



Brief Lives

Anita Brookner

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Brookner again shows herself to be the consummate observer of social nuance in this deeply felt chronicle of an unlikely friendship between the flamboyant, ego-centric Julia and modest, self-effacing Fay, the narrator. Thrust together by their husbands' business partnership and by their sharing of a guilty secret, these two women form an intense and intimate bond that highlights their uneasy compromises with each other -- and with life itself.

Brief Lives Details

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Paula Dembeck says

It is morning in late nineteen forties London when Fay Langdon sees the obituary of her friend Julia in the newspaper and begins thinking about the past. She remembers her early life growing up as the only child of loving parents and her successful career singing on radio. She thinks about her marriage to lawyer Owen Langdon, the man for whom she abandoned her singing to become a housewife. It all brings to mind her relationship with the egocentric Julia and a life that was interesting but one that never fulfilled her.

Owen Langdon was the man she convinced herself she wanted, seduced by the promise of romantic love in the twenties songs she sung on the radio. After she left her job she was quickly corralled into taking on the role of his hostess, entertaining his business friends at endless dinner parties. In the early years of her marriage she quickly realized that Owen was a workaholic who favored long days at the office and had little inclination for the demonstrations of affection, tenderness or sexual intimacy Fay longed to experience. His emotional and physical distance meant her dream of children soon faded and she resigned herself to the type of life she never wanted. Her relationship with her mother-in-law Vinnie was also strained. Vinnie adored Owen and believed a mother should come first in her son's affections. She saw Fay as a rival for his love and attention and she was intimidated by her cool demeanor.

Fay met Julia, the selfish and snobby wife of her husband's partner Charlie at a dinner party. Julia was eleven years older than Fay but they did have some things in common. Both were affluent and childless but the similarities ended there. Julia was a strong, forceful and difficult woman, while Fay was more quiet, passive and reticent.

Julia had been a cabaret star and retained a sense of the dramatic from her days on the stage. She always appeared elegant and well-dressed, part of her act of projecting an almost regal presence. Julia suffered from debilitating arthritis which limited what she could do for herself, but she had cleverly gathered a small group of devoted friends around her to help meet her needs. Despite the fact they helped her, she treated them badly, ordering them about and openly criticizing and often bullying them. She treated them with complete disdain and appeared totally uninterested or concerned with their feelings. Her friends tolerated her behavior and seemed unable to pull themselves away from her. Maureen, her former dresser from her theater days and one of her more steadfast and loyal friends, was completely devoted to her.

Fay became caught up in these co-dependent relationships, her low level of self-confidence holding her in this tight circle of helpers Julia had around her. And although she recognized what she is doing and hated herself for it, Fay too seemed unable to pull away.

Owen died at the early age of fifty-two, leaving Fay fifty years old at the time, financially secure but without the companionship she craved. She soon became Charlie's mistress, but found he too was a disappointment as a partner in a relationship. After Charles' death, she met Dr. Carter and began another relationship of comfortable companionship. He was a divorced bachelor and although they enjoyed each other's company, Fay discovered he valued her only because she was independent, financially comfortably and attractive for her age. He appreciated her eager welcome when they met at her home for a meal, but he also enjoyed the safety of an early departure. It's as if he felt that the later he stayed, the more deeply committed he would become. He was comfortable with the ways things were in his bachelor life and had no thoughts of marriage. After this relationship collapsed, Fay was not certain she wanted to marry again, although she longed to be appreciated and once again experience companionship. She was searching for a sense of attachment and the

illusion of belonging it brought with it.

As Julia grew older she was forced to deal with the death of her mother and her husband Charlie and soon found many of her friends had drifting away. Even Maureen, who had stayed by Julia's side for years, had plans to get married. Julia then seventy-four, immobile and bitter at Maureen's engagement, tried to lean more heavily on Fay, but she resisted. Although the deceit of the affair she had with Julia's husband Charlie weighed heavily on her conscious, Fay was determined she would no longer carry the burden of obligations Julia had placed on her. She promised herself that she would extricate herself from this relationship no matter how painful the process.

This is not a novel in which the plot drives the characters or the action. In fact, not much happens. Instead, it is the reflections of an older woman living alone in her declining years and about to enter the final years of life. It is a novel of quiet introspection and contemplation as she reflects on her life of more than sixty years with a sense of melancholy. Looking back, it has not been a hard or even difficult life, but it is not the life she had expected.

Sara says

Definitely one of the most boring books I have ever read.

Sometimes, I'm okay with very little action and a lot of introspection. The woman - Fay - was just far too introspective and depressing for me. And she went on and on and on about her unhappy life and how she just basically gave up and resigned herself to a life of loneliness. Not to mention she had some masochistic wish to be friends with a woman named Julia who was clearly a Bitch with a capital B.

Most of us would have dumped Julia long ago. Preferably in the Thames. (Did I mention this takes place in London?

Fay went on and on and on about her middle age and her old age and how it was just the way with women of her day and age. I believe she was born in the late 1920's. At some point, I wanted to slap her and tell her to "get a life".

I finished it, though. Finished the book as if performing penance.

Fredsky says

As we single women toddle towards our deathbeds, all alone, how should we best be feeling? ('At least HE isn't here to see me in this mess!' or 'Help me Help me Help me!' or 'Ahem! I have some last words here! Let go of that drip and copy this down!') or what? The narrator is telling her story, the story of her life, from the perspective of a well-behaved English woman in her sixties. She considers herself elderly. She is certain that she will die without any loved ones present to help her on her way.

She is in a morbid state; her husband has died, her lover has died, and the nasty, demanding wife of her lover has NOT died but has kept a coterie of lonely women around to admire her, be insulted by her, and do anything they can for her. Our heroine, being a creature of Brookner, allows herself to be swept away by this

aging dominatrix, and hates herself for it.

Her test comes when an unmarried man shows an interest in her. Soon she is inviting him to lunch, to dinner. He is elusive, rude, totally armored against any kind of intimacy whatsoever. She likes him but finds him impossible. Nevertheless, she is hardwired to want a man as a companion. These situations resolve themselves both singly and together as this single woman, looking towards death, manages to remember to stay alive in the meantime.

Ali says

I really do love Anita Brookner's writing, although, I find when it comes to writing a review I am somewhat at a loss to explain why. Her novels are certainly not plot driven, and people who only like plot driven narratives might well be driven mad by the quiet contemplation and introspection. I like the quite genteel lives of Brookner's world, and find – maybe alarmingly that I understand them. I often hear and see the word depressing applied to reviews of Brookner's novels – well I can see why – though I prefer the term melancholic. Anita Brookner does make me examine my own life – and it's not always comfortable to do so. In *Brief Lives* we meet Fay and Julia in middle and late middle age. Both are married – and later widowed, affluent and childless. Fay was once a singer on the radio before her marriage, Julia an actress – who has ever since retained her sense of the dramatic. The novel opens with Fay reading of Julia's death, a woman with whom she shared a great deal of her life until more recently.

“Julia died. I read it in *The Times* this morning. There was quite a substantial obituary, but what immediately fixed my attention was the photograph, one of those studio portraits of the late 1930's or early 1940's, all huge semi-transparent eyes, flat hair, and dark lipstick. I never liked her, nor did she like me; strange, then, how we managed to keep up a sort of friendship for so long.”

In her younger days, newly married, Fay lives in quiet fear of her mother-in-law Vinnie, who's obsessive like adoration of her son Owen is intimidating. This relationship is mirrored to an extent in the “friendship” that develops between Fay and Julia, Julia the wife of Owen's business partner. As the years pass, Julia - eleven years Fay's senior – becomes more reliant upon Fay - in a purely selfish way, she manipulates Fay, who, knowing that she is in thrall to Julia seems unable to leave Julia behind, even when their husbands through whom they are connected have died. Julia is a kind of frail but elegant bully. Around Julia are the lonely women, who help her live quietly in her grand flat, including a slightly pathetic young woman Maureen who Julia obviously despises, and Julia's former dresser from her theatrical days. Julia orders them around in her imperious way, little appreciating what they do for her, while telephoning Fay to wheedle another visit. As she herself ages, Fay must contend with the deaths of her mother and then her husband, finding that she is now alone, alters Fay's view of herself and the world around her.

