



Miss Mole

E.H. Young

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E.H. Young (1880-1949) was born in Northumberland, England and lived for many years in Bristol, which became the setting for most of her novels. Of Young's twelve works of fiction, Miss Mole is considered to be her masterpiece.

Miss Mole Details

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From Reader Review Miss Mole for online ebook

Mary says

What a lovely book.

Miss Mole is a wonderful character and she does get her man in the end.

I loved it.

Carla says

A masterpiece in every sense, both in the conception of the character of the optimistic, ever-adventurous Hannah Mole, and in the inventiveness of the storytelling. Hannah's dreary poverty, and the slights of her daily life, are presented with matter-of-fact clarity, no sentimentality, and with the author's dry wit. The author doesn't over-dramatize the limitations imposed on Hannah, but one bristles for her sake, and by extension, for all women. I will read this one again and again.

Alex says

I'm surprised there aren't more readers of this masterpiece. (Almost) all appear to be female as well. My gender's loss.

Nina says

An odd book. Weirdly long paragraphs. I kept longing to mark them with the double-stem-backward-P in red where they should have been broken into two or three. And my attention frequently wandered.

And yet, Miss Mole's misreadings of the people around her reminded me so much of my own that I kept on until the highly unlikely ending. I, for one, having seen how often she missed the mark, even knowing how often she hit it, can't believe that she found her True Love at last.

Still, there is something to be said for kindness, acceptance and attention. So perhaps her Prince-not-so-Charming will turn out to be a decent husband after all.

I did wonder about Corder's relationship to his younger daughter, Ruth, though. What man moves a pubescent girl into his dressing room after his wife's death if he didn't have incestuous designs? Better to put the two girls in one room, if the younger was having troubles sleeping after her mother's death, surely. Ruth makes an odd comment about her father's not being in his room at one point. It did make me wonder.

Was Young implying this or was I reading it into the text from the perspective of our more enlightened age?

Corder is such a deeply creepy guy, even without this, that it struck me as overkill.

Emily says

Valiant heroine with a sense of humour, comedy of manners that isn't as obviously frothy as Miss Pettigrew lives for a day though in many ways similar. A sweet book with a happy ending that is a relief.

Darcy says

Miss Mole can be summed up pretty easily: Mary Poppins for adults.

E. H. Young was one of those best selling authors whose works are now found mostly in "Friends of the Library" book sales. If you do come across a copy, though, snap it up and save it for one of those dreary winter evenings when you need the book equivalent of a cup of hot cocoa (and read it while drinking real, actual hot cocoa).

The novel's premise is fairly simple--it is a classic governess tale, complete with shrewish, snobby female relative, clueless bachelor love-interest, and horrible, spoiled kids. To be fair, Miss Mole is not precisely a governess--she's employed as a housekeeper for Mr. Robert Corder's somewhat unconventional family. But if she is hired to look after his children and make sure dinner gets put on the table, she seems to spend most of her time babysitting the adult population of the town of Radstowe.

In this respect, *Miss Mole* is a fairly conventional story--perky governess/housekeeper whips everyone around her into shape with a combination of clever tricks, charisma, and refreshing candor. You only need to read once, for example, that her employer is a minister to know that he's going to turn out to be the worst kind of hypocritical preacher--blind to his own faults, judgmental of others, and completely lacking in compassion. But if many of the figures and situations in *Miss Mole* are familiar and well-trodden, the character of Miss Mole herself is a creation wholly grounded in the 1920s and 30s. She's a late Victorian woman struggling in the interwar period with the changing demands of feminism, gender stereotyping, and sexual desire. If she shares some similarities with her literary forbearer, Jane Eyre (another Victorian governess), well, let's just say it's hard to imagine Jane Eyre making jokes about muffins or buying fancy shoes. Rather, Hannah is "stuck"; she was raised in one century and has to cope with existence in another. She's pretty well equipped in many ways to deal with her situation--she has a vibrant sense of humor and resiliency. But for all the story's wit and comedy, *Miss Mole* strikes me as a bittersweet tale, covered over with a Happily Ever After. For every one Hannah Mole, who triumphs over the evil-ish Robert Corder and the snobby cousin Lilla, there were hundreds of Miss Moles who faced lifelong fiscal and emotional vulnerability to the whims of others (especially other married women). To put it bluntly--Miss Mole is a window into a generation of women who were completely unprepared for the radical social changes of the twentieth century. They were raised to be dependent and pushed into a world where dependence was no longer an option.

Rather than simply papering over the complexities of the 20s and 30s for women, the novel confronts them head on. This isn't a lost classic--E. H. Young could have, at times, benefited from tighter editing, for example--but for all that, it is a hidden little gem of a book--sparkling and thoughtful at the same time.

Amy says

Brilliant.

I know that word is overly used in reviews but frankly, there is no better word for this book. My mom recommended this and I am so very, very glad she did.

I do not want to tell too much about the story because in doing so I would give away what is so precious about this novel, the unfolding of it all. Miss Mole is not always a reliable narrator but not in the newfangled "Girl on the Train" sense but in the very human way we have of trying to make our lives less drab and humdrum and dare I say it, less sad?

There are moments in this book, true moments that will stay with you and so many great passages. Here is one that jumped out at me and will give you a taste of the prose;

"I shall never forget it," he said, his head in his hands.

"No, but other people will , and that's what really matters. That's our weakness-- and our strength. There's no shame," she said, as though to herself, "no disappointment, no disillusionment, we can't bear if we can keep it to ourselves. It's the beastly curiosity and the beastly speculations of other people that get one on the raw. ..

Mimi says

‘Miss Mole’ is considered Young’s greatest work and won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize in 1930.

Hannah Mole is an ‘invisible’ woman: poor, middle-aged, and single; she works in service (albeit in slightly elevated positions such as companion or housekeeper). Hannah’s ‘life lived in houses which were not her own and where she was never safe from intrusion’ requires a range of survival strategies: based on minor acts of rebellion, fortified by a Mitty-like fantasy world and surprisingly stylish shoes. She also has a secret.

Hannah’s subversive acts have led to a series of early dismissals and when the narrative begins she is facing an increasingly uncertain future. She becomes a housekeeper to the recently widowed Rev. Corder, his nephew Wilfred and daughters Ruth and Ethel. Corder is a self-centred man whose daughters are a backdrop for his relentless self-regard: Ruth and Ethel, it seems, are Miss Moles in the making. Hannah’s position and influence in the Corder household allows her to blossom, as well as gain a circle of supportive friends and, despite setbacks, her fortunes start to take a turn for the better.

I haven’t read any of Young’s novels before and I’ve been pondering how best to position this for others who might be in the same position. The blurb on my battered, green Virago edition suggested something fairly upbeat, so I came to ‘Miss Mole’ expecting something along the lines of ‘Miss Buncle’ or ‘Miss Pettigrew’; similarly, downtrodden ‘but portrayed with a consistently light and comic tone and on the road to certain triumph. However, for me, the character of ‘Miss Mole’ set off a different series of initial associations: the more complex women of Barbara Pym and Anita Brookner or those found in novels like ‘Lolly Willowes’ and ‘The Vet’s Daughter’, whose ‘invisible’ lives are shot through with melancholy. I realise this makes ‘Miss Mole’ sound like a sombre read but it’s saved from that by Young’s wry observations and some wonderfully humorous passages ‘the burglar and the wig’ for example, as well as a ‘fairy-tale’ romantic ending. (It also reminded me of Alison Light’s excellent ‘Mrs Woolf and the Servants’ her non-fiction account of the behind-the-scenes women whose work enabled women like Woolf to have ‘rooms’ of their own.)

‘Miss Mole’ is overwhelmingly character rather than plot-based. It has a narrow focus on Hannah and the Corder household, although we get snapshots/vignettes from the wider world. I found the opening chapters slow and hard to get immersed in. Also, the prose style seemed a little awkward at first becoming more fluid as the narrative progressed. And as the story unfolded I became increasingly curious about Hannah, her reliability as a narrator, and her secrets. Once that happened I became invested in her fate, along with Ruth and Ethel, all of them trying to retain a sense of self in negotiation with a culture in which their desires are considered inconsequential or worse non-existent. However, I found the first half of the book more engrossing than the second, which dragged in parts and could have been edited down.

Overall this won’t be to everyone’s taste (it wasn’t always to mine) but if you enjoy Pym or Thirkell as well as the more introspective Persephone titles or the kinds of books on Virago’s original list this is worth a try. I think in some circles ‘Miss Mole’ has a cult following, personally I’m not sure it’s a novel I would actively want to revisit nor was I entirely convinced by the conclusion but there were sections I enjoyed immensely. It’s currently out of print but I picked up a second-hand copy quite easily.

Jane says

This is my first book by E H Young and I am enraptured. There are touches reminiscent of Barbara Pym and Dorothy Whipple, but she definitely has her own unique style. This was a page turner and quite delightful. Now I will begin the happy task of reading many more of her novels.

Katrina says

To begin with I really disliked the character of Miss Mole but she grew on me, as did the book, although I liked Chatterton Square more.

QNPoohBear says

Miss Hannah Mole, a spinster of almost 40 years, has an abundance of imagination and spirit but a decided lack of money. She’s forced to make a living hiring herself out as a companion to cranky old ladies or some other type of demeaning job. After a brief interlude at Mrs. Gibson’s boarding house where she rescues a man from a suicide attempt and earns a cold shoulder from boarder Mr. Bleckinsop, she takes a place as housekeeper to Nonconformist minister Robert Corder. She disagrees with his severe black and white approach to morals and with the way he is raising his family. Hannah prefers the company of nephew Wilfred to her employer. She would leave but younger daughter Ruth, emotionally fragile and still reeling from the death of her mother, really needs Miss Mole’s kindness and humor. Mr. Corder also wages his own battle with Mr. Bleckinsop, who wants to leave the chapel and with Mr. Pilgrim, a rival minister and mystery man from Hannah’s past. When Hannah’s past threatens to catch up to her, she makes plans to leave but can’t bear to continue on as before. She has a dream of love and a home of her own despite a tainted past.

I have mixed feelings about Miss Mole. I liked/didn’t like her sense of humor. I liked how it kept her sane and kept Ruth happy but I didn’t like how she teased her wealthy cousin. She was also pert with Robert Corder, who is not a likable person, but he doesn’t have the sense of humor to even understand her and it just

makes him hate her. I also didn't like how she flaunted secret knowledge in his face. She felt bad about it, which is good. I didn't really see why her past was anyone else's business and why it would affect her present. I did like her enough to want her to be happy. She's a complicated character. I did like Ruth. I felt bad for her because her father was so awful and pompous. He didn't understand her and I gather that her mother did. The loss of her mother really affected Ruth and her father is not sympathetic. Miss Mole manages to get Ruth to come out of her shell a bit. Ruth's older sister Ethel is more like their father but she has a mind of her own and wants to get out of her father's house. She's not daring enough to be a real rebel and I found her irritating. Miss Mole's cousin Lilla was also a bit annoying. She's stuffy and snobby, without a sense of humor and everyone wants to please her. Mr. Samson was my favorite character and he was hardly in the book. I enjoyed his refreshing frankness and he reminded me of Mr. Harrison in Anne of Avonlea. Mr. Bleckinsop is confusing. He exhibits a lot of character growth without really being in the story much.

This story is told not quite stream of consciousness but it's mostly Hannah's internal thoughts and feelings. There's a little bit in the heads of the other characters. I found it confusing because Hannah doesn't tell the whole story of things that really happened and we get a lot of information after the fact. She talks about the Riddings and Mr. Pilgrim but we're not shown what happens with the Riddings. We don't get the full story about Mr. Pilgrim and only finally get the story of her "sordid" past.

This book wasn't really my cup of tea but it wasn't terrible either.

Ali says

This is quite a slow read I found, but not in a bad way, Miss Mole is the kind of novel that it is worth taking your time over. I loved the character of Hannah Mole, as she's not wholly conventional, a wonderfully flawed character, speaks her mind - tells fibs, sometimes a little sad, sometimes cynical. However she is an indomitable woman, a romantic survivor, who easily wins the affections of Ruth and Ethel, the daughters of pompous non conformist minister Reverend Corder. We see Hannah Mole's life and her past in a rather disjointed non-chronological way - as if Hannah is keeping her secrets to herself until the very last. Poor Miss Mole, her best years behind her, no home of her own, an embarrassment to her cousin - she nevertheless enriches the lives of several people around her. Finally she is rewarded in a way that most readers would cheer at, in a wonderfully poignant little final scene.

Eileen says

Oddly, the word that springs to mind for this one is "charming." Ok. I really like E.H. Young; this is the fourth book of hers I've not only read but owned. All are set in the early 20th century, so there's always a cultural hump to get over, but this time I find the hump a little...different. The story concentrates on Miss Mole, a 40ish housekeeper working for a minister's family, who makes her own fun by use of her sharp, witty mind. Great! So it's kind of a disappointment when the ending begins to devolve into a more typical scandalous-past love story. It's not entirely typical--no melodrama (leave that to the kids in the minister's family, oh man)--but the last few pages definitely dip toward oh-I-am-saved territory. That's not to discount the rest of the book--I'm pretty happy with it on the whole--but you'd think the interesting figure of Miss Mole would be able to use that mind to deal with her past herself, love affair notwithstanding.

Lee says

Oh Miss Mole, you long suffering thing. Honestly, I don't know how you do it. Suppressing all of that intelligence, wit and humour takes a lot of energy and I don't blame you for the occasional outburst. Do not judge yourself so harshly. You are not the type of person who can suffer fools gladly. You squirm internally while looking dutiful. I wish you had been MY companion or housekeeper. I would have been so grateful for your love and attention. You are a fabulous character who deserves to be happy. (And your love of fine shoes is so endearing!)

What a shame that your secret past is about to undo all the fine work you've done with this poor screwed up family. Dare we hope for you? How will it all end?

Elizabeth (Alaska) says

At first, I thought this was just an excellent character study, devoid of plot. That's certainly right up my alley. Hannah Mole is certainly the most well-developed character, but there is also Robert Corder, a minister and her employer. Also strong supporting characters are Corder's daughters, Ruth and Ethel.

All stuffy things had been implied, for Ruth, in the name of housekeeper; stuffy frocks, thick stockings, a prim face and an oppressive sense of duty, yet here was Miss Mole looking, for all her lack of fashion, like a lady who belonged to a world unconnected with chapels, where beauty and leisure were expected and attained. It was a peep through a door Ruth had always wanted to open, and she said quietly, "I like it when you're not darning."

I don't think it is possible to create a really good character study without some action. At least I probably wouldn't read it. But the action here is quiet, and perhaps the most important action took place before the book opens. It is set late in the decade plus between the Great War and the onset of the Great Depression and takes place over just a few months time. Despite some perhaps too frequent very long, complex sentences, the prose is just what I like.

This is apparently Young's best known, best liked work. I might be willing to poke around and see if there is another I might like. I liked this very much, but I'm not likely to chase after many others by her. A good, solid 4 stars that builds to 5, but doesn't quite climb over that line.
