



The Bradshaw Variations

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Since leaving his job to look after his eight-year-old daughter, Thomas has found the structure of his daily piano practice & the study of musical form brings a nourishment to these difficult middle years. His pursuit of a more artistic way of life shocks & irritates his parents & his in-laws. Why has he swapped roles with his wife, Tonie?

The Bradshaw Variations Details

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From Reader Review The Bradshaw Variations for online ebook

Hugh says

A searching and beautifully written dissection of the stresses and tensions in the lives of an ordinary middle class extended family.

Martin Jones says

Rachel Cusk shows us a family. If you are of a reflective bent, you can draw your own conclusions about identity and the roles of men and women. Alternatively you can just watch with interest, amusement, or horror, as a family reveals itself from multiple viewpoints. The writing is beautiful, without being so self-consciously clever that it fails to suit characters who might not be showily clever. We watch through the eyes of - amongst others - university tutors, children, or young Polish lodgers who clean hospitals and prefer magazines to books. In each case the writing suits the narrator.

It might seem that this is a disconnected story, with no central character, no real plot, and no overt message. Music, however, holds this together. One family member, Thomas, has taken time out of his career to look after a young daughter and learn the piano. Music represents both freedom and discipline. Thomas tries to learn a piece from *The Well Tempered Clavier*, a collection of music written by J.S. Bach in 1722. *The Well Tempered Clavier* was a turning point in musical history, representing the final standardisation of tuning. From that point on, musicians could play together in large, sophisticated groups. The Bradshaws are a large group who somehow get along, finding that oddly musical compromise between the random and the monotonous. The Bradshaws include rigid, traditionally-minded old fools, modern career women who hate their careers, house-husbands who know nothing about house-work, frustrated wives who drink too much, or who love the idea of being an artist whilst they secretly prefer chaotic family life with an impulsive husband, two long-suffering children, and a manic dog who pees, vomits and hurls himself at doors which he always wants to be on the other side of. They all live together like musicians in some kind of experimental jazz band. By extension people generally might be considered to live together in a similar way. Bravo I say.

Kasey Jueds says

I have loved Rachel Cusk ever since Grace recommended *The Country Life* to me many years ago, and this novel, her newest, didn't disappoint me. Like the last couple of her books I've read, including *Arlington Park*, this one deals largely with parenting, with parents trying to hold onto their identities or reinvent themselves after having children... but in a larger sense it's also about people struggling to understand their lives. Everything in Rachel Cusk's books--moments, conversations, pieces of furniture--seems supercharged with emotion, usually of the dark, complex variety. Occasionally it's hard to believe that her characters are really thinking and feeling to such a great extent over, say, a cup of coffee. But mostly they are believable and sympathetic, and they're always fascinating.

Katherine says

"September is a skewering place, the heart, where the pin of routine is thrust in" (7).

"His heart clenches, just as it does when the music gains its highest note, grasping and grasping out of its own confusion until it reaches its mark and the screw of emotion is turned. The confusion, he sees, is necessary, for it is what the resolution is born from" (9).

"It is steep, so that the bottom looks remote from the top, the hazy geometric spill of buildings levelling out below with its drone of traffic and sense of life as something inalienable and general rather than fragile and particular, though close up this illusion is successively unmasked as the moderate scale of the reality becomes clearer" (15).

"...a job for someone like Angela Deacon, who had done it for years; an older woman with a wardrobe full of cashmere and earth tones..." (18).

"...as the flame changed the candle and sent it running over the edge of itself, running and running into new paths as though it sought to be free of what it was, of what it became once more as soon as it reached the air and stiffened in its tracks" (20).

"It's always the same, the difficulty of being himself with these people, his family, the difficulty of locating his own authenticity. He says things he doesn't feel, and what he feels most keenly he doesn't say at all" (59).

"He doesn't think people can ever be as good consciously as they are by instinct..." (71).

"She still doesn't know why he got so excited. He is six-and-a-half feet tall. It is important, when a man that tall throws himself in the air" (186).

"He stops and waits. At last it comes, the trill of a bird joyously piercing it, trilling and trilling, garlanding the still air with a ribbon of song" (234).

