After Leaving Mr Mackenzie by Jean Rhys

Feedback- Monday 31st October -The English reading Group Berlin

We all admired Rhys's fierce talent. She had an ability to see what others could not, or refused to see, and the guts to write about it. And her writing still reads, 80 years later, as entirely fresh and modern. Her use of short chapters and short paragraphs feels experimental and brave. Her ability to paint pictures with the minimum of words is really impressive. Set in Paris and London in the twenties, we felt we were right inside the drab Parisian room with the shabby spotted mirror with the gilt frame, the ostentatious red plush sofa, the bed covered in an imitation satin quilt of faded pink.

“At the farther end of it stood an unframed oil-painting of a half empty bottle of wine, a knife and a piece of Gruyere cheese, signed J.Grykho.1923. It had probably been left in payment of a debt.”

One or two of us had read Jean Rhys’s novels before. Mostly her more famous novel Wide Sargasso Sea. (which is a retelling of the story of the mad woman in the attic in Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre). After Leaving Mr Mackenzie is one of her earlier novels, published in 1930. The story is fairly simple. Julia Martin is dumped by her former lover Mr Mackenzie and offered, under humiliating if not threatening circumstances, a financial allowance to stay away from him. She needs this money to survive and then comes a fatal letter cancelling any more payments.

Julia has no family connections, or anyone to whom she can appeal for help who hasn't already begrudingly offered her a handout. She is forced to rely on her ability to attract men but with decreasing success as her looks fade. (She is only in her mid-30s. But in the twenties one was considered old at forty)

Julia returns to London at the suggestion of a new, but less than dedicated, suitor. She visits her sister Norah who is jealous of Julia's freedom and expensive clothes. Her paralysed mother dies and Julia returns to Paris where, once again, she bumps into Mr Mackenzie. Very little has changed. She still asks him for money. She is locked into a way of life she doesn’t feel she can escape from. We see her finally in the hour between the dog and wolf - in her twilight years. What will become of her?
We agreed that we would have had less understanding of Julia Martin’s plight if we had read about it when we were younger. Choices for women in the twenties were very limited. At first it seems shocking that she survived by living off money she received from men – she was not exactly a prostitute but a “kept” woman. A professional mistress- providing sexual pleasure at a time when men usually had to marry a girl to be able to have sex with her. They were such different times! In her mind she started off with great ambitions - she was a seeker of adventure at a time when women were expected to be demure and respectable. "She wanted to go away with just the same feeling a boy has when he wants to run away to sea ... Do you understand that a girl might have that feeling?"

She wanted it like iron.- We puzzled over this image until it was pointed out that iron was a precious metal and in huge demand after the first world war. She was casting off her conventional background, marrying to escape, to have an adventure. When her marriage failed, not many opportunities were open to her. Some of us felt she should have just taken any work she could find, perhaps as a maid. At least then she would have been an independent woman. But it must have been tempting if men kept offering to keep her in a certain lifestyle.

Until after Mr Mackenzie, she had known the pleasure of being desired, but her beauty was diminishing and so too was her power. "She had grown fatter in the last few months and her coat was now too tight and too short for her. She imagined that it gave her a ridiculous appearance, especially behind."

She loved beautiful clothes, but she was poor. She knew that "if you have money, you can go one way. But if you have nothing at all — absolutely nothing at all — and nowhere to get anything, then you go another."

In After Leaving Mr Mackenzie Rhys is telling it as it really was, to pull back the curtain of social decorum and say, "Look! This is what we’re really like to one another!"

Julia describes how she used to sit for a sculptor named Ruth. There was a reproduction of a Modigliani painting on the wall. The woman in the painting had a "sort of proud body, like an utterly lovely proud animal. And a face like a
mask ... The eyes were blank, like a mask, but when you had looked at it a bit it was as if you were looking at a real woman, a live woman."

Rhys contrasts appearances and reality. It was so important, so much stronger in her day, to maintain a rigid standard of respectability. Julia rails against these repressive forces for their effect of making hypocrites of everyone. In a typically self-deluded way, Mr Mackenzie thinks he is beyond reproach. After seeing him two or three times she had spent the night with him at a cheap hotel. Perhaps that was the reason why, when he came to think of it, he had never really liked her.

