*The Grown-ups* (1989)

by Victoria Glendinning.

CUSTOMER REVIEWS

**\*\*\*\*\* a quintessential "British-woman-novelist"**

There is a particular genre of British authors - british WOMEN writers who have such mastery over the nuance of man/woman behaviour that one could flatter oneself (if one were as fine a writer as they) that the book you are reading is a transcription of your own diary. In The Grown-ups" Victoria Glendinning, by virtue of her own incredibly discerning eye and ear writes about the kinds of random thoughts that you and I have, but never have the wit - or the will - to record. Speaking, for example, of elevator music she says ""a Chopin piano concerto from hidden speakers sprayed into the enclosed space like air-freshener" Flicks of knife-sharp characterizations, seemingly effortless, fill the book which is populated by a large cast of English semi-upper-class, each etched in acid and insight. I stumbled on this book in a dusty paper-back and am now asking Amazon to find me at least two more copies to give to friends....and am checking the notable biographies she has written of Rebecca West and Edith Sitwell. Ms Glendinning is extraordinarily funny, and deeply gifted.

**\*\* Well Written, But Not a Very Satisfying Read**

Dr Leo Ulm, a celebrated author, well-known social philosopher and television personality, suddenly has a stroke at the age of fifty-nine and dies soon afterwards, leaving behind several women who have idolised him and who now have the opportunity to re-examine their feelings for him. There is his ex-wife Charlotte, quietly losing her mind, who has longed for him since he divorced her; there is his second wife, Martha, much younger than Leo and an illustrator, who has neglected her work in order to accommodate his every need; there is Martha’s friend from her schooldays, the lovely Alice, who has tried to console her need for Leo by marrying Leo’s and Charlotte’s son, Fergie, who was blinded by an accident in childhood; there is Clara (another friend from school), who has dreamt of having sex with Leo; and there is also Emmeline, a Frenchwoman Leo slept with whilst at a conference in Washington, who found it difficult to let him go. But why did all these women find Leo so attractive and why were they all so devoted to him? As we read on we discover that Leo was a vain, egocentric, chauvinistic and monstrously self-centred individual who didn’t deserve the adulation he received - so, again, why did all these women find him so fascinating?

Unfortunately Victoria Glendinning has created such an unlikeable character in Leo Ulm that his total lack of redeeming qualities makes it difficult to be interested in him or the women who foolishly allow themselves to become obsessed with him. And furthermore, the female characters (excepting Charlotte) are not particularly likeable either, especially Clara who is unable to commit herself to her lover Harry (who wants to marry her) and treats him dismissively because she cannot get Leo out of her mind and who selfishly considers sleeping with Leo even though he is the husband of a close friend, without any thought of the pain this might cause to Harry or Martha. Admittedly this is a well-written novel, there are some good pieces of descriptive writing and there were parts to the story which interested me; however, ultimately this is a tale about a group of privileged, immature and self-indulgent characters - and consequently I found this a less than satisfying read. I have read Ms Glendinning’s biographies of Vita Sackville, Rebecca West and Edith Sitwell, all of which I found both informative and very readable, but I’m not sure I would be interested in reading another fiction title by this author - however, I do have her biographies of Leonard Woolf and Anthony Trollope on my shelves and am looking forward to reading those some time soon.