



Lullabies for Little Criminals

Heather O'Neill

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A gritty, heart-wrenching novel about bruised innocence on the city's feral streets—the remarkable debut of a stunning literary talent

Heather O'Neill dazzles with a first novel of extraordinary prescience and power, a subtly understated yet searingly effective story of a young life on the streets—and the strength, wits, and luck necessary for survival.

At thirteen, Baby vacillates between childhood comforts and adult temptation: still young enough to drag her dolls around in a vinyl suitcase yet old enough to know more than she should about urban cruelties. Motherless, she lives with her father, Jules, who takes better care of his heroin habit than he does of his daughter. Baby's gift is a genius for spinning stories and for cherishing the small crumbs of happiness that fall into her lap. But her blossoming beauty has captured the attention of a charismatic and dangerous local pimp who runs an army of sad, slavishly devoted girls—a volatile situation even the normally oblivious Jules cannot ignore. And when an escape disguised as betrayal threatens to crush Baby's spirit, she will ultimately realize that the power of salvation rests in her hands alone.

Lullabies for Little Criminals Details

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From Reader Review Lullabies for Little Criminals for online ebook

Diana Jorge-tulk says

This book was heartbreaking and sad. It made me realize how children are really left to the mercy of their parents and in this case her father. This is not a feel good book, but it doesn't mean that it's not a good book. I liked it a lot and I would recommend it. But be warned its gut wrenching and part of that is because its very believable. The author did a great job with that. You just know that there are children everywhere living these messed up desperate life's by no fault of there own. And in this case not even the parents fault completely. They are a product of circumstances, environment and social class. But what it made me realize as a mother is how important a mother is in the life of a child. Especially in the early years. To be held touched, kissed, whispered to and even yelled out of love to. A mothers love or someone who fills that place for a child is so important so that that child doesn't turn to just anyone to for fill that need. This book was wonderful and great one for discussion. Great book club choice.

Ammar says

Omg what a debut

I can't believe I haven't read this book till now.

Montreal.. it's underbelly through the eyes of a 12 turning 13 girl. Raw. Funny. Sad and shocking.

Baby our narrator, her father Jules and a cast of desirable and undesirable characters from different walks of life. I'm thinking It's the 1970s and there is a lot of delinquency, drug use, prostitution, and gangs.

The narrative is fresh and sharp, the child is smart so the reader gets a sharp perspective of the street life and the complex system that lives there... drugs, bums, pimps, social workers, foster homes, the justice system.

A critique of society and a journey of discovery both inside and out. One gets to see love, loss, sadness, rebellion, sex, drugs, highs and lows through the eyes of Baby.

Shannon (Giraffe Days) says

Baby (that's her real name) is eleven going on twelve. Her mother is dead, her father, Jules, has raised her alone in Montreal. He's only 26, and more of a child than she is. He's also a heroin addict, a "loser" as Baby is well aware. They constantly move apartments, often to escape people Jules owes money to, and wear clothes often pilfered from the lost and found boxes.

Baby is smart, though. She does well at school, except for the times when she was younger when she followed Jules advice. But Jules gets tuberculosis, and the medication makes him crazy. Two months at a rehabilitation centre makes him distant and their close relationship is destroyed. Her own experience in a juvenile detention centre has a profound impact on her. The indifferent social workers assigned to her don't help. It's when Jules locks her out that she's forced to look after herself, and with no friends or relatives there's only one person she can turn to. Soon she's caught up in the world of Alphonse, a local pimp, and made to turn tricks - i.e. sleep with men for money, all of which she gives to Alphonse.

I loved Baby's voice, her frankness, her honesty, her street-smarts and her yearning. I wanted her to do well soooo badly, my heart ached for her when she dropped out of school. The tone of the novel, despite its somewhat melancholic theme, could have been dark and depressing but is light and airy, thanks to Baby and her way of seeing her world. It introduces you to a side of Montreal you don't really see when you visit (I've only been there once), and explores the lives of the poor children who often have to look after their own parents, and whose value systems differ drastically from what is considered 'normal'. Highly recommended.

Wanda says

If you want to get a child to love you, then you should just go hide in the closet for three or four hours. They get down on their knees and pray for you to return. That child will turn you into God. Lonely children probably wrote the Bible.

We forget, as we get older, how vulnerable it feels to be a child. To not be in charge. Not responsible for where you live, what you eat, or where your money comes from. In fact, we tend to idealize those days, thinking wouldn't it be wonderful to go back to the worry-free existence of a child? We forget that children have worries too, especially if they don't have responsible adults in their lives.

This book also reminded me of lessons learned when I was old enough to go stay at friends' houses: whatever you have grown up with is normal for you. Doesn't matter how chaotic your own home is, you don't realize it until you have a calmer home to compare it to (or vice versa). Your family's regular foods will seem odd to others, your mom's way of slicing a sandwich may even seem idiosyncratic to some. The "normal" routine may seem very exotic to those children who have no routine to speak of.

I was distinctly reminded of the memoir by Jeannette Walls, *The Glass Castle*, where she and her siblings just accepted the way life was with their alcoholic father and dysfunctional mother. They learned early to take care of themselves, because their parents weren't going to do it. And let's face it, every family has their own dysfunctions—no matter how stable, there's some weird thing that every family does that make it "unhappy in its own way." (Thanks, Tolstoy).

Many lovely turns of phrase, lots of laugh-out-loud moments, plus that last sentence lifted my spirits with hope!

karen says

don't make your books look like chick lit if you want people to read 'em.

more free advice from me.

but it's true - not all of us have a sarah montambo in our lives to tell us, "no, this is really very good." because it is. and this is not just me groping all the canadian books in the corner of the dancefloor, this book is a sparkly little gem.

at the beginning, it reminded me a lot of *weezie bat*. it is a similarly glossy-slick storytelling style, but this one is about a girl with a loving junkie single dad who treats her like a peer (and since he is only 15 years older than her, he's not far off) and they breeze from apartment to apartment in montreal in a daze where

there are no consequences and everything will be okay, even if they have no money and there are dangers on the streets and foster homes.

but it doesn't stay rosy.

this one is not teen fiction, but she captures the young teenage character so well, in both thoughts and actions. even though baby is exposed to so much that is unsavory, she is still a little kid with a kid's energy, freaking out pimps with her sudden dancing and yelling, trashing a house and not stealing the jewelry (because of her own kid-logic) but stealing a cute turtle knickknack, avoiding bathing...it's like what greg is always saying when he talks about *lolita*; that lo is totally gross, the way a little kid is, playing with her gum and being dirty and smelly, and it's not like in the movie at all, or in most may-december films. kids are rarely sexually precocious, even when they are imitating behaviors they have seen or been taught. the gross will always out. and i loved that about this book; the moments of kid-grossery that would pop out unexpectedly.

in the back of the book, where harpercollins slaps all those readers' guides and interviews, there is this wonderful passage in her "making of" feature:

the inability to properly identify danger exists throughout the book. whereas children can be terrified by a puppet of a crocodile or a photograph of a shark in a national geographic magazine, they are unable to get it through their heads to look both ways when they cross the street or that there are strangers that you cannot talk to....

when i was eleven, i used to have a friend whose older brother was a junkie. he and his friends were the coolest kids in the neighborhood. some high points in my childhood were when drug addicts would flip out and come out of their apartments in their underwear with cats on their heads. we kids would dance around them, shouting and laughing with our hands up in the air. i wanted to capture this nonjudgmental attitude a lot of lower-class kids have to drugs. i also wanted to portray the relationships these same kids have with seedy adults. children believe the lies that adults tell them and are dutifully impressed. lowlifes are fantastical creatures who animate the world of children, and, in turn, lowlifes love children who are their most captive and adoring audience.

that's what i was trying to say, about the things i liked about this book. but she is a writer, so she said it much much better.

this book was written five years ago. i am ready for a follow-up, please!!

edit - yayyy!!! i finally got my second book. thanks for listening, heather o'neill!

come to my blog!

Donna says

A magnificently beautiful first novel, and I didn't want it to end!! O'Neill has a magical, musical storytelling style that is a pure joy to read, even when the subject matter is as dark as this. The story is about 12-year-old Baby, being (kind of) raised by her heroin-addicted and shiftless single father. It is an engrossing account written from the perspective of this thoughtful, precocious and surprisingly philosophical youngster, a memoir of life in the seedy corners of Montreal — a life that is by turns both excruciatingly frightening and beautifully naive, and filled simply with a child's craving to be loved. It very effectively juxtaposes the dark horrors of life on the streets with the innocence and silliness of childhood, and every word rings with

absolute truth. Loved it!

FAVOURITE QUOTES: “In the temporary illumination of the headlights, the insects were scribbling out messages from God that we couldn’t get. You couldn’t see what was up ahead. How did you know that the universe still existed a few feet in front of the car? How could you know that God was continuing to imagine it all? How could you be sure that he hadn’t forgotten about the road and that you wouldn’t soon be driving into nothingness?” [p. 72]

“Sadness fit me like blue jeans. Sadness fit me like a hangman’s noose. It crawled on me like an electric blanket and it was hard to resist its warmth.” [p. 225]

Kristina says

I couldn't put this book down. The narrators voice and descriptions were great. Some of the sentences made me want to laugh out loud and cry in the same moment. It was pretty disturbing throughout, as one should expect a story about a young teenage girl with a heroine addict father and deceased mother to be. Honestly, I read it under the impression that it was a memoir, so I really thought the story was true, at least as far as the author remembered it. I don't know if I would have enjoyed it quite as much as a story because I tend to give authors more lee-way with memoirs than with fictional stories. The ending was sort of abrupt-- but it did make me cry through the last 5 pages or so, so I guess it worked.

I don't know that I would necessarily suggest this book-- except maybe to a friend who seems way to happy and perky and needs to be brought down a few notches on the happy scale.

Sharon says

I want to say that I liked this book, I really do, but in the end I can only say that I tolerated it. I found the voice to be simultaneously irritating and endearing. The narrator, a 12/13 year old street child named Baby, has a habit of describing everything with multiple similes:

After he said that, his kisses began to feel good. They were like tubes of lipstick being crushed against my mouth. I took comfort in his kisses. They were so soft now. They made me smile. His kisses tasted like my tears, so I realized that I was crying. They were like kissing baby’s feet. It was as if little babies were stepping on me.

After a while it's like having your hand squeezed too tightly over and over - it hurts like hell but at the same time it's reassuring simply because it creates a sense of repetition.

It doesn't help that the subject matter is so bleak: child prostitution, drug addiction, street life, poverty. Baby’s ability to maintain some semblance of being a child despite her utter lack of a childhood is the one redeeming grace. She can express who she might have been even as she describes herself falling further and further away from that potential.

The first person narrative definitely creates a sense of kinship between the reader and Baby, which renders her story all the more painful. In the end, there is a glimmer of hope for Baby and her father, but having been deadened by all the terrible things that happened along the way, I’m not sure I cared anymore.

Ben Babcock says

Second Review: January 26, 2016

Wow, did I ever write more concise reviews in 2008!

In that spirit, I don't have much to add after this second reading. I'm teaching this to my Grade 12 English class of adult Aboriginal learners. We spend a lot of time reading texts by/about Indigenous people and issues, such as *Indian Horse*. I wanted to expose them to a slice of Canadian identity (Francophone culture) they haven't encountered before. In doing so, we can compare that experience to the experience of Indigenous identities, and we can talk about stereotypes. As many of my students have experience with the issues in this book, it also helps them identify with the characters' struggles. I'm pleased with how hooked they are on the book. (We haven't finished reading it in class yet!)

What did I pay attention to this time? Baby's yearning for a mother figure feels much more pronounced.

I also appreciate how, even though O'Neill writes Baby's narration with a precocious vocabulary, she makes it clear that Baby's emotional maturity is far behind her intellectual maturity. Baby is an academically advanced person, but she can still be as petulant and childish as any twelve-year-old.

Whereas in my first reading I was captivated by the characters, this time I also paid attention to the way the system fails both Baby and Jules. In the past seven years I've come to understand how systemic problems, and lack of privilege, affect individuals and manoeuvre them into situations that give them few good options. That is very much the case here, as we see when Baby goes to a correctional facility for little more than having the temerity to experiment with drugs and have a negligent parent.

Once again, the juxtaposition between Baby's relationship with Alphonse and her budding attraction to Xavier broke my heart. I wanted to cry as her facade of normalcy shattered around her and Xavier learned who she was. *Lullabies for Little Criminals* reminds us, over and over, of how we judge and are judged by others, and how these judgements influence us.

Definitely a powerful novel, one which is not diminished on subsequent readings.

First Review: July 30, 2008

About two hundred pages into the book, I suddenly realized that this story was breaking my heart.

It's sneaky. You don't know you're getting attached to Baby, the main character, until it's too late. You don't realize you're emotionally invested in her, that you want to see her make the right decisions that lift her out of the morally ambiguous streets and propel her to a successful, happy life. So when events push her into doing the opposite, it's terrible.

The theme that resonates with me most is that childhood is the most precious innocence we have. Baby makes several philosophical remarks about childhood, how society encourages us to grow up too fast--and the fact that we can't go back afterward. We're stuck as adults. As an 18-year-old, I've reached the legal age for adulthood. I'm venturing into that scary world of responsibility; no one treats me as a child anymore. I have the advantage of never experiencing Baby's hardships, yet I still feel confused at times. Everyone probably does, which is why this book captures your heart.

Baby has no mother, and her father is not much of a father figure. She is a person of remarkable natural integrity and morals nonetheless, but as the book progresses, these morals get twisted further and further out of focus as she tries to deal with growing up while her father slips further away from reality. She goes through several phases of friendship, attempting to fit in at school, hanging out with other kids at a community centre, hanging out with a more dangerous social misfit than her, her first boyfriend ... and being seduced by a pimp.

It was the contrast of those last two relationships that broke my heart. Baby, fast approaching the nadir of her pre-adolescent life, succumbs to the advances of the neighbourhood pimp. You think, "Okay, this can't get any worse. Yeah, she's with a pimp, but she'll get out of it. She'll find a way out." Then she meets a boy her age and falls for him, and suddenly *it is that much worse*. Baby is torn between two worlds, two different lifestyles. She tries to push each away in turn, but both stick to her and try to claim her.

The ending is open. It does not neatly wrap up Baby's life in an epilogue, tell us that she went on to live happily-ever after. If it had, that would cheat the book of its significance. I won't spoil it, but I will say it is positive.

Trying to do the right thing is hard enough when you know what "the right thing" is. When you don't even know that, and you're a thirteen-year-old girl without the advice of a parent to guide her, life is much, much harder.

JK says

There are so many reviews of this book out there, and it's difficult to find one which will say a bad thing about this book. It has been praised so highly that I had no choice but to read it. It's described it as outstanding, witty, riveting and believable. To me, unfortunately, this book was none of these things, and I cannot begin to imagine why people thought it was. I hated it from beginning to end; it was truly awful.

When I start a book, I like to finish it. I like to get a good idea of the writing style, and if I hate the book from the beginning I like to see whether or not my opinion can be turned around. This has been known to happen. Forcing myself to finish *Lullabies* was nothing short of self-torture. There was nothing in this book that made me want to keep reading. The characterisation was laughable! I had no shred of concern about anyone in the slightest. This is a very young girl who has been thrown into a world of prostitution and addiction. O'Neill did absolutely nothing to evoke my sympathies in this girl; in actual fact this poor abused girl was a chronic irritation. From the beginning, pieces of plot are thrown at us for nothing more than shock value. I didn't feel shock. I didn't feel anything because I wasn't connecting with anything in this book at all. It was a completely numb experience for me.

The Independent on Sunday said this book was full of 'magical imagery'. I do beg to differ. O'Neill tried too hard to romanticise scenes, giving us the most ridiculous imagery that could ever be imagined. Her similes were irrelevant and nonsensical; it seemed as though they were just thrown in to put stars in our eyes. Each sentence seemed to be a line of nonsense which had just been thrown in for effect. The plot ended up extremely disjointed as a result of this - I had no idea where I was for the majority of my time reading. I'd have laughed if I wasn't too busy grinding my teeth.

Not only did O'Neill overly fabricate her writing style, her morals leave something to be desired as well. There was no sense of right or wrong in this novel, the themes of addiction and prostitution were embellished into elements of a wonderful, glamorous life. There was no shred of empathy, just a severe elaboration of a girl's poverty stricken life.

Although I can appreciate what O'Neill was trying to do with this novel, it is safe to say that she has missed the point by a long shot. I could go on and on about this book's shortcomings, but I would be sitting here for a long time. I just can't even begin to fathom why this novel has won and been nominated for so many book awards, where better novels have deserved to win, but have missed out. It's shocking.

If you value my opinions at all, please avoid this one. I feel like I have wasted my time reading and reviewing when I could've been reading something else. Avoid like the plague!

Anja Banjanja says

This is a book I think I will be "carrying" with me for the long time.

It is heartbreaking and beautiful, scary and lovely. I don't think I can do right to it with any review, so just trust me and read it.

What I can say is that Heather O'Neill has a style of writing that is absolutely original and wonderful. Her sentences are amazing, the words she chooses are stunning and the characters make you want to cry and smile at the same time. She managed to write about such horrific things in such pretty manner without romanticizing them. I love how we can see Baby growing up simply through the style of narrating.

All in all, it's a great novel and I am so glad I bought myself a copy. Now I am anxious to get my hands on other O'Neill's books!

Jessica says

Oh, I really did want to like this book. I fell in love with Heather O'Neill's story about Jesus in middle school on *This American Life*, and was hoping for more writing like that. Instead, I often found her writing style so distracting that it was hard to stay in the story. Just opening the book to a couple random pages:

"The snowflakes came down like little bits of newspaper. The night was a typewriter key that got stuck and kept punching all the letters on top of the others until all that was left was a black blob."

"All the trees looked like the tufts you pulled out of hairbrushes. They were like a child's drawing of lightning or the veins on an old man's arm."

Like fellow reviewer Sharon, as the book went on I found it harder to care about the characters and what was happening to them. I still have hope for O'Neill's future work, but this one did not do it for me.

Kim says

Damn. This book just about broke my heart. It wormed its way in and split me three ways---three different identities rubbernecking in the lives of Jules and Baby.

The story is seen through the eyes of Baby, a 12 yr old who lives with her Dad in Montreal. Her Mom died when she was one and Jules, well... bless him, but he's not the most responsible guy on the planet.

Jules is the first rip in my identity crisis: He is still a child himself, having had Baby at 15 and deciding to take her out of the backwoods of Canada to the gritty side of Montreal. He's a junkie with get-rich-quick

dreams and an undiagnosed mental illness. I love Jules. I can't help it. I know too many people like this, I've been where he is. I know, intimately, what he's going through. He's still a kid but loves his daughter enough that he keeps trying to pull it together to keep her with him. Baby's love for Jules is unconditional. He is her best friend and they watch out for each other only as fucked up kids can.

As I was walking home, I spotted Jules on the street corner. He was craning his neck all over the place, looking around for someone. He started gesticulating in a way that made it seem as if he was having an imaginary argument in his head. He kept putting his hand, palm up, in front of him, as if he was asking the universe, "What? What? What?" His hat was down over his eyes, and when I called out his name he had to tilt his head way up to get a look at me. I knew it wasn't me that he had been looking for, but when he saw me, he shouted out happily anyhow."

So, Jules and Baby go from crappy apartment to crappy apartment living off what Jules can sell from the garbage he collects and soup kitchen handouts. Baby is aware that she is different from other kids but instead of this depressing her, she feels special. She feels that her life is much more exciting and since she has nothing, then she's better off than the kids that do and end up wanting more. Pretty astute for such a young kid. Baby's definitely an old soul.

Here is the next rip: Baby. I think back to being 12 and there is no way that I can even compare her life to mine. I had the suburban white girl upbringing. Baby befriends pimps and junkies and moves to foster homes and detention centers when her Dad is not well enough to take care of her. But, she does all of this with the strongest will. She is amazing. I can't say that enough. Her insights are beautiful:

Suddenly I realized that I wanted everything to be as it was when I was younger. When you're young enough, you don't know that you live in a cheap lousy apartment. A cracked chair is nothing other than a chair. A dandelion growing out of crack in the sidewalk outside your front door is a garden. You could believe that a song your parent was singing in the evening was the most tragic opera in the world. It never occurs to you when you are very young to need something other than what your parents have to offer you.

Me? I wanted to make sure that my new painter's cap matched my ten speed.

Baby endures so much in such a short time. And I know that I'm talking like Baby is real and that this is true, so I know that I need to credit the writing. I can feel the seedy alleys off St. Catherine Street. I can smell the wood smoke coming out of the pimp's dreads. I am there with Baby the first time she shoots heroin or loses her virginity. It's all so real and the writing is still fairy tale like in its delivery.

"Come here, Baby," she said. She threw her cigarette into the grass and spread her arms to me. "I want to give you a hug. You don't get enough hugs, I can see that. I'll give you one of my special teddy bear hugs."

I stepped closer to her to receive my hug and get it over with. She squeezed my cheeks and smelled my hair. She put my head between her two palms. Then she pulled my whole body to her and hugged me. I waited for her to let go of me, but she didn't. At first I thought I was going to die of claustrophobia, but then I noticed that she smelled like cocoa butter. I liked her smell. It reminded me of postcards and pictures of brown palm trees.... Then I decided to just enjoy it. She had fat arms, the type of arms that held sailors and soldiers and thieves. The kind of arms that held someone who was going away to jail for ten years. They were the arms of a woman who had eaten a hundred delicious cakes and pastries to get them this comfortable. I wrapped my arms around her and squeezed her tighter. I wanted to feel every part of my body touched by her. We stood like that, just hugging, for a long while.

Normally, I would skim a hug scene like this, but I was right there, smelling cocoa butter and seeing sailors. I love this book.

The final rip was the one that broke me. This was the Mom in me. The need to take Baby and to shelter her even though she'd probably fight me (and herself) at every curve. To ward off the fiends that are waiting so eagerly to corrupt. I felt for Jules and his fight to stay sober and his fear for Baby. I felt for every one of the street kids that Baby encounters until I was spent. I gave too much. I had to follow Baby's advice:

You see only the beautiful things when you stand still. You only see things that you don't ordinarily notice. The birds are the prettiest things, I imagine.

What happened to the Halcyon days of youth?

Dan says

Not for one minute did I believe this narrator's voice. In every paragraph, the author muscled her way in front of the story and waved at me--"Look at me, I'm a writer! Check out this metaphor!"

Mel says

This book was a really good debut novel!

A funny tidbit about this book before I review it: this was immensely popular when I was young. In my middle school and high school library, this book was always checked out. I don't know if it's because this is a Canadian book, or because it's set in Canada, but I definitely expected this to be a lot more popular than it is according to Goodreads.

That being said, I'm glad I finally read this Canadian classic novel. It is set in Montreal, the city I live in, so it was really cool to have the association with the locations I did in this novel. When the character mentioned apartments she lived in, streets she lived on, or parks she's visited, I was able to picture them.

This book was really sad though, it follows a 13yo girl who grows up with a very young single father who is battling a drug addiction. It shows the relationship with her father, and her downward spiral into a deviant life herself.

I really enjoyed it. I think I expected a book about a rebellious preteen girl who gets into drugs and sex and prostitution and has this really rough and intense life. And while I got a little bit of that, this book is more about innocence. This girl never really grows up, never really toughens up. She just does what she needs to do to survive. All she really wants is to be loved and comforted and she looks for it in all the wrong places since she can't get it where she needs it. It was hard to remember at times that she was only 13 because she has so much wisdom and knowledge of the real world and it's heartbreaking in that sense.

I gave it only a 4 star because it's a little slow. I could only read 40-50 pages at a time because it was a bit slow and VERY dense. Not much dialogue so 10 pages sometimes felt like 30. But all in all a really good book.

tee says

A more apt title would have been *Similes for Little Criminals*, it would have better prepared me for the onslaught of cutesy prose which, amazingly, did not bother me in the slightest even though sometimes I felt like I was being bashed over the head by cotton candy stuffed condoms. Like jelly filled gloves, slapping me gently but steadily across the face like the hand of a moody yet camp pimp. Guys, I am fucking THIRTY years old now. I can not get away with writing scathing, whiny reviews because I am no longer cute and young like a uncoordinated yearling. I am now officially old and anything negative I have to say will be deemed bitter. Like old coffee grounds. No longer will you consider me edgy, I will be classified as neurotic. Perhaps eccentric, god forbid, geriatric. My reviews will be passed over, oh there is that cranky old bitch, who cares what she has to say, she's thirty and jaded. She was fine last year when she was fresh faced and bushy-tailed, now she's just all wiry grey haired bush and her face isn't fresh, it's OLD. Like an abandoned boot. I've pledged to stop wasting my time hate-reviewing books and spending the rest of my short time on earth reading great ones. I don't have time to dilly dally anymore. Tick tock motherfocok, I got 3,000 books on my to-read list.

This one, by this Heather O'Neill person was really long and there were several times where I got a bit worried I might see proper old age before I finished it. It just went on and on and on and I was about 75% of the way through (see, I know the percentages 'cos I'm one of those arse stains that use an ereader 'cos I'm blind as bat shit (okay, now that I've typed that I realised it's blind as a BAT (or bat-shit crazy). it's a nice amalgamation of both and I can see about as well as a bat turd so it's apt). Wait, where was I, I got lost in multiple sets of parentheses there. Oh right, the book. It was long and at one point towards the end I was like, I have been reading someone's well constructed brain-fart and haven't even questioned its unique and harrowing scent yet but then it picked up pace and finished itself off quickly and tidily like any good man should. i mean, book. Other reviewers will tell you things about Baby and Jules and use words like depressing and bleak and narrative and *feelings*. I want to just say this, I ate a whole packet of family sized salt and vinegar chips for dinner because that's just what you can do when you're an adult. You can make choices like that.

Sometimes people like Baby can revel in heroin usage and homelessness at age 13 but what the fuck ever, she don't know how the hard bitches roll.

It is totally 3.35am and I am sitting here hunched over my keyboard mashing at keys making things that look like words on this here screen because I can't sleep because my knees are aching and I have heartburn. Like a fucking old person. Seriously. I looked at my goodreads profile before and was so taken aback seeing, "details Age 30 , Female , Australia" in my details that it's tainted my entire review. It doesn't hit you 'til it creeps up on you like that, written all matter-of-fact, balls-out, public profile THIRTY. I was going to write an entire review constructed solely of similes and look how fast it deteriorated. It fell apart like a newspaper sitting on wet grass in the humid rain of somewhere like Manila. Goodreads hasn't got "TOP FUCKIN' ONE PERCENT OF REVIEWERS" written there though has it. I'll take the liberty of informing you of that myself. They emailed me and told me this week, just like when your employer pulls you aside and tells you you're the best employee they've got, keep up the good work mate. Who even wants that quiet praise bullshit, sing it from the rooftops, give me a badge and a cocktail named after me. Put my name on a billboard, decorate a cake with a picture of my haggard old face on it. Way to make me sing my own praises and make me look like a douchebag, I've already made a tumblr post about it only to get ignored. Now I have to try and glean admiration this way as well. Fuck you goodreads, you still won't trick me into buying shit from amazon. QUIET PRAISES DO NOT WORK WITH ME.

So anyway, how about that hey, top 1% and I rarely mention plot line or, hell, the book at all when I'm reviewing. With 20 million users that means i'm one of the top 20,000 on here. Amongst all the YA reading

gif-fucking-using, picture slutting jerks, here I am. GIF free and thirty. I typed that as thirsty, which is true. I need rehydrating after all that chip eating.

This book was pretty good, you should read it.

Natalie says

Ok, so this one actually kept me up at night, both in the sense that I didn't want to have to put it down, and then once I did, the images still plagued my brain. I don't know what I can say about it... it was beautifully written, almost poetic in her descriptions, if such a thing can be said given the content of what is being described... those who have read it will completely understand. She did such a good job of recapturing the thought processes, and the mentality of being that young.. the innocence, and naivety. Makes you want to go back to when life was all about collecting rocks, chasing butterflies and reading archie comics. Her metaphors were brilliant in their simplicity... can't think of anything of the top of my head, other than it was phenomenal. That's it.

Betsy Robinson says

There is nothing like a well-written novel about growing up with a certifiably insane parent. I think there should be a new subgenre of literary novel/Bildungsroman called "family psychosis," and I would put this book near the top of the list as one that is really well done.

Told from an adult perspective, looking back at herself as a 12-year-old, first-person protagonist Baby intrepidly follows her drug-addicted father around Montreal as he gets clean but becomes increasingly paranoid. She bounces from him to a foster home to other caretakers. And what gives this book an authenticity that will be recognized and applauded by anyone who grew up in an insane family is her dealing with it as if it is normal. Because for her, it is. Also, the required responsibility of the young protagonist takes it into the realm of adult fiction (as opposed to young adult, which usually bores me).

Here are some other recently read books I've appreciated in the literary novel/Bildungsroman/family psychosis subgenre. They are all very different from each other; when written well, these books convey unique voices—perhaps because the material inherently requires the expression of experiences of life negotiation invented by a character with only herself for reference:

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian by Sherman Alexie

The Vegetarian by Han Kang

Body & Soul by Frank Conroy

Reasons She Goes to the Woods Deborah Kay Davies

Eggshells by Caitriona Lally

In the well-written books in this genre (and probably this is true of all really well-written books), there are no fads or trends, and nobody is mimicking a voice that's not their own.

Barbara McEwen says

5 stars - what? a perfect novel?! No, not technically perfect, but man this one spoke to me. Characters, place, prose, all sucked me in and had me riveted start to finish. She portrays that age (12-13) just so true to life (at least for me). That bizarre time between childhood and adulthood and both the strengths and vulnerabilities of kids growing up in a tough situation. I like a good weird book so this was a treasure for me for sure.

Tatiana says

This book made me sick to both my heart and stomach.

But it has to be said, Heather O'Neill writes about the most gruesome experiences in poverty and crime with remarkable affection. It's a very interesting perspective that she, after having lived in circumstances similar to Baby's, has such a fond, nostalgic view of her past.
