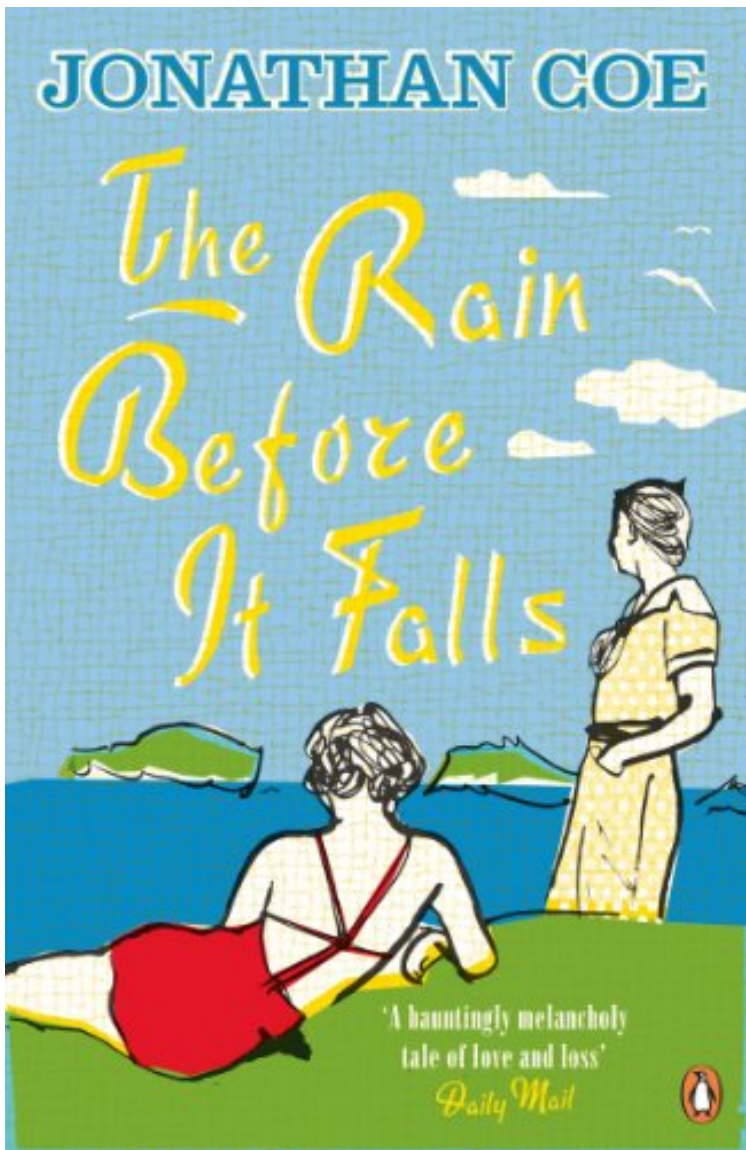


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The Rain Before it Falls



Par Jonathan Coe
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThe Rain Before it Falls - Jonathan Coe's heartbreaking novel of family secretsDeeply moving and compelling, The Rain Before it Falls is the story of three generations of one family riven by tragedy. When Rosamund, a reluctant bearer of family secrets, dies suddenly, a mystery is left for her niece Gill to unravel. Some photograph albums and tapes point towards a blind girl named Imogen whom no one has seen in twenty years. The search for Imogen and the truth of her inheritance becomes a shocking story of mothers and daughters and of how sadness, like a musical refrain, may haunt us down the years.'Spectacular, heartbreaking, beautifully written. Rosamund's story is one of the most extraordinary and compelling you will ever read. Impossible to put down, I loved every minute of it' Sunday Express'A sad, often very moving

story of mothers and daughters' Guardian'Entirely compelling...the plot will keep you rapt...reminiscent of Ian McEwan at his most effective' New Statesman Jonathan Coe's novels are filled with moving, astute observations of life and love, and are written with a revealing honesty that has captivated a generation of readers. His other titles, *The Accidental Woman*, *The Rotters' Club* (winner of the Everyman Wodehouse prize), *The Closed Circle*, *The Dwarves of Death*, *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim*, *The House of Sleep* (winner of the 1998 Prix Mdicis Stranger), *A Touch of Love*, and *What a Carve Up!* (winner of the 1995 John Llewellyn Rhys Prize), are all available in Penguin paperback.

ExtraitNumber three: the caravan.I have not yet described Warden Farmthe house itselfin any detail, but I think I will talk about the caravan first. It was one of the first things that Beatrix showed me in the garden, and it quickly became the place where we would retreat and hide together. You could say that everything started from there.Aunt Ivy gave me this photograph herself, I remember, at the end of my time living at her house. It was one of her few real acts of kindness. Beneath her warm and welcoming exterior, she turned out to be a rather distant, unapproachable woman. She and her husband had built for themselves an active and comfortable life, which revolved mainly around hunting and shooting and all the associated social activities which came with them. She was a busy organizer of hunt balls, tennis-club suppers and the like. Also, she doted on her two sons, athletic and sturdy boysgood-natured, too, but not very well endowed in the brains department, it seems to me in retrospect. None of these things, at any rate, made her inclined to expend much of her attention on methewanted guest, the evacueeor indeed on her daughter, Beatrix. Therein lay the seeds of the problem. Neglected and resentful, Beatrix seized upon me as soon as I arrived, knowing that in me