MOURNING RUBY
by Helen Dunmore
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INTRODUCTION

Abandoned as a baby, Rebecca has no tie to her parents other than the men's size-eleven shoebox in which she was found. Yet she grows from a child of no one and nowhere into a woman who creates her own unorthodox but tender family. First, there is Joe—a brilliant historian and loyal friend who longs for more than Rebecca can give him, but whose devotion sustains her. Adam, Joe's friend, is the man who becomes her husband. And Ruby is the daughter whom Rebecca loves with almost unbearable intensity.

Then this hopeful life is dealt a blow that could shatter the strongest ties. Rebecca flee's her marriage, and Adam sinks into a life numbed by routine and isolation. In the end, it is Joe who enables them to find the way back to understanding, and offers Rebecca a history that she can call her own.

Illuminated by both sorrow and vivid joy, Mourning Ruby is ultimately about the transcendent power of storytelling itself.

Robert Kurson's Hitler's Last Subs


ABOUT HELEN DUNMORE

Helen Dunmore started her writing career as a poet, and has published a number of collections of poetry. Her novels too contain haunting descriptions and images, and are often characterized by the kind of pared-down writing which is found in many poems. Consequently her novels have often been described as poetic.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. For much of her life, the shoebox that Rebecca was abandoned in is her only connection to her real mother. Later in life, Rebecca realizes, "I needed the story, not the object." Once Rebecca recognizes this, she tells Lucia, "The truth is that it was only possible for me to come and find you when I was no longer in search of my mother at all." Why do you think Rebecca feels that way? What is she in search of, if not her mother? Does she ever find it?

2. Airplanes are discussed throughout the novel by several characters. In Chapter 2 Rebecca recalls the story of Mandelstam's baby airplanes: "The Russian poet Mandelstam once wrote about baby aeroplanes. He wrote about an aeroplane in full flight giving birth to another aeroplane which immediately flies off and gives birth to its own baby . . ." Joe tells Rebecca that the story is a metaphor for the way things came alive in Mandelstam's head. What could the airplanes represent in Rebecca's life? What is the significance of airplanes to other characters in the novel?
3. Why do you think Rebecca sees Ruby riding on the fire truck after her airplane makes the emergency landing?

4. Rebecca is not the only character in the novel that experiences a sense of loss. Which other characters experience feelings similar to Rebecca? Rebecca says that it was Mr. Damiano who taught her to learn poems by heart so that during the many times that she thought she had nothing she would find that she still had the poems. Does this help Rebecca? Do Rebecca and the other characters with similar feelings overcome this loss? If so, through what means?

5. Compare Rebecca’s relationship with Joe to her relationship with Adam. What does Adam offer Rebecca that Joe does not/can not?

6. Rebecca mentions her desire to feel safe throughout the novel. What does she want to be safe from? Does Rebecca ever feel safe?

7. While visiting Joe in Moscow, Rebecca has an epiphany: "My whole body was flooded with happiness . . . I thought that this was why we had come to Moscow, though we hadn’t known it. We had come to be loosened from ourselves, to hear of griefs that were larger than our own, to be able to say those sweet words that so often stuck on our tongues.” How does this change once Rebecca and Adam experience their own immense grief?

8. Discuss the differences between how Adam and Rebecca mourn for Ruby.
9. Though the title is **Mourning Ruby**, Ruby is not the only person mourned in this book. Who or what else is mourned? How does this impact other characters?

10. Who do you think Rebecca is speaking to at the end of the novel?
Mourning Ruby

Helen Dunmore—started her career as a poet. Began writing in the 1990’s. Has written children’s and adult novels. Is considered one of the most accomplished contemporary British writers.

Dunmore was born in Dec. 1952 in Yorkshire, the second of four children. She was always fascinated by poetry; her first poem appeared in the local paper at age 10. Both her parents were highly educated and her sister became a painter. Dunmore attended York University, studying English and Related Literature, and discovered the writing of Katherine Mansfield and read Russian poetry.

Later taught English as a Foreign Language in Finland, and upon her return to England began to have many of her poems published. She married at the age of 27, and a son was born in 1981; she already had a stepson. On the challenges of writing while raising a family she says “the sense of every faculty being stretched beyond what I’d thought possible was difficult. Her main working time was in the mornings when the baby usually slept. If he did not “I had the playpen beside me and would drop in a different toy as I shot back the carriage return.” She published three volumes of poetry during the 1980s and was extremely busy conducting writing workshops for adults and children, giving poetry reading, accepting writing residencies, and teaching at universities.

In the early 1990s, she began to write fiction, as well as continuing with three more collections of poetry, and another collection for children as well. “Poetry makes you very economical. You realize what every word does. And with children’s books too, you have to make sure every sentence works, because your audience can leave you just like that.” Her first adult novel, Zennor in Darkness won the McKitterick Prize, awarded for a first novel by a writer over forty. Shortly after, Dunmore was surprised at the age of 41 by a late pregnancy, with her daughter born in 1994.

Won the Orange Prize for fiction for A Spell of Winter—an award offered only to female novelists writing in English. She won against Amy Tan and Anne Tyler. She expresses regret that literary prizes “pit writer against writer,” maintaining a strong sense of comradeship with other writers, particularly women. She has also been made a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. Though she has won many awards, she maintains her privacy, revealing her distaste for publicity: “Celebrity is very frightening, it’s not something I’ve ever found appealing.”

Interviewers are often puzzled by the disparity between Dunmore’s subject matter in many of her books and her life as a polite, reserved mother of three. “Oh, you look so nice and friendly, how can you write about such dark things?” She replies, “There are lots of layers to a human being and you’re not going to see them all in the shop window, are you?”

It wasn’t until 1997 when one of her novels Talking to the Dead, was published in the U.S. (she has been published since 1983). Mourning Ruby is her 8th novel.
Rebecca—grows from a child of no one and nowhere into a woman who creates her own unorthodox but tender family. Part of growing up is learning the story of your life and your family. For R. to heal she must find some link to her parentage. Is the device Dunmore uses too contrived? Joe writes a fictitious family history for her, a WWI romance involving her imagined great-grandmother.

Spins romantic stories of her past to compensate for the meager facts of her existence. Only find her true identity in her role as Ruby’s mother; when that vanishes, it fall to her old friend, Joe, and her boss Mr. Damiano to present her with new stories that allow her to once more create a life without Ruby.

One likes her immediately, for not turning out like her parents—my adoptive mother had nerves as rare as orchids. A very poetical metaphor.

Sharing a flat with Joe, she begins to enjoy the pleasures of friendship and family for the first time in her life. Joe introduces her to simple pleasures and shows her that loneliness need not be permanent.

Her vision on the plane causes her to rethink the last three years of her life and what her future holds.

Joe—loyal friend who longs for more than Rebecca can give him, but who is very devoted to her. The brother she never had? Joe enables Adam and R. to find the way back to understanding, and offers R. a history she can call her own. Joe’s story comprises the second half of the book—intersperses letters from Joe to R.

Tells R. that she must find the key events in her life, not just the shoebox story.

Obsessed by Stalin and his wife. Part of novel revolves around the questions of whether it her death was suicide or murder. R’s story dissolves into a novel that Joe writes about a prostitute and pilot in the first world war.

Joe says that “you take a flight inside yourself when reality becomes unbearable”, to describe a state of fugue. Music. An imitative polyphonic composition in which a theme or themes are stated successively in all of the voices of the contrapuntal structure. Psychiatry. A pathological amnesiac condition during which one is apparently conscious of one’s actions but has no recollection of them after returning to a normal state. This condition, usually resulting from severe mental stress, may persist for as long as several months.

Mr. Damiano—an unconventional savior. A circus impresario turned hotelier who places absolute trust in her abilities as his personal assistant.

Story of growing up in a circus where his parents were trapeze artists.

Adam—sinks into a life numbed by routine and isolation.

Finally starts to move 3 yrs later after finding out Pascal, his wife are preg
Ruby—loved with almost unbearable intensity.

Incidental characters are impressive in a few deft strokes—Paschal, the warm, incisive friend who helps Adam cope with his loss. R’s parents—really wanted a boy. R’s mother says R is like some kitchen implement that’s strange today. She knows it must have a use, but hasn’t discovered it yet.

Theme—the transcendent power of storytelling itself.

The rendering of the physicality of their grief makes the novel gripping. Dunmore captures grief’s insidiousness.

Dunmore’s preoccupation with time lost. She has overlapped past and present in previous novels, with a conventional narrative, here R’s story jumps from past to present, sometimes within the space of a paragraph. Her tale also contains other, smaller stories.

Does the historical dimension of the story feel extraneous to the intimacy and horror of the book’s central theme, the passion and the fragility of the bond between mother and child? Everything centers on this, from Adam’s job as a neonatologist, to Joe’s novel, in which Florence becomes a prostitute in order to survive with her daughter. Too obsessive? Florence able to shield her child from hostile aircraft, just as R. dreams of shielding Ruby from traffic.

Novel focuses only on the beauty and charm of a young child and the devastation of the bereaved parents; none of the characters step into full moral life. At the beginning of Dunmore’s career, she portrayed flawed, richly sexual beings, but her characters have become increasingly “good” people in terrible situations.

Theme of flight—the trapeze artist, Will is a pilot, R. on the plane in an emergency landing, Joe falling out the window. Flight as a metaphor for life and death.

Style—novels contain haunting descriptions and images, often characterized by the kind of pared-down writing found in many poems. Her novels have been described as poetic.

A tale of unbearable suffering and unexpected redemption as lyrical and lush as life itself. Lovely passages about Adam’s hospital work with other people’s children, and about R’s work for Mr. Damiano.

R.’s palpable grief portrayed with a poignant and powerful empathy, an anguish so strong that it envelops the reader in its enormity. Yet a story told with a haunting beauty and a hopeful message.

Story begins with wry humor (being found in a shoe box outside an Italian restaurant) which doesn’t suggest what is to follow. A shadow lies over the comedy.
Helen Dunmore

December 12, 1952-

Name: Helen Dunmore

Biographical and Critical Essay
Zennor in Darkness
In the Money
Burning Bright
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How Poets Work
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Writings by the Author
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WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

BOOKS


- *Going to Egypt* (London: Julia MacRae, 1992).

- *In the Money* (London: Julia MacRae, 1993); republished as *In the Money* (London: Red Fox, 2001).


• Recovering a Body (Newcastle upon Tyne, U.K.: Bloodaxe, 1994).

• Secrets (London: Bodley Head, 1994).


• Go Fox! illustrated by Colin Mier (London: Young Corgi, 1996).

• Amina's Blanket, illustrated by Judith Lawton (London: Heinemann, 1996).


• Bestiary (Newcastle upon Tyne, U.K.: Bloodaxe, 1997).

• Allie’s Apples, illustrated by Simone Lia (London: Mammoth, 1997).

• Love of Fat Men (London: Viking, 1997).

• Clyde’s Leopard, illustrated by Gerry Ball (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).


• Allie’s Rabbit, illustrated by Lia (London: Mammoth, 1999).


• Allie Away, illustrated by Lia (London: Mammoth, 2000).

• Aliens Don’t Eat Bacon Sandwiches: Short Stories (London: Mammoth, 2000).

• The Ugly Duckling, illustrated by Robin Bell Corfield (London: Scholastic, 2001).

• The Siege (London: Viking, 2001; New York: Grove, 2002).
• *Snollygoster* (London: Scholastic, 2001).

• *The Zillah Rebellion* (London: Scholastic, 2001).


**OTHER**


Helen Dunmore already had a distinguished reputation as a poet before she began writing novels in the 1990s. Since then she has reached a much larger, and diverse, audience with a series of children's fictions and adult novels, several of which have won major awards. Her distinctive style and thrilling narratives have earned her a secure place as one of the most accomplished contemporary British writers.

Dunmore was born 12 December 1952 in Beverley, Yorkshire, the second of four children. Her father, a manager for an industrial firm, was frequently transferred, and the family often relocated. As a child, Dunmore was fascinated by poetry, and by the time she was seven or eight years old she was already on her way to becoming a poet, learning poems by heart at school and practicing writing sonnets at home on scraps of card. From an early age she aspired to be a writer, at no time considering another career, and was experimenting with poetic form before the age of ten, when her first published poem appeared in a local newspaper. Moreover, her family background may have stimulated her interest in literature. Both parents had benefited from higher education, her mother taking degrees at the universities of Manchester and Oxford, and they fostered intellectual values at home. While Dunmore was the first member of her family to become a professional writer, others were interested in the arts, and a sister became a painter.

