



Zennor In Darkness

Helen Dunmore

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In her prize-winning first novel, *Zennor in Darkness*, Helen Dunmore reimagines the plight of D.H. Lawrence and his German wife hiding out in Cornwall during the First World War. Spring, 1917, and war haunts the Cornish coastal village of Zennor: ships are being sunk by U-boats, strangers are treated with suspicion, and newspapers are full of spy stories. Into this turmoil come D. H Lawrence and his German wife, Frieda hoping to escape the war-fever that grips London. They befriend Clare Coyne, a young artist struggling to console her beloved cousin, John William, who is on leave from the trenches and suffering from shell-shock. Yet the dark tide of gossip and innuendo means that Zennor is neither a place of recovery nor of escape . . . 'Helen Dunmore mesmerizes you with her magical pen' Daily Mail 'A beautiful and inspired novel' John le Carré 'Secrets, unspoken words, lies that have the truth wrapped up in them somewhere make Dunmore's stories ripple with menace and suspense' Sunday Times Helen Dunmore has published eleven novels with Penguin: *Zennor in Darkness*, which won the McKitterick Prize; *Burning Bright*; *A Spell of Winter*, which won the Orange Prize; *Talking to the Dead*; *Your Blue-Eyed Boy*; *With Your Crooked Heart*; *The Siege*, which was shortlisted for the 2001 Whitbread Novel of the Year Award and for the Orange Prize for Fiction 2002; *Mourning Ruby*; *House of Orphans*; *Counting the Stars* and *The Betrayal* , which was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize 2010. She is also a poet, children's novelist and short-story writer.

Zennor In Darkness Details

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From Reader Review Zennor In Darkness for online ebook

Lynn says

One of the earlier books by the much missed Helen Dunmore.

Sarah says

Zennor in Darkness is Helen Dunmore's first novel for adults, however she is also very prolific with children's novels. All of Dunmore's books are shockingly descriptive, and even this adjective lacks justice -- obviously she has had the gift to write so well since day one because Zennor in Darkness is truly incredible from an intimacy standpoint and is beautifully written.

The novel is set in England during WWI along the coast of Cornwall. Those infamous U-boats are prevalent and us readers are faced with the impending doom of this region's war days to come.

We are introduced to Clare Coyne, a beautiful young woman who lives alone with her father and is close with nearby family, including her beloved cousin John William, whom just happens to be visiting home while on leave from the violent trenches. Adding spice to this ensemble is the character of author D.H. Lawrence and his bold German wife Frida, both of whom have settled in the village.

Basically, Zennor in Darkness is about Clare's interaction with her family, D.H. Lawrence, and all the other drama that goes hand in hand with war -- and coming of age.

As often expected with these types of novels, we read about Clare's coming-of-age as a young woman as she is introduced to love, violence, sex, friendships, humanity, and various bohemian arts. You may shrug and roll your eyes at this because after all, aren't all coming-of-age novels practically the same?! But...Dunmore is always magnificent because her characters are so vulnerable and just HUMAN. We read the inner monologues of many characters but mainly Clare, and it's these private thoughts that really hold heavy on our hearts. Awwwww....you may say, but it's entirely true. For those of us who have never felt the impacts of war during our lifetime, Zennor in Darkness is jarring, scary, and really makes you put the book down to run and kiss your loved ones. The novel really makes you appreciate life.

Another admirable trait of Helen Dunmore is that she makes her literature into art. I bet she doesn't consciously do this because you can tell by the way she writes -- I just love how she throws in new vocabulary words in the least intimidating way possible. It's simply beautiful and leaves me awestruck.

My only gripe about Zennor in Darkness is the cliché at the end. Of course I'm not going to provide spoilers but think about it...what befalls beautiful and naive young girls new to love and sex? Hmmmmm...

Helen Dunmore is underrated and NOT to be missed! I knew there was a reason I added her entire bibliography to my wish list months ago.

I highly recommend Talking to the Dead (1996) in addition to Zennor in Darkness. I've yet to read all her other novels, so stay tuned! Newer titles include The Betrayal (2010), Counting the Stars (2008), and House of Orphans (2006).

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Rebecca says

We randomly pulled off the road into the little village of Zennor. It's a tiny Cornish village set just in from the sea that happens to have a tea room, a museum and a wonderful Cornish bookshop. I was even more surprised when I realized that I already had this book about Zennor at home, waiting to be read.

Zennor in Darkness was immensely richer than the World War I story I thought would be within the covers. The book was a blend of what might be Cornish traits--poetry, practicality, strong passions and personalities. It wasn't at all what I expected, both earthier and more ethereal.

Antoinette says

This was one of those books that I was dying to read because it takes place in Cornwall (St Ives and Zennor). I have been to Cornwall and am back there for a second time (staying in St Ives!) It is a magical place- this book captures its allure beautifully. The descriptions are evocative of the place and probably the people living here in 1917.

But.....

The start was slow for me- for the first almost half of the book, I actually would rate it a 3 ! But for just over the second half of the book, I would rate it a 5!

What I loved about the book: the place , of course; the way small town gossip ignites like a fire; the descriptions of the effects of the war on the returning soldiers and on the people left behind; the love and bond of family; and the fact that D.H. Lawrence and his German wife are incorporated into the story. The beginning is slow- too many family members to keep track of; too descriptive at times and too much circling around the same storyline- but then this book explodes ! I read the second half in less than a day. I do highly recommend this book, but be patient at the start !

Roger Brunyate says

View from the Sidelines

The title is less mysterious than it might seem. Zennor is a tiny town near St. Ives in Cornwall where D. H. Lawrence leased a secluded cottage in 1916 and 1917. The Darkness is of course the First World War, which claimed the young men of the county, brought German U-Boats to their shores, and set the suspicious villagers against Lawrence, his strange pacifist ways, and his German wife Frieda von Richthofen (a distant cousin of the celebrated Red Baron). Also straddling the gap between two worlds is the fictional Clare Coyne and her widowed father Francis, an impoverished younger son of minor Catholic aristocracy. Francis' wife, a former lady's maid, died of TB while Clare was still an infant, leaving her to be brought up mainly by her extended family in this Cornish town, people of good heart but a different class and religion from her father. But while Francis Coyne lives in isolation on dwindling investments, writing a book on local botany, Clare leads a full life among her relatives and friends, developing her talents as an artist, and eventually striking up a friendship with Lawrence himself.

Zennor is a lovely place, with bracing cliff landscapes and sea air, beautifully evoked by Helen Dunmore. But the darkness is never far from their doors. Telegrams arrive with sickening frequency announcing yet another death. Men return wounded in invisible ways. Passions flare in brief encounters that only reinforce awareness of the destruction taking place just the other side of the Channel. *Zennor in Darkness* ranks with Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy as a view of war from the sidelines, helpless but by no means unaffected.

This is a remarkable achievement by any standard, but as a first [adult] novel it is simply astounding. I can certainly see similarities with two more recent Dunmore books that I have read: she will use the WW1 period again in *A Spell of Winter*, and Clare's Cornish childhood is very similar to that of the heroine in *Talking to the Dead*; indeed the power of childhood memories and close familial connections is a powerful theme in all three books. But as opposed to the rather melodramatic plot constructs in those later novels, this one deals with a period that needs no additional drama; its story unfolds naturally, almost inevitably; and its combination of fact and fiction seems effortless. Clare is a beautiful character, and Dunmore's Lawrence shares that edgy charisma that made his thinly-veiled appearance in Aldous Huxley's *Point Counter Point* the highlight of that book also. I am eager to see what Dunmore makes of another real-life wartime setting, that of the siege of Leningrad, in her 2002 novel, *The Siege* (which I eventually reviewed).

Susy says

I wanted to love this book. Set in Cornwall (a place I recently visited) during the Great War and including real life author, DH Lawrence as a character and a young Irish Catholic protagonist it should have been a book I inhaled. But I didn't. I waited for the pace to hasten and the characters to reveal their souls to me but it didn't happen.

And yet, I loved reading about a place where I recently hiked and the descriptions of the coast and the sea were familiar.

I liked it enough to read more of this author.

Anne Tucker says

So enjoyed this book - I read it in 3 days and couldn't put it down. I am also intrigued by the fact that it meant so much to me in the post-referendum Brexit world that we are in (and how differently I might have thought about it if I'd read it 2 years ago).

It was beautifully crafted - the mix of current story and past information on each character - was very well handled, slowly revealing more about each person's motivation. Although it is about DH Lawrence (and is mostly true I think), he is presented mostly in his anti-war capacity and married to a German woman, rather than as a controversial novelist that we might know him better as. The relationship between him and Clarey is beautifully explored, along with the serious insecurities of both; the understated crisis in John William is so delicately handled that it's even more shocking when he kills himself.

And the marvellous descriptions of the pointless waste of life and the horror of WW1, with the lies told by the powerful to enable them to keep feeding cannon fodder to this useless nightmare that is out of control and that nobody can stop, as too many have already died for anyone to be able to admit it was a huge mistake.

And the way that people's perceptions are manoeuvred (through 'fake news') to allow continuous support for the war, is heartbreaking and terrifying in equal measures.

Brilliant writer and the characters will stay with me for a long time.

Claudia says

I found this a compelling story although it is quite dark and depressing in parts. It really reminds you how awful WW1 really was for everyone involved and shows the effect that it had on the soldiers, their families and society in general.

Paula Bardell-Hedley says

The British poet, novelist and children's writer, Helen Dunmore died of cancer at the age of 64 on 5th June 2017. Sad to say, I have only now come to her work with this, her very first novel, published in 1993.

Winner of the McKitterick Prize, *Zennor in Darkness* could best be described as a rich, intricate, intensely lyrical historical novel. Set in the spring of 1917, at a time when the controversial author, D.H. Lawrence, and his German wife, Frieda (pejoratively referred to as "Hunwife" by wary locals who suspect the unconventional couple of being enemy spies) sought refuge from war-obsessed Britain in a tiny Cornish coastal village close to St Ives. Their story is interwoven with those of finely drawn fictional characters, in particular, Clare Coyne, a young artist they befriend.

This mesmerizing, poignant novel, which explores what it means to belong and how it feels to be an outsider in a tight, ultra-traditional community, seeks to define courage amid a miasma of gossip, scandal and innuendo.

All told, Dunmore published twelve novels. I intend to read each one of them, probably in sequence. Sheer indulgence? Maybe, but I'm thoroughly hooked and have much catching-up to do!

David says

Helen Dunmore's first novel gives hints of what is to come. All her other ten novels on my bookshelf are better, but "Zennor in Darkness" is still worth reading. I thought at first it seemed very ordinary, but the story and the writing soon picks up. It is an interesting mix of fact and fiction. The central character is a young Clare Coyne who lives with her father in St Ives, a short way from Zennor where D H Lawrence has taken a cottage with his wife Frieda. The writer was actually there in 1917 when the book is set, and the fact that Frieda is German makes for a tense atmosphere with many of the locals.

When Clare meets Lawrence they strike up a friendship. Clare is encouraged to visit his wife as she knows no women there. Clare retorts "Is that sufficient recommendation - the fact that I'm a woman". I preferred the fictional relationships of Clare and her cousins family, making do with the limited resources of wartime. The trauma of those relations who died or return damaged is eloquently described as is the impact on the community.

Katie says

Zennor in Darkness is about the effect WW1 has on a small rural community on the Cornish coast. At the heart of the novel is the relationship between two cousins, Clare and the shell-shocked John William. It deploys a lot of flashback to recreate their relationship as children.

I found it a rather uneven novel, brilliant and thoroughly engaging in parts but a little overly ambitious and even pretentious in others (it was Helen Dunmore's first novel).

DH Lawrence and his wife Frieda are characters in the story and though it was enjoyable reading about them their presence seemed rather gratuitous. We're told local residents are suspicious of them because Frieda is German but all the novel's characters, except one token nasty clergyman, are shown to be essentially good people so this hostility towards the Lawrences never has any dramatic representation in the novel. It's a bit of real history tacked on to a fictional story without much purpose. I thought Dunmore could have been less generous with some of her characters. If there's ignorant bigotry afoot show it, make it a force in the narrative. Instead she seemed intent on creating a romantically nostalgic vision of early 20th century pastoral life. What was most impressive was the writing itself which has made me eager to read her later work.

Huw Rhys says

I'm not at all sure what to make of this book.

On the one hand, there is a heart string tugging love story at the centre of it, in which all the horrors, futility and despair of the first World War on both sides of the English Channel are invoked. This central thread is beautifully written, and the story is rounded in as much as such a story can be rounded - but the questions it asks in themselves are thought provoking and evocative. If this were the only story written about in this book, it would have been a far, far better read.

Unfortunately, another half story is shoe horned into the whole, like an ugly attempted graft onto a tree that was never meant to be, and ultimately withers and dies like a rather poorly thought out experiment. This is the story of DH Lawrence and his German wife Frieda, who were living near Zennor in "real life" at the time at which this story was set. It almost seems as if the author felt honour bound to work this historically accurate fact into the story, but it just doesn't work unfortunately - and as a result, adds a completely unnecessary layer of obfuscation and irrelevance into what is otherwise a perfectly enjoyable WW1 love story, set in a gorgeous part of the world, and full of believable characters and situations.

Kirsty says

Helen Dunmore's *Zennor in Darkness* proved the perfect tome to pick up over a relaxed and warm bank holiday weekend. I first read the novel some years ago, but did not remember much about it, save for D.H. Lawrence featuring as one of the protagonists, and the sweeping Cornish setting. First published in 1993, John le Carré calls this 'a beautiful and inspired novel', and the *Sunday Telegraph* deems it 'highly original and beautifully written'.

Zennor in Darkness opens in May 1917, when war has come to haunt 'the coastal village of Zennor; ships are being sunk by U-boats, strangers are treated with suspicion, and newspapers are full of spy stories.' It is into this environment that D.H. Lawrence and his German wife, Frieda, move, seeking a cheaper existence away from the controversy which his writing has caused in London. Also resident in the village, and living with

her widowed father, is a young woman named Clare Coyne. She is a young artist, whom Lawrence and Frieda soon befriend.

When Lawrence arrives in Cornwall, it is almost directly after the publication and scandal of his novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. In Zennor, he is 'growing vegetables to eke out his tiny income. He earns his living by his writing, and it has shrunk close to nothing since his novel was seized by the police in November 1915 and prosecuted for obscenity. The book is shameful, say reviewers and prosecution. It is a thing *which creeps and crawls*... He does not know when he will be able to publish another novel. But with a remote cottage rented at five pounds a year, and cheap rural living, he hopes that he and his wife may get through the war.' Controversy follows the Lawrences wherever they go, however; local residents are highly suspicious of Frieda's German accent, and the couples' penchant for singing Hibernian lullabies to one another. 'This brazen couple,' writes Dunmore, 'ignores the crossed, tight webs, the drystone walls, the small signals of kinship, the spider-fine apprehensions of those who've lived there for ever once they feel a fly strumming somewhere on their web.'

Dunmore's descriptions throughout are highly sensual. At the outset of the novel, when Clare decides to swim with her cousins with nothing on, she writes: 'Second in, she must be second out. And she wants the sea to herself for a minute, the noise and swell of it, her bare flesh rocking in salt water.' The rural scenery, as well as the current crisis and its effects, are set with such grace. Dunmore is very understanding of the location against which the action of the novel plays out, as well as the wider political climate, and the links between the two. When Clare and Lawrence survey the sea, for instance, she writes: 'It is wonderful to have your back to the land, to the whole of England: to have your back to the darkness of it, its frenzy of bureaucratic bloodshed, its cries in the night... To have your back to this madness which finds a reason for everything: a madness of telegrams, medical examinations and popular songs; a madness of girls making shells and ferocious sentimentality.'

Dunmore's depictions of people, too, are vivid and memorable. When Clare meets Lawrence for the first time, for instance, she finds that 'his beard is astonishing. It juts from his face, wiry and bright red, and then the sunlight catches it and it's all the colours she'd never have thought human hair could be: threads of orange and purple like slim flames lapping at coals.'

Whilst the majority of the novel is told using the third person omniscient perspective, the use of diary entries written in Clare's voice are effective. Using this technique, Dunmore shows a more tender side of her, and it is also, of course, far more revealing than she is able to be in her public life. Snippets of first person perspective, and thoughts of individual characters, have been woven throughout. Sometimes asides are given, or reflections between snatches of dialogue. Separate characters are focused upon in individual chapters, and we are thus able to see the rich tapestry of those who live within Zennor, some of whom are real historical figures, and others of which have been imagined by Dunmore.

Everything within *Zennor in Darkness* has been beautifully placed into what is a taut and tightly executed novel. Throughout, Dunmore's writing is measured and careful; she is understanding of her characters, and never resorts to melodrama. *Zennor in Darkness* is a novel to really admire; it is slow, sensuous, incredibly human, and highly beautiful.

Vanessab says

This book is beautifully written, lyrical and descriptive. I think it owes a good deal to D.H.Lawrence's work and a few sentences seemed to be straight out of "Sons and Lovers". I enjoyed the historical detail and the character portrayals as well as the exploration of gossip, rumour and misapprehension. The descriptions of

the Cornish Coast are very evocative.

I did find it a little ponderous and repetitive in places but look forward to reading more by this author.

Fenella Ford says

Having been fortunate enough to hear Helen Dunmore speak when she gave one of the Suffolk Book League's monthly talks some years ago, I was intrigued to read her first novel - hadn't read any others of hers. I had recently read a couple of other books around the First and Second World Wars (in 2014 Testament of Youth, and this year In Love and War by Liz Trenow - enjoyed that more than Zennor - and The Childbury Ladies Choir which I absolutely loved) and have visited Cornwall this year, which were also draws to this book. I would say I enjoyed Zennor, but I didn't love it. At first I found it rather heavy on the sensuous descriptions of colours and physical feelings - it reminded me of actually reading Lawrence, which I did in my first year BA course in English Literature - Twentieth Century Literature, which included Sons and Lovers, Women in Love and The Rainbow. It made me think that Dunmore was rather self-consciously imitating this aspect of Lawrence's style, along with the descriptions of sexual play here and there during the book. However, from reading other reviews I think perhaps this is just Dunmore's own style rather than a reference to Lawrence's style. I thought there was a nice symmetry to the beginning and end, with the three girls going for a walk but wondered why the three of them had been set up in the first chapter when Peggy barely figures throughout the book. I felt the sense of isolation and awkwardness of both Frieda (what a lot she gave up for Lorezo - her marriage, children, home - and yet he was always out with his new friends and acquaintances, so how much did she actually see of him? I guess he was partly making himself fit in with neighbours in order to protect them and get them accepted), and Clare's father - I felt sad for him. I was interested to realise, after I had finished the book that the Katherine and Jack Murry were actually Katherine Mansfield and her husband - would have been interested to have know this before. Would I read another Helen Dunmore? Possibly, but not yet - I was glad to finish it and get on to something else.

SPOILER ALERT

Interesting question mark introduced in the closing chapters about the paternity of Clare's baby - was it really her cousin's or Lawrence's as her father suspected? From Clare's view there is no doubt it was her cousin's.