"I hate hypocrites." She had said that once. Quite casually.

He agreed. "So do I," he had said.

Julia goes on to describe how, on impulse, she told her life story to the sculptor she used to pose for:

"I wanted her to understand, I felt that it was awfully important that some human being should know what I had done and why I had done it. I told everything. I went on and on."

"And when I had finished I looked at her. She said: "You seem to have had a hectic time." But I knew when she spoke that she didn't believe a word."

We remarked how much Rhys packs into such a small novel. (138 pages) So much more than in some novels twice its size. We discussed how she does this. Using few words, Rhys makes no apology for any of her characters. Men use Julia Martin and she uses them. Julia’s depression, failure and desperation are faced head-on. She doesn't offer a facile solution. She knows you don't have to have readers' sympathy to have their admiration. Or she doesn't care. Her writing moves at a fast and economical pace. It is unpredictable and surprisingly funny. "Anything might happen. Happiness. A course of face massage."

It is vivid and observant. “There was a vase of flame coloured tulips in the hall - surely the most graceful of flowers. Some thrust their heads forward like snakes, and some were very erect, stiff, virginal, rather prim. Some were dying with curved grace in their death.”
The loss of childhood is movingly described. “When you are a child you are yourself and you know and see everything prophetically. And then suddenly something happens and you stop being yourself, you become what others force you to be. You lose your wisdom and your soul.”

Ten year old Julia catches butterflies and keeps them in an old tobacco tin. She is fascinated by the sound of the butterflies beating their wings trying to escape. She had hoped to keep them in a comfortable cardboard box and give them nice things to eat. “If the idiots broke their own wings, it wasn’t her fault” she said. Was she having a premonition of her own future? Her wings were clipped soon after she tried to fly. That was the first time she was afraid of nothing - the day she went catching butterflies.

Julia asks herself “the last time you were happy about nothing: the first time you were afraid about nothing. Which came first?”

Rhys shows the ambivalence surrounding female sexuality, and the sadness of seeing a dream giving way to an empty reality. Julia is becoming deadened by the struggle to survive in a world of indifference, is in fact becoming indifferent herself. Julia is a female outsider, a speciality of Rhys’s fiction. She is portrayed from a variety of viewpoints, her own thoughts and observations and those of people she meets and family members. These thoughts and ideas are constantly changing, evolving with mood and circumstances.

‘Animals are better than we are, aren’t they? They’re not all the time pretending and lying and sneering, like loathsome human beings”

Mr Mackenzie was once attracted by her beauty and sensitivity until it became a bore, “she began to depress him...a feeling of caution and suspicion which almost amounted to hatred had entirely overcome him.’ Mr Horsfield vacillates wildly between attraction, disgust and gratitude. Julia too is shameless and manipulative when she can raise the energy, when she can force herself out of the solitude she has come to prefer to human contact. Having flouted convention, she comes to realize too late that age is not kind and she can no longer hope to survive on looks alone.

This is the relevance of the title. Before Mr Mackenzie she had youth and beauty on her side. After Mr Mackenzie she finds she is becoming invisible to
men, especially young men. Some of us thought she would commit suicide, in true tragic-heroine style. But no, she soldiers on and in desperation boldly asks Mr Mackenzie for money. It doesn’t seem to have occurred to her to buy a modest house with the money from Mr Horsfield. This would probably have seemed too conventional and boring for her. We had to remind ourselves that we were reading about a woman from a very different period in history. And one who had chosen a Bohemian lifestyle.

Thanks to the skill of Jean Rhys’s writing we were sympathetic to her situation even though she seemed a very self-centred character. Was she an early feminist? We weren’t sure. Rhys was writing openly about sexuality which was revolutionary then. Another famous woman writing early about sex, Anais Nin, wasn’t published until the late thirties.

Sadly success was slow in coming for Rhys. She was 76 before she received the recognition she deserved. By then, in 1966, times had very much changed.

*Highly Recommended*

A small masterpiece, one of us declared. None disagreed. Original and innovative.