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Jacqueline Winspear

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Maisie Dobbs isn't just any young housemaid. Through her own natural intelligence—and the patronage of her benevolent employers—she works her way into college at Cambridge. When World War I breaks out, Maisie goes to the front as a nurse. It is there that she learns that coincidences are meaningful and the truth elusive. After the War, Maisie sets up on her own as a private investigator. But her very first assignment, seemingly an ordinary infidelity case, soon reveals a much deeper, darker web of secrets, which will force Maisie to revisit the horrors of the Great War and the love she left behind.

Maisie Dobbs Details

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From Reader Review Maisie Dobbs for online ebook

Carol. says

Is there anything more controversial at Goodreads than star rating? I think not (and yes, I think it's more controversial than porn or V-blogs). People have opinions on whether or not one should star books that weren't finished, whether one can star unread books by authors they don't like--or even do like--and then there are those that will actually argue a reviewer's rating based on the reviewer's interpretation, the infamous 'you read it wrong' offense.

Here I am, deciding to stretch my reading boundaries a little by giving Miss Maisie Dobbs a try: I enjoy mysteries, I love a good female lead and--hey--I'm a nurse, so why not? Well, because I am generally bored by historical fiction. But you know--stretch, right? I discovered Maisie Dobbs was both better and worse than I expected. Better, because I generally enjoyed it until the 'worse' part--a deep immersion into Maisie's past from ages thirteen to twenty-ish.

Remember how I mentioned recently that there is a shortage of niceness? Not in Maisie's world. Maisie is Little Women, Nancy Drew and the intuition of Claire DeWitt wrapped up into one self-assured bottle of plucky, industrious kindness. Maisie has a benefactor who has encouraged her to set up a little detective shop, and so she rents a room and makes friends with Billy, veteran and odd-jobsman. A man makes an appointment to ask M. Dobbs to discover if his wife is cheating on him, and much like Claire DeWitt, Maisie tells him that she may not like the answers she finds--and so he must trust her to do what's right. Maisie gets close to the wife, discovers the mystery of her visiting the grave of a recently deceased veteran, and uses her skills to 'accidentally' encounter the wife and forge a connection. She discovers the mystery of the veterans' home for the disfigured, coincidentally the same place her benefactor's son is planning to retreat to. Before too much more progress is made, we journey back to Maisie's youth when she first encountered her benefactor.

So here's the deal: I actually liked the absolutely tropey Maisie--intelligent, book-smart, industrious, honest, and attractive--who, much like Nancy Drew, is practically perfect as well as the apple of her daddy's eye. I was vaguely interested in the obvious non-mystery, a home for disfigured veterans where men are mysteriously dying. The writing is decent, with solid character-building. But the transition to the past was awkward and continued for far, far too long to maintain any sense of suspense (perhaps helping the reader forget the solution?) and basically had little to do with anything except to build character background and show Maisie's own role in the war. I almost quit; I loaned the book to my mom in the meantime, until self-flagellation led me to finishing. It remained rather boring, in an insipid, historically romantic kind of way, using one of my absolute, very least favorite excuses for a criminal behavior and laughable denouement (and not in a good way). There was a bonus character twist that really made little to no sense.

On my personal scale of enjoyment, it was a solid 'meh'--I'm just not interested in historical fiction as a rule, so you have to be an *ah-maz-ing* writer for me to enjoy it (hello, Connie Willis!). In my world, it's about two stars for enjoyment, veering uncomfortably close to a Did Not Finish. Yet the writing skill--if not plotting--is actually much higher. On the niceness scale, it's a solid five, and on the Mom's Scale, it was good enough to warrant checking out the next book from the library. I might even skim the next one, to see if Winspear learned some plotting. So there you go: unrated because of niceness.

Jennifer says

I really enjoyed this first book in Winspear's mystery series. Maisie Dobbs is a very intriguing and sympathetic heroine full of admirable traits.

At age 13, after her mother's death, her father sends her to be a servant in the home of a kindly aristocratic family. The family sees much promise in the smart Maisie and offers to fund her education. WWI breaks out and Maisie feels called to volunteer. She goes to France as a nurse and her experiences impact her in a way that changes her life forever. When she arrives home after the war, Maisie continues her education and ultimately opens a private investigation firm. One of her first jobs appears to be a routine infidelity case but ends up being much more and causes Maisie to revisit many of her traumatic memories of the Great War.

The mystery and plot are excellently written and exciting. I like the way that the author weaves in history and flashbacks to bring interest to the plot. I am a big fan of the WWI time period, as well. Winspear's strength lies in her characters...right up my alley!

Sherry says

I love this book. I listened to the audiobook. It's beautifully done. I am going right into book 2. I'm already attached to the characters.

Diane says

This is a story about a cute, clever, and plucky young woman named Maisie Dobbs. Maisie is setting up her own private investigation practice in London. The year is 1929, and everyone we meet is still coping with the effects of the world war, including Maisie.

Maisie has a cute and charming way of talking with people and getting them to share their stories. Her first client is a man who thinks his wife is cheating on him. Maisie follows the woman, befriends her and learns her sad tale about a loved one who was wounded in the war. Later, the man died of suspicious circumstances, so Maisie investigates a farm called The Retreat, using her charm and wits to get an inside look.

The middle section of the book is a flashback to how Maisie got to be so plucky and sweet and charming. Her mother died at a young age, and Maisie had to go into service to help her father pay the bills. Luckily, Maisie's master was a kind woman who observed the girl's cleverness, and encouraged her to study and take lessons from a tutor. Eventually, Maisie earned the chance to go to college, although the war intervened. In the end, Maisie shares her own sad story of what happened to her during the war.

Did I mention that Maisie is cute and charming and sweet and plucky and charming?

A few friends recommended this book to me, knowing how much I enjoy charming British novels. But an odd thing happened — I thought this novel was TOO charming and precious. Maisie was TOO cute and plucky. The story was TOO predictable and bittersweet.

I felt like the author was hitting me over the head with a pile of those big books that Maisie liked to study in order to emphasize how cute and plucky she was.

This book is the first in a series about Maisie, and I'm not sure if I will read any more. I'm glad I finally checked out this one to see what the fuss was about, but my curiosity has been satisfied.

Allison says

Maisie Dobbs starts out in the late 1920s, with Maisie just setting up her investigation business. It gets into the first real case, then takes a significant detour into the past to give Maisie's backstory - I'd say probably half the book shows her childhood up through WWI nursing experiences. So although there's a mystery, it really felt like a WWI historical novel much of the time, along with the horrors and sadness it left behind. Once Maisie's character is fully established, it comes back to the original mystery and wraps it up quickly. The story of the past does end up being related to the mystery, so it all ties together in the end.

I found the story absorbing. I really liked Maisie - she's smart and manages to work her way out of servitude using her brains and her connections. But once WWI comes into her life, the story takes a tragic turn. For some time after finishing it, I felt haunted by it. It was so sad! Usually, this would have stopped me from enjoying it, but the surrounding narrative of Maisie's life in the 1920s made me feel that this is just the beginning of Maisie's story. I have hope that she will find her way out of the grief and pain of what's behind her and be able to forge a new life. I'm guessing that future installments will also focus less on her personal story and more on whatever mysteries she's investigating.

One thing I found kind of weird is the way that Maisie conducts her investigations. I would have thought her brains would come into it more, but she relies on some sort of sixth sense. For example, she puts herself in the physical position of the person she's studying, and that allows her to feel what they are feeling. She uses that intuition to help her solve her cases. She also has premonitions and there's more emphasis on general intuition than facts and clues. I don't know if this will bother me going forward or not. Her mind is sharp, so I'd like to see her use it as well as her hunches.

For now, I know that her story affected me, and I want to see what's in store for her.

Original Thoughts:

I really enjoyed this, even though it was really sad in places. Review to come...

Chaitra says

Well. This was a waste of time. I don't think there was an aspect of this book I did not hate. Starting from the holier-than-thou main character, to the non-existent mystery, to the amazing (not) resolution of the non-mystery, to the abrupt hundred pages worth of tedious flashback in the middle of the mystery; everything bothered me.

So. Maisie Dobbs is a private eye. She was a housemaid once, but it turned out that she was one of nature's rare prodigies, reading Latin by candlelight. Her masters then decide that she ought to be tutored, along with all her work as parlormaid. Enter Master Yoda from stage left, I mean, Maurice Blanche. He fills her mind with such gems as "*Rush into conclusions not... In the stillness, wait awhile...*", which pop into her mind opportunely in present day when she's talking to clients.

Anyhow. On to the mystery! A ladies infidelity is suspected by her husband, the lady is blameless, and Maisie spends some time giving him shit for suspecting his wife. However it leads Maisie onto a suitably creepy post-war hidey hole for army men affected by the war called The Retreat. Nothing happens. Then, there's someone else talking about the Retreat too, and Maisie decides to investigate. Cut. Flashback into Maisie's early life. Some tedious accounts of class differences. Maisie in college. Maisie as a nurse in WW I France. Maisie with Simon, a brilliant and talented young doctor who worships the ground she walks on. Cut Back. Where were we?

There's hardly a set up for a mystery in this book. The half hearted attempt is cut abruptly so we have pages of Maisie backstory, for no discernable reason. By the time the story comes back to the current time, I lost any inclination of knowing what would happen. I had to finish it though. Maisie herself I thought had a border-line God complex. She instructs her first client to make her a commitment, and to his marriage. She calls herself responsible for the safety of all parties, but she makes friends with and invites confidences (even after the husband has been sent away happy) from her emotionally susceptible mark, by lying about who she is. But let's not call this unprofessional.

She has dodgy methods of problem solving. She may regurgitate the Maurice Blanche homilies to herself, but she the chill down her spine makes her jump into conclusions pretty much from the start. She is never wrong though, so I suppose that doesn't matter either. As for her personal life, she behaves despicably. (view spoiler). The two paragraphs of lame explanations for her actions were the final nail in the coffin of this series for me. I'll re-read Agatha Christie for the nth time instead.

Joanne says

A beautifully written story of a young girl's rise from household servant to wartime field nurse to her own successful career as a private investigator during WWI-era England. This novel is so much more than just an historical mystery with a clever female sleuth. Winspear creates Maisie's story of her first professional case in such a way that with flashbacks we understand the physical and psychological scars of those who served during wartime...the sacrifices of the body, mind and heart....which has made Maisie develop a sense of purpose in life that goes beyond just solving mysteries. She has empathy for those who suffer or are in need, and this first installment of Maisie Dobbs will reveal the path that has brought her from servant to beginning her own professional business. A great beginning to a series that I can't wait to continue.

4.5 stars

Leanna says

A neighbor recommended Jacqueline Winspear's *Maisie Dobbs* as one of the best books she's read. The book cover boasts quotes from *The New York Times* ("Be prepared to be astonished"), NPR ("A quirky literary creation"), and Alexander McCall Smith ("[A:] real gift"). Naturally, I had high expectations.

Maisie Dobbs is a detective and self-proclaimed psychologist in post-WWI London, and the novel splits its time between a case and detailing Maisie's background. Only half the book is a mystery as Maisie investigates "The Retreat" where injured soldiers escape the stares of society.

In the other half, Winspear recounts Maisie's past. She moves from being a greengrocer's daughter to an aristocrat's protégé to a WWI nurse to a private investigator. *Maisie Dobbs* is almost too good to be true:

brilliant and dedicated, moving seamlessly between all ranks in society.

The book is well written, but the split-nature of its format backfires. Maisie is too perfect to be an appealing heroine (although a disturbing scene at the end of the book belies Maisie's perfection). And Winspear does not fully develop the mystery, so its climax borders on the ridiculous.

Winspear has written several more books in the Maisie Dobbs series. Though I haven't read them, they are apparently more consistent with the genre and concentrate more on mysteries and less on Maisie's history. I will have to invest in the second novel before dismissing the series completely.

Hilary says

In general I prefer to confine the term 'Mary Sue' to fan fiction, where it belongs. But when I tell you that Maisie has purple eyes, rippling black hair, outstanding intelligence, a near-psychic empathy with her clients, and is practically perfect in every possible way & I think I may be allowed an exception. On top of all this, the author researched the First World War background for this very, very thoroughly and, oh, how it shows! Throw in a faithful Cockernee sidekick (wiv an 'eart of gold), a salt-of-the-earth costermonger father (also wiv an 'eart of gold), an eccentric Suffragist and her household (ALL with hearts of gold) and & I can hardly bear to say it, but a denouement that involves our heroine thwarting the bad guy by bursting into song & I'm afraid it's simply dreadful.

Magdalena aka A Bookaholic Swede says

This book just didn't work for me. Maisie Dobbs was mostly annoying and a very boring character and the story was very bland. I liked the ending, but probably not enough to want to read more books about Miss Dobbs unless anyone can convince me that they will get better.

Hannah says

I picked up *Maisie Dobbs* from the library upon the rec. of my GR friend Carol, and have to say that this initial entry marks what may prove to be one of the cleverest mystery series since Dorothy Gilman brought the retired and intrepid Mrs. Pollifax to life back in the 1960s. (For more on Mrs. Pollifax, see *The Unexpected Mrs. Pollifax*)

Don't go into reading *Maisie Dobbs* with any preconceived ideas about what you'll find there. Yes, it's a mystery -- somewhat. Yes, it's a historical novel -- somewhat. Yes, it's an exploration of psychological healing -- somewhat. In fact, *Maisie Dobbs* is one of those books that can't really be pegged and shelved in its own confined area.

The book starts in 1929, when Maisie sets up her detective practice and receives her first solo case: A man wants Maisie to find out if his wife is having an affair. After solving that, the book abruptly switches gears and goes back 19 years, to 1910, when young Maisie is just a lower class girl living with her widower, costermonger father. While Maisie is decidedly low class in the ridged class structure of pre-War Britian, she is anything but low class in her intellect. Her bankrupt father sends her into service at the home of a wealthy and sympathetic upper crust family. From here, we learn Maisie's backstory - essentially, how she came to

"be" Maisie Dobbs, Detective. This portion takes up quite a bit of this 290+ page book, so that by the time it's over, we're back to 1929 and Maisie's intuition leads her on an offshoot of her initial case, and the resolution of some feelings Maisie has been carrying around for quite a long time.

The writing is spare and somewhat simple in places, which initially put me off. However, once I got into its rhythm, I was hooked. I loved the setting (pre-and-post WWI England), and enjoyed Maisie's backstory with all it's information about being "in service". The ending was probably my favorite of all, but I won't tell...

I eagerly await my next installment of Maisie Dobbs:

to see if Winspear can keep up the novelty of her first book in the series.

And oh yeah, the covers on the Penguin editions ROCK. I want them as posters, they are so evocative of the era. Excellent!

Alice Lippart says

I enjoyed this so much I barely care about some of the faults it has. Excellent experience.

Dawn Michelle says

Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhh I have book hangover. M A S S I V E book hangover.

I loved this book so very much - even the parts that made me cry [I have such a problem with books that deal with war in general {as anyone with a soul would}, but books that deal with WW1 in particular are very distressing to me]. I loved the characters and I adored Maisie and all she was determined to do regardless of the fact that she was a woman. This was a lovely story - a full on mystery with no murder [to speak of] and genuine intrigue. I am so looking forward to the second one.

The Narrator was simply delightful - it is so lovely to finally have a fantastic narrator after so many bad ones of late

Hayes says

ETA Jan 2013: quick re-read before I start the rest in the series.

A little better the second time round. Clearer head, or something. But my original opinion, below, still holds. 3.5 stars

I liked this, very much; I just didn't love it. I wanted to be more connected to Maisie, but felt that she slipped away before I could learn to love her. I liked the story and the back story and the way they intertwined, although I found the switching back and forth in time was handled a little awkwardly.

I will continue the series.

Alaina says

It took me a few tries to start this book. Probably the only reason I finally read it was because I'm trying to read the books I already have, instead of adding to my ever growing pile of books to read.

Maisie Dobbs is a new private eye in post WWI London, setting up shop and trying to earn a good client base in a world still getting used to the working woman outside of service. With a cunning mind, great determination, and a bit of luck and help along the way (from a supportive father and a liberal and open minded employer) Maisie has been able to go from a young girl in service to studying at a University to making her own way in the world. With the outbreak of WWI, and the sudden death of a friend, she is moved to put her dreams on hold to join up as a field nurse to help the boys at war. The first book in the Maisie Dobbs series; it sheds some light on what happened to Maisie in the passed during the war, while also following along as she uses everything her mentor Maurice Blanch taught her to solve the mysteries brought to her by clients or ones she discovers along the way.

I found this book a bit hard to get into. A number of parts felt like filler, constantly having the character going back over what had just occurred. That is not a bad tool to use, but I felt it was used far too often. Many of the characters I felt were more of a caricature, few of them felt real, or had any real depth to them.

The book starts off in 1929 as Maisie is just setting up her detective agency after her mentor retires. It shows her close relationship with her once employer Lady Rowan, and her admiration for her mentor Maurice. She is portrayed as very careful with her finances and meticulous with her work. She gets her first clients with help from Lady Rowan, and along the way of investigating she uncovered a much bigger mystery. The book then jumps back to 1910, just after Maisie has lost her mother, it follows Maisie through having to go into service to help her now savings-less father, to University and to the outbreak of WWI. It speeds through time from when she decides to leave school to help the cause as a nurse to the time she ends up on the battlefields in France.

I found this portion of the book, where Maisie's background is revealed, to be very dry. It hols all of the major events in Maisie's life but didn't feel like a huge impact. Maisie felt like a robot during this time period. Except for when she herself decides use the great library without permission, she goes along doing as she is told with little emotion. Nose to the grindstone yes, but since it offered little colour to Maisie's character I lack feeling towards her.

It wasn't until things really start rolling and being revealed towards the later half of the book, after it jumps back to 1929, that I actually am finally really turning pages. I found the the conclusion very interesting and did enjoy how it was all finally revealed and the path taken to get to it.

It took a sleepless night to finally finish this book, and I'm not sure when or if I will be starting the second book in the Maisie Dobbs story.