



The Madam

Julianna Baggott

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West Virginia, 1924: Alma works in a hosiery mill where the percussive roar of machinery has far too long muffled the engine that is her heart. When Alma's husband decides that they should set out to find their fortune in Florida, Alma has little choice but to leave her three children and ailing mother behind. But when Alma is then abandoned at a Miami dock, she is suddenly forced to make her own way in the world. With the help of a gentle giantess and an opium-addicted prostitute, Alma reclaims her children from the orphanage and forges ahead with an altogether new sort of family. As an act of survival, she chooses to run a house of prostitution, a harvest that relies on lust and weakness in men, of which "the world has a generous, unending supply."

The Madam is the story of a house of sin. It is here where Alma's children will learn everything there is to know about "love and loss, sex and betrayal." Based on the real life of the author's grandmother, *The Madam* is a tale of epic proportions, one that will haunt readers long after its stunning conclusion.

The Madam Details

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From Reader Review The Madam for online ebook

Tamara says

A motley group of survivors strive to negotiate 1920s dustbowl America. Negotiating a life of grim beauty and unsteady redemption, a thread of hope and salvation somehow remains. A gritty but thoroughly enjoyable read, based on the author's grandmother's life and memories. 3.5 stars.

Christie says

The Writing of this book was well crafted and artistic. I give it four stars for the writing alone. I do wish there had been more plot. 200 pages more in fact. There were so many things going on that in just over 300 pages the reader barely has time to delve into any of the events. Everything was so surface I wish that there were fewer characters and fewer happenings so that the author had time to develop things more.

Rachel says

The writing was beautiful and gave me a headache. Her words brought with them extremely vivid images and yet I felt detached from all of the characters. It's a shame there was no "voice", because based on real life experiences of the author's grandma, that voice could have been powerful. The pivotal scene in which she decides to become a madam was over in a few paragraphs. The entire book felt rushed. Lovely language, but a forgettable story.

Emily Reitz says

Baggott has a poetic, emotional, associative way of writing, and it's intoxicating. This story was like being swept along in a fit of desire, fear, and malaise. But I love the book! It was informative for me to read about whores as I intend to use this for a character I want to write. That being said, feminists will love this book for the strong female characters and oftentimes the realistic horrors of male figures (not all men but enough).

Sara says

This is an relentlessly depressing book about a poor woman working in a hosiery mill whose husband abandons her and she opens up a whorehouse. What made it most exhausting was that the book was written completely in present tense. Besides that, there was virtually no character who was remotely appealing. One of those books that I put down in the middle and didn't finish.

Malcolm says

Stolid, pragmatic Alma leaves work at the lint-filled hosiery mill and plods home through her 1920s West Virginia world awash in coal dust to a house packed full of show-people boarders, a railroad man husband with pie in the sky dreams, and three children who deserve a better childhood. When she gets there, her work will begin again, endlessly, as though the denizens of the household comprise a rather large and unseemly nest of squalling baby birds with infinite needs and peculiarities.

En route, Alma pauses at a carnival, steals time away from those infinite needs and peculiarities at a side show of oddities on display where she spends her dime to see the Mule-Faced Woman. The Mule-Faced Woman is grotesque but, on balance, her life appears better than Alma's. Yet, Alma senses impending change, she's not sure exactly what, but she needs it if she's ever going to give her kids better than she ever got.

Julianna Baggott's spartan, poetic prose weaves an off-kilter and dramatic story suggested by her own family's legends. In the acknowledgments, Baggott thanks her grandmother "who was raised with show people, nuns, hustlers and whores" for sharing the the facts of a very unusual life.

After her husband Henry leaves her when his sure-fire money making scheme doesn't pay off, after the boarders disappear when the show closes, after almost all of Alma has drained away, transforming the large house into a bordello is the only sensible solution. The whores, the clients and the police bring a new normalcy into Alma's life even though her children will one day want something better than the nest. There's money now and food on the table.

Life for Alma "becomes too complicated if she entertains the notion that her daughter is turning into a woman in a house like this. Alma can feel her life rising up for new consideration, but she prefers the way she has been for years now: A morning goes by and then an afternoon. Eventually there's evening. She sleeps. She is within it all, desperately so, and she doesn't have to think beyond it."

It's not for us to know how truth and fiction combine in this well-told tale with its careful, yet intricate plot seasoned--some will say--with Southern Gothic flavoring, and overflowing with blunt-edged emotions and a no-nonsense view of life's trials and toil. But the atmosphere from beginning to end is relentless and cruel and deeply wonderful because Baggott loved her protagonist, and the show people, nuns, hustlers and whores enough to show their world of lint and coal dust and sex as almost sacred.

Marlee says

Although I ravenously devoured Baggott's children's books as a kid, I haven't so much as thought of her work since middle school. When I saw her section at the library, I thought it was about time I checked out her adult publications. This may have been a mistake.

Don't get me wrong, I gave *The Madam* four stars and don't regret it. The writing was impeccable, the characters were (mostly) interesting, and for the most part I enjoyed it. So why did I feel like something highly important was missing?

It is possible (although not probable) that my disgruntlement stems from the ending. That was hands-down

the strangest, most out of place culmination I've ever had the misfortune to encounter. After that event, the last few pages kind of floated away and the whole book made even less sense than ever. However, the reason I say it isn't probable my disquiet was born from the end is that I had the feeling throughout the whole book. From page one I had this restless, uncomfortable feeling, like someone was looking over my shoulder. I've wracked my brain to think what was wrong, and I can't figure it out. Something was missing. I couldn't tell you what it was, or why it was so darn important, but I vouch fully for the fact that it wasn't there.

Aside from that, I can't formulate much else. As I said, the writing was nice and Alma was deep and original. The time period was well-chosen and well-researched. It certainly wasn't a bad read, but I just can't shake that annoying, eerie feeling that Baggott forgot something.

Nicole says

This book was ok, but not quite what I expected. The prose was very dense and sometimes difficult to follow. I liked the plot but felt like a lot of things weren't really answered as the story moved along. Near the end, a new story line started very abruptly and didn't leave room to finish some of the original plot points.

Rebecca says

Sigh. I really wanted to give Julianna Baggott's fiction a chance. I adore her poetry and admire her ability to make a living through popular novels too. Unfortunately, I just cannot get into her prose. I tried reading *The Miss America Family* years ago, but put it down after just a few pages. I decided I owed it to her to at least read one of her novels straight through. *The Madam* looked promising, but ugh, nothing happened. The characters were not interesting. The plot was predictable.

So, I'll stick with Baggott's poetry. :)

Amber says

There are books written for writers and books written for readers, this one was so "writing" heavy that the plot was lost along the way. There is no question that the writer was accomplished and wrote beautifully, but if the plot isn't there, writing good will never save you! Very jumpy and the characters were very under-developed. I didn't care for ANY of the characters with enough compassion to actual care what happened in the book.

Jenney says

The writing was beautiful, but I didn't care for the story or any of the characters.

Danyel says

I liked this book a great deal. It touches on a particularly lucrative way of rebuilding a life at the end of a relationship. I always felt like the characters were not completely formed but I still felt that they were accessible.

Mark Malone says

I rate this book 2 of 5 -- FAIR. I would probably have liked this book better, with its depiction of poverty, subjection of women, and overcoming life's difficulties, if I had not read it right after reading Betty Smith's *A TREE GROWS IN BROOKLYN*, which developed these themes so deeply and poignantly.

Jeana says

When I first started reading *The Madam*, I fell in love with the beautiful writing, but by end, I was exhausted of it. I just wanted her to say things without trying to be so artistic.

I realize that this book is based on the author's true grandmother's life and while I can appreciate that, I didn't feel the book showed enough motivation/character development to make the things the characters did plausible. For example, the most pivotal part of the novel--Alma deciding to run a brothel out of her home--seemed to not be a struggle at all. Like she just decided what the hell? It didn't work for me that she made such a borderline moral decision without much inner conflict. And it seems like most of the events in the story were done without much personal conflict. It just didn't work for me.

My favorite character in the story was the nun. I liked that she was different and human and I liked a lot of the author's observations about nuns v. prostitutes.

All in all, I would say the reading was fast, but it was hard to get into the lives of the characters because of the layer of flowery language between the reader and the characters.

Jessica says

Alma is married and has three children. She is suffocating from her daily life, from her children's needs, from her work in a loud and dusty hosiery factory in a loud and dusty mining town, and from poverty. When her husband Henry learns that there are abandoned trunks full of valuables for sale at a reasonable price in Florida, they decide to take a trip. That trip is the catalyst for change in almost all aspects of Alma's life.

I liked this book. Well, more specifically, I liked the writing. It's just so evocative of time and weather and place and change. Here's a sample from the beginning of the book:

But Alma can feel things shifting. She knows nothing of atoms. She can't. She's a woman in a hosiery factory in Marrowtown, West Virginia. It's 1924, nearly summer. Atoms are still the matter of physicist's dreams,

dim stars with the skies just beginning to ink. But if she did know of atoms, she would say she could feel the restlessness of them, like schoolchildren at the end of a long spring day. She's aware of the vibration of everything - not just the factory's thrumming hive, but in some minute invisibility all around her, inside of herself, a small electric charge.

In addition to excellent writing, the story was interesting. However, about halfway through, it kind of lost me. It took some unexpected turns, and left me a little unsatisfied. The characters are so good. At least, their potential is good. There's Delphine, the opium-addicted whore. There's Roxy, the homeless lesbian. There's Sister Margaret, the good-hearted and practical nun. And there's Alma herself. But each of these characters, for me, failed to live up to her potential. In fact, I felt like this whole book failed to live up to its potential.

While I can't wholeheartedly love this book, I am curious as to Baggott's other, more critically acclaimed works. Perhaps I'll read one of those someday.
