η απογοέτευση, το πθος, ο φθνος, η συμπνοια, ο εγωισμός, ο θαυμασμός και τέλος η απομυθοποίηση. Ψως το πιο οδυνηρό όλων είναι η απομυθοποίηση (εδ του μντορα) και το επερχόμενο μος. Σε κάποιο σημείο ο ζωγράφος βρσκει την τέλμη να ξεστομίσει στο πρόσωπο του μοντέλου του "ο κριτικός είναι σε σχέση με το ζωγάφο, τι είναι ο ευνοχος σε σχέση με τον άντρα". Του πρε μερικ χρονια και πρεπε να μεσολαβσουν τραυματικά γεγονότα για να καταλάβει μερικ πράγματα.

Θαυμάσιο βιβλίο αλλά και δύσκολο να το ακολουθήσει ένας βιαστικός και ανύμνος αναγνώστης.

Προσεγμένη και μορφή η κδοση της γρας, πως πντα. Εστόχο εξφυλλο.

Πολύ καλή επιμύεια και μετάφραση.

Greg says

I approached this with caution as Pears' "An Instance of the Fingerpost" was a daunting read for me.

However, I was pleasantly surprised with this simple, straightforward story: in a secluded location a gentleman is visited by an old friend and the two of them reminisce and resolve a previous conflict. No, wait, that was Sandor Maria's stunning masterpiece, "Embers", which was first published in Hungary in 1942 and was rediscovered and translated for English readers in 2001. But "The Portrait" takes place on an island while "Embers" takes place in the mountains. Yes, that's it: island vs. mountain. (Chaucer likely utilized Boccaccio's 14th century "The Decameron", Shakespeare certainly was inspired by stories of others. The plot of "Lolita" closely followed Patricia Highsmith's "The Price of Salt"...who was it that said there is nothing new under the sun?) Anyway, I'll wrap it up by saying I enjoyed "The Portrait" on its own merit: a suspense story without a word wasted. And I think I'll have another by Pears. And if you too liked this, you must read "Embers"!

Dani says

Shame on me.

I bought this book long (loooooong) ago but tucked it away on one of my faraway shelves without ever reading it due to the fact that I once tried another book by this author but ultimately had to give up because I found it completely unreadable and thus incomprehensible at the time. Consequently, it had me convinced that either his writing style wasn't my cup of tea or that my pea brain just wasn't able to translate his clever writing into plain English but whatever the reason, I never was in a hurry to try again.

However, recently, I made a deal with myself to finally work my way through all those books on forgotten shelves that I never read and so, Iain Pears and I met once again. And it pleases me to no end to say that time around, I enjoyed his company so (SO) much!

I won't go into what the story is about because I truly think that the less you know about the plot going in, the better your enjoyment of it will be. Just let the story come to you as it unfolds leisurely, completely in its own time. And don't quit before the end, because the ending is what tilts this story from good to great.

4.75 stars

John says

This is the third Iain Pear's novel I've read and while it may not be on a par with *An Instance of the Fingerpost* or as clever as *Stone's Fall*, it certainly fits into the Pear's oeuvre. I don't have a lot to say about the novel that cannot be found in the other reviews. I think one's reaction to the book has to do with the response to its dramatic monologue structure: the entire book consists of the protagonist's one-sided discussion with the person whose portrait he is painting. Some found it boring. On the other hand, I found the way the protagonist describes how their relationship evolved over the years to be captivating. It kept my interest during the early stages as well as the end.

Like other Pears novels, this too is a historical mystery which is neatly wrapped up in the last few pages. However, during the course, other smaller mysteries are revealed, all of which lead up to the final mystery about why the artist attracted the art critic and friend to this remote island off the coast of Brittany.

As an aside, I also enjoyed Pears discussion of late 19th and early 20th century art scene in France and England. I don't know much about art but the protagonist's discussion of character portrayal in painting and

the role of the art critic were in their own ways quite "revealing".

Mike says

This is a beautiful little masterpiece of a book. It might well have been titled, "The Menacing Foreshadowy Book of Foreshadowing", because right from the beginning (in fact, right from reading the cover flaps), you know that something bad is going to happen . . . and the badness is deliciously telegraphed in a thousand ways over the course of the book.

It is a monologue, the words of an artist as he paints a portrait of his subject, an art critic whom he has known for years. As he creates his portrait in oil, his words create a verbal portrait of the man, as well as portraits of several other characters from their shared history, and a self-portrait of the artist himself.

By the end of the book, the artist's motivations and intentions become clear. What kept this book from being truly great, I think, is that by the end of the book the artist has convinced us of the justice of his crime. Instead of revealing a monstrous, horrible fate for an innocent man, Pears essentially shows us a fate which is more or less deserved, if perhaps not richly. His protagonist is self-effacing, not grandiose.

Like the others of Pears' "serious" books, this one is incredibly well written. It is a joy to read just for the prose, even if the struggles within the art world and artists do come across as a bit fey and silly.

Tony says

I frequently encounter two types of spoiler. The first being those clearly identified in advance and the second which thrusts the whole deal up your nose without warning.

I hate the first because I am unable to read the review in advance. I hate the second more however, and this book suffered a great deal because of this one. I stupidly read the review in The Guardian just after I had embarked on it. I had immediately guessed half out the final outcome but this really ruined it.

I wanted to abandon it after the first chapter but persevered even though I knew the end and had guessed the other two or three sub-tales. But I continued. I have no real idea why. This is a monologue and a monologue which would be impossible; no one would sit without attempting to respond to the revelations/accusations.

Maybe it would work as a short story, but much of this bored me, particularly as I had already unpicked it.

EDIT: Oh by the way... I do appreciate the irony here! :o)

Lacey says

I listened to the Audio CD version of this book. Pretty blah for me. The entire book was internal monologue ramblings.

uk says

a truly fine study in beauty, art, aesthetics, corruption, and death. really recommended.

Althea Ann says

This is really a fantastic book.

It's short, and entirely in the form of a first-person monologue. An artist, retired from London's busy art scene to a remote and rural island, has invited a former friend, a well-respected critic, to come sit for a portrait. As the work progresses, the artist recounts the tale of how the critic became his mentor in the art world... at first, on the surface, it may seem a rather banal tale, if one that offers interesting insights into the scene in England at the beginning of the 20th century... but as the narrative progresses, progressively more undertones of darkness and menace appear, and the reader begins to suspect there is more to this story than the reunion of two old friends... and the denouement makes it all more than worthwhile.

Most impressive in this, is Pears' ability to create characterizations and insights that far exceed the limited vision and self-centered attitude of his narrator, all through that narrator's words.

Chris says

Ah, I can't say anything really without giving away the plot.

I can say, the book is gripping, creepy, thrilling, and just the right length. Read it in one sitting.
