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Eddie Twyborn is bisexual and beautiful, the son of a Judge and a drunken mother. His search for identity, self-affirmation and love takes us into the ambiguous landscapes, sexual, psychological and spiritual, of the human condition.

The Twyborn Affair Details

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Author : Patrick White

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From Reader Review The Twyborn Affair for online ebook

Andy Quan says

An Australian friend recommended that I read Patrick White, and that the Twyborn Affair is the best. It's topical to read now though, as transgender people are having a cultural 'moment' and are everywhere on TV and the media. For a book from 1979 to propose a three-part story, following the protagonist's life as a woman, then man, than woman, it was long ahead of its time.

I wish I would have liked the book more though. I can see its merit, and the way that Patrick White uses voice and different landscapes completely Australian and completely original. Rich Australians travelling and living in Europe, the upper crust of society both there and in country NSW, was interesting. And equally engaging was his lack of modesty or timidity about writing about sex, and bodily functions. A home abortion in a brothel was one particularly graphic scene.

But I found the writing difficult to read, his exaggerated comical caricatures, how brash their social interactions. The language is really florid. Characters are often eating, the grease smearing all over their hands and face, and settling into their clothes; similarly, women's make up is described as caked on, running or otherwise causing problems. It has taken me a very long to get through the book, though I decided to commit to getting through (and admittedly, each part got easier to read; the first is the toughest I think).

Still, it's all just a matter of taste, that there were just a few too many factors that I didn't connect with in his writing and themes. He's a celebrated, Nobel-winning author, and a number of reviewers think this is his best book. I think I'm unlikely to give him another go though.

Rose says

Timely yet dated, this novel published in the late 1970s follows one character through three incarnations in the same lifetime, the first of which is so persuasive that the second comes as a bit of a surprise. I read it cold, with no sense of what was coming, and found the first section puzzling until the second provided revelation. By the third section, you can't help but be disappointed, even saddened, by the this character's continuing need for evasion, for concealment. History has caught up with the Eadie Twyborns of this world, perhaps even liberated them. Still, from the South of France to a sheep ranch in the Australian Outback -- described in gruesome detail -- to a brothel in decadent pre-WW2 London, this novel sheds a light on the mysteries of gender and identity.

Jim Leckband says

I came across this book by randomly choosing a book from the recommendations Goodreads gave me for the psychology genre. At first I was a little mystified - I was expecting to get a non-fiction book of psychological quirks that I find fascinating to read - à la Oliver Sacks. This emphatically was not that book! But after reading, the recommendation was spot on, the psychology of the main character, Eudoxia/Eddie/Eadith, is essentially the core of the book.

In these days of transgender awareness, a straight person might be tempted to think that all this gender fluidity is a new thing - otherwise why hadn't they seen or heard about it? Having eyes do you not see, having ears do you not hear? This book is also about the not-seeing - by others and the main character as well. What is astounding to me is that an older Australian writer in the late 1970's wrote this. I guess that to those who can see, nothing is hidden - and it seems Patrick White can see!

To digress a little bit (ah, who am I kidding, everything is a digression.) - I first read Patrick White decades ago. We had an Australian post-doc in our department and I mentioned that I was reading him. The reaction was so dramatic that I can still remember it. Basically it was a conservative, moral reaction that this was an author to avoid - like he was unclean or something. After reading this book, now I can guess where these views came from.

In any case, this kind of moral repugnance is not present in the book at all. It would have been easy to include some bigot characters to spew about unnatural this or that, but I am glad that White did not make it that kind of book. At its core is the truth that the nature of a human is expressed from within and that truth can lie uneasily with what society expects. Edward Twyborn (born twice? born with two?) in the words of today, identifies as female, but can be attracted to either gender. The three sections of the book follow her from Eudoxia in 1912 as a young wife to a barmy Byzantine Greek in the south of France, to an Australian sheep farm as Eddie in 1920 and finally as a whorehouse madam (!) right before the war in London.

The book is brave in never presenting Twyborn in tormenting anxiety about her nature, it seems she has accepted it. However that acceptance is not without cost as each of these sections portray. The main cost is that Twyborn is afraid of love because she cannot trust the other to accept her as she is. Which is the tragedy of the book as several times it is obvious to the reader that there are those who would. The Hollywood ending puts an ironic stamp on that though. (view spoiler)

Andrew says

Misery! War! Sexuality! Anomie! Oh, modernists...

Echoes of Virginia Woolf throughout the entirety of the book. Patrick White could care less for the voyage of the individual. It's far more interesting to watch identity and society shift and elide.

I don't know that as a novel it was terribly satisfying, but there were some beautiful sequences that made it a worthwhile read. It was a bit too Anglocentric for my tastes, but I can imagine that any lover of the British modernists looking to branch out a bit might adore it.

Shane says

Try as I might I could not get through this book and abandoned it after a hundred pages. There is beautiful literary writing here, but that alone does not carry a novel.

White seems to have pulled extensively from his life, including the male Greek lover, an aging one in this tale. Eudoxia, the Australian hero (or heroine) dresses as a woman to hide his homosexuality and lives an idyllic life with the aging widower Angelos Vatatzes in a French villa. His mother Eadie's friend Mrs.

Golson and her husband are also vacationing in the same area. Eadie and Mrs. Golson too had once dressed up as a man and woman to go out to a part of town where single women were frowned upon, and this event is seared across Eudoxia's memory. The Golsons are rich and the husband only signs letters and attends board meetings to keep his enterprise Down Under afloat. In France, Mrs. Golson spots the youthful "Mrs. Vatatzes" from afar and lusts after her. Pelletier, the newspaper vendor by the beach spots Mrs. Vatatzes swimming nude and lusts after her. Even Mr. Golson has his eye on "her." And poor aging Mr. Vatatzes, who was faithful to his first wife, now dead, fears that he will lose his youthful male lover. And Eudoxia is frustrated because Angelos cannot reciprocate his passion, because "Passion and lust are as necessary as a square meal."

That's as far as I got. Why? Because the book seems to go around in a circle of confused gender, sexuality and identity. And masturbation is the only release for these self-indulgent and self-absorbed characters. The scenes are set pieces where someone is recollecting, spying on or visiting someone else. This lack of movement was frustrating and as I wasn't interested in joining the characters in masturbatory release, I put this book away for another time, when I may be a bit more patient in venturing through the remaining pages.

Justin Evans says

White is dense. Here you have a book about a woman, who turns out to 'be' a man, who prefers to live as a woman, who decides to live as a man, who (plot spoiler) dies. By the time you've read the back cover, then, you'll know we're already in Tiresias and Orlando territory. The book is a triptych. In the two wings, Ms. Twyborn is in Europe; in the central panel, he's in Australia--so, an inverted *Lost Illusions*, in which the provincial (i.e., Australian) is in the centre (Europe) at the beginning and end of the book, and returns to the provinces in the middle portion. The individual sections also call to mind endless books: the first third could be a Henry James novel, only with Australian expats instead of American (and, you know, explicit gender trouble). The middle third is much the other big White novel I've read (*Vivisector*) in its attention to the Australian landscape and the business with Australian identity. The final third takes place in a brothel, and reminds me, at least, of Baron de Charlus towards the end of Proust.

I have no idea if White intended all of these echoes, but I enjoyed them.

Also dense: White's prose. Generally, I'm bored silly by physical descriptions, but White's is so musical and intricate that I compulsively re-read them. Consider this sentence, almost devoid of content, but still breathtaking:

"Where the villa was situated there opened a view of the sea, its hyacinth deepening to purple at that hour of evening, islands of amethyst nestling in tender feathers of foam, clouds too detached in every sense to suggest something physical, only a slash of brash sunset to warn of the menace invariably concealed in landscape and time."

or

"Not yet recovered from the storm of the night before, the whole landscape had remained withdrawn in its sombre self, the sea still streaked with oily black, except when throwing itself against the promontory of rock or the strip of gritty plage, it flashed a frill of underskirt which would have shown up white if it had not been dirtied, toned with grey concrete, black asphalt, the straggle of palms, saw-toothed blades parrying the last

of the wind, a line of tamarisks, their cobweb-and-dustladen branches a dead green at the best of times, now harried to a kind of life, overall the coastal spine covered with a scurf of dead grass and network of black vines."