“I was very lonely during the weeks that followed my mother's death. I knew that I should never again be all the world to anyone, as it says in the song. Normally I despise women who claim never to have got over their parents' death, or who affirm that their fathers were the most perfect men who had ever lived. I despise them, but I understand them. How can any later love compensate for the first, unless it is perfect? My simple parents had thought me unique, matchless, yet they had let me go away from them without a murmur of protest.”

Although I enjoyed this novel enormously, *Brief Lives* won't be my favourite Brookner novel, I think that would be *A Closed Eye*, or *Look at Me*, however it is a typical Brookner book and so if you were to read it and enjoy it, then it would be fair to say you will like her others too. Anita Brookner's writing is beautiful, her observations of people in their quiet genteel lives, for me quite unparalleled. Though I find there is a coldness to Brookner's writing, which is absent in the novels of such writers as Elizabeth Taylor and Barbara Pym, who also examine the lives of upper or middle class women. With its overriding themes of ageing and

nostalgia, *Brief Lives* is an intelligent and poignant novel, which benefits from a slow and considered reading.

WndyJW says

Reading this novel is like reading the diary of a woman's marriage and widowhood and her relationship with a vain, narcissistic, former theater actress. This is very much a character study which I enjoy. Fay shares with us the expectations, disappointments, fears, accommodations, and consolations of a rather lonely life. I liked Fay. She was not a particularly brave or assertive woman, but she did find the strength to make for herself the kind of life in which she could be happy. I was drawn in by Brookner's limpid prose and look forward to reading more of her books.

Jessie says

Rebecca West once famously said, "I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat." The narrator could do with a bracing slug of feminism. Trod-on, used, manipulated, the narrator never grows into a full person, although maybe we are all malleable in different ways. The book is ponderous and detailed in relaying the inner workings of a woman of a certain age, and is at least revealing about a world I don't quite understand.

Jane says

This is my first Anita Brookner book and while it is very well written it is also a very depressing story. The main character, Fay, compromises her life so much through marriage, friendship, an illicit affair and even her living accommodation that by the end of the book I wanted to slap her and tell her just to paint the bloody walls another colour and replace that horrible carpet and stop thinking of yourself as being old at 45 and get rid of that bitchy 'friend'.

Robin says

Loved it.

Rita says

A Brookner book [1990] is certainly not cheerful! The two main characters are upper-middle-class women who each spend their last years alone [husbands having died]. The one is a convincingly described self-centered manipulator. The other allows herself to be manipulated -- by everyone, pretty much. Although she is deep into introspection throughout the book, she doesn't seem to me to ever get beyond her childhood

training of dutifully pleasing and caring for other people.

I find it all quite depressing. She is convinced that life without a male companion is without value and without happiness, and her conviction [apparently] prevents her from enjoying all the things and people potentially around her. Among all her inner monologuing I detect quite a number of contradictions; I am assuming - hoping - that Brookner has put these there on purpose.

A typical passage [p100]:

"If I still looked forward hopefully to some experience that remained vague in outline, if I still dressed with care and was fastidious about my appearance, I was nevertheless quite resigned to spending the remainder of my life alone. I even took a certain pride in the prospect. No more unwelcome hope and disappointments, no more wild anticipations, brooding let-downs. I was of an uncomplaining disposition, had never nagged or belaboured my husband, was good at disguising my cares. It seemed to me a better thing to suffer than constantly to accuse. Yet all this good behaviour, if that is what it was, had left me a little sad, a little passive, and that occasionally seemed to me unfair. But I put such thoughts out of my mind when they occurred and on the whole they did not bother me unduly."