Maya Rock says

I like that there are fewer metaphors and the plot moved more briskly than other Cusk books. I also really enjoyed the writing and insights into life. However, I have to say, I am getting tired of the analysis of domestic life. It's one of those situations where she is depicting something that is boring and it makes the book boring. Also, I was enjoying this book much more until it got slotted into "Affairs Only End Badly" and then, even worse, into what should be my new subcategory "Affairs Are Accompanied By Trips To The Hospital." Anyway Rachel Cusk characters are doomed to keep living their lives of boredom; and I get that that is maybe true to life for the majority of people, but there were like nine main characters in this, and I would have liked to have seen one who wasn't in a relationship that they treated like a jail sentence. I won't remember this book, much like the other domestic drama one whose name I forgot.

I also wouldn't mind a historical book or a book where they leave the country. (From Cusk.)

Still it is Rachel Cusk, so very easy to read and full of amazing descriptions.

Maya Panika says

The style is all; richly metaphorical, terrifically dense and complex - this book should be read for the sheer enjoyment of the beauty of the writing because there isn't really any story, at heart it's a character study, a group of normal lives, woven together by the mundane and everyday.

I found the characters got lost in all the writing. They sit in the great web of it, unable to move much under the weight of metaphor which ultimately left a great coldness around them. I never felt any attachment to these mostly unsympathetic, dislikeable people and didn't really care what happened to any of them (especially Claudia who I just wanted to destroy, I badly wanted her to *die*).

Which is not to say I didn't enjoy the book, I did, but it's a writer's book; a book for those who love language and appreciate literate writing for its own sake. I wouldn't take it to read on the train or a plane, it needs time and space and undisturbed peace to fully appreciate this unusual and quietly remarkable book.

Jason Pettus says

(Reprinted from the Chicago Center for Literature and Photography [cclapcenter.com:]. I am the original author of this essay, as well as the owner of CCLaP; it is not being reprinted illegally.)

Although a little of such stuff goes a long way for me, I do in fact quite enjoy the occasional literary-oriented novel, one that eschews plot developments almost entirely to instead exist as merely a complex character study; take for example veteran character author Rachel Cusk's latest, *The Bradshaw Variations*, which is not much more than a probing look at an upper-middle-class British family whose spouses spend a year switching roles (the full-time mom enters the world of academic senior management, while the corporate dad spends a year re-engaging in his youthful passion for classical piano), and what kind of effect this has on the family in general, which by extension becomes a look at what the lives are like of their related siblings and their own upper-middle-class British families. As such, then, it's not really Cusk's point to have a lot of stuff "happen," and those who need such a thing in their novels will be profoundly disappointed with this one; it's instead a dense look at the multiple layers of personality that make up each of these fully-realized people, which by the end becomes a deep slice-of-life look at what being a Western middle-classer in the early 2000s is really all about in the first place. A great pick for those who like their literature academic and slow-moving in nature, but that should absolutely be avoided by everyone else.

Out of 10: **8.6**

Javier Avilés says

De hecho, ni la termino de leer:

Las variaciones Bradshaw, de Rachel Cusk

Charlotte says

I enjoyed "The Bradshaw Variations" but somehow it doesn't hit the spot, because the characters don't have enough space to develop properly. There are so many different voices and viewpoints from the wider Bradshaw family that it's hard to focus on the central narrative of Thomas Bradshaw and his wife Tonie. Thomas has given up his job to allow Tonie to become head of the English department at a lesser university,

and (incomprehensibly, so far as their respective parents and siblings are concerned) Tonie now brings home the bacon while Thomas takes over the school run and experiments with piano lessons. In the course of the novel we also delve into the lives of Thomas' elder brother Howard and his wife Claudia, younger brother Leo and his (seemingly alcoholic) wife Susie, and dissatisfied elderly parents. I found it slightly frustrating to see almost as much of the ostensibly lesser characters as we do of Tonie and Thomas, as the result is that no-one gets the attention they deserve within what is, after all, a fairly slender volume (249 pages). I have therefore been left feeling unsure whether I really "know" any of the characters, and rather wishing that I did. But a pleasant enough read despite that.

Kim says

2.5 stars. Too short in my opinion.

Trish says

Moving backward through Cusk's oeuvre I come to this novel featuring flawed suburbanites—couples whom Cusk, in the end, treats gingerly. There is no need to be cruel since we all suffer from some sort of imaginative lapse, whether or not we can recognize our own among those described here. One character is a woman often silent and dressed in black, standing watching, judging, and sometimes relating the action to readers. But she can wear blinkers in her own household, not recognizing how untethered and unsure her husband has become in his role, until he abandons part of it.

This is another of Cusk's book that begins with a challenge, in this case, the question *What is art?* Readers will look forward to how this book relates to that question, repeated time and again throughout the narrative, just about the time the reader feels far removed from that promising interrogative start. And the final scene is another of Cusk's remarkable, unforgettable bloodbaths which recall theatrical roots that seem to underpin much of Cusk's work.

Three couples, the husbands all brothers, hold special delights for those tracing the effects a father might have on children and grandchildren, though the father, now an old man, is mostly just a memory.

"[Leo] has never heard his father raise his voice. There has been no need to raise it: it is in the leveling persistence that the violence is accomplished...it goes over everything and mechanically levels it, like a tank. It is benign, ruthless, unvarying...His voice has talked in Leo's head about the world and its ways since he can remember."

The father barely shows in person until that fateful last scene. We realize then that any failures or successes of the now-grown sons probably have little to do with the father after all this time. The range of the boys' personalities prompt sniggers of recognition among those who have grown up with siblings, so used are we to the way the confident, the envious, and the spoilt interact.

We also get three different views of marriage, four, if you count the parents, still married after all these years. Howard and Claudia seem so unlikely until near the end when we see what holds them together. Leo and Susie limp along together, Leo relying on Susie to interface the world for him, despite her frequent tipping over into barely managing. Tonie has her own job, dresses in black, and generally stands aloof while her husband Thomas struggles with his own identity and sense of self-worth. Each brother is a little jealous

of the others, except perhaps Howard, the entrepreneur. He sees the world for what it is and works with it.

This is a wonderful novel filled to overflowing with characterizations of people, of events, of passions, of depressions. We are not necessarily led anywhere—that is, it is essentially plotless, like a life is plotless. But it makes us recognize actions which will lead to an unhappy outcome, barring any intervention. It can be a mirror or a map, depending on where the reader finds him/herself. It is beautifully deft and concise, the prose that brings us the struggles, joys, failures, and ambitions of the Bradshaws. And it features a dog and a piano and an adagio that tick-tocks like a clock. Time is relevant.

Laura says

I thought *The Bradshaw Variations* was an incredibly moving book. Cusk's remarkable way of identifying and describing emotions allowed me to relate to each character in some way. While they were all connected, the characters were also painfully isolated by their own unique circumstances. As Cusk turned the spotlight on each one, I was able to understand Olga's homesickness, Tonie's restlessness, and Thomas's yearn for truth, etc. I hope someone is already writing the screenplay based on this fantastic book, and I look forward to reading other works by Rachel Cusk.

Jim Leckband says

Bad Sign: "She wonders why everyone here is so formless and anonymous. Their bodies look lumpy in the dusk, their faces featureless and indifferent as stones. The lack of excitement almost frightens her." (p. 198)

When a reader reads the above lines and retorts, "Yeah, I know what you mean, I'm kinda there myself now that you mention it..." then there is a problem.

I'm totally willing to man-up (is that the correct usage for "man-up"? I've never really "manned-up" in anything, or been exhorted to "man-up", but I hear it is a term of accepting burdens or responsibilities) that I'm to blame - maybe I'm not the right reader for this book at this time. But I never really understood what the point/message of the little vignettes of the Bradshaw family added up to.

Perhaps it was that unlike a sonata or a symphony, where themes are developed to a point or resolution, in a piece composed of variations, it is just the same theme viewed in different ways. But it didn't seem like that, I didn't see much variation on a theme. Just different members of the family doing not very interesting stuff that didn't really go anywhere. I guess that's life.

Leon says

Apparently some people deem Rachel Rusk too clever in her books. I get that, somewhat, in her past work, like *In the Fold*. In that one she brandishes here cleverness with long sentences and very, very long conversations. Here, in her new work, she has tempered such lengthiness, somewhat. Sentences are still long, but for the most part they are now shorter and more immediate in their directness and mood.

Basically her novel is about the lives of the Bradshaw clan, particularly Thomas and his wife Antonia, or

Tonie as he calls her. Thomas is taking a sabbatical from work, for a year, to take care of their daughter Alexa, while Tonie goes off to head a department in her university, after her promotion. Thomas wants to learn how to play the piano. Meanwhile Tonie, working late, gets propositioned by good-looking visiting lecturers, and finally succumbs to one. As if this is a punishment for straying, she hears bad news about her daughter, when she is taken ill with meningitis and loses part of her hearing. We, the readers, ask, Are they good parents?

This is also the question we ask of Thomas's other two brothers, Howard and Leo, and their wives, and their parents. To answer for one pair, we see that Mrs Bradshaw doesn't quite take to Tonie. Claudia, Howard's wife, thinks taking care of her children has caused her her artistic career.

Don't start on this book looking for any solid plot, and there is not any, really. All the reader does throughout this not so lengthy novel is step into the Bradshaws' world of thoughts and observations. However, savour the way Cusk writes – need I say again – so cleverly. A story without plot, this novel, nevertheless, gets your attention with fine details about domestic lives that appear so very normal on the surface, while beneath, deep emotions hover and simmer. Cusk carries these emotions so effortlessly, as per usual, in her so clever way.

matthew says

Pinched and caustic without ever being about anything other than the vague sense that being a human being is an existence defined by sorrow. Miserabilism at its most decadent.

[later]

Cross posted at my blog

Cusk's *The Bradshaw Variations* is... a varied experience if you will. For every beautiful phrase or miraculous insight, there's a simile that doesn't work or a plodding moment of inauthentic introspection. I took a few notes and quotes while reading this. Let's begin with a simile that feels so artificial, so forced, as to beg a question—was the simile invented before the object? was the object invented *for the simile*? On page 41: "The lawn at the back of the house is undulating: it rises like a woman's body into two mounds with a soft sloping space between them." Yuck. I was stunned by this comparison—what an inelegant and unnecessary moment. Similes, I believe, aren't simply for art's sake; these tricks and features should illuminate an aspect of the narrative, the character, the themes, anything; similes should work organically to produce meaning, not to lay there on the page like a beautiful dead fish gawping for water. The focal character in this instance isn't articulated through the simile; the simile tells us nothing about the scene, the character, the setting, anything. It's, as I said earlier, inelegant and off-key.

Later, Tonie, one of two protagonists, is at a cocktail party with her friend, who has been asking questions of a man. This is how Cusk describes the interrogation: "She asks him one thing after another, like a mother spooning food into a baby's mouth: when she comes to the end of one question, she is ready with the next" (89). Again, yuck. I admire the reversal of the simile: we usually expect questions to *extract* something (info), not to *insert* anything, and there's artfulness in this opposite. But it clangs and stumbles, like a toddler maneuvering a new space.

But, not all the similes are duds. Just as many soar and hit their mark. On page 129: "Her dogs were the

same, quivering like compasses around her," a gorgeous turn of phrase. I'm not sure if the simile does any heavy lifting in this sentence, but when it's that lovely, we should be more willing to forgive.

A final example, my favourite of all, on page 94: "When they talked Tonie had the sense of something big and bounteous nearby, as the sea can be sensed when it is still just out of sight." The context only deepens this beautiful sentence: she and her future husband, the second of a pair of protagonists, have begun their romance, which has all the potentiality for beauty and darkness as the sea itself, a tumultuous and scary thing, but gravely gorgeous nonetheless.

The rest of the novel, aside from the prose itself, is just as I described *Arlington Park* but more so: pinched and caustic without ever being about anything other than the vague sense that a living human being is an existence defined by sorrow. Characters come and go without ever making any impact on each other. Tonie's erotically charged encounter with a visiting lecturer feels like the only narrative incident to propel the characters (in that she eventually sleeps with a different person hitherto unknown to her). The rest of the cast wander their surroundings feeling both incredibly disconnected from each other (a theme) and oddly hyperarticulate about their inner lives in relation to others. Never before have I read a 21st century novel in which the entire cast are superheroically attuned to each other's interiority. In *Arlington Park*, this heightened perception produced lovely thematic resonance; in *The Bradshaw Variations*, it yields an endless void of authenticity and hollowness.

Again, I worry I'm being unduly harsh. I did like this novel, but after two of these exercises in miserabilism, I worry that Cusk and I don't have the same goals in literature. I don't want just formal elegance and aesthetic beauty but something more, something more than empty vessels paradoxically overstuffed with interiority careening around each other for ~250 pages.
