



## Undue Influence

By Anita Brookner

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### Undue Influence By Anita Brookner

In **Undue Influence**, acclaimed novelist Anita Brookner proves once again that even in the most closely circumscribed of lives, hearts can venture into unknown-and potentially explosive-territory.

Claire Pitt is nothing if not a practical young woman, living a life in contemporary London that is to all appearances placid, orderly and consciously lacking in surprise. And yet Claire's tangled interior life gives the lie to that illusion. She is prone to vivid speculation about the lives of others, and to fantasies about her own fate that lead her into a courtship so strange that even she wonders at its power to compel her. Martin Gibson and his chronically ill wife Cynthia come to depend on Claire to an extent that is nothing short of baffling, and yet Claire becomes ever bolder in her pursuit of their acquaintance-and, ultimately, of Martin's elusive affections. The result, a potent tale of urban loneliness and the chance intersections that assuage it, constitutes one of Brookner's finest and most psychologically acute achievements.

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

A new Anita Brookner is unlikely to surprise, unlikely to shock or disturb. Yet her fiction remains utterly compelling. *Undue Influence*, her 19th novel, follows the usual pattern: a single, bookish woman, whose life is dominated by loneliness and the seeming impossibility of marriage, has her forlorn equilibrium disturbed by an unsuitable attraction. At 29, Claire Pitt is one of Brookner's younger alter egos--financially independent, clever, emancipated but empty. When she sees Martin Gibson in the secondhand bookshop where she works, Claire is beguiled.

I looked at my watch and realized that he had been silently reading for thirty-five minutes. By this time he could have had one or two of Heine's poems off by heart. Either that or he was translating them. Perhaps he too was a man of letters. But he looked too ineffable, and also too unhappy, for that. I altered my estimate of him. He was a dilettante, a caste I had always admired.

Soon, Claire's desire to be part of the story she tells herself about Martin's probable life leads her to provoke the quiet crisis so indicative of a Brookner dénouement.

This gifted author, who is seen by some critics as the embodiment of Jamesian exactitude, is really quite the opposite. An almost pathological writer, Brookner returns again and again to her notion of the inability of women to think of marriage as something that will rescue them--and yet they are pulled toward the ideal (one they easily deconstruct) of a romantic savior. A particular, melancholic despondence saturates her work, and disappointment dominates, despite the humor, erudition, and classical elegance of her prose. Brookner is a modern, bitter writer. Few novelists have the ability to create such complete characters and then dissect their motives so clearly. Even fewer have the skill to delineate the emotional complexity of the domesticated manners that mark our inability to communicate with one other. *Undue Influence* is another triumph of profound psychological investigation--and perception--from one of England's finest writers. --Mark Thwaite

#### From Publishers Weekly

To 29-year-old Claire Pitt, a self-contained single woman living in London, her mother's death is more than an ordinary bereavement: it is the beginning of a process of self-doubt and a failure of nerve. Left alone in the apartment that she and her mother shared, Claire gradually realizes that she craves "the permanence of someone's affections" and the state of marriage, which she has always despised. Having vaguely pitied her widowed mother, Claire now feels sorry for the elderly spinster she works for at a second-hand bookstore. Faintly hoping to avoid these two women's lonely fates, Claire now sees that she is as alone and vulnerable as they were, and that her sexual freedomAexercised in quick, anonymous couplings that she initiates and then abandonsAhas not given her any basis for a lasting relationship. Opportunity seems to appear when Martin Gibson, a handsome, wealthy, but shallow and self-absorbed ex-professor, comes into the bookstore. When Martin's invalid wife dies soon afterwards, Claire sets her cap for him and fantasizes the life she will haveAnotwithstanding her skeptical nature and the absence of love on both sides. In Brookner's expert hands, Claire's realization that weak, unworthy Martin will not neatly fulfill her dreams is accomplished with lapidarian skill. At first Claire is complacent about her own shortcomings ("I'd lay claim to few moral qualities"), but she has no qualms about her behavior. She is an opportunist who views the world through ironic eyes. Yet Brookner's portrait of Claire's disillusionment and growing fear, as she descends from a competent independence to a state of frightened wandering in the heart's desert, is etched with quiet compassion. The novel contains a fine brace of supporting characters whose behavior implicitly reflects on

Claire's fall into limbo, and Brookner's narrative skill works like a scalpel exposing the complexity of each of their lives. As she has done many times before (*Falling Slowly*, etc.), but never with more acuity or grace, Brookner illuminates the inner turmoil of lonely people living courageously while the door to the future begins to swing closed. (Jan.)

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#### From Library Journal

Brookner once again takes on the themes of loneliness, the scars we bear from the emotional wounds of our past, and the ways that people do (and do not) connect as she tells the story of Claire Pitt, an unmarried woman in London. Claire, whose mother just died, takes a job in a bookstore owned by two elderly sisters. Working in the basement (the foreign language section, which hardly ever has any customers), her task is typing up the articles and journal entries of the sisters' long dead father, readying them for possible future publication. When older, attractive, and somewhat mysterious Martin Gibson comes to the basement one day looking for a book, Claire is drawn to him. They become involved despite Claire's knowledge throughout that Martin feels no real connection to her, and what begins for Claire as another of her brief and superficial affairs moves into the territory of obsession. Brookner's characters are somewhat chilly and distant, and although the reader feels empathy for Claire's situation, it is also hard to understand her self-delusion. Diana Quick's narration is superb; she fully conveys the despair and pain Claire experiences and enhances the emotional nuances in the story. Her first-person reading of Claire's thoughts and conversations are always compelling. Despite Quick's talents, this remains ultimately a distant novel best appreciated by loyal Brookner fans. DMelody A. Moxley, Rowan P.L., Salisbury, NC

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##### Stephen Louis:

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##### Lily Winstead:

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**Mark Miller:**

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**Beth Kelly:**

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