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Me Before You (Book Review)

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It's almost impossible—by my thinking—not to categorize *Me Before You* as a “problem” novel, a story that may well be consumed by the prominence of a single social issue. I wish that weren't true in a way, because categorizing Jojo Moyes's new novel as such tends to flatten it into a monograph—and it isn't. Not at all.

Ms. Moyes has created wonderfully human characters in what amounts to a love story. It is, without a doubt, her own particular version of the love triangle, a story that swells with charming human character. Really, it's just another love song. But romantic comedies wouldn't be the hits they are if they didn't touch something inside of so many of us, and this one does, big time.

Me Before You is the story of Louise Clark, a woman who has been burdened by her own indifference toward life itself. Her family is poor and unemployed, and she has, throughout her short life (she's just old enough not to be young), simply given over most everything she could be to serve the other hapless members of her own working-class, English family of ne'er-do-wells. When the coffee shop where she's worked for years finally tips over, she becomes, like the rest of the family, unemployed.

Then she reads a note asking for someone to be a care-giver. It's an irony of our times that just about anyone can be a care-giver. That sounds awful, and it's not literally true; but throughout this country we often give our tired and worn out folks over to people who are, as often as not, illegal; after all, they're the only ones who'll take the jobs, given such obscenely meager pay.

Lou Clark applies for and gets that kind of position, taking care of man who was everything she has never been, a wealthy entrepreneur named Will Traynor, a thorough-going jet-setter who's become a quadriplegic after a horrible accident. Lou is a child in life's experience, an innocent, really, someone who has no clear idea of identity or purpose. Will has been the opposite, a wildly successful corporate raider, a paramour, a feature story from the pages of *GQ*.

But no more. He's imprisoned in a wreck of a body that requires 24-hour-a-day maintenance. He's terminally unhappy and makes sure everyone around him shares his pitiable miseries. Lou's job is to tend him. She's not a nurse, so the bodily functions he re-

quires are not her province; her job description is, at least on paper, to be nice to a monster.

What she comes to understand soon enough, however, is that she's become Will's mother's last hope. Will has decided to go to Switzerland and be done with it all, but he's somehow contracted with his mother to wait six months to see if maybe some light may appear he simply hasn't seen in the midnight of his physical horrors. In many ways, Louise Clark *is* that six months.

Will's bargain with his mother was not mentioned in the job description, and Lou Clark, who is almost delightfully naive and sweet, is not a happy employee when she discovers the truth. When she took the job, there'd be no mention of her having to be a savior.

But *Me Before You* is a love story, and soon enough Lou Clark finds herself falling for someone who is, in many ways, everything she isn't, in every way her opposite. And there lies the outline of the story, something we learn early on—Louise Clark, angel of mercy; Will Traynor, the black prince; and that third player, Death itself by way of assisted suicide.

Me Before You has a plot line that offers no mysteries—it's a plain and simple love triangle. What keeps the story afloat is character—Ms. Moyes's Lou Clark tells the story lovingly and honestly; she's a wonderful character, a modern-day Jane Eyre. If the job of a writer is to make the reader fall in love, Ms. Moyes does it, beautifully. I read this novel because the reviewer in the *New York Times* said when she finished the book, her first thought was to read it again. I wanted to read a novel just like that.

It is everything that reviewer claimed. I really loved it, loved reading it, I should say, even though, half way through and maybe even earlier, it's almost impossible not to run right through the stack of pages yet to be thumbed because you know, finally, that this plot can end in only two ways—either Lou convinces Will to love her and love life itself, or else Will books a flight to Switzerland and wills his own death. The outcome is that bare bones—life or death.

And that finally is what makes *Me Before You* a “problem” novel, a story that ties itself so closely to a particular social problem—in this case euthanasia, assisted suicide, mercy killing, call it what you want—that the immense moral question pervading the story simply takes over. For years, I told my col-

lege students they couldn't write term papers about abortion because, really, what else could be said? Everything becomes cliché—and there's some of that in *Me Before You*, quite simply a novel about assisted suicide.