Dunmore attended York University to study English and Related Literature. She found it a dynamic place that offered her a broad range of study—from Anglo-Saxon and medieval literature to French literature—and the opportunity to develop her own poetry through presenting a creative-writing paper for formal assessment and credit toward her degree. Works by women writers were largely absent from her course of study, texts by Jane Austen and Virginia Woolf being the exceptions, but Dunmore discovered the writing of Katherine Mansfield and read Russian poetry, in which women writers had a more assured position.

Dunmore's undergraduate studies were followed by a period (from 1973 to 1975) teaching English as a Foreign Language in Finland, an experience that is reflected in many of her short stories. At that time she began seriously to write poetry, and shortly after her return from Finland she began to publish her poems in literary magazines. She faced the excitement and challenge of defining herself as a woman poet in the mid-1970s and combining the writing of her first collections, in the early 1980s, with motherhood. Dunmore married at the age of twenty-seven to Francis, gaining a stepson, Oliver; her son, Patrick, was born in 1981. In her contribution to *How Poets Work* (1996) she states that writing while having "the sense of every faculty being stretched beyond what I'd thought possible" was difficult, but Dunmore has carefully honed her creative process to incorporate the demands of family life. She became adept at using such time as she had available: "When I was writing the poems for my
first collections my main working time was in the mornings when my baby usually slept. If he did not I had the playpen beside me and would drop in a different toy as I shot back the carriage return."

During the 1980s Dunmore published three volumes of poetry: *The Apple Fall* (1983), *The Sea Skater* (1986)--which won the Alice Hunt Bartlett Award--and *The Raw Garden* (1988), a Poetry Book Society Choice. Her poems have also appeared in many magazines and anthologies, and she has won several prizes for her work, including second prize in the *Times Literary Supplement/Cheltenham Literature Festival Poetry competition* (1989) and first prize in the *Cardiff International Poetry Competition* (1990). In addition to writing, Dunmore has engaged in a wide range of literary activities: conducting writing workshops for adults and children; giving readings at literary festivals; accepting writing residencies, for example at the Polytechnic of Wales in 1990; and teaching, both university teaching at various institutions, among them the University of Glamorgan and Bristol University, and school teaching.

Dunmore discovered her versatility in the 1990s. Although she had experimented with prose-writing earlier in her career, she was not satisfied with the results. In the early 1990s, however, Dunmore began to write fiction, not only for adults but also for children and teenagers, while maintaining her production of poetry, publishing three more collections and a book of poetry for children, *Secrets* (1994). Dunmore does not see any of the genres in which she works as dominant but perceives herself as a writer who is able to move readily from one to the other, following where her curiosity leads. Her comments at the presentation of the Orange Prize, quoted in the 16 May 1996 issue of *The Times* (London), typify her view: "I wouldn't define myself as a children's writer, a poet or a novelist because I want to feel that we can push the boundaries of what we are." Children's fiction allowed her to develop her interest in strong, bold narratives and to explore fictional modes, for example science fiction, which would be inappropriate for her realist adult novels. She thinks that writing for children has taught her a great deal, as she explained in a 2 May 1998 interview with Lottie Moggach for *The Times* (London): "Poetry makes you very economical. You realise what every word does. And with children's books too, you have to make sure every sentence works, because your audience can leave you just like that. You learn a lot."

Her first book of children's fiction, *Going to Egypt* (1992), was quickly followed by an adult novel, *Zennor in Darkness* (1993). *Going to Egypt* is a coming-of-age novel for young adults about a young girl, Colette, who dreams of traveling to distant, exotic lands but instead discovers her first love in a British seaside town. An inspiration for *Zennor in Darkness* was Dunmore's curiosity about D. H. Lawrence, a writer whom she has researched and lectured on, and with whom she has occasionally been compared with in regard to her frank writing about sex. In the novel she takes the period in Lawrence's life when he went to the village of Zennor, in Cornwall, initially with Mansfield and John Middleton Murray, with the dream of establishing an artistic community. Mansfield and Murray did not stay, but Lawrence and his wife, Frieda, did, and the novel relates some of their experiences in the summer of 1917, setting them amid the lives of fictional villagers. Dunmore was anxious that the period details be as accurate as possible and worked carefully on establishing the right clothes, food, furnishings, and songs to generate authenticity. The passion for lived detail is a trait she has shown in all her subsequent fictions.

The Treveal family, with its matriarchal grandmother and young men vulnerable to conscription, constitute the core of the story, especially Clare, a girl whose strivings for personal identity and artistic aspirations are nourished by her meeting with Lawrence. The deprivations and pressures of wartime are vividly evoked. Food is scarce and unpalatable, consisting of gray bread, metallic rhubarb jam, and margarine that "tastes like axle-grease." Patriotism is the order of the day, but even Clare's conformist father privately loses faith in the war: "We are like children whose game has gone terribly wrong." Like children, the villagers of Zennor vent their anxieties through hostility aimed at the pacifist strangers, the
Lawrences. As war intensifies and more men die, they "need more enemies. Even the Germans are not enough any more." Yet, the girls, Hannah, Clare, and Peggy, still have their fun in the unexpected sunshine, held together by childhood memories, rare pleasures--a small piece of chocolate and Clare's "body starts to tingle"--and by a strength fostered by adversity. Despite the horrors of fear and loss, Dunmore asserts the resilience of youth and the triumph of life over death.

Along with keeping house for her widowed father, Clare paints, but her achievements are limited by the demands of her father, Francis Coyne, whom she feels obliged to assist by producing botanical illustrations for his book. Lawrence sees the drawings she has done and kept to herself and appreciates her talent. Francis Coyne, from a rather grander background than his Trevelc wife, is a repressive influence on his daughter and is starkly juxtaposed with Lawrence, whom Dunmore portrays with sympathy. Francis wants Clare's drawing to be "meticulous," but Lawrence encourages her in what she wants, work that is "flowing and alive." When Clare visits the Lawrences in their isolated cottage, the marital relationship is characterized by warmth, spontaneity, openness, and energy; in contrast, Francis Coyne finds sexual release through furtive visits twice a month to May Foage, whom he pays for her services. Both men are outsiders in the community, Francis separated by class. Lawrence suspect because of his German wife and because, as Clare says, he is "different from anyone else." It is Francis who finally rids the village of the Lawrences by writing an anonymous letter to the authorities that results in their being given official notice to leave. The hypocrisy of wartime society, where patriotism is professed but sons are saved by any means possible from the draft boards, is overt in the treatment of the Lawrences and in the cover-up of the suicide of John William, Clare's shell-shocked cousin. Francis believes that Lawrence has seduced his daughter, but in fact it is John William who has sexually initiated Clare. When John William, who has already been in combat, came home on leave from an officers' training camp for further wartime preparations, their childhood friendship was intensified into passion, but his odd behavior hid memories Clare could not share; shortly after their sexual encounter he returns to the training camp and blows off his head.

By the end of the novel Clare is pregnant with her cousin's child, but she insists on finding her own way rather than being defeated by circumstances. As Judy Cox remarked in Socialist Review (July/August 1997), Dunmore's novels "expose how social hierarchies and restrictions invade the most intimate parts of our lives, and how, on a personal level, women resist." Dunmore herself said of the novel in a 9 March 1995 Guardian interview with Marianne Brace: "I wanted to look at what happens to a society that's under pressure. It's when people are tested that you see real quality." Zennor in Darkness won the £5,000 McKitterick Prize, awarded for a first novel by a writer over forty, and was generally well received. The unsigned reviewer for The Times (5 March 1994) found it a "fine first novel," showing a "sure hand" with character. Dunmore's writing was compared with Woolf's in its "poetic incandescence" and use of multiple viewpoints.

In the same year Dunmore published a novel for teenagers, In the Monkey (1993), in which two children, whose father has mysteriously come into money, move to a large country house away from the friends and the life that they know. The loneliness and anxiety of the narrator, Paul, whose suspicions about the source of the money are realized when the police arrive at the end of the novel, is both echoed and relieved by the discovery in the house of Sarah-Louise, a ghostly servant girl whose fear of mistreatment has kept her in the house for a hundred years. Parallels are drawn between the dubious activities of Sarah-Louise's employer and Paul's present-day problems in a well-plotted narrative about the "trap of fear."

With her children moving through their teenage years, Dunmore was surprised at the age of forty-one by a late pregnancy. In February 1994 her daughter, Tess, was born, an event that had an enormous impact on Dunmore's life, though her writing continued unabated. In the afterword to her fifth poetry collection, Recovering a Body (1994), Dunmore discusses how her pregnancy concentrated her
thoughts on the physical and psychological effects of female aging: "Forty is a good age for thinking about the body." The tangible presence of the body and sensory experience are perhaps the most constant features of Dunmore's writing. Her characters do not exist in the abstract but are constructed through their physical engagement with the world. Precise rendering of tastes, sights, sounds, and, in particular, smells, gives her writing a visceral quality that has made its mark on her readers.

Almost simultaneously with the arrival of her new baby, Dunmore's second novel, *Burning Bright* (1994), was published. As with many of Dunmore's novels, *Burning Bright* takes its title from literary sources, and the allusion here is to William Blake's "The Tyger" (1806). Like Clare in *Zennor in Darkness*, the central characters of both *Burning Bright* and Dunmore's next novel, *A Spell of Winter* (1995), are young motherless girls facing difficult challenges and entering unconventional, potentially shocking, sexual relationships. In *Burning Bright*, Nadine, just sixteen years old and virtually ignored by her parents, who are absorbed in the problems of a younger disabled child, sets up with Kai, a Finnish pimp passing himself off as a property dealer, in a dilapidated London house, and is quickly duped into an encounter with a psychologically scarred cabinet minister, Paul Parrett, whose unusual sexual requirements, such as wanting to be tied up to watch women masturbate, have been difficult to satisfy with Kai's regular girls. Paul is a sympathetic character, offering no threat to Nadine, who faces dangers elsewhere when Kai nearly kills Enid, an old woman who, because of her squatter's rights, lives precariously at the top of the house, knowing that Kai is desperate to be rid of her for financial profit. Enid is well aware of the vicious world Nadine has entered and hopes to protect her from it, succeeding where she failed many years ago to save her lover, Sukey, from being murdered by Caro, the third member of an uneasy lesbian triangle. The novel opens with Enid's sharp memories of the bloody death of Sukey, which establishes an expectation of violence culminating in Kai's attack on Enid:

She's never seen a bull charge, but it must be like this. He runs at her and she's lifted with him, the butt of it thrashing out her breath. The air is tearing around her; everything's so fast, so much stronger than her. Suddenly he's close, his breath in her face, his eyes glaring at something she wants to say isn't in her, isn't here at all. But she has no breath. He's got her, she's in the air, lifted high by the arms so her feet dabble against the floor. . . . She sees her doorknobs whip past, her heavy door, and then he hurls and she flies but doesn't know where she's going as the air hisses in the white downpour of her falling.

Dunmore makes no judgments on her characters. She said in an interview with Tom Morris for *The Guardian* (19 April 1994), "I'm not taking a moralistic stand in any way." Evil is a presence, and passion can lead to murder, but the darker areas of the human psyche are explored in a way that is intimate without being prurient and that leaves the readers to decide for themselves.

*Burning Bright* was praised for its seductive narrative and the management of suspense. Penny Perrick, in a 20 February 1994 review in *The Sunday Times* (London), found Nadine "one of the most convincing 16-year-olds in fiction, with that strutting assertiveness that masks insecurity." Dunmore's economical visual prose and rich sense of physicality were also applauded. In a 13 February 1994 review for *The Observer* (London), David Buckley dubbed it a "surprisingly uplifting novel which touches sordidness with grace." The impact of the novel is enhanced by Dunmore's bold use of the present tense for Enid's memories of long ago and the events of present time, unusual in fiction but used to great effect in all her novels, not only giving immediacy to incidents in the here and now but also suggesting the inescapable pull of the past.

