



The Darlings

Angela Jackson

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Angela Jackson's *The Darlings* is an eccentric novel set within a contemporary Scottish marriage.

Mark is a graying, demoralized, antsy office worker who aspires to work as a comedian. But he feels guilty about his past: he killed his best friend in a cricket accident as a teenager. His partner, Sadie, is an expert seamstress who helped Mark when he was at his lowest. Having conceived via IVF, she's expecting a baby, and is zealous about preparing for the baby's arrival.

The affectionate couple has settled into habits and patterns. They often make assumptions, and they don't always listen to one another. When Mark encounters Ruby, a former classmate who witnessed his teenage accident, he's drawn to her optimism, and he convinces himself that she's helping him recover.

The novel is led by domestic scenes and keen observations. With Sadie, Mark is a passive person who's prone to deflections. When he meets Ruby, he vies for her esteem. Their encounters are marked by ease, but also the anxiety initiated by his infidelity. In parallel side stories, Sadie's younger sister and parents feature in.

Sharp and clear, the plot coalesces around its characters' quiet disappointments. They make painful, familiar choices, led by their neglected emotions, unrealized dreams, and failures to articulate what they want. Though they don't recognize it, they all experience repression and restlessness; their lives are ordinary but compelling. Conversations and subtle shifts of psyche are used to show how their relationships drift.

Mark cannot avoid deciding between his relationships; momentum builds around his inevitable choice, which involves the mature acknowledgment that past actions leave irreparable marks. *The Darlings* is a dark, humorous novel in which a troubled man's crises have clear consequences.

KAREN RIGBY (July / August 2021)

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