I've been at the bedsides of a dying father and a dying mother-in-law in the last half-dozen years. Our two remaining parents are both mid-90s, and while both of them are doing well, both have also told us that they're more than ready to die. Both are believers. Both look forward to an after-life that will restore peace and joy and love and free them of the walkers both depend on. Let's face it—what remains for both of them could be harrowing; I've seen suffering I wouldn't wish on anyone.

I've often thought that our culture will inevitably entertain quality-of-life questions with more vehemence than it does presently. The inconceivable cost of medical care for elderly—and I'm one of them—will bring that discussion on. There are millions of “boomers” after all, millions and millions of us, and we're going to live longer and longer and longer and need more and more and more medical care, which is ever more and more expensive. We are, alive, a daunting legacy for our children. It's almost impossible to believe that the specter of assisted suicide won't become more of an issue very soon.

But this sweet novel proves, without a doubt, that doctor-assisted suicide will never be easy. Will has an acidic personality when Lou begins to tend him. He's angry and bitter; but then Ms. Moyes gives us every reason to believe he has a right to be a horror—he is,

after all, totally dependent on others to perform every last physical function—and clean up after him.

Louise, the innocent, through her own naive persistence, gets him to love her, something she never guessed she'd do, even if she'd wanted to early on. But even her love for him and his for her, all of it artfully orchestrated by Ms. Moyes, is not enough to keep him from standing by a decision he told his mother he wanted six months before.

This novel is all about assisted suicide.

Jojo Moyes has created wonderful characters, a man and a woman who almost blessedly incarnate the arguments for and against euthanasia. I honestly loved this novel. It's everything the reviewer said it would be.

But there's no escaping the fact that its joys and its riches can't compete with the “problem” it faces—a problem we do. It's a mark of its strength that, had Will Traynor ditched his plans to die and taken up life with a woman who grew to love him, we would have believed the story, even if we would have rolled our eyes at the expected outcome.

Still, when Will Traynor wins, by losing, it's somehow wrong, which means, finally, that the novel itself is deeply unsatisfying simply because of its outcome: Will Traynor chooses death over life. Even though he has every reason in the world to do exactly what he does, it's still a god-awful choice.

I really loved this novel, but when it's all said and done, it's finally less of a love triangle than it is an argument for death. And that's always sad.

Paas, Steven. *Christian Zionism Examined: A Review of Ideas on Israel, the Church and the Kingdom*. Nürnberg: Verlag für Theologie und Religionswissenschaft Publications, 2010. 135 pages. ISBN: 9783941750869, and Donaldson, Alistair W. *The Last Days of Dispensationalism: A Scholarly Critique of Popular Misconceptions*. Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011. xv + 168 pages. ISBN: 9781608995158. Reviewed by Keith C. Sewell, emeritus professor of history, Dordt College.

These two books—Stephen Paas's *Christian Zionism Examined: A Review of Ideas on Israel, the Church and the Kingdom* and Alistair W. Donaldson's *The Last Days of Dispensationalism: A Scholarly Critique of Popular Misconceptions*—come from distant parts of the globe. Steven Paas has been active as a Presbyterian minister in the Church of Central Africa and a lecturer in the Zomba Theological College in Malawi. He has published a number of works with the Reformatorische Verlag Beese of Hamburg, Germany. Alistair Donaldson is Lecturer in Biblical Theology,

Biblical Studies, Hermeneutics, and Worldview at Laidlaw College in Christchurch, New Zealand. These two books are united in their opposition to “Christian Zionism” of the pre-millennial dispensationalist variety—a view of the “end times” remarkably prevalent in the United States, presented in Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970) and by other figures, including Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and Derek Prince (94-5). This view is presupposed in the best-selling “left behind” novels of Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins.