

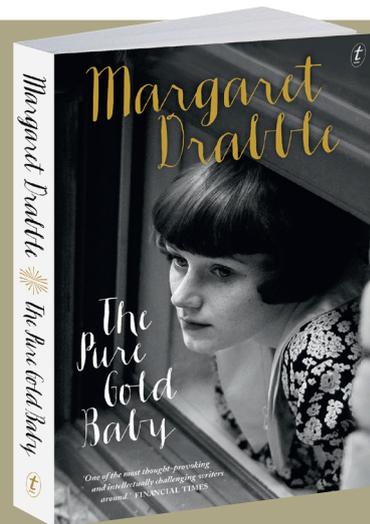
The Pure Gold Baby

MARGARET DRABBLE

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Fiction, Trade Paperback



Praise for Margaret Drabble

'As meticulous as Jane Austen and as deadly as Evelyn Waugh.' *Los Angeles Times*

'Drabble's fiction has achieved a panoramic vision of contemporary life.' *Chicago Tribune*

'Reading Margaret Drabble's novels has become something of a rite of passage. . . . Sharply observed, exquisitely companionable tales.' *The Washington Post*

'One of the most versatile and accomplished writers of her generation" Joyce Carol Oates, *The New Yorker*

About Margaret Drabble

Dame Margaret Drabble was born in Sheffield in 1939 and was educated at Newnham College, Cambridge. She is the author of seventeen highly acclaimed novels, including *A Summer Bird-Cage*, *The Millstone*, *The Peppered Moth*, *The Red Queen* and most recently *The Sea Lady*. She has also written biographies and screenplays, and was the editor of the *Oxford Companion to English Literature*. She was appointed CBE in 1980, and made DBE in the 2000 Honours list.

A reader's introduction to *The Pure Gold Baby*

In the early 1960s, a young anthropologist becomes a single mother to Anna, the 'pure gold baby' of the title. Jess devotes herself to Anna, who is intellectually deficient, perpetually sunny-natured, a constant source of concern. Anna is 'a millstone, an everlasting burden, a pure gold baby, a precious cargo, to carry all the slow way through life to its distant and as yet unimaginable bourne on the shores of the shining lake' (20). The novel follows Jess, Anna and the narrator over half a century.

Jess is drawn to Africa, which she visited as a young student and where saw the lobster-clawed children to whom she retrospectively attributes her maternal sense. But she becomes an armchair anthropologist and doesn't return for decades.

Once old enough, Anna goes away to an institution, which seems pleasant enough, although Jess is never sure that this is the right course. Jess sees another type of institution when she becomes unwillingly responsible for Steve after his attempted suicide in the community garden shed.

While it tells the individual stories of Jess and Anna, *The Pure Gold Baby* is also a nuanced commentary about England, as it was and how it is now. English society is dissected through the book's characters—not just Jess and Anna, but Jess's men, and the other playgroup mothers and their families. There are many references to classic English literature—Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Austen, and Yeats amongst them.

While the narrator tells us little about herself, this is also, obliquely, her story, and it is her reflections on modern life and its contrasts with the past that prompts our thinking.

Written with sometimes caustic wit and with great insight, *The Pure Gold Baby* is a novel ripe for discussion.

Questions for discussion

1. Why has Drabble chosen the description of the 'pure gold baby' for Anna?
2. Jess is also described as 'pure gold' (47): 'That is how we like to see her, our Jess, the shining one who did not lie and did not falter.' Is Jess pure gold? If so, how? If not, why?
3. Jess knows that the lobster-claw children are a symbol for her, but doesn't know of what. Are we supposed to come to a conclusion?
4. Why does Drabble choose Africa as Jess's untaken path and the place where she experiences her 'proleptic tenderness'? What else does Africa stand for in this novel? Why does the narrator see Jess's relationship with someone from Africa as 'predictable'? What does the shining lake stand for? And related to this, what of the story of Livingstone?
5. What sense do we get of the narrator as a character?

6. Jess 'has been constrained by circumstances, like many women through the ages.' What is Drabble saying about the responsibilities of womanhood, and of motherhood in particular? Is this a feminist book?
7. 'Jess decided that she would be better than good-enough. She would be the best of mothers' (20). Later Jess reflects that 'she had made Anna safe and herself indispensable. This had been short sighted' (202). Did Jess have another choice?
8. 'Those of you who are by nature apprehensive and suspicious will read this account as a warning, and you will be right' (6). What is it warning us of?
9. What is the novel saying about mental illness? Discuss the characters of Steve and Zain. How do they contrast with Anna, who is not 'mentally ill' but who is mentally and emotionally different?
10. Does the novel condemn 'political correctness'?
11. Why is the message 'MUM IS DEAD' more powerful than the concept that God is dead?
12. 'Our children were so good, our hopes for them so high. Goodness seemed to be their birthright. How could any of them go astray?' (82) And yet, shortly after this— 'Anna didn't really know how to be bad. We were all, in our way, bad—motivated by ambition, or rivalry, or envy, or lust, or spite, or sloth, and observing the seeds of them in our beloved born-innocent children. But Anna didn't know these emotions.' (84). Why do children 'go astray'? What is the meaning of Anna's purity?
13. 'I was young, vigorous, immortal. I knew I and my children and my children's children would never grow old and we would never die' (137). Why do we refuse to believe we will age and die?
14. 'We lived in an innocent world' (9). Is this a nostalgic book? Does ageing inevitably bring nostalgia?
15. Discuss the long scene where the narrator and Jess go to the opening of a new centre. Storm clouds gather; Jess sees a picture of the lobster claw children in front of the shining lake; the mad mother of a child resident of the centre heckles the speaker; Jess passes out (the narrator believes she has 'an epiphany of anxiety') and Raoul re-appears. Why is this scene so central?
16. What does the return to Africa bring Jess?
17. The narrator tells us that 'Jess is looking for meaning where there isn't any. She's just a bit too inventive about causation. I'm more resigned to the random and pointless' (291). Is this a caution against looking too closely for causation in the novel itself? If so, why does Drabble bring in the character of Christine right at the end?