



The Dive from Clausen's Pier: a novel

by Ann Packer

Publication info: New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 2002.

Pages: 370 p

ISBN: 0375412824

Summary

How much do we owe the people we love? Is it a sign of strength or weakness to walk away from someone in need? These questions lie at the heart of Ann Packer's intimate and emotionally thrilling new novel, which has won its author comparisons with Jane Hamilton and Sue Miller.

Description

A riveting novel about loyalty and self-knowledge, and the conflict between who we want to be to others and who we must be for ourselves.

Carrie Bell has lived in Wisconsin all her life. She's had the same best friend, the same good relationship with her mother, the same boyfriend, Mike, now her fiancé, for as long as anyone can remember. It's with real surprise she finds that, at age twenty-three, her life has begun to feel suffocating. She longs for a change, an upheaval, for a chance to begin again.

That chance is granted to her, terribly, when Mike is injured in an accident. Now Carrie has to question everything she thought she knew about herself and the meaning of home. She must ask: How much do we owe the people we love? Is it a sign of strength or of weakness to walk away from someone in need?

The Dive from Clausen's Pier reminds us how precarious our lives are and how quickly they can be divided into before and after, whether by random accident or by the force of our own desires. It begins with a disaster that could happen, out of the blue, in anybody's life, and it forces us to ask how we would bear up in the face of tragedy and what we know, or think we know, about our deepest allegiances. Elegantly written and ferociously paced, emotionally nuanced and morally complex, The Dive from Clausen's Pier marks the emergence of a prodigiously gifted new novelist

Reviews

From Publishers Weekly

Packer's engrossing debut novel begins without ostentation. On Memorial Day, Carrie Bell and her fiance, Mike Mayer, drive out to Clausen's Pier for their annual ritual, a picnic with their friends, a trip they make the way a middle-aged couple might, in grudging silence. Before their resentments can be aired, Mike dives into too shallow water, suffering injuries that change their lives. If Mike survives, he will survive as a quadriplegic, and Carrie faces unexpected responsibilities. Ultimately, Carrie does what is both understandable and unthinkable. She leaves her hometown of Madison, Wis., and shows up on the doorstep of a friend in New York City. There she discovers a different world, different friends and a different self. The hovering question--what will Carrie do? Abandon Mike or return to him?--generates genuine suspense. Packer portrays her characters--both New Yorkers and Madisonites--deftly, and her scenes unfold with uncommon clarity. But if Packer has a keen eye, she has an even keener ear. The dialogue is usually witty; more important, it is always surprising, as if the characters were actually thinking--one of the reasons they become as familiar to the reader as childhood friends. The recipient of several awards, Packer is also the author of *Mendocino* and *Other Stories*. Clearly, she has honed her skills writing short fiction. What is unexpected is the assurance she brings to a larger canvas. In quiet but beautiful prose, Packer tells a complex and subtly constructed story of friendship, love and the hold the past has on the present. This is the sort of book one reads dying to know what happens to the characters, but loves for its wisdom: it sees the world with more clarity than you do.

From Booklist

Starred Review Packer's first novel is a sensitive exploration of the line between selfishness and self-preservation. Carrie Bell is 23 and has lived in Madison, Wisconsin, all her life. She is engaged to her high-school sweetheart, Mike, and all seems well--to everyone but Carrie, who is falling out of love with Mike, with Madison, with everything. On Memorial Day she numbly watches Mike dive off of Clausen's Pier and break his neck in the too-shallow water, leaving him a quadriplegic. She is stricken with grief, guilt, indecision, and fear--she wants to be supportive and faithful, but she cannot make herself love him again. After a painful summer of hospital vigils, she flees to New York City and tries on a new life, a new relationship. She cannot escape what she's left behind, though, and must eventually face those who feel she has betrayed them. There are no easy answers for Carrie, but her struggle to do what's right and her revelations about the life she wants for herself will keep readers turning page after eloquently written page.

From The New Yorker

At the start of this quietly engrossing debut novel, twenty-three-year-old Carrie Bell is tiring of her stalled life in Madison, Wisconsin, and her bland, relentlessly loving boyfriend of eight years' standing. When a dive into the local reservoir leaves him paralyzed from the neck down, she flees to Manhattan, where she takes shelter with a group of wannabe artists in a decaying Chelsea brownstone and falls for an elusive older man. The journey is a familiar one, but Packer fleshes it out with a naturalist's vigilance for detail, so that her characters seem observed rather than invented, and capable of mistakes that the author may never

Biography

<http://www.annpacker.com>



Ann Packer was born in Stanford, California, in 1959, and grew up near Stanford University, where her parents were professors. She attended Yale University and then, after five years working at a publishing company in New York, she went on to the Iowa Writers' Workshop, selling her first short story to *The New Yorker* a few weeks before receiving her degree. A fellowship at the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing followed, and she spent two years living in Madison, Wisconsin, which would later become the setting of her first novel, *The Dive from Clausen's Pier*.

While living in Wisconsin she published short stories in literary magazines and had a story chosen for inclusion in the annual O. Henry Awards prize stories anthology. With support from the Michener-Copernicus Society of America, she completed her first book, *Mendocino and Other Stories*. The National Endowment for the Arts provided a fellowship, and she spent much of the next decade working on *The Dive from Clausen's Pier*. A critical success that became a national bestseller and was translated into ten languages, *Dive* received a Great Lakes Book Award, an American Library Association Award, and the Kate Chopin Literary Award. Ann's second novel, the bestselling *Songs Without Words*, was published in 2007, and she is currently at work on a fourth work of fiction.

Ann returned to her native Bay Area in 1995. She lives with her family in San Carlos.

Bibliography

Mendocino and other Stories (2003)
The Dive From Clausen's Pier (2002)
Songs Without Words (2007)

Author Interview (from Vintage Books)

Q: In *The Dive From Clausen's Pier* your 23-year-old heroine, Carrie Bell, is torn between whether to stay or go when her fiancé becomes quadriplegic after a terrible accident. It is a coming-of-age story that draws us in immediately to a complex web of moral dilemmas. What made you tackle this tragic subject?

AP: That's a hard question, because it assumes an awareness of why one writes what one writes, and a measure of control over one's subjects that I don't think can really exist. I know HOW I began to write *The Dive From Clausen's Pier*; that is, I can locate the earliest retrievable moment in the process, which was a phrase I jotted down in my notebook, along the lines of "a woman whose boyfriend is injured in maybe a hunting accident." Looking back, I can see that I was intrigued by the ambiguities of the situation: he's her boyfriend, not her husband; he's injured, not killed. I imagine I was wondering what I'd do if I were this woman, how I'd find a way to live with and understand the choices I'd make.

Getting back to the why, though: I think that's more complex and perhaps not fully answerable. One of the characters in the book actually speculates about this, or something like it. An aspiring poet, she says, "I think the family IS the artist. Just like the sky is, or all the books you've ever read." I suppose I think, similarly, that a novel--whether "art" or not--is formed

because of and by all that has formed its writer: her family, the sky, all the books she's ever read. In other words, more than can be named. In the case of me and *The Dive from Clausen's Pier*, I think the family part played a prominent role in the formation of at least one aspect of the book: when I was ten years old, my father had a stroke that paralyzed the right side of his body, which is similar to what happens to Mike in the novel. I say this played a prominent role, and yet it's also the case that I wasn't thinking about the parallel as I wrote.

Q: So you drew on first-hand experiences to portray the worlds of intensive care and rehab?

AP: Seeing my father in the hospital and then watching him work to regain function and independence were certainly indelible experiences, but I didn't so much actively draw on them for the book as realize later that they had helped propel me toward my subject. When it came to the medical aspects of the novel, I did a lot of research: into spinal cord function, the ramifications of injury, the process of rehabilitation.

Q: What about the picture you paint of Mike after he's home from the hospital? Did you do research there, too? Are there any other parallels to your father's experience?

AP: I researched the practical side of living with a spinal cord injury, but not the emotional side; it was my job as a novelist to imagine that. As for further parallels to my father's experience, I suppose the answer is yes, in that Mike struggles with depression. My father did, too, and in fact he ultimately committed suicide.

Q: So in a sense the novel turns things around: Carrie, the healthy person, struggles over whether to leave Mike, the disabled one; whereas in your life the disabled person left the healthy one.

AP: That's interesting. I suppose in a way all fiction revises life, whether to make it happier or sadder or funnier or stranger or tidier or messier--whatever the writer wants or needs.

Q: The novel is set in Madison, Wisconsin, a town that you seem to know intimately. Tell us about your relationship to that place.

AP: I lived in Madison for a couple of years, during which time I wrote the phrase in my notebook that I was talking about earlier. I started the writing about six months after I moved away, and I suppose Madison became the setting both because the story had begun to percolate there and also because I was now living in France, and Madison was my most recent American place. Living elsewhere while I was writing the book had its moments of frustration--what was the name of that street, again?--but in certain ways it was also very freeing, because it allowed me to ignore or forget aspects of the city that did not serve my fictive purposes, and to invent others that did. When I think of Madison now, I'm struck by how memories of my life there are intermixed with moments from the book, or even with passages I wrote that I ended up cutting. And because it's been several years since I've been back, the life I imagined there for Carrie and her co-characters is often more vivid to me than the life I lived there--even though, of course, it was my experience that provided the foundation for theirs.

Q: Later, the action moves to New York, a city that you also seem to know quite well -- its geography, its artists who "want to be something." One senses that you must have fallen in love there once -- or at least fallen in love with the city. Could that be right?

AP: I lived in New York for the five years following my graduation from college, and I was, of course, awestruck by it. Like most people in their early twenties, I spent my time immersed in

the possibilities of who I might become, and New York offered a thrilling--and sometimes terrifying--variety of answers. I loved it, certainly, and still do, but it's also interesting to me that I didn't start writing until after I'd left. I'd been gone about four years when I started *The Dive From Clausen's Pier*, but given Carrie's age and the age I was when I lived in New York, it was probably inevitable that I would use it in the novel, both as a setting and as a symbol.

Q: At the beginning of the novel, Carrie lives a life in which friendship and loyalty are paramount, and yet her sense of herself is shattered when she runs from commitment. You explore the question of whether we are "bad" or just "who we have always been" when we make decisions that hurt other people. Tell us more about that.

AP: When I set out to write the book I wasn't conscious of wanting to explore this, but as I look back I can see that one of my projects was to investigate alternatives to the idea that life can be divided into right and wrong. An analog to this idea--to the idea that there ARE alternatives -- would be that every act has a multiplicity of meanings, not just from affected person to affected person, but also from one aspect of a given person to another aspect of that same person. One thing that happens to Carrie in the novel is that she moves from a rather severely moralistic position to a position of curiosity and perhaps even acceptance.

Q: Carrie's most constant coping mechanism for dealing with her pain -- guilt, anger, desire to flee -- is to turn to sewing as an occupation. How did you come upon something as both mundane and original as that to express so much emotion? Can you talk about what sewing represents in the book?

AP: It's funny, there are things I can retrieve from the writing process and things that I can't. I really don't remember how I arrived at sewing for Carrie, though I know that once I sat her down at her sewing machine I felt (rather than decided) that sewing would become an important activity and theme. As for what it represents, I think that changes during the course of the novel. At first it's very much about escape from the world outside her apartment, where Mike is so gravely injured, and where the people in her life have expectations and assumptions that she doesn't quite know how to deal with. Of course, she has many of these herself, and the sewing offers some mental respite, too. Later, she sews toward the possibility of self-invention, self-transformation, and I think by the end she is using it as a way to take care of herself financially and, in a sense, psychologically--she can support herself, and she can take her aesthetic sense and make something with it that will reflect an internal process of understanding and imagination.

Q: The book is about opposites -- the quiet familiarity of leafy Madison versus the buzz and excitement of New York; caring for both high school sweetheart Mike and urbane, cynical Kilroy, etc. Talk about how one person can be drawn in such different directions.

AP: I think we are always imagining alternatives for ourselves, especially when we are young. That we are who we are, or have become who we have become, can seem like an accident of timing at one moment and completely inevitable at another. Carrie faces the possibility of an alternative self in a very real and immediate sense, but the opposites she's pulled toward strike me as real-life manifestations of choices, or possibilities, that are inherent in us all the time. And it's probably the case that if the choices aren't opposite, the choice itself isn't so difficult, or so interesting.

Q: You are a mother of two children in her early forties, living in northern California. The world of Carrie seems many miles away. What made you write about this group of friends and post-college life right now? Did you start the novel when you were younger and then come back to it?

AP: I think the key to this lies in the phrase "right now." The present moment of the book's creation is actually about a decade long. I did start the novel when I was younger--considerably younger--but I didn't so much come back to it as never leave it. It was a very slow process with some fairly long breaks during pregnancy and my children's early infancies, but I've been with it--and it's been with me--all along.

Q: Tell us about the short story collection you published eight years ago with Chronicle Books in San Francisco.

AP: The book is called *Mendocino and Other Stories*, and it consists of the short stories I wrote in graduate school and after, stories that cohered around certain themes--the navigation of relationships, the aftereffects of loss. It was great fun, after years of sending the stories to magazines and journals all over the country, to see them all together in a single book, and to realize that they had a book-like feeling of belonging together.

Q: Who have been your mentors in writing? Who has encouraged you to write?

AP: I had some wonderful teachers in graduate school, but never a mentor. I think I've been most encouraged by my readers--whether teachers, editors, fellow writers, family members, friends, even strangers: by anyone who has responded to something I've written.

Q: What's next for you as a writer? Is there a way in which this book prepares you for the next one?

AP: I'm guessing that each novel--and I've certainly found this to be the case with short stories--will present its own set of challenges and seemingly unsolvable problems along with moments of pleasure and discovery. I hope this is the case, because it's the whole package that makes writing interesting to me. I've only written one novel so I can't say for sure, but I suspect that most of what you learn from writing a book is how to write THAT book.

Film Version

The Dive From Clausen's Pier was a 2005 Lifetime original movie directed by Harry Winer and starring Will Estes, Michelle Trachtenberg, and Sean Maher. Many of the characters in the film are in their late teens or early twenties, while in the source novel they are much older. The film also ends on a slightly more optimistic tone than the novel.

Discussion Questions (from ReadingGroupguides.com)

1. Why is Carrie unable to cry until Mike awakes from the coma (p. 1)?
2. What effect does Rooster have on Carrie's emotional turmoil during part one? Is Rooster fair in his attack on Carrie outside the library (p. 76)?
3. When Carrie and Mike see the bride and groom on TV in the hospital, Carrie thinks: "If his next words were Let's get a minister over here and get married tomorrow, I would say yes" (p. 91) What feelings are driving her at this point? What might have happened to Carrie and Mike if Mike had persisted in getting married after the accident?

4. What does Mike mean when he says: "It was like we were already married—we'd gone too far" (p. 370)? What went wrong or changed in Carrie's and Mike's relationship? Did Carrie or Mike change, or did their circumstances change, or both?
5. Carrie tells the reader: "For him [Mike], it was all about the future. For me, the past" (p. 69). How does Carrie's past inform her present? What do each of the three memories of her father mean for Carrie (pp. 28-9)? What Carrie does not remember about her father is "nearly infinite . . . A whole book of things, an entire encyclopedia—a volume that I tried and tried to fill at the Mayers'" (p. 29). Might Carrie have stayed with Mike—and the Mayers—for longer than she would have because she was trying to fill the void left by her father? What influence does Carrie's memory of her father have on her decision to leave Madison—and then, ultimately, to return? By returning, is Carrie escaping her father's legacy?
6. When she leaves Madison, Carrie seems to believe that people are defined by the actions or perceptions of other people. She says: "Because we were caretakers of each other's habits and expressions, weren't we, witnesses who didn't just see but who gave existence?" (p. 128). Remembering Kilroy's touch, she says, "How extraordinary . . . that someone could touch you and make you into something" (p. 330). Carrie's mother asserts that "people aren't defined by what they do so much as they define what they do" (p. 318). Are people defined by what they do, or by how others perceive them, or by neither? Does Carrie's opinion on this topic change by the novel's end?
7. How does Mike's family react to his accident? How do his friends react? Are these reactions typical or expected in the face of such a tragedy? What about Carrie's outward behavior in reaction to Mike's tragedy makes her behavior so surprising to their families and friends? Are there typical or expected ways people react to tragedies generally, and what do deviations from this expected behavior signify?
8. Carrie explains her love for sewing: "It was the inexorability of it that appealed to me, how a length of fabric became a group of cut-out pieces that gradually took on the shape of a garment" (p. 11). How is the process of sewing, and Carrie's own projects with expensive silk fabrics, a metaphor for Carrie's emotional evolution? Does playing pool have a similar meaning for Kilroy?
9. Is it Jamie's call that propels Carrie to finally return home, or is some other event the catalyst for her return? Does guilt or obligation play a role in Carrie's decision to stay in Wisconsin? Is she trying to prove something to herself or to others? Is she acting truly selflessly? Is she settling, giving up or being true to herself?
10. Could Carrie properly be called a heroine? What would have been the heroic path for her to take?
11. Carrie poses the question: "How much do we owe the people we love?" When she leaves Madison, she seems to view the answer as an all or nothing proposition: "What I had discovered was that I couldn't give up my life for Mike—that's how I saw it at the time, that's the choice I thought I had to make. And because I couldn't give up everything, I also thought I couldn't give up anything" (p. 128). Does Carrie see her answer differently at the end of the novel? What does Carrie give up for Mike? Did she need Kilroy in order to have something other than herself to give up for Mike? What does Kilroy owe his parents? Can love be separate from obligation? How might Jamie's or Rooster's or Kilroy's definition of love differ from Carrie's definition?

12. How do the tones and styles of part one and part three reflect Carrie's different state of mind before her time in New York City and afterward?

13. What is Carrie looking for in a relationship? What characteristics of Kilroy attract Carrie that were or are absent in Mike?

14. Is Carrie's resolution of her relationship with Kilroy satisfying? By "being there" in Carrie's life, what does Kilroy teach Carrie about herself? What does Lane teach Carrie about herself?

15. Is the resolution to the mystery surrounding Kilroy satisfying? Is "the tragedy named Mike" different for Carrie than for Kilroy (p. 359)?

16. Why are the minor characters of Harvey (Mike's new roommate in the hospital) and Harvey's wife (pp. 199—200) so significant to the novel's themes of love, obligation and choices?

17. Mike and Rooster theorize about the irony in names such as the dentist, Dr. Richard Moler, or the orthopedist, Dr. Bonebrake (pp. 18—19). Do the names in the novel—e.g., Carrie Bell, Kilroy, Rooster—have any ironic meaning?

18. While Mike literally dives from Clausen's Pier, who figuratively dives from Clausen's Pier? What metaphoric images does the title conjure up for the reader before and after reading the novel?

19. Envision an inverted version of *The Dive from Clausen's Pier* written from Mike's point of view in which Carrie had been the one to have had the accident. How might their lives have played out differently? What does this exercise reveal about their relationship and Carrie's character?

For Further Reading

The Dogs of Babel: A Novel by Carolyn Parkhurst

Bel Canto by Ann Patchett

Three Junes by Julia Glass

While I Was Gone by Sue Miller

Midwives by Chris Bohjalian

The Pilot's Wife by Anita Shreve

Drowning Ruth by Christina Schwartz

Black and Blue by Anna Quindlen

Open House by Elizabeth Berg