Crikey. As a whole, this book somehow combines the syntax of late James with the physicality (and repetitions) of D. H. Lawrence--while remaining pleasurable.

And the ideas are dense too. Twyborn's gender bending could have been gimmicky, but the Tiresias echoes help to focus on the most important question here: can one embody a myth? And is human sexuality an adequate one? In the first world war, Twyborn comes across a Captain who tells him about fucking a French woman. As he went at it, he had a vision, "like the wings of a giant cocky, soft, and at time explosive." Plainly, he sees the woman as an angel, but closes his story, "Don't know why I'm tellun yer this. About giant cockies. You'll think I'm a nut case... An' don't think I'm religious!... Because I believe in nuthun... NUTHUN!" This anecdote is followed by a passage about Mme. Twyborn's brothel, which is consistently described as a convent--here, "the brisk sound of [the assistant's] brown habit, the rustle of her bunch of keys, if not her rosary, could be heard in the corridors... and as they issued out of the individual cells under her charitable control."

Throughout the novel, the characters appeal to something that can work as their personal myth, but rarely ascend/descend to organized religion. Curiously the only survivor of the second world war is M/me. Twyborn's mother, who spends all of her time in church or reading a prayerbook. She doesn't know her son has died, but she sits, enjoying the birdsong as a bulbul "cocked his head at her, shook his little velvet jester's cap, and raised his beak towards the sun."

So, in sum: great prose, great thoughts, no silly existentialism. One of the best novels I've read this year, but certainly not for everyone.

mark monday says

i picked this up in a hostel donation shelf in amsterdam; it was missing both the back and front covers and the author was unknown to me. i knew nothing about it except that it was something to pass the time reading while high, as my traveling partner slowly regained her health. i think it was the best circumstances in which to read the book; its mysteries and dreamlike meanderings completely free from descriptive and contextual blurb, all explication left entirely to my own impressions. something about the sometimes languorous, sometimes precise writing style and the lingering sense of mysterious motivations barely expressed by the characters was so reminiscent of the polite dutch people around me, in their city full of strangeness and charm. reading the movement of the protagonist through periods as an australian jackaroo, a brothel's madame, a soldier in world war 2 france, a transvestite... it felt at first like trying to figure out the narrative of a dream, until slowly, with no great defining moment, everything made perfect and tragic sense. it was a move from a description of a dream into the dream itself. by the end of the novel i felt as if i had looked through the author's eyes and thought the author's thoughts.

in the end, what is the meaning? well, as with all great books, there are many avenues to finding meaning and many sorts of meanings on display, many "points" that can be found and many that are being made, consciously and perhaps otherwise. identity and its potential fluidity. self-affirmation. class and social conventions. masculine & feminine archetypes. an ode to landscapes, both country and city. bourgeoisie vs. bohemia. the peace that some find in war, the war that exists during peace. lots of things. if i had to chose

one of the above, i'd say the first: Identity. what is it, anyway?

now a warning: this is dense, dizzying, poetic prose. *challenging*. think Peake, Pynchon, Paul Scott, etc... he's quite different from those authors but they all share an occasional sort of impenetrability in the writing. well, at least superficially impenetrable - the opposite of a quick and shallow read. wonderful stuff, gorgeous and memorable prose, but not for everyone i suppose.

according to australians i met during the trip, apparently Patrick White's novels are required reading back home, but the kind that few australians ever actually get around to reading. a strange fate for the only australian nobel prize winner for literature! to be known yet unknown - so much like the protagonist of his fascinating novel.

Tim says

This book is worth reading simply because the central character is a person worth knowing. Eddie Twyborn was assigned "male" at birth but lived much of life as a woman. To the extent we come to know Eddie/Eudoxia/Eadith, we come to understand the complicated relationship between psyche and body in this individual who is at times care-free, careful, diffident, sensitive and solitary. While the book never focuses solely on the conflict of E's internal feelings and external expression of gender, it is central to the story. It is a conflict of which only E (and eventually the reader) is aware. It is sometimes the driving force in decisions E makes and sometimes a secondary concern, but the incongruent gender expression is never entirely absent.

I appreciated that White never presented E as an object of contempt or pity. We see a person who is stuck in a life of compromise. E's story contains no moments of wallowing in angst but there is also never a moment of unadulterated joy. The times of deepest contentment seem to be when the character is alone, working or recreating in the Australian outback. While not lacking for friends, the reader comes to see that however E chooses to live, as either male or female, s/he is never truly known to others. By the end of the book, I was yearning for E to find an intimate, to encounter that person who can be entrusted with her full sense of herself, with her past and her hopes for the future.

Instead of the writing transporting me into the story and the time and place of the telling, I felt instead that it was a barrier. The words seemed too laboriously chosen, too thoughtful. I could feel the author straining for the sentence, for the scene. Patrick White wanted to carry the reader away as much as I wanted to be transported. But I was always conscious of the author's efforts to do so and in the end felt the burden and strain of the writing. I was intrigued by the construct of the book, however. The first part was told from a variety of points of view, most from what turned out to be minor characters, but this approach gave the reader an excellent idea of who E was to others. The second part of the book was entirely from E's point of view, no shifts in the narrative. The third part of the book was still from E's point of view, but in a more detached way. We weren't close in like we were in the second part. We also didn't see E from any external point of view and this, I think, contributed to the understanding of E's isolation. Really rather a brilliant approach by Patrick White, but the strained writing made enough of an impression that I ended up with only a middling reading experience.

Lizbet says

The thing with Patrick White is that it's hard to pick the number of stars to give. In fact, I'm not sure that I really like this star-rating thing. So often I read a book which is beautifully and intelligently written and that you enjoy reading but that you can't say you loved because the author has a clever knack of making things distasteful. So this was a very good book, but not a loveable book.

Anne says

I found this book very moving, as I followed three "chapters" in the life of Eddie Twyborn. My score reflects not only White's exquisite sensitivity and humour as Eddie Twyborn explores his sexuality - and the heartbreak of what it is to live in a society that does not accept who one is - but the gems of language and sentence that I am coming to love in White's work. What an artist he was with language!

Lisa says

Anyway, I'm not surprised that The Twyborn Affair was a bestseller. It's easier to read than the High Modernism of Voss and it's an intriguing read. The curious life and identity of Eddie Twyborn is told in three parts:

in the south of France where Joanie Golson, in retreat from British scorn for 'colonial' Australians, discovers and becomes fascinated by 'Eudoxia' Vatatzes, and there are enigmatic hints of a relationship that don't make sense;

the interlude on the Monaro where Eddie Twyborn has ambiguous relationships with the local squatter's wife, Marcia Lushington and the manager Prowse ; and

the life of Eadith Trist, the madam of a high-class bordello in London.

To read the rest of my review (but beware, there are spoilers)

<http://anzlitlovers.wordpress.com/200...>

Meredith says

This is a beautifully sculpted book. I have most of White's work still to read, but I do respond to his ability to get under the skin, as it were, of his characters. His descriptive prose is extremely visceral and like all lovers of language he uses surprising contrasts of imagery which are often centred around the body and its functions, its failings, its excretions. Even a stale afternoon tea sponge is described through a bodily metaphor, "It...looked ghastly rich, with raspberry blood trickling down snowy crevasses." There is sometimes an over-reliance on a particular image however. Two or three women on separate occasions are likened to a "raw scallop", making you recoil from an image of plump, inert white flesh and a gross orange mouth, but to use this simile more than once is to dull its effect and jolts you out of the narrative. This is a small criticism though and I absolutely relished White's poetic writing. His descriptions of place are as much about a psychological space as a material one and I like this almost phenomenological idea of every one of us being so immersed in the world that it is inside us as much as it is external to us. I look forward to immersing myself in more of his novels, I hear 'Tree of Man' is superb and then there is the infamous 'Voss'

to get acquainted with too.

Miriam says

I finished reading this a month ago, so I'm a little blurry on the details now. But one thing I'm sure about is that this book definitely improved with a re-read.

I think I've already mentioned that I read this at a younger and more prudish age. Back then, I had the impression that it was all about flatulence and masturbation and deviant, deviant sex. It impressed me a lot, I think, in a scarring kind of way.

This time around, though, I found it pretty tame. The sexuality was actually handled quite delicately (compared to what we're used to seeing now). The flatulence -- since I was expecting it -- came across as less purely offensive and more indicative of character and atmosphere. And the masturbation was there for literary reasons: it was clearly metaphorical and symbolic and everything, even if it *was* all slimy and explicit.

I can't summarize the plot without giving away the ending, so let me just wax ultra-vague. Mainly, this novel is about identity. Not just identity as a sexual being, but identity as a person of a particular nationality (in this case, Australian) and within a particular family and community. The characters spend most of their time just groping their way towards what it means to be them. Also: they keep bumping into each other in the dark, skittering apart, and then coming back together again. Maybe, ultimately, that's what it's like to be somebody.

So here we have three E???: **Eudoxia**, the enchanting young mistress of an elderly, flatulent Greek man. Poor Doxy constantly asks herself what she???'s doing with her life, whilst dodging the sticky romantic fantasies of an older woman whom she recognizes as her own mother???'s special friend (though the woman doesn???'t recognize *her* for reasons which will become clear later on).

Then there???'s **Eddie**, son of a respectable Judge, but he goes off into the Outback to work as a farmhand and lose himself in the land, whilst dodging the temptations of his boss's wife and the suspicions of the foreman.

Lastly, there???'s **Eadith**, the magnificent brothel madam, who has to decide what she stands for when war comes knocking on her door. Plus, she has to dodge the propositions of men more interested in her than in her whores.

Okay, fine, I changed my mind. It's not about *identity*, it's about *dodging overly amorous admirers!*

And weaving in and out of these stories is a procession of mothers and fathers and other embarrassing persons who remind the E???'s who they are and who they???'d rather not be.

The Twyborn Affair didn???'t have a happy ending, but in the context of what the novel was trying to achieve, it had an appropriate one. A happily ever after in domestic bliss would just be a petty vandalism against all these images of identities in flux. And anyway, this way, it???'s more memorable.

This impressed me for all the wrong reasons when I first read it. Now I???'m pretty sure I???'ll remember it

for better ones.

Lee Kofman says

The Twyborn Affair was a feat of linguistic fireworks. I loved immersing myself in the universe of White's language and from the second part of this 3-part-novel also became really involved with the narrative. In fact, I ended up being so moved that I burst into tears in a nails salon as I was finishing the book there, to everyone's considerable embarrassment... This bawling session is a testimony to White's talent, because I'm a tough audience when it comes to tears, and even more so because the protagonist wasn't actually, when you think of it properly, done that well. We never really got deeply into his/her mind, and she/he remained somewhat aloof, somewhat unreal. I also thought White's social satire went a bit overboard, lots of two-dimensional characters. And, wow, does he dislike women... Still, the prose and the narrative twists and the dizzying variety of the novel's settings all make this book a very worthy read.

Brent Hayward says

Patrick White was a consistently incredible writer and this book, so far, of those I've read, is his best. (He said the same thing, in interviews.) The protagonist, Eddie Twyborn, through three incarnations, slips in and out of name, time, geography and gender. Sentences resonate with profundity. The structure is invariably surprising and original. You need to pay attention. Cumulative effects of this book (and any White novel) are a dense, moving source of emotional complexity, so insightful into, well, being human that slow explosions of epiphanies go off one after the other. Plus, in The Twyborn Affair, fringe sexuality and identity issues (PW was a rebellious, cantankerous gay man in an especially challenging era) add an outsider's poignancy and, at times, an uncharacteristic raunch and even a disturbing dimension, elevating the book above not only others in White's oeuvre but also Cormac McCarthy's and Nabokov's, two writers whose presence is felt (by me, anyhow) whenever I read one of PW's works. Outstanding.