But of course these thoughts bothered her a very great deal, and constantly. It's sad. Especially because she probably speaks/stands for a great many women in our society.

=====
Ian responded:

"I am glad you are enjoying some Brookner books--at least they are not leaving you indifferent.

You seem to be a bit more censorious of her characters than I remember being myself. Your last longish citation seems to me a good example of the Brookner skill in seeing clearly the kinds of rationalizations quite intelligent and sensitive people can elaborate to explain their behaviour to themselves.

My recollection is that two of her books I especially liked were Look at Me and A Friend from England. If you cannot find them in your library, you would be welcome to borrow my copies."

Chris Walker says

The book clubs will have fun with this one, discussing the arresting limitations of the ageing characters, especially the narrator. Well written, full of unrealised hopes and dreams and the approaching spectre of old age - good depressing fare! The self aware reader will no doubt have lots of good advice for the narrator by the end of it of what she should be doing instead of sitting in her flat feeling sorry for herself when she is obviously still in good health and retains a fantastic brain with astonishing powers to recall in detail the events of decades past!

Richard Smith says

Wikipedia says that Anita Brookner's "novels explore themes of emotional loss and difficulties associated with fitting into society, and typically depict intellectual, middle-class women, who suffer isolation and disappointments in love." That's certainly true of this novel—and, I fear, true of her own life. Having published her first novel aged 53 she published a novel a year until 2009, surely too many novels.

I read *Hotel du Lac* years ago and remember only the stillness. I came to read *Brief Lives* because of the flurry of publicity that surrounded Brookner's death in March. That's peculiarly apt in that the novel begins with Fay, the narrator, reading the obituary of Julia, the other main character of the book; and the book ends with Fay imagining a conversation about how her death was-- "Not all that bad... You ought to give it a try one of these days." These two women come together because of their husbands, both of whom are failures as husbands in different ways, and are then locked together for life despite not liking each other at all.

This is a book about women, and like all the books I am currently reading by women (Howard, Bowen, Brookner) seems to be about the failure, or at least fragility, of their relationships. Fay says in the novel: "I was not given to speculating about other people's emotional lives. I assumed that they were all like mine: faulty." Do most relationships seem like failures to most women? I fear they might. (Tell me if you're a woman.)

Almost nothing happens in the book, which spans the lives of the two main characters, but I was engrossed—partly because the style is so exact, crystalline. Julia is described as "acid, heartless, virginal," which I thought wonderful; it made me think about *BMJ Confidential* where people are asked to summarise their character in three words--"acid, heartless, virginal," would be so arresting. Although I've declined to appear in *BMJ Confidential*, thinking it too incestuous, I've thought about my three words and settled provisionally on "curious, energetic, frivolous."

Here are the quotes I mined from the book, a goodly haul:

I see if a woman has it in mind to bring a man to heel she may have to play a part which runs counter to her own instincts, unless her instincts are those of an aggressor...

Growing old is so meaningless when there are no young people to watch.

I know now that inside every one of us there is another self, wistful, wary, uncertain, but also cruel and subversive, a stranger who can respond to any suggestion, any impulse, whether wise or unwise, though it is usually the latter.

It [the capacity of women to exclude men] is a resource which can outlive its usefulness, as alliances are made and broken, and jealousies begin to peak.

Women in such a situation [isolated from men] will unite in deploring the childishness of men, their deceptions, and their frivolity.

I was not given to speculating about other people's emotional lives. I assumed that they were all like mine: faulty.

Love is not the awesome prize I once thought it was but a much more daily commodity, penny plain rather than tuppence coloured. But I suppose that women throughout the ages have felt dissatisfied with what is available, the friendlier varieties of love which are natural to the human race, and have broken their hearts and suffered mightily for unsuitable partnerships which were never meant to be consummated.

Julia was essentially a creature of insinuation, the eyelids lowered and then flying open, request and accusation mingling, retribution to follow.

I had no time for her tragic attitudes, for I knew that whatever pain she felt was always confined to her own

preoccupations.

Sometimes it only wants a little whisper of approbation to set one on one's way.