Interviewers are often puzzled by the apparent disparity between Dunmore's startling subject matter and her life as a polite, reserved mother of three. In her 1998 conversation with Moggach she recalled the comments of a Finnish interviewer: "Oh, you look so nice and friendly, how can you write about
such dark things?" Dunmore's public persona reveals little of her, as her answer testifies: "there are lots of layers to a human being and you're not going to see them all in the shop window, are you?"

Dunmore strenuously avoids self-disclosure in discussions of her life and work, preferring to allow the writing, where "readers get the full picture," to speak for itself.

Gritty subject matter and the legacy of the past again dominate in *A Spell of Winter*, published in 1995. Although she is a young woman, Cathy dwells morbidly on her childhood and adolescence, alone in her disintegrating house in a chilly winter: "A spell of winter hangs over it and everyone is gone." Place and time are not specified, but as events unfold it becomes clear that the setting is the same as that of *Zenmor in Darkness*, England during World War I. This novel, however, is much more insular than the earlier one, as Dunmore has exchanged the multiple viewpoints of her first two novels for a single, first-person voice. She described it to Brace in their 1995 interview as a "story about painful losses," in which grief and isolation cause Cathy to withdraw further and further into herself.

Cathy recalls her life with her brother, Rob, and her grandfather in a house increasingly given up to decay as the family fortunes decline. Their mother leaves with no explanation, and their father, overtaken by grief, has a breakdown, ending his life in an asylum. Cathy looks to their servant, Kate, for love but is hounded by their old governess, Miss Gallagher, whose possessive love inspires in her only fear and disdain. As the siblings grow up, they become closer, united against the world, until an intense, consuming, incestuous relationship develops, resulting in a secret and messy abortion. The relationship is reminiscent of that of Cathy and Heathcliff in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847): "we're turning into one another." Finally, everyone Cathy loves has left her, her grandfather and brother through death, and the claustrophobic narrative is dominated by Cathy's inner world and the richly drawn landscape that echoes her feelings. There is, however, a potentially happy ending when Cathy, in the company of a rich, older lover, seeks out her mother in France, seemingly released from the spell of the past.

The novel is not always totally convincing. When Cathy takes up a spade and leads Miss Gallagher deep into the woods, where fear precipitates a fatal heart attack, her cold malice seems excessive, even if the governess does know her secret. It is one thing to feel anger at a woman "breathing her threats like sugar," quite another thing to deliberately engineer her death, as it seems Cathy may have done. As Louisa Kamps, reviewing the U.S. edition for *The New York Times* (25 February 2001), noted, "Cathy displays a weird lack of empathy toward human beings that makes her not very credible, or likable. The hatred she feels for her needy, overly solicitous tutor, Miss Gallagher, seems gratuitous, to say the least." The passionate relationship with Mr. Bullivant, a father figure, is also a surprise when the final chapter brings the story up to date, though it attests to Dunmore's underlying optimism about the capacity of people to recover from profound psychological damage and go on with their lives. Reviewers had mixed feelings about *A Spell of Winter*. Dunmore's considerable literary talents were not in doubt; the craftsmanship and the sheer beauty of the erotic, lyrical writing gave much readerly pleasure. Many found the novel powerful, unsettling, and magical. Some reservations were articulated by critics such as Gill Hornby in a 23 March 1995 review in *The Times* (London) about the possible monotony of a first-person narrative in which everything is pervaded by Cathy's feelings and sensations, and the dangers of writing that is too insistently poetic.

In these first three novels Dunmore marked out her distinctive territory: forbidden or repressed passion, the secrets and deceptions within family life, and the addictive quality of love. Talking to Giles Coren for a 23 February 1995 interview in *The Times* (London), she said: "I am interested in addictive relationships, people who are drawn towards something that will harm them and in the ways they try to break free from it." She investigates dark subjects--betrayal, incest, abortion, murder--in an intensely physical and almost matter-of-fact way. The girls in the early novels find a way out of the darkness, given direction by a substitute parent--Lawrence for Clare, Enid for Nadine, Mr. Bullivant for Cathy--
but escaping an oppressive past through their own strength of will. The conclusions of these novels are positive; in Dunmore's later works endings are harsher, with limited possibilities for rescue.

Given that Dunmore was already well known as a poet before she began publishing novels, it is unsurprising that her fiction has been viewed as "poetic," with a few commentators suggesting that the poet's voice was paramount in her prose. Dunmore is dismissive of this view, telling Moggach that "I think the word 'poetic' is really horrible. People who write 'poetic' novels aren't poets, they're just throwing their adjectives around." In a 31 May 1997 review of Bestiary (1997) and Love of Fat Men (1997) in The Independent (London) the poet Carol Rumens pointed out that there is a "holistic quality" to Dunmore's imagination and that she does not write "what is disparagingly known as 'poet's prose.'"

In 1996 Dunmore published several works, including a novel for teenagers and a novel for adults. The teenage science-fiction thriller Fatal Error, about a virtual-reality theme park ride and villains plotting to sabotage it, was welcomed by the reviewer Maureen Owen of The Times (London), who noted in a 3 August 1996 review that in her portrayal of Nicky, the heroine, Dunmore had "done an impressive switch into the mind and dialogue of an adolescent girl." However, the major event of the year for Dunmore was her winning of the first Orange Prize for fiction, for A Spell of Winter. An award offered only to women novelists writing in English, the Orange Prize came with a purse of £30,000, which at that time made it the most valuable award in Britain for a single book. The establishment of a women-only literary prize attracted a degree of controversy and publicity that was heightened by disputes between the five female judges over the quality of the 146 entries. When she won against strong competition from Amy Tan and Anne Tyler, Dunmore professed herself unconcerned by the arguments the prize had spawned, quoted in the 16 May 1996 issue of The Times (London) as declaring "We have a unique tradition of women writing fiction in England. . . . We are foolish if we don't celebrate something we are so strong in." The prize continued to court debate the following year when A.S. Byatt was quoted in an 18 March 1997 article in The Independent (London) as having protested that women should not be "ghettoised" in this way.

In How Poets Work, Dunmore expresses regret at the way that literary prizes "pit writer against writer," having throughout her career maintained a strong sense of comradeship with other writers, in particular women, suggesting that they "have a common work which belongs to none of us." However, she felt that the Orange Prize did draw attention to the way in which such awards are given and foregrounded women's writing. Dunmore is supportive of women's writing and critical of its debasement. In her February 1995 interview for The Times (London) she stated: "Women are doing all sorts of things with fiction, but there is still this attitude that the big boys Martin Amis, Julian Barnes, Kazuo Ishiguro are the ones doing all the experimenting." In her own writing Dunmore likes to explore different narrative possibilities but, though she is a lifelong feminist, she does not see herself as bound to a particular feminist agenda or as a writer who addresses her work only to women. A consequence of winning the Orange Prize was that Dunmore became much more widely known as a novelist. Sales of A Spell of Winter quadrupled after the award was given, and the tag "Orange Prize winner" was often attached to her name in the press.

Despite the celebrity attendant on winning a major literary prize Dunmore continued to maintain a private life in Bristol, where she has lived since 1977. She has always worked at home, though in 1999 she bought a nearby studio apartment to use for writing. Although she has been involved in reviewing for national newspapers for some years and has participated in radio programs, she avoids television appearances and defends her privacy fiercely. On the whole she maintains her distance. In a 26 May 2001 interview for The Daily Telegraph (London) she revealed her distaste for publicity: "Celebrity is very frightening, it's not something I've ever found appealing."

Talking to the Dead (1996) is the first in a set of novels that she referred to in an unpublished interview
with Ann Hancock on 3 November 2000 as a "triplet," the other two being Your Blue-Eyed Boy (1998) and With Your Crooked Heart (1999). Talking to the Dead continues Dunmore's exploration of intense sibling relationships and dangerous secrets shared by siblings. Told in the first person and almost entirely in the present tense by Nina, the novel begins with the funeral of Nina's older sister, Isabel, who has committed suicide by drowning. The remainder of the novel is retrospective, focusing upon Isabel's last, hot summer, when Nina comes to stay in her house in the country after the difficult birth of Isabel's baby, Antony. The sisters are close but not at all alike. Isabel is beautiful and loves her house and garden but is rather distant from those around her, including Richard, her husband. Nina, a photographer and unmarried, enjoys sex and food, both of which feature prominently in the novel. The birth of Antony brings to the fore the jealousies experienced by the two sisters, both of each other and of their younger brother, Colin, born when Isabel was seven and Nina four, who died when only three months old, supposedly of crib death.

Through conversations between the sisters and through snatches of memory and dream by Nina, key moments of their childhood are re-created. Like Cathy and Rob in A Spell of Winter, they receive little attention from their artistic parents, and Isabel becomes an erratic surrogate mother for Nina. Isabel is the "sensible one," Nina the difficult toddler. Both sisters are clearly annoyed by the birth of a brother who will use up what little maternal affection exists in the house. Nina remembers: "I didn't want it. She was my mother, mine and Isabel's." But Nina also has a memory of Isabel smothering the baby and of Isabel's illness after the death of Colin. The truth of her recollection is put in doubt when Isabel, all love and concern, tells Nina that it was she who killed Colin: "You were only four... You were jealous, of course you were." The complexities of the sisters' relationship and the mystery surrounding Colin's death are played out within a claustrophobic household that consists of Richard, Isabel's husband; Edward, her gay friend; and Susan, a local girl acting as nanny to Antony. Richard and Nina begin a torrid affair, everyone worries about Isabel's physical and mental health, and no one speaks of the things that matter: "This house is stiff with things which can't be said." Nina seems to see food as the road to freedom. When Isabel suggests a celebration feast, for which each of them will present a course, Nina responds with enthusiasm and prepares for gourmet cooking; lingering descriptions of food preparation and consumption are prominent in the novel. However, the feast does not take place and the food and the flowers are thrown away, because on the day of the feast Isabel walks into the sea.

As a whodunit thriller the novel is intriguing. Nina is not a reliable narrator, and the reader is never sure which competing view of events is the right one. Sometimes Isabel is the victim, scarred by the past and drifting into madness as motherhood recalls her lost brother. Yet, she is also manipulative, unlikely, and lacking in feeling. Similarly, Nina, while seeming at a disadvantage in comparison to her lovely sister with the beautiful house, the husband, and the baby, is also callous, having sex with Richard as the police search for Isabel's body, seeming almost to claim Antony as her own at the end. The plot is managed with great control, reaching a chilling yet ambiguous conclusion when, on the final page, Nina remembers a moment when it seems that she asked Isabel to get rid of Colin for her.

Talking to the Dead was favorably reviewed; there was agreement that Dunmore had now mastered the novel form, producing a compelling, riveting narrative that retained her sparkling, visual prose without sacrificing narrative development, what Caroline Gascoigne called in a 7 July 1996 review for The Sunday Times (London) "a memorable and assured work." The novel was seen as erotic and disturb ing, the writing concentrated and sharp. Joan Smith, in a 10 August 1996 review in The Financial Times (London), called the novel "outstanding for its near-perfect control and deceptively limpid prose." In 2001 it was featured on the BBC Radio 4 program Book Club, a show in which a group of readers discusses a novel with its author.

In 1997 Talking to the Dead became the first of Dunmore's novels to be published in the United States. Publication in the United States enhanced her standing, with reviewers echoing their British
counterparts. Reviewing the novel for *The Washington Post Book World* (10 August 1997), Carolyn Banks remarked that "Helen Dunmore . . . takes a tale that could drive a thriller and weaves her linguistic spell around it. The result is brilliant and terrifying, an unbeatable combination. . . . Without sacrificing any literary merit, *Talking to the Dead* provides a textbook example of structuring for suspense." Carol Kino, reviewing the book for *The New York Times* (1 June 1997), noted that "In the hands of another writer, these elements--murder, adultery, repressed memory, familial love--might well have become a fevered, one-note drama," but that what makes Dunmore's novel "so gripping and complex is her ability to convey many different layers of experience at once," with "language dense with imagery and metaphor, as compacted as poetry."

Published in 1997, *Love of Fat Men*, her first collection of short stories, includes nineteen stories, none longer than a dozen pages, many set in a cold Scandinavia. They represent the work of many years: some of them were written before Dunmore began to write novels and were previously published in magazines. About half of the stories concern fragments from the life of a Finnish girl, Ulli, depicted in "Family Meeting" as a child seeking attention from her family and elsewhere as a young woman, self-contained, elusive. Dunmore reveals Ulli's life through hints and silences, and the last Ulli story, "Girls on Ice," written in a postmodern mode, ends bleakly and without resolution. The remaining stories are generally snapshots of relationships. Reviewers such as Susanna Rustin in a 9 August 1997 review in *The Financial Times* (London), found quite different qualities in these stories. Those who valued a strong plot found the sparseness of story and characterization somewhat disappointing and felt that the poet in Dunmore was more to the fore than the novelist. Others saw great merit in the collection, finding the stories polished, profound, and perceptive in their examination of the mundane. While some emphasized the darkness of these "icy" tales, others were struck by the warmth and humor.

Also published in 1997 was a volume of poems, *Bestiary*. Influenced no doubt by Dunmore's success as a novelist, reviewers found narrative qualities in her poetry, as previously they had seen the poet at work in her fiction. In the 20 July 1997 issue of *The Independent on Sunday* (London) the reviewer, Sarah Maguire, described the best poems as having "the deft punch of a powerful short story," while Ruth Padel, in *The Independent on Sunday* (London) on 10 October 1999, discussed "The Surgeon Husband," from this collection, as turning "story fragments into little lyrical epiphanies."

Published in 1998, *Your Blue-Eyed Boy* follows *Talking to the Dead* in some respects. The novel begins, "There are things you should know about blackmail," and an element of the plot concerns embarrassing youthful nude photographs sent by a former lover to the protagonist, a respectable judge with a husband and two children. It is, however, by no means confined by the thriller genre, but is rather an examination, as in the earlier novel, of past hurts and buried sadness, and the need to carry on. The first-person narrator, Simone, shares with Nina a kind of hardness that enables survival, though perhaps at a cost: "My face is soft, but you have to be hard to get where I am." Again the use of the present tense gives a tactile immediacy to the narrative, but the landscape of *Your Blue-Eyed Boy* is bleaker and harsher than in Dunmore's previous work. Passion is absent, and gorgeous descriptions of food do not appear in this novel of a family that is dogged by poverty: greasy margarine rather than butter, "a cake of soapy cheddar" and cheap bread rather than the "shiny purple aubergines" fresh from the market that Simone once bought. The crisis in this novel has been precipitated by the near bankruptcy of Simone's architect husband, Donald. The family has escaped absolute ruin by Simone's taking on a job, district judge, for which she feels not fully prepared, and which has taken them out of London to a damp, cold, and remote house by the sea. This cheerless existence does not bring them financial security as Simone's improved earnings disappear in debt repayment. Already the situation is tense; Donald is depressed and angry, the children unsettled and confused. Most of the difficulties between husband and wife remain unspoken, but Dunmore conveys with skill the anxieties and hidden resentments between them.
Into an already fragile situation come the photographs, sent by Michael, the Vietnam veteran who was Simone's lover in the (fictional) New England resort town of Annasett when she was eighteen. Uncertain of what Michael may want from her, Simone dreads the post and the telephone but starts to recapture that time, and the present-day narrative is interspersed by graphic scenes of Simone, Michael, and Calvin, the friend who took the photographs. When Michael appears in the flesh, older, fatter, and damaged by years of hospitalization—the legacy of his Vietnam experience—the past presses more forcibly on Simone: "Memory spreads over my senses like a film of oil, brilliant and treacherous." She recalls the stories Michael told of the horrors of war, alongside memories of her childhood and the misery of her parents' deaths. Of her father's early death she thinks, "I let the blow sink into me silently, and I'm still reeling from it." While her personal dilemmas accumulate, her work as a judge continues: child custody disputes, domestic violence, other people's tragedies.

Walking with Michael on the marshland that borders her home, Simone finds out that Michael has come to take her back with him, plane tickets already in his pocket. They have sex out on the beach, and she feels at ease with him, physically if in no other way. On the walk back along the sea wall, high above the beach, however, Michael falls and is killed instantly. Simone, perhaps used to coping, is strangely detached from the scene but realizes there is no one but she to take responsibility for the situation. A grueling chapter describes in great detail how Simone drags Michael's body into a small boat and takes it out to sea, because she does not want any evidence of her whereabouts exposed, particularly to her husband. As he has always worked in the boating industry, boats have been Michael's life, and it seems an appropriate end.

Afterward, life returns to normal, but Simone's guilt and anxiety affect her confidence, and she feels haunted by Michael's ghost. It is uncertain how her life will go on. Your Blue-Eyed Boy was mentioned frequently as a contender for the 1998 Booker Prize, and there was little critical dissent from the assessment in the 3 May 1998 review in The Sunday Times (London): a "powerful read, but one that is not at all comfortable." Neil Spencer, writing for The Observer (London), found room for criticism, remarking in a 3 May 1998 review on the "improbability of its basic scenario" and the "sketchbook" characterization of Donald. In The New York Times Book Review (6 September 1998) Mark Lindquist tempered a generally favorable review with the remark that Dunmore "writes gracefully and has an excellent sense of place, but overloads her story with peripheral detail. By the end, the reader may be skimming pages, but not necessarily to find out what happens next."

The last novel in the "triplet" of thrillers, With Your Crooked Heart, appeared in 1999. In this novel Dunmore continues her complex psychological study of family relationships, particularly between siblings. Johnnie, the beautiful but hopeless younger brother, is a source of perpetual anxiety to Paul, who has become a successful businessman, specializing in the redevelopment of contaminated land. Paul loves Johnnie like a son and has indeed taken over the rearing of him from their grief-stricken mother, depressed after the death of her husband. However, Johnnie persists in exploring the seamier side of business, becoming involved with drugs and in schemes for moneymaking that never quite come off. As he tells his former sister-in-law, Louise, toward the end of the novel, Paul has suffocated him with attention: "I can't move without him knowing. I can't even breathe. Everything I've done, he knows." Included in what Paul knows is the fact that Johnnie fathered Louise's child, Anna, though this is never discussed and only acknowledged by Louise right at the end. Johnnie himself never quite lives up to what the reader is told of him—his beauty, his charm—and the reader has to take on trust the love he inspires in Paul, Louise, Anna, and in most of those who meet him.

Many chapters of the novel tell of the significant events in the past: Louise's decline into an overweight, irresponsible alcoholic. Just as Paul took Johnnie away from their mother, so he takes Anna from Louise, installing her in a house in Yorkshire with a young and beautiful, but vacuous, stepmother, Sonia. What motivates the characters is a key question, but one that is also hard to answer.
As with Dunmore's previous two novels, the characters are all curiously unlovable and enigmatic. Paul clearly wants to escape his working-class past through worldly success, but his obsession with Johnnie is less comprehensible. Louise professes to love both brothers and her daughter but spends most of her time in a drunken lethargy. Johnnie appears to be on a course of self-destruction, careless of his own safety or of the feelings of others. For Johnnie "not to be able to trust yourself is the biggest thrill of all." The three of them are bound irrevocably together, Louise saying on several occasions that she is married to Paul until death despite the fact that they are legally divorced.

The most positive character is Anna, ten years old and bravely supporting herself when no one else seems able to. After being ostracized as an outsider in Yorkshire, she is saved from loneliness by finding both a kitten, which she nurtures as determinedly as Paul does his waif-and-stray brother, and David, a local boy she befriends. Unlike her family, Anna has a sane hold on the world as is demonstrated when Dunmore juxtaposes two journeys in the closing chapters. Louise and Johnnie, having run away to Brighton to escape the hoods who are pursuing Johnnie because he owes them money, are on a ferry to Denmark, red-eyed with drink and fearful of discovery. Anna and David are on a train from Leeds to London to see Anna's mother, a journey carefully planned and successfully accomplished. When they find Louise is not at home, they set up camp in the garden to wait for her return, still tending the growing kitten. Meanwhile, on the ship Johnnie is having his face slashed and his legs broken, a punishment for his own misdeeds but also a payback to Paul from a crook he had crossed in the past. When Louise intervenes, the maiming turns into a double murder and she is thrown overboard, and it seems that the obsessive love of Paul and Louise for Johnnie--the two continually having indulged and bailed out Johnnie and thus contributed to his inadequacies as an adult--has merely brought about Johnnie's and Louise's deaths.

The novel ends as it began, in Louise's London garden. The opening is a characteristic Dunmore scene, a sensual and visual description of a heavily pregnant Louise sunbathing naked on the warm stone of the terrace. At the end of the book Paul comes in search of Anna and finds her asleep in her sleeping bag beside David, already moving on from Paul to "somewhere he cannot go."

As a narrative, With Your Crooked Heart builds up tension and a sense of inescapable fate: that the adult characters are all in some way doomed is early established. The presence of the past, which Dunmore emphasized in both Talking to the Dead and Your Blue-Eyed Boy, is here preeminent, and the fragmentary quality of the storytelling is more marked. No constant voice holds the narrative together as it moves from first person to third and, uncommon in fiction, to second, a device that can be confusing for the reader.

Carole Morin, in a 4 September 1999 review in The Daily Telegraph (London), was disappointed by the novel, saying that Dunmore's "life-affirming sensibilities appear to be struggling with the chic aesthetic of self-destructiveness that is imposed on the narrative. In the process, what might have been a satisfying midlife-crisis novel becomes a failed attempt at passionate prose." Reviewing the paperback edition of the novel for the 1 March 2000 issue of the same newspaper, Marc Davidson demurred slightly, calling the book a "powerful but frustrating novel" but one with "passages of eloquence and poignancy." In her review for The Guardian (4 September 1999), however, Katy Emck called With Your Crooked Heart "a peculiarly direct and gripping read ... a novel that stays close to the visceral experiences of life."

Dunmore's second collection of stories, Ice Cream, was published in 2000. The stories are adventurous and varied in both form and subject matter. In some, Dunmore foregrounds narrative, moving beyond her usual realist mode, as in her experimental writing for children. "Leonardo, Michelangelo and SuperStork" is a science-fiction story about cloning, in which the idea of keeping up with the neighbors takes a sinister turn. Next-door neighbors Susie and Pat are both pregnant; in their gardens they
compare conditions in the summer heat and bemoan the price of a child these days. Natural conception is illegal, and all babies are produced to order, selected from catalogues, and Pat is curious to know whether Susie can top her superior Michelangelo product. Susie claims to have used Leonardo, the most expensive service at more than £100,000, but is reluctant to show Pat her brochure. It transpires that Susie has committed a crime, conceiving a child naturally with the help of a medical student who has secretly removed her birth-control device (called a "Rubicon") to allow conception to take place. When Pat's husband is about to inform on Susie and her husband, Reuben, the couple flee, with Susie giving birth Madonna-like in a pigsty.

An element of social comment is also present in the title story, "Ice Cream," in which a beautiful, famous young woman, Clara, celebrates her twenty-fourth birthday in a restaurant with her sleek, well-dressed friends. Clara "never eats ice cream," and as the craving takes hold of her, her personal trainer, Elise, tries to divert her, reminding her of the days when the teenage Clara was "wide and sleek as a whale." The friends suggest avoidance strategies—spitting it out, vomiting it up, taking pills to kill the appetite—while the waiter looks on stiff and frowning. After Clara gives a slight nod to the waiter, he brings Clara a platter of the finest ice cream. Clara takes a mouthful and swallows. The sensuous pleasures of physical existence win over the enforcement of repressive dictates.

Several of the stories deal with painful material. In "Lisette" a Jewish doctor who devotes his life in Paris to treating tuberculosis in the poor is taken to Auschwitz with his wife and delicate young daughter. This story ends the collection, and the final sentence is perhaps a reflection on many of the stories included: "I felt I had to tell it, even if you're tired of it, even if you've heard it all before." In "The Clear and Rolling Water" Dunmore deals with the despair of a failing sheep farmer in a remote area who puts all his hopes into an unsuccessful scheme building holiday cottages on his property.

Three of the stories offer further snapshots from the life of Ulli, the Finnish girl featured in Love of Fat Men. "The Kiwi-Fruit Arbour" follows up her adolescent relationship with Jorma from "Spring Wedding," a story in Love of Fat Men. Here she is pregnant, away from home as is often the case in her tales, staying with a French family and wondering if they are aware of her condition. She ponders on what Jorma is doing and whether he will understand what is happening to her. "The Icon Room" and "Living Out" both show Ulli living alone and having slightly bizarre encounters with men she meets by chance.

In her 30 March 2000 review for The Times (London) Amanda Craig observed that the title of Ice Cream encapsulates the nature of Dunmore's work. On the one hand, there is the soothing sensuality of the writing that has been consistently admired, designating her the "celebrant of the senses." On the other hand, chilliness is pervasive too, a dispassionate seriousness that renders the world disturbing. Readers and reviewers have been entranced by the brilliance of her thriller plots, but underlying the stories, as Craig noted, is "a deep disquiet about the way our society works." Dunmore's protagonists usually survive, but they never quite know when the ground will give way beneath them.

Dunmore's seventh novel, The Siege (2001), marked another change of direction, away from the thriller to historical fiction. Having had for many years a strong interest in Russia and its literature—she cited Leo Tolstoy as her favorite novelist in a 19 September 1999 interview with The Sunday Times (London)—she developed the idea of giving an inner view, through the intimate experiences of a family struggling for survival, of the siege of Leningrad in World War II. Like her first novel, Zemnor in Darkness, it was carefully researched and became for the author a major preoccupation during, and for some time after, the writing. The novel centers around Anna Levin, who has become responsible for both her four-year-old brother, Kolya, and her inefficacious father, Mikhail, a writer whose work is considered unpublishable under Joseph Stalin's regime. Although the setting and subject matter are much different from her previous work, she continues in The Siege to demonstrate her skills in
storytelling, in rendering the sensuousness of everyday life, and in observing human behavior in extreme circumstances. She told interviewer Robert McCrum of The Guardian (10 June 2001) that she found the "rapid and catastrophic decline" that Leningrad experienced during the siege "chilling and fascinating." In an interview with Sybil Steinberg for Publishers Weekly (21 January 2002) Dunmore indicated that her theme in the novel was more than the survival of a single individual or family; referring to the 11 September 2001 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, she said, "I think we have an expectation that civil society is quite fragile, but often it turns out that society is capable of a huge effort in order to preserve the whole. What history shows is that people often do survive, and their resilience was quite miraculous."

Rachel Cusk, in a 2 June 2001 review for The Daily Telegraph (London), called the novel "remarkable, affecting and extremely accomplished" and said that it "represents a pinnacle in Dunmore's fiction, and in the year's fiction too. There are few more interesting stories than this; and few writers who could have told it better." Reviewing the novel for The New York Times (31 March 2002), Janice P. Nimura observed that the "best historical fiction delivers emotional truth through the lives of imaginary but ordinary people, making it possible to feel the texture of events that have been smoothed out by the generalizations of conventional histories" and declared that in The Siege "the specific becomes epic as five people huddle in one freezing room and Dunmore describes what is happening to them in language that is elegantly, starkly beautiful." The novel was short-listed for both the Whitbread Novel Award and the Orange Prize in 2002.

In October 2001 Bloodaxe Books published Out of the Blue: Poems 1975-2001, a collection that comprises twenty-nine new poems, selections from her 1994 collection for children, Secrets, and those poems from Dunmore's earlier Bloodaxe collections that she thought worthy to stay in print. In addition to her still-growing reputation as a novelist and short-story writer, Helen Dunmore's reputation as a poet remains high, and she continues to attend poetry festivals as well as give readings from her novels. In November 1996 she was a member of a panel of three, including Andrew Motion (who later became the Poet Laureate), judging entries for the T. S. Eliot Prize for poetry, and she was chairwoman of the panel that awarded the T. S. Eliot Prize to the Canadian poet Anne Carson in January 2002, making Carson the first woman recipient of that award. Evidence of her literary distinction can also be drawn from her election in 1998 as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. She has become internationally known, with her work translated into many languages, including Japanese. Her novels have sold particularly well in France and Scandinavia, while her children's writing is popular in Germany.

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Interviews:


Reference:


About this Essay: Ann Hancock, University of the West of England, Bristol


Source Database: Dictionary of Literary Biography
Mourning Ruby by Helen Dunmore

INTRODUCTION

Abandoned as a baby, Rebecca has no tie to her parents other than the men's size-eleven shoebox in which she was found. Yet she grows from a child of no one and nowhere into a woman who creates her own unorthodox but tender family. First, there is Joe—a brilliant historian and loyal friend who longs for more than Rebecca can give him, but whose devotion sustains her. Adam, Joe's friend, is the man who becomes her husband. And Ruby is the daughter whom Rebecca loves with almost unbearable intensity.

Then this hopeful life is dealt a blow that could shatter the strongest ties. Rebecca flees her marriage, and Adam sinks into a life numbed by routine and isolation. In the end, it is Joe who enables them to find the way back to understanding, and offers Rebecca a history that she can call her own.

Illuminated by both sorrow and vivid joy, Mourning Ruby is ultimately about the transcendent power of storytelling itself.

ABOUT HELEN DUNMORE

Helen Dunmore started her writing career as a poet, and has published a number of collections of poetry. Her novels too contain haunting descriptions and images, and are often characterized by the kind of pared-down writing which is found in many poems. Consequently her novels have often been described as poetic.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. For much of her life, the shoebox that Rebecca was abandoned in is her only connection to her real mother. Later in life, Rebecca realizes, "I needed the story, not the object." Once Rebecca recognizes this, she tells Lucia, "The truth is that it was only possible for me to come and find you when I was no longer in search of my mother at all." Why do you think Rebecca feels that way? What is she in search of, if not her mother? Does she ever find it?

2. Airplanes are discussed throughout the novel by several characters. In Chapter 2 Rebecca recalls the story of Mandelstam's baby airplanes: "The Russian poet Mandelstam once wrote about baby aeroplanes. He wrote about an aeroplane in full flight giving birth to
another aeroplane which immediately flies off and gives birth to its own baby . . . " Joe tells Rebecca that the story is a metaphor for the way things came alive in Mandelstam's head. What could the airplanes represent in Rebecca's life? What is the significance of airplanes to other characters in the novel?

3. Why do you think Rebecca sees Ruby riding on the fire truck after her airplane makes the emergency landing?

4. Rebecca is not the only character in the novel that experiences a sense of loss. Which other characters experience feelings similar to Rebecca? Rebecca says that it was Mr. Damiano who taught her to learn poems by heart so that during the many times that she thought she had nothing she would find that she still had the poems. Does this help Rebecca? Do Rebecca and the other characters with similar feelings overcome this loss? If so, through what means?

5. Compare Rebecca's relationship with Joe to her relationship with Adam. What does Adam offer Rebecca that Joe does not/can not?

6. Rebecca mentions her desire to feel safe throughout the novel. What does she want to be safe from? Does Rebecca ever feel safe?

7. While visiting Joe in Moscow, Rebecca has an epiphany: "My whole body was flooded with happiness . . . I thought that this was why we had come to Moscow, though we hadn't known it. We had come to be loosened from ourselves, to hear of griefs that were larger than our own, to be able to say those sweet words that so often stuck on our tongues." How does this change once Rebecca and Adam experience their own immense grief?

8. Discuss the differences between how Adam and Rebecca mourn for Ruby.

9. Though the title is Mourning Ruby, Ruby is not the only person mourned in this book. Who or what else is mourned? How does this impact other characters?

10. Who do you think Rebecca is speaking to at the end of the novel?
Mourning Ruby

published in 2003,
by Penguin
ISBN 0141015012

More than thirty years ago, a mother laid her newborn baby daughter in a shoebox and left it by the bins in the back yard of an Italian restaurant. Now that baby, Rebecca, is a mother herself, searching for her origins and a story that will make sense of her life. Mourning Ruby is hugely moving, strongly plotted novel, full of vitality and a brilliant wealth of story. It’s about memory and history, loss and mourning ... and how to cope if you are flying across the Atlantic in a plane when one of the engines fails ...
Your early novels, A Spell of Winter and Zennor in Darkness were historical novels, as was The Siege. Your Blue-Eyed Boy and With Your Crooked Heart are contemporary novels. Which sort of writing do you most enjoy?

I enjoy research; in fact research is so engaging that it would be easy to go on for years, and never write the novel at all. However, the difficulties and pleasures of the writing itself are similar for a novel with a historical setting and a novel with a contemporary setting, as far as I'm concerned.

Mourning Ruby is a very cleverly plotted novel, bringing together several different stories, and set both today and in the past. Can you tell us a bit about this sort of writing and its benefits?

Mourning Ruby is not a flat landscape: it is more like a box with pictures painted on every face. And each face is also a door which opens, I hope, to take the reader deep into the book. My aim is the same as that of Mr Damiano, a showman who employs Rebecca for much of the novel. He wants to create Dreamworlds. He believes in pleasure, and says that play is the best thing that human beings do. I agree with him on this. Sex is play, food is play, love is play; playing with our children is one of the most profound experiences many of us ever have. And writing fiction is also a form of play. I would like people to come into my Dreamworld and then choose to stay.

One of the themes in Mourning Ruby is the significance of personal and public history. How important do you think it is to be aware of one's own history?

I think it is vital. To try to expunge an individual's history is a terrible violation. It is a violation which has obsessed the tyrants of the twentieth century. They do not want simply to kill their opponents, but to liquidate them, to deny that they have ever existed. As individuals, we are shaped by story from the time of birth; we are formed by what we are told by our parents, our teachers, our intimates. George Santayana famously said that those who fail to understand the past are condemned to repeat it. Those who try to obliterate the past are injuring the present. Family story and public history make sense of an individual's place in the world. It may not, however, be a sense that anyone wants to hear.

You are also a children's author and poet. Do you think that either of these have influenced your writing of novels?

Yes, I think so. Writing children's books gives a writer a very strong sense of narrative drive. Children will not pretend to be enjoying books, and they will not read books because they have been told that these books are good. They are looking for delight. Poets go through a very tough apprenticeship in the use of words. Writing poetry makes you intensely conscious of how words sound, both aloud and inside the head of the reader. You learn the weight of words and how they sound to the ear. I have found this immensely valuable in writing prose, and especially in writing dialogue. You have to search for the voice of each character: the things that he or she could or could not have said, the distinctive rhythm of the voice.

You have used poetry in Mourning Ruby. Could you tell us why you decided to do this?

Many chapters are headed by poem quotations. These epigraphs are another way of shining light on what is happening at this stage of the novel. One poet, Osip Mandelstam, is a vital figure in Joe's imagination, and Joe introduces Rebecca to Mandelstam's work. (Mandelstam died in the Stalinist terror, and Joe is writing about Stalin.) I certainly hope that some readers of Mourning Ruby might want to go on and read poems by Mandelstam, if they don't already know his work.

You won the first Orange Prize for A Spell of Winter, you were shortlisted for both the Whitbread and the Orange again for The Siege. What do you think of the value of book prizes?
I am with Kingsley Amis on this one. He said that literary prizes are good if you win them. I would agree. I have also judged many literary prizes, and I'm very aware that no matter how disinterested the judges try to be, it is not an objective process.

Do you think of plot first and then themes or vice versa? How do ideas for fiction come to you, since your novels are so different from each other?

Often I begin with a scene. For example, when I began *Mourning Ruby*, I could see very clearly the shoebox in which Rebecca was laid. In fact every detail of that scene was clear: the smell of leather and cardboard and new baby, the gusts of cooking smell from the restaurant extractor fan, the thick, warm darkness and the lights shining out into the yard. When a scene is as sharp and powerful as this, and it won't go away, then I know that there is fiction in it.

combination of things in me. I'm a poet and I've read a lot of Russian poetry and can hear its sounds. Russian poetry is so important to an understanding of the culture. I have a love for the place and you have to feel deeply about a city to want to write about it. Some people find those long winters quite repellent but I find them fascinating, exhilarating even. But then to imagine going through that long winter without the heating, without the food, without the structure, with everything crumbling. There is a wealth of fascinating historical material available in terms of work written by historians, but also people's diaries, people's memoirs, peoples' own experiences. It's almost a question of where do I begin, there is so much. It's got to be a novel, so where's the narrative drive, where's the story? It was very difficult.

Was there a particular reason for having these characters, in this relationship, in *The Siege*?

I wanted a double story. The younger ones have grown up under Stalinism. They have to be pragmatic, they don't remember anything else; this is their only life, this is what they've got to live with, this is the material they've got and if they want to survive they have to accommodate to one degree or another. For the older characters there is the memory of all kinds of different pasts, of what the revolution could have been, of the twists and turns that led to Stalinism. There's the sense of loss that they may have betrayed themselves. They have stories that the younger generation don't know about. So, there is a double story and it partly consists of unearthing and unravelling what's happened in that older generation. And the young people, will they survive, will they have the physical, emotional and even the moral energy go through this siege? And, if so, what kind of life are they coming to? That was my intention for a double story and the stories echo one another.

Why are you so particularly attached to this episode of history?

It's a very emotional subject. Everybody I've talked to who's written the history of that kind of tragic time feels that there is something you're grappling with. You cannot fully grasp it, you try to grasp it, then there's the effort of trying to make a shape out of it. A novel, in the end, is a container, a shape which you are trying to pour your story into. After I'd finished I felt that I couldn't really abandon the place or the people; they still echo.

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MOURNING RUBY

By Helen Dunmore.

Putnam, $23.95.

Rebecca and Adam have lost their only child, 5-year-old Ruby. The psychological impact of her death on the couple is keenly portrayed, but it is Helen Dunmore's rendering of the physicality of their grief that makes "Mourning Ruby," her eighth novel, so gripping. Dunmore captures grief's insidiousness, its slow colonizing of the senses. Impressive, too, are the peripheral characters here, realized in a few deft strokes; best is Pascal, the warm, incisive friend who helps Adam cope with his loss. For Rebecca to heal -- she was abandoned by her mother at birth -- she must find some link to her parentage. It's too bad the devices Dunmore uses to accomplish this are contrived. Rebecca's friend Joe, a historian, writes a fictitious family history for her, a World War I-era romance involving her imagined great-grandmother. The second half of "Mourning Ruby" presents Joe's story. Interspersed letters from Joe to Rebecca help navigate this complex subnarrative; one welcomes the assistance while feeling a vague dissatisfaction with the artifice of it all. "Mourning Ruby" is worth reading for its first half alone, which evokes intimacy, grief and friendship with genuine grace. Kate Levin
In 1982 Lourdes is a 16-year-old "short, copper-skinned mulatta" who must leave her comfortable home in Havana for her four-month stint in the countryside at a government-ordered student work camp. At home, Lourdes loves Russian cartoons and plays with dolls, and once at camp, she feels younger than her friends, who sneak out in the evenings for steamy encounters with boyfriends. She's particularly overwhlemed when the object of her first passionate crush turns out to be her female bunkmate, the sexually precocious Aurora. While trying to sort out her feelings for Aurora, she masters "the gymnastics of necking" with her first boyfriend and begins to recognize the hypocrisies of communism (particularly when a corruption scheme is uncovered at camp), her father's philandering, and the racism within her family and around her. Written in Lourdes's vulnerable, believable voice, this moving first novel describes the particulars of living under Cuban communism while skillfully articulating "the pieces of a childhood inexorably left behind." —Kathleen Hayley

Henry Wears was once a hot Hollywood screenwriter, with a marriage, a pool, and a Jaguar. He was paid $250,000 for a screenplay that never made it to the screen. Now the marriage is over, the pool is gone, and the jaguar is rusting away. When a producer, who used to be a lover, meets him for lunch about a script idea, his star begins to rise again. Soon he's meeting with actors, fielding calls from producers, and writing a second screenplay on spec. This could be his second big break, if he can only stay focused and not lose his temper. The author, who is also a screenwriter, makes the business and the game-playing come alive. Although his behind-the-scenes revelations are almost too close for comfort, the average reader will dry his wet and easy style make the book a singular charm; however, it is the quirky characters and fast dialogue that really sell it. —Bettsie DiEne

Dietrich realistically re-creates the tumult and the confusion that characterized Rome's last-gasp attempt to retain its stronghold in Britannia as the empire faltered and began to crumble in the latter half of the fourth century. Built early in the second century, Hadrian's Wall was both an engineering and a military marvel. Eighty miles long, the impenetrable barrier separated Roman Britain from the barbaric Celtic tribes ever threatening the border. Passed over as commander of the Petrian Cavalry for purely political reasons, battle-hardened Galba Bassadis hatches a treacherous plot to disgrace Lucius Florius, the ambitious aristocrat sent to usurp him. When Marcus betroths, Valeria, a senator's daughter, arrives from Rome, Galba immediately begins to manipulate them both. However, Valeria proves more resourceful and resilient than Galba ever imagined. Kidnapped by a Celt employed by Galba, she falls in love with her captor, provoking a battle that signals the beginning of the end for both Hadrian's Wall and the mighty Roman Army in Britain. Page-turning historical fiction replete with action, adventure, and passion. —Margaret Flanagan

VAM: The action-packed plot will keep older teens reading, graphic violence. C3.

Gao Xingjian, winner of the 2000 Nobel Prize for literature, is a sensitive, micro-
Record: 1

Title: Helen Dunmore
Language: English
Source: Guide to Literary Masters and Their Works
Document Type: Author Biography

Authors Information:
Gender: Female
National Identity: England; United Kingdom

Publication Information:
Salem Press, Inc.

Abstract:
Dunmore became well known as a poet, children's writer, and adult novelist. She established herself as one of the most accomplished contemporary writers in England.

Literary Genres/Subgenres:
Long Fiction; Poetry
Romance; Children's Literature

Document Information:
Essay by Bethany D. Cox

Accession Number: MOL9790302207

Database: Literary Reference Center

Author: Helen Dunmore
Born: December 12, 1952; Yorkshire, England

Principal works:
long fiction
Zennor in Darkness, 1993
Burning Bright, 1994
A Spell of Winter, 1995
Talking to the Dead, 1996
Your Blue-Eyed Boy, 1998
With Your Crooked Heart, 1999
The Siege, 2001
Mourning Ruby, 2003
The Seal Cove, 2004

children's literature
Going to Egypt, 1992
In the Money, 1993
Recovering a Body, 1994
Allie's Apples, 1995  
Amina's Blanket, 1996  
Fatal Error, 1996  
Bestiary, 1997  
Clyde's Leopard, 1998  
Great-Grandma's Dancing Dress, 1998  
Allie's Rabbit, 1999  
Brother, Brother, Sister, Sister, 1999  
Aliens Don't Eat Bacon Sandwiches, 2000  
Allie Away, 2000  
The Zillah Rebellion, 2001  
The Silver Bead, 2003  
The Lilac Tree, 2004

poetry
The Apple Fall, 1983  
The Sea Skater, 1986  
The Raw Garden, 1988  
Secrets, 1994  
Snollygoster, and Other Poems, 2001 (children's poetry)

short fiction
Love of Fat Men, 1997  
Ice Cream, 2000

Helen Dunmore was one of four children born to parents who both benefitted from higher education and promoted intellectual values in their home. She had an interest in poetry as a child, and began to memorize poems and write sonnets at the age of eight. By the time she was ten, Dunmore was set on becoming a writer. She studied English and related literature at York University and graduated in 1973. Afterwards, she went to Finland to teach English as a foreign language for two years, and she remained there until 1975. She wrote poetry while in Finland and had some of it published in literary magazines upon her return to England. During the 1980’s and 1990’s, Dunmore continued to write and also held writing workshops, gave readings at literary festivals, and taught at both a university and lower-school level. She was a teacher of poetry and creative writing for the Arvon Foundation and also took part in the Poetry Society's Writer in Schools program. Her university teaching jobs included position at the University of Glamorgan, the University of Bristol, and the Open College of the Arts.

Dunmore married in 1980, gaining a stepson, and had her first child in 1981. She easily combined motherhood with her writing all throughout the 1980’s. Her second child, a daughter, was born when Dunmore was forty-one years old. Dunmore's first non-poetry publication was a children's book, Going to Egypt; it was followed by an adult novel, Zennor in Darkness, which earned her the McKitterick Prize in 1994. Dunmore also received the Signal Poetry Award in 1995 for Secrets and the Orange Prize for Fiction for A Spell of Winter in 1996. She was short-listed for the T.S. Eliot Prize for Bestiary and the Whitbread Novel Award for The Siege. Dunmore was honored with the Orange Prize for Fiction for The Siege in 2002. She was
also made a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. Her publication of many novels, several short stories, and countless poems proved Dunmore to be a very successful writer with diverse talents. She became internationally known, and her work was translated into many languages and was sold in France, Scandinavia, and Germany.

*Essay by:* Bethany D. Cox

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‘Pinocchet will die despleased and live in Infamy. This book, on the other hand, will stand as a classic’ - Susan George  

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CHILDHOOD ELEGY  
Helen Dunmore’s preoccupation with time lost reaches its climax with this exploration of bereavement. But the horror is too much to bear, writes AMANDA CRAIG

Fiction  
Helen Dunmore’s Mourning Ruby  
Viking, 310 pp, £16.99

To turn the death of a child into the subject of a novel takes courage, at least for a literary novelist. The abduction, rape or murder of children is a staple in crime fiction: so for a child to die as a result of running into a road, as happens in Mourning Ruby, would barely cause most readers’ hearts to miss a beat.

Rebecca, the narrator, was herself deprived of both father and mother, having been found in a shoebox outside an
Italian restaurant. Her story begins with a wry humour more suggestive of the picaresque than what follows. One likes her immediately—for not turning out the way her adoptive parents hope, for her fantasies about pickpockets on the Tube, for mistrusting sensitive people: “In my experience what they are chiefly sensitive to is themselves. My adoptive mother had nerves as rare as orchids.” (Dunmore, who is also a poet, excels at this kind of metaphor—inspired, if you think how orchids’ roots resemble ganglia.)

Even so, a shadow lies over the comedy. By the time Rebecca survives an emergency plane landing and sees her child Ruby in the second of touchdown, you know this is going to be a tale of unbearable tragedy. It does not, however, unfold quite as you might expect.

Dunmore has successfully carried her readership through the horrors of incest, murder and war by means of prose and plot-lines as taut as hausers. Her preoccupation with time lost reaches a climax in this exploration of bereavement. Where past and present have overlapped in previous novels, as in Talking to the Dead, there has been a conventional narrative to follow, with surprises and twists arising out of a mastery of technique. Mourning Ruby is constructed differently. Not only does Rebecca’s story jump about from past to present, sometimes within the space of a paragraph, but her tale contains other, smaller stories, like a Russian doll.

Rebecca has a best friend, Joe, who introduces her to her future husband, Adam. Joe is obsessed by Stalin and by Stalin’s wife, Nadezhda Alliluyeva, and part of the novel revolves around the question of whether it was suicide or murder that left Nadezhda’s children motherless. Ultimately, Rebecca’s story dissolves into a novel that Joe has begun to write, about a prostitute and a pilot in the First World War. (This is so good that you can’t help hoping it will be the springboard for the real thing next time.) “You take a flight inside yourself when reality becomes unbearable,” as Joe says, and the novel enacts Rebecca’s state of fugue.

This becomes hard work, despite the quality of the writing and the author’s humane insights. Dunmore is, I think, the most gifted novelist of her generation, and consistently pushes herself to new challenges—most impressively in her last novel, The Siege, which fused the personal and the political in its account of the siege of Leningrad. Here, the historical dimension feels extraneous to the intimacy and horror of the book’s central theme, which is the passion and fragility of the bond between mother and child. Everything centres on this, from Adam’s job as a paediatrician to the novel that Joe writes. Florence, the young unmarried mother in Joe’s novel, becomes a prostitute in order to survive with her daughter. It becomes too obsessive, and all too much.

Grief and anger drive a wedge between Rebecca and Adam for three years, even though there is hope that, by coming together to mourn their dead daughter, they will have a future together. The small

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Dunmore is the most gifted novelist of her generation

Joys of having a child, the total immersion of the self in love, are sensitively described. Yet there is a darker side to parenting that makes this a less credible novel than Talking to the Dead, with its sinuous and sinister revelation of sibling jealousy. Overwhelming love brings with it a fear of harm so intense that parents often fantasise about their child’s death as a release. For all the nauseating sentiment surrounding Little Nell, Dickens understood this; here, Dunmore evades it.

Because the novel focuses only on the beauty and charm of a young child, and the devastation of the bereaved parents, none of the characters steps into full moral life. Although Dunmore began her career portraying flawed, richly sexual beings, her characters have become increasingly “good” people in terrible situations arising from external rather than internal forces. Mourning Ruby is never less than accomplished and formally inventive, but one needs more than this, and horror, to achieve a work of art.

Amanda Craig’s new novel, Love in Idleness, is published by Little, Brown
Dunmore, Helen
MOURNING RUBY
Putnam (288 pp.)
$23.95
Mar. 2004
ISBN: 0-399-15148-6

Award-winning British novelist Dunmore (Ice Cream, 2003, etc.) tracks the rollercoaster ride of a woman from nothingness to identity, a journey she is fated to repeat.

In 1965, newborn Rebecca's mother abandons her in a shoebox behind an Italian restaurant. To help find her before the rats, and she is passed on to adoptive parents who feed her but forget to Haunted by the void in her past, Rebecca must wait until she is grown to find salvation in two who's writing a book about Stalin's second wife that eventually becomes a bestseller, is her roommate, the brother she has never had. His equally attentive friend Adam, a doctor whose premature babies, becomes Rebecca's husband, and her adult identity is complete when she gives Ruby. Life is wonderful until five-year-old Ruby dies in a car accident and Rebecca regresses to

of nothing." She and Adam separate, but she encounters a third unconventional savior, Mr. Di circus impresario turned hotelier who places absolute trust in her abilities as his personal.Meanwhile, Joe, who has never forgotten Rebecca's need for ancestors, is writing a story to fixation on that wretched shoebox. In his work-in-progress, set in France in 1917, single mother vows never to abandon her daughter, even if it means working in a brothel close to the front. Joe both echo chamber and harbinger: Florence shields her child from hostile aircraft just as Rebecca dreamed of shielding Ruby from traffic, while the brothel's attic bedroom will find its counterpart in bedroom that reunites Adam and Rebecca.

The layered narrative somewhat muffles the impact of Rebecca's emotional death and rel Dunmore's eighth novel still offers plenty of incidental pleasures. (Agent: Caradoc King)

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Accession Number: 11597140
Fiction

MOURNING RUBY
Helen Dunmore. Putnam, $23.95 (288p)
ISBN 0-399-15148-6

When Rebecca, the narrator of most of Dunmore's fine, almost unbearably sad eighth novel (after Ice Cream), shares a flat with Joe in London, she begins to enjoy the pleasures of friendship and far the first time in her life: she was abandoned as a baby and adopted by a couple remarkably unsual parenting. Joe, a historian interested in Stalin, introduces her to simple pleasures and shows he loneliness need not be permanent. And it's through Joe that she meets Adam, a neonatologist becomes her husband and the father of their daughter, Ruby ("For the first time, I was tied to some blood"). Given the book's title, Ruby's death is no surprise (though it's still heartbreaking without melodramatic), and Dunmore plumbs the consequences of loss: How does one mourn, and then accep unacceptable? Numbef by Ruby's death, Rebecca drifts away from Adam, finding diversion in a job assistant to a hotelier, Mr. Damiano; Adam buries himself in his work with premature babies. Ambiti Dunmore complements this tragic narrative with two other stories, one autobiographical, told t Damiano, about growing up in a circus where his parents were trapeze artists, and one told by Joe, e of fiction set during WWI about a man and a woman who could be his and Rebecca's ancestors. Reb own story isn't told linearly, so these narrative asides aren't as distracting as they sound. And the critical to the author's main theme: that narrative is a key to understanding and to acceptance. This rare novel, an intensely emotional, fiercely intelligent story, fiction with the power to offer rede
t Author tour. (Mar.)

FYI: Dunmore has won Britain's Orange Prize for Fiction.

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Fiction

Dresler, Mylene. *The Frontiers*. Putnam, Apr. 2004. c.250p. ISBN 0-399-16163-X. $26.95. A wounded seabound spirit hangs helplessly at sea, but the Gulf Coast's historic house, the Texas Golf Club, has connections to his stepmother's request to visit his aging playmate, whose life has largely focused on his heart medication prescribed by his stepmother, Sarah, and her husband, Dick, inside a fried and Southernly home. The interaction is intimate, involving a documentary of the life and distinguished writing career of Papa Boud. Under the bright lights of the cameras, the family's secrets are shared and relationships tested. A third novel, *Drew* (Little, Brown, 2001), delivered a well-intentioned mix of compelling characters and plot, but the focus was narrower, and the plotting more obvious.

Dunn, Helen. *Mourning Ruby*. Pitman, Mar. 2004. c.280p. ISBN 0-399-15456-5. $25.95. Part of the growing trend in literary fiction is the story of one person's life and its family. But for Rebecca there is no story. She was abandoned as a baby in a box, and later adopted by a couple who really wanted a boy. When she grows up, she tries to create her own story. An adoption system that works, and at the same time, creates a sudden desire to be a mother. The problem is that Charles lives all the way across the country. To make matters worse, her agency has been taken over by a larger one, aptly named Big. Award-winning writer Dunn uses her insider's knowledge to tell the story of a baby sitting in the sun with her parents. Activities like reading to dogs, acting as a pressure point at photo shoots, and publicly handling stars just out of rehab make her too busy for a love life. But when she meets Charles, a partner in her agency, she suddenly craves to specialize. The question is whether Dunn can make her the focus of her novel, or whether she will end up writing a story about her own life.

Gillison, Samantha. *The King of America*. Random, Mar. 2004. c.224p. ISBN 0-312-50014-9. $24.95. Despite his youth, rambling by the writing of anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, Stephen Hesse finds meaning in a college teacher's plans for an expedition to New Guinea. Stephen's father, the wealthy governor of New York, agrees to finance the expedition. As a participant, Stephen is responsible for collecting the native art. Headstrong and hoping to impress a collection that will impress his father, Stephen's only warning is not understanding his mission. When his vessel is stranded, he ignores the caution of his companion and this sets him on a search for his ship. This novel has beautiful prose describing the natural splendor of New Guinea and its precious artifacts and its people. The story is an exciting adventure and well worth the read. The story is an exciting adventure and well worth the read.

Graver, Elizabeth. *Awake*. Holt, Apr. 2004. c.210p. ISBN 0-684-82013-7. $24.95. Neither myth nor romance, this is a story of love, death, and a puzzle at its center. In 1923, Harvard student Martin Finch is struggling to keep his finances afloat when he stumbles upon the opportunity of a lifetime: a chance to buy the painting of a young girl's face, which has been identified as the subject of a famous portrait. With the painting in his possession, Martin is able to solve the mystery of its origin and its true value. An unlikely hero, Martin Finch is the perfect candidate to solve the mystery of the painting, and his work is highlighted by the vivid depiction of the painting itself. The novel is a thrilling adventure and well worth the read.
Multi-story structure

Section: READING GROUP REPORT: WPRM HOLES BOOKSHOP

Worm Holes Bookshop reading group found Helen Dunmore's Mourning Ruby too open interpretation.

Jo Dodd of Worm Holes says: "This was an interesting one — it got an overall score of 5.5, achieving a consensus among us. At the beginning people scored it higher, but by the end, it came down. On had discussed it, everybody appreciated more the complexities of the book. It wasn't the type of book could take on holiday — it was a hard read, and heavy, not uplifting.

It is a story of love, aeroplanes and the tangled webs of life, about how our lives have patterns as they weave together. The principal story is about Rebecca, Joe and Adam. Joe leaves and lets Rebecca and so Adam and Rebecca together have a child, Ruby.

The tragedy at the heart of the book is when Ruby is killed in a car accident. She's running down a street to greet her mother, but there's a road between them and a car comes — it's such an everyday thing. Other stories are woven around this one, but the book is tangled and obscure.

One woman in the group suggested there was a theme around the idea of a fugue — meaning a musical term describing a tumult of sounds and a psychological state. There was also the story of Susan's fugue, or flight, as well as other flights throughout the book.

Joe tells the story of Stalin to Rebecca, and also gives her a story. He challenges Rebecca's own story being left by her mother in a shoebox. The book looks at how life is what you decide are the key even

There's also the story of Mr Damiano, his sister Bella, and Dream-world, which is dotted through the book — too much so for us.

And then the story of Florence and Will, a First World War romance, which Joe gives to Rebecca. Joe's very ephemeral character — we couldn't understand why he tells Rebecca this story. At times, I wasn't confuing about what is a story and what's reality.

It was not such an easy book to go with and enjoy, because some of the stories don't come to a conclusion. Some strands do, but some don't, which diluted the group's enjoyment. It is a good book to re-read and to take apart — it has complexity to its structure and form.

Flight was used as a metaphor for life and death. Mr Damiano's father is a trapeze artist; Will is a pilot; Rebecca has a key moment on a plane in an emergency landing.

The reader is left wondering if Rebecca and Adam are going to be happy and put the pieces back together. It may not happen in real life, but if it doesn't in a book you feel cheated.

We felt our intellect was challenged by this one. The quality of the writing would justify a score of eight out of ten on pure enjoyment, we just weren't getting there. It doesn't give the reader much closure. We we
feeling, 'oh'."

PHOTO (COLOR): Penguin Books
PHOTO (COLOR)

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By Liz Bury

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Childhood elegy: Helen Dunmore's preoccupation with time lost reaches its climax in this exploration of bereavement. But the horror is too much to bear. (Mourning Ruby) (Book Review) Craig, Amanda.


Mourning Ruby

Viking, 310pp, 16.99 [pounds sterling]

To turn the death of a child into the subject of a novel takes courage, at least for a literary novelist. The abduction, rape or murder of children is a staple in crime fiction: so for a child to die as a result of running into a road, as happens in Mourning Ruby, would barely cause most readers' hearts to miss a beat.

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Rebecca has a best friend, Joe, who introduces her to her future husband, Adam. Joe is obsessed by Stalin and by Stalin's wife, Nadezhda Alliluyeva, and part of the novel revolves around the question of whether it was suicide or murder that left Nadezhda's children motherless. Ultimately, Rebecca's story dissolves into a novel that Joe has begun to write, about a prostitute and a pilot in the First World War. (This is so good that you can't help hoping it will be the springboard for the real thing next time.) "You take a flight inside yourself when reality
becomes unbearable," as Joe says, and the novel enacts Rebecca's state of fugue.

This becomes hard work, despite the quality of the writing and the author's humane insights. Dunmore is, I think, the most gifted novelist of her generation, and consistently pushes herself to new challenges—most impressively in her last novel, The Siege, which fused the personal and the political in its account of the siege of Leningrad. Here, the historical dimension feels extraneous to the intimacy and horror of the book's central theme, which is the passion and fragility of the bond between mother and child. Everything centres on this, from Adam's job as a paediatrician to the novel that Joe writes. Florence, the young unmarried mother in Joe's novel, becomes a prostitute in order to survive with her daughter. It becomes too obsessive, and all too much.

Grief and anger drive a wedge between Rebecca and Adam for three years, even though there is hope that, by coming together to mourn their dead daughter, they will have a future together. The small joys of having a child, the total immersion of the self in love, are sensitively described. Yet there is a darker side to parenting that makes this a less credible novel than Talking to the Dead, with its sinuous and sinister revelation of sibling jealousy. Overwhelming love brings with it a fear of harm so intense that parents often fantasise about their child's death as a release. For all the nauseating sentiment surrounding Little Neil, Dickens understood this; here, Dunmore evades it.

Because the novel focuses only on the beauty and charm of a young child, and the devastation of the bereaved parents, none of the characters steps into full moral life. Although Dunmore began her career portraying flawed, richly sexual beings, her characters have become increasingly "good" people in terrible situations arising from external rather than internal forces. Mourning Ruby is never less than accomplished and formally inventive, but one needs more than this, and horror, to achieve a work of art.

Amanda Craig's new novel, Love in Idleness, is published by Little, Brown

Document Number: A110024670
REBECCA, the narrator of Helen Dunmore's excellent new novel, is an orphan, abandoned by her mother and left in a shoebox outside an Italian restaurant. As a young adult she shares a flat with Joe, a brilliant young historian, but falls in love with a friend of his, a neonatologist called Adam. Rebecca and Adam marry and have a baby girl, Ruby. But when Ruby is four, she is killed in an accident. Rebecca is inconsolable. The marriage falls apart and she separates from Adam. After months of despair, she slowly gets back on her feet, taking a job as PA to a luxury-hotels tycoon.

Events are not related in order. Ruby's death is signalled in the first few pages but is not described until more than halfway through the novel. Ms Dunmore's toing and froing between past and present is artfully done and greatly enriches the central story of the death of a child and a parent's grief. There are lovely passages about Adam's hospital work with other people's children, for instance, and about Rebecca's work for Mr Damiano, the hotelier, which chime in unexpected ways with the novel's main themes of love and loss. Ms Dunmore's beautifully measured, unostentatious prose conveys terrible shudders of feeling. She is a marvellous writer and "Mourning Ruby", despite its occasional longueurs, is a real gem.

Mourning Ruby.

By Helen Dunmore.

Document Number: A108759094
Helen Dunmore

Birth: 1952 in Yorkshire, England
Nationality: British
Occupation: Writer, Poet
Updated: 01/13/2005

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BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

Since her first collection of poems, The Apple Fall, appeared in 1983, Helen Dunmore has proved herself a prolific and versatile writer, publishing novels and children's verse as well as further volumes of poetry. The Apple Fall introduced a poet who, at thirty-one, was already clearly in possession of her own intense, humane, and individual voice. Dunmore's sensitivities respond acutely to a broad spectrum of concerns that runs from the political to the domestic, from the abstract to the anecdotal. Themes as diverse as recollections of Proust, Berlin in the last days of the wall, the development of a baby within her own body, or a man waiting for a heart operation all engage her creativity. More than most, perhaps, Dunmore's is a world in which sensation plays a central role:

It's not that I'm afraid,
but that I'm still gathering
the echoes of my five senses--

how far they've come with me, how far
they want to go on.

Dunmore frequently writes from a perspective that reverses the stereotypical viewpoint. A poem about a child escaping from bed to interrupt the adults watching television presents the writing of poetry as a mundane activity when contrasted with the child's exploration of its dreamworld:

... the nightly row of the typewriter
and piles of discontented paper by the table.
I make poetry common as floor washing

but still you wade in, thigh-deep in dreams
at nine-thirty, while we are doped
on one sofa, numb to excellent acting.

In The Raw Garden (1988) Dunmore aimed at producing an elaborately structured, thematically linked work. The poems discuss perceived ideas of the natural and unnatural in the context of landscape and, in her own words, are "intended to speak to, through, and even over each other." Wide, occasionally surreal leaps of the
imagination come to Dunmore with sometimes disconcerting ease. There can be an almost cinematic abruptness to her changes of focus, though the technique often produces images of startling power. In "Permafrost" a close-up of "frozen things / snowdrops and Christmas roses" pulls back to "nuclear snowsuits bouncing on dust" and then

... moon-men lost on the moon
watching the earth's green flush
tremble and perish.

Recovering a Body (1984) is built around another community of concerns, this time those related directly to the body: "Sexuality, aging, death, reproduction." The title poem fantasizes about a woman waking in the morning to find her body gone and then recounts the various stratagems she employs to retrieve it. This poem and many of its companion pieces are a striking demonstration of Dunmore's sensitivity to nuance and her insight into these vital areas of human feeling. The shorter poems in particular convey intense emotion in language that eschews rhetoric in favor of economy and precision:

meet me where the fire
lights the bayou

watch my sweat shine
as I play for you.

It is for you I play
my voice leaping the flames,

if you don't come
I am nothing.

Dunmore is generally at her best when working on a relatively miniature scale. The creative territory she occupies is one of markedly fluid boundaries, and it may be because of this that her longer poems, with their sometimes unwieldy structures, can seem too improvisatory and discursive for their own good.

UPDATES

January 11, 2005: Dunmore's novel The Siege was chosen for the third annual Great Reading Adventure in Bristol, England; 4500 copies of the book were donated by the publisher to schools, libraries, and businesses to promote the event. Source: Guardian, http://books.guardian.co.uk, January 11, 2005.

PERSONAL INFORMATION


Biography Resource Center

Helen Dunmore

1952-

Source: Contemporary Authors Online, Gale, 2003.
Entry Updated: 11/11/2003

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"Sidelights"

Helen Dunmore is an award-winning English author with diverse talents and credits; she has published poetry collections, adult novels, and fiction for children. Dunmore's first novel published in the United States is the gothic Talking to the Dead, a Freudian tale of two sisters who share a haunted past. "The book's prelude," pointed out a Publishers Weekly critic, is "a searing prose poem so evocative that it renders almost palpable the yew-scent of a sizzling hot summer graveyard." Isabel, the beautiful, older sister, gives birth to a son, nearly dies during childbirth, and, as a result, must undergo a hysterectomy. Nina, a London-based photographer who narrates the story, then travels to the country to stay with Isabel and her husband, Richard, in their secluded farmhouse home with a walled garden Isabel lovingly nurtures. After her child's birth, Isabel seems more fragile and remote than ever. The now-barren Isabel abandons her garden and slowly spirals into madness, leaving Nina to tend to her once-beloved apple trees. The interactions of others in the house—the nanny, Isabel's gay confidante, her husband, and the baby—all bring into sharper focus the sisters' relationship. Beneath their seeming closeness and easy intimacy lie hidden layers of duplicity, jealousy, and cruelty, not least of which is Nina's luring of her brother-in-law, Richard, into a torrid sexual affair. Nina begins remembering long-buried, disturbing memories of the apparent crib death of Colin, their infant brother, some twenty-five years ago, and the tragic event's devastating consequences.

Carmela Ciuraru wrote in Entertainment Weekly, "Truth proves slippery in his startling novel—you'll find yourself anxious right up to its bitter, heartbreaking conclusion." In Booklist, GraceAnne DeCandido found Dunmore to be "pitiless in her exposure of her characters..." and, consequently, "none of them inspire sympathy." Despite her cautions, DeCandido said, "Dunmore is a very deeply sensual writer: heat and shimmer, food and water, texture and scent are beautifully realized." And in a People Weekly review, Paula Chin declared the novel "sensual, delectable and chilling... The prose is limpid—the descriptions of food are voluptuous, the sex scenes urgent and raw—and Dunmore's plotting is masterful."

Your Blue-Eyed Boy, Dunmore's 1998 book, begins with thirty-eight-year-old Simone, a mother of two young boys who is struggling to keep her family financially solvent. Her fragile existence is further undermined by recurring memories of a childhood trauma. She has recently accepted a position as district judge in their remote seaside village in her native England, not out of a desire to explore career opportunities, but in sheer

desperation to keep the family out of bankruptcy, while her husband, unemployed and emotionally on the verge of ruin, cares for their sons. But her already stressful life suddenly takes a turn for the worse when Michael, an American Vietnam veteran with whom Simone had a sexual relationship some two decades ago when she was eighteen and spending the summer in the New England resort town of Annasett, sends her a very intense letter that includes nude photos of the two of them together. His contacts escalate from letters to telephone calls; then he arrives in her village, eager to renew his obsessive fantasy relationship with Simone, whom he has nurtured in memory as his one true love during the past twenty years, part of which he spent in a mental hospital. Although he claims he just wants her to return to America with him, Simone fears that Michael intends to blackmail her with the nude photos taken by his war buddy, Calvin, whom she recalls as a constantly intrusive and disturbing presence in their relationship.

A Publishers Weekly reviewer noted how "The novel's marsh-country setting, where bogs can swallow people whole, is a fearsome metaphor for a life abundant with insecurity and tension." In a Library Journal review of Your Blue-Eyed Boy, Caroline M. Hallworth stated, "Dunmore's writing is adept and her plot solid, if somewhat predictable. However, Simone never emerges as a truly sympathetic character." Booklist critic Vanessa Bush noted, "Dunmore has written a compelling novel about reconciling desires of the past with responsibilities of the present."

Louise, the antiheroine of With Your Crooked Heart, is a spoiled, rich, beautiful woman, who, after ten years of unsuccessfully trying, is finally pregnant. She is married to Paul, a wealthy and ruthless real-estate developer who has made his fortune converting dilapidated buildings into luxury apartments and selling contaminated land. Paul is indulgent to the extreme with both his wife and Johnnie, his younger—by some ten years—far more handsome and charismatic, hoodlum brother. While Paul has escaped the mean streets of their poverty-stricken childhood, Johnnie fouls up every opportunity presented to him by his doting elder sibling, while consorting with petty criminals and drug dealers and involving himself in crime and cocaine deals. However, Louise's seemingly idyllic life conceals a dark secret—the baby she is carrying was fathered by Johnnie in a latenight tryst in a squalid city park.

The book quickly jumps forward by a decade. Louise is fat, alcoholic, and divorced. Paul has secured custody of ten-year-old Anna, and has retreated, along with the icy, horse riding-obsessed Sonia, to a mansion in Yorkshire, making it nearly impossible for Louise to exercise her visitation rights. Young Anna finds it difficult to fit in at her new school; she is, for the most part, distrusted and rejected by her country classmates who resent her wealth and "airs". Sonia's maternal mode seems to be patterned on the fairy-tale archetype of wicked stepmother. Anna's savior, of sorts, is her gentlemanly classmate and best friend, David Olierenshaw, with whom she saves an orphaned kitten, a nurturing act that serves to help keep her mind off her own troubles. Paul's shocking act of cruelty to Charlie Sullivan, an aging crook who had been responsible for Paul's first big break, backfires and brings retribution in the form of contracted thugs who target Johnnie and Louise, who then flee to Harwich. Concurrently, little Anna, accompanied by her friend David, runs away from home and heads south towards her mother's home, not realizing Louise is running for her life. Tragedy ensues in the denouement. Noting the "chicanery" and "betrayal" performed by the characters throughout the story, Dana Kennedy wrote in the New York Times Book Review that "there's no real light in this twisting, sensually written tale." A Publishers Weekly reviewer enjoyed the author's "sharp, elegant prose," and "Dunmore's eye for contemporary detail and her light, sensuous prose."

PERSONAL INFORMATION


AWARDS

Alice Hunt Bartlett award, 1987, for The Sea Skater; Mckitterick Prize, 1994, for Zennor in Darkness; Signal Poetry Award, 1995, for Secrets; Orange Prize for Fiction, 1996, for A Spell of Winter; shortlisted for T. S. Eliot prize, for Bestiary; shortlisted for Whitbread Novel Award, 2001, and Orange Prize for Fiction, 2002, both for The Siege; Cardiff International Poetry Prize.
CAREER

Writer. Has worked as reader, performer and, teacher of poetry and creative writing. Past associations with Arvon Foundation and the Poetry Society's Writer in Schools scheme; instructor at University of Glamorgan, University of Bristol's Continuing Education Department, Open College of the Arts. Contributes to arts programs on BBC Radio.

WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

POETRY

- The Apple Fall, Bloodaxe (Newcastle upon Tyne, England), 1983.
- The Sea Skater, Bloodaxe, 1986.
- Snollygoster and Other Poems (for children), Scholastic, 2001.

FICTION

- Going to Egypt, MacRae (London), 1992.
- In the Money (for children), Red Fox (London), 1993.
- Go Fox!, Young Corgi, 1996.
• *Fatal Error*, Yearling, 1996.

• *Talking to the Dead*, Little, Brown (Boston, MA), 1996.


• *Allie’s Rabbit*, Mammoth, 1999.

• *Brother, Brother, Sister, Sister* (for adolescents), Scholastic, 1999.


• *Zillah and Me*, Scholastic, 2000.


• *The Zillah Rebellion* (for adolescents), 2001.


• *The Lilac Tree*, 2004.

**OTHER**

• (With others) *Poetry Quartet 5* (audio), Bloodaxe Books 1999.

Contributor of reviews to *Times* and *Observer*.

**MEDIA ADAPTATIONS**
Burning Bright was serialized on BBC Radio's Woman's Hour. Zennor in Darkness has been optioned for film.

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

PERIODICALS


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SOURCE CITATION


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