



The Philosopher's Pupil

Iris Murdoch

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When George McCaffrey's car plunges into a canal with his wife still inside, nobody knows whether George is to blame. Nobody, that is, except an Anglican priest who happened to witness the whole thing. And when George's former teacher, the charismatic philosopher Rozanov, returns to town, George's life begins to spin wildly out of control. Set in the English spa town of Ennistone, *The Philosopher's Pupil* is a darkly comic story of love, redemption, and the complex nature of the human condition.

The Philosopher's Pupil Details

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Author : Iris Murdoch

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From Reader Review The Philosopher's Pupil for online ebook

Lauren Albert says

Still like this. 4/09

Rachel Hartman says

Very mixed feelings about this one. If I promise a proper review later, that probably won't happen. Whatever I'm going to say, I have to say now. I appreciated the depth and variety of characterization here, but felt the writing was pretty heavy-handed. Interesting meditations on God, philosophy, psychology. It really was the narrative voice that bothered me. It is very much a conceit here. The narrator introduces himself, calls himself N, names the whole town after himself (Ennistone - ha ha), and then proceeds to show us the deep inner workings of every single person's head. Which is hard enough to pull off when it's simply the Magical Omniscient Author doing it, but outright weird when it's a person in the story, tangential to the events, doing it. Also: flying saucer. I have to admit, that didn't make a lot of sense to me. So yes, of the two Murdoch books I have now read, I preferred the other.

Michelle says

I felt very meh about this one. I usually love Murdoch, but this one I really struggled to finish.

John Cairns says

I did much of this yesterday, lost to Goodreads, which flickers. It's the narrator says he knows 'Delphi is empty.' It is. The gods might as well be in Britain. The author's playful, 'If George was in a novel he would be a comic character.' He's not. His use of the term 'semi-conscious will' indicates he knows nothing of the unconscious will as distinct from that of conscious will which, left to itself, acts immaterially eg choosing one toothpaste over another and is if ignorantly informed by the unconscious will when it's acting spiritually eg desiring one person over all others, otherwise interchangeable. One gets some idea of the animus the philosopher bears his pupil from his excoriation of the pupil's brother, Tom. Who the fuck does he think he is! (the philosopher that is) was elicited from me and duly marginalised. It wouldn't take much psychology on Tom's part to realise if he says he's going to a party the crowd will follow, his use of the excuse to leave them an example from the novel itself of an unconscious will acting through consciousness to effect something, the author's in the guise of Tom's. There's many a hint of killing. Pearl's confession is wonderful. I liked the detail of 'a piece of the cracked glass ...fell out on to the lawn.' 'How innocent I once was and could have been made happy by this.' 'No more ...older persons between her and the grave.' George's teeth figure a lot. That he 'felt vaguely unwell and feverish' indicated he was the one like to die. Tch! she uses 'burn'for 'scald'. I thanked god that 'Tom McCaffrey was standing outside.' Murdoch is so cheeky: she answered my initial question how would the narrator know. He had 'the assistance of a certain lady.' That should mean of a character in the book but I'll settle for Murdoch herself. It's a brilliant way to justify the rationale of the novel, with one mighty leap, she is free.

The introduction I read afterwards. It's a good analysis of her oeuvre. In quoting her he repeats the misspelling of 'pedlar', maybe because the publisher is American. He may be wrong about murder and accidents. It's fairly clear the first was attempted murder, as was the last. What's interesting is the would-be murderer can't remember what he did ie he did it unconsciously, precluding its registering on conscious memory, giving plausible deniability. That's how your unconscious takes advantage for your benefit of conscious ignorance. Maybe the introducer doesn't know this of himself.

Brooke says

Fascinating and absurdly comedic. The beginning of the book was slow as Murdoch spent considerable time describing the setting. The book's pace then moves to break-neck speed. The language, characters, and pacing of this book were unlike any other I've read. A look at individuals' images of others, themselves, and their place in the world. Very curious and enjoyable and makes me want to read more Murdoch. This book would make excellent fodder for a book group - especially as I am sure that without discussion, I have missed quite a bit of Murdoch's allusions and symbols.

Patricia says

This review is from a reread, a strange trip back to the 1980s. The passages I loved are still there. I had forgotten about Adam and his dog Zed and that came as a pleasant surprise. And the Spa and the Slipper House are still a pleasure. But this time I was annoyed by George, the Philosopher's Pupil himself. This badly behaving male is a constant recurring character in Murdoch. When I first read this book I think it was the first time I had come across him and I was charmed. Now, references to his domestic violence are shocking and so out of place and outdated that Murdoch's gentle tolerance shown towards him is disconcerting. Murdoch has so many tricks and twitches that become irritating and repetitive. I remember now that is why I gave up on her. But there is pure gold in there too.

Jesse Field says

As with *The Bell*, an earlier work by Murdoch, *The Philosopher's Pupil* features a handsome young man who loves life, a middle-aged man struggling to juggle religious faith, homosexuality and existentialist malaise, and a man angry and hurt and turning bad before everyone's eyes. There are women characters, too, drawn with a distinctly less nuanced palette. A droll, gently comedic plot spins around a family, the McCaffreys of Enniston, that would certainly make for a decent Wes Anderson film, with Ben Stiller as the brother who complains too much.

Murdoch's stories shine with a kind of moral ardor, with characters agonizing endlessly over what they do and what they see happening. Adultery, domestic abuse, homosexuality, marriage, aging, doubting, working all get detailed, nuanced treatments from the insides of character's minds. As the title promises, there is a philosopher and his pupils, but philosophy can't save them from distressing and shocking levels of conflict and dissatisfaction. They are in a novel after all.

The tool of an omniscient third person narrator, called N., seems calculated to make it seem as if the town itself were narrating all this. Indeed, some of the best writing is about the town of Enniston, with its old

Roman baths that were a tourist institution in the high pseudo-science days of the early twentieth century, its Ring of Druid stones, its citizens like the McCaffreys quietly living off investments from Victorian factories. Tiny Enniston is effectively the entire two millennia history of Europe, the moral and intellectual backdrop against which some citizens pursue knowledge, but most just try to survive and get by with, if not happiness, some certain stages of satisfaction.

I am going through Murdoch's novels on Audible.com. Kudos to reader Gildart Jackson, with his subtle, touching renditions of all the characters voices. I'm not at all sure I'd have enjoyed this long and at times tedious book without such a splendid performance.

Stephen P says

a brilliant mind with so much to say. i'm just not sure the novel was the best vehicle for her formidable ideas. the flow at times of this book was disrupted for me by tedium and heavy-handedness. i would have thought essays might have provided a freer medium for her curiosity and finely honed intelligence.

bobbygw says

Absolutely wonderful. A stunning novel. 'The Philosopher's Pupil' is a Dante-esque tale of love - in which numerous types of love are evoked, from dishonest to honourable, self-defeating to masochistic, platonic to deviant, and never ever simply just one type at any one time - that is set in Ennistone, a town renowned for its natural hot water springs/baths, and also filled to the brim with the heat of gossip, anger, passions, and small-minded mischief makers. But this review is not about the plot, as that's for you to enjoy in your own reading. This is an homage to the truly marvellous characters that Murdoch's genius has given life to in this novel.

Murdoch has a mature nineteenth century novelist's depth to her characters; she is easily a match for Tolstoy, Trollope and Eliot, to name some of the giants of fiction. Her fictional beings are beautifully detailed, fully realised in scope and complexity, and each draws you in with their own personal world view, and reasoning and often troubled emotional life, and you are captivated in your watching and listening to them live and breathe and assert themselves in their muddled worlds.

Her dialogue alone is worth the price of the novel - and the prologue, relating the car 'accident' (for it really isn't one, but an incident resulting from a violent action), is a tour de force, introducing George, the novel's devil in (barely) human form. But he is scarily human. He is, for me, the most fully realised and horribly convincing, nightmarish psychopath and sociopath I have read in fiction. Far scarier than Hannibal Lecter as a fictional creation, and more believable than a real-life monster like Ed Gein. With his extreme ranting and raving, his sheer loathing and violent, misogynistic fantasies (as well as behaviour), he is apocalyptic in tone and revenge. Yet he could just as well be one of your neighbours who has become utterly mad, yet within a framework of apparent sanity at the same time.

He is the strongest case and example - though there are several others in this novel - of Murdoch's tremendous ability to create flesh-and-blood human beings that convey her passionate intellectual and creative interests, while never failing to be merely conduits or foils for her fictional plotting. There's never any sense of Deus ex Machina at work, here - her creatures spring from the page, and are all tremendously

individual in language, thought and action.

As if psychotic George wasn't enough for one novel, there's also the philosopher of the novel's title as well, John Robert Rozanov (George was once one of John's pupils): he is manipulative, amoral, uncaring, soulless, intellectual and emotionally moribund and, in many ways, is far more of a devil than George himself (though never committing physical acts of violence, or verbal, as George does with such relish and ease).

Then there are the brothers to George: Brian, who is just the most miserable, endlessly complaining and always irritable sod - and relentlessly funnily drawn through his dialogue and through whom a lot of the novel's humour is brilliantly played out; and Tom, the youngest of the brothers, at university and, for most of his life, to his teenage years, he is naive, delightfully happy and at one with his world and his peers, until corrupted by a Faustian task that John compels him to take up.

Besides the above-named individuals, you also have the joy of being entertained by Brian's put-upon wife, poor, defeated Gabriel, always tearful, always troubled, and ready to blubber at the drop of the proverbial hat; then there's the intellectual, yet remote, and incredibly martyrish Stella, wife of the monster George (to give him credit, besides his murderous rage and violence and misogyny, he does save Zed - probably one of fiction's most charming, delightful and convincing portraits of a clever little doggie, who is Zen-like and always understanding, even when he's clueless; both part of the natural world, and yet connected with his human peers - including, most particularly, the other marvel in this novel, the boy Adam, offspring of Gabriel and Brian, and who is Francis of Assisi-like, as well as Buddhist, in his immediate and deep empathy with all living things. Murdoch clearly knows her Varieties of Religious Experience, and if the Gabriel, Stella and Zed weren't enough, you have Father Bernard, an Anglican priest who's also an atheist, who believes ultimately that the only hope and saviour for the world is religion without god, and ends up preaching like some sort of ethereal combo ascetic-Russian hermit/-ancient Desert Father-type to remote Greek island kindly peasants (and otherwise local birds who'll hang about, and the sea and the rocks).

In short, I loved, loved, LOVED, this novel. It's PHWOR, and fab, funny and dark, with substance, yet as light as a perfect soufflé. There's also plenty here for lovers of Plato and Dante, for example, and yet such references are never done in an ostentatious way, but flow seamlessly with the events and thinking of the novel and her characters. And all these riches are carried through with zest right to the end and beyond, with you being totally immersed in and absorbed by the mess and muddle of these human lives (a true Murdochian talent). You are left joyous and breathless and happy and utterly, utterly impressed by Murdoch for her philosophical wisdom, her mischievous wit, her darkness and light, her psychological insights, her innate appreciation of what it means to be human. She is a novelist extraordinaire.

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Ana says

I knew Iris Murdoch was a writer with phenomenal power in explaining and expressing human typology.

I had, though, no idea her books could be so powerful.

"The Philosopher's Pupil" surprised me in many ways, but the best thing about it were by far the characters.

Usually, my rating for a book is by how good the action/plot was. In this book, I had to change my ways. Loved loved loved the characters. I especially enjoyed Tom, George and Diane, even though they were not

the only ones to be preseted as important characters. Of course, I thought all of them were really well constructed, even Ruby, who at first I thought was plain boring. I liked some of the comparisons that took place in the book, as well as some part of the drama of the big and all-mighty philosopher, John Robert Rozanov, but I thought his actions were a bit fake and his thinking a bit plain.

No worries, though, I had a very fine time reading this book.

Irene says

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Erin says

i officially adore iris murdoch. the characters she creates are excellent examinations of human nature. i find myself identifying with almost all of them, both those i root for and those i despise. again, i love that the setting itself is often a character. and add overt (if limited) examination of philosophy to the wonderful job she already does? irresistible.

there's also good potential for comparative essays between this work and crime and punishment (george) and les miserables (john robert about hattie vs. jean valjean about cosette). if, you know, you're still in ap english...

Marshal says

Well, this was a bit of a struggle - the first 'serious' fiction I've read in years. Being so steeped in story-driven stuff and anything with exploding robots, something so character-focused sometimes had me yelling (mentally) FFS make something happen.

But there was enough incident to keep me going and plenty of interesting stuff about /why/ people did stuff. I shall probably try something more straight-forward next, but I might look at Murdoch again in my loooooooooong retirement :o)

Jason Pym says

Everything a novel should be. I love the way she takes you inside each of the characters thoughts, and that the setting and people are given time to breathe, to really come alive. When the actual plot does take off though (after about page 300) things seem to happen fast. A real joy, I didn't want to finish it.

Gila Gila says

I'm a diehard Murdoch fan, and couldn't really get into this - ended up actually skimming through pages, which I've never done, ever with one of her novels. I'm filing this under Return To for a re-read, because it may be a case of Iris dear, it's me, not you.

Carol Douglas says

Philosopher Iris Murdoch indicts philosophy -- or some of its (mis)uses. She shows how corrupting an obsession with abstractions can lead to lack of involvement with the real world. Her characters are, as always, complex. She points out that individual people are more unique than any philosophy or social science dreams of. Her books are all worth reading, and this is one of her best.

Alex Crossley says

Like reading a soap. Went on a bit long.

Jane says

In this one the power of the Dark Lord (one theme in Murdoch is a magnetic character) is not erotic but intellectual. Is there any more miserable creature in the world than a rejected graduate student? Like an abandoned child endlessly searching for his father's approval, the philosopher's pupil seeks for the formula that will unlock the Great Philosopher's treasury of blessings (which as only the reader can see, may not exist). Why Murdoch chose to set this story perched over the monstrous and dangerously aging pipe room, in the steamy chambers of Bath's baths, is a little bit of a mystery to me. Probably some kind of symbolism.

Claire says

This book quickly rose to becoming one of my favourites over the course of my perusal. I saw that one of the characters in another one of the (Russian, I think) novels I was reading was reading an Iris Murdoch novel, so I picked this one up to understand the mindset the author was trying to convey. Oh... wow.

This is one of those books that demand your thought far away from the text. The intricacies of the relations between the characters fascinated me.

Funny the way people can be.

James says

Interesting narrative overlaid with philosophical commentary. This is not a book for those who do not enjoy the discussion of ideas; but if you do enjoy fiction interlaced with philosophy this book should be on your list. It is not surprising that the author, Iris Murdoch, was an academic philosopher before she was a novelist.