Adultery is not noble. Adulterous lovers are not allowed to be star-crossed. Anna Karenina and Emma Bovary are not really heroines. Even when there is real love, authentic love, it is not the sort in which one rejoices. That night I began a long training in duplicity, in calculation, in almost continuous discomfort, but also in confidence and expectation and effectiveness. Year did not diminish any of these feelings: they continued my apprenticeship.

I was free now, free of all encumbrances, free of hope that greatest of all encumbrances.

I had graduated in an academy where words were used as a disguise and where the whole object was to divine the unspoken intention.

One returns to the company of women when any blow falls, when the limp in the breast or the unexplained smear of blood are discovered, when the threats which are peculiar to a woman's life come uncomfortably close.

Nothing is straightforward in this life, however ardently one desires it, the one true outcome.

Underneath all experience lurks the child's bewilderment.

And this despite her death, which I read about in last Monday's Times. So irrelevant did her death seem that I almost looked forward to discussing with her, felt something like a quickening of interest. "What was it like?" I should have asked. Her eyelids would have come down again as she considered. "Not all that bad," I can hear her say, in her most famously throw-away tone. "You ought to give it a try one of these days."

WndyJW says

Reading this novel is like reading the diary of a woman's marriage and widowhood and her relationship with a vain, narcissistic, former theater actress. This is very much a character study which I enjoy. Fay shares with us the expectations, disappointments, fears, accommodations, and consolations of a rather lonely life. I liked Fay. She was not a particularly brave or assertive woman, but she did find the strength to make for herself the kind of life in which she could be happy. I was drawn in by Brookner's limpid prose and look forward to reading more of her books.

Lambeam says

Anyone over fifty would be wise to have a stiff drink before starting this book - preferably a gin and tonic because that is what everyone in the book is drinking. The author has a brilliant talent for describing in unflinching detail what it is to grow old in the company of widows and unmarried women. A very painful read.

Anne M says

Brookner is my kind of author. It's all about the writing - not just plot. Page by page is a pleasure. Subtle characterization is the hallmark of her writing. This book's lead character is vividly developed. A very satisfying read.

John says

I wasn't going to review this one, but having finished listening a few minutes ago, I've changed my mind.

A reviewer has stated that if the protagonist, Fay, were to attend a costume party, she'd attend as a Question Mark by default. I agree; her life so identified with being a wife (and widow), that we never really learn exactly *who* she really is. She even seems to try the role of adulteress, although the fellow is dead by the time the story gets going, and his widow (as it later turns out I believe), suspected, and didn't really care. So, in the end, she's left trying her best to be an elderly nobody, after a husband whom it turned out wanted a spouse, but not a wife (equal partner), an affair that meant more to her than the others involved, and a potential, final coupling that turned out to be Mister Wrong. Poor Fay ... poor well-meaning Fay.

What gives this book any meaning? Why not two stars (for the writing quality) and an "I found it rather a bore and a chore"? Julia.

She's been referred to as an "ageing dominatrix" and "a Bitch with a Capital B" elsewhere, and I can't argue that one at all. I could *easily* see Patsy Stone from Absolutely Fabulous dropping by for a few free drinks: " 'Sup, Jules?" "Patsy, *darling!*" Soulmates, indeed. A bit of a spoiler that she was the "wronged" woman whose husband was at it with Fay. Perhaps Fay felt guilty over that, but it seems more that she was sucked in by Julia's selective helplessness. Anna Massey did a terrific job voicing Julia as so incredibly narcissistic, but print readers seem to have gotten that down well, so Brookner hit a home run on that score. You have to marvel at her ability to attract people with "Use Me" signs on their backs.

The ending was neatly done, as far as the Julia Problem was concerned, but a bit ... unresolved for Fay's future. Recommended? Well ... you'll either be fascinated by "How Do We Solve a Problem Like Julia?" (hat tip to the Von Trapps), or incredibly frustrated by the endless parade of dysfunction. If you're new to Brookner, I found Hotel du Lac more approachable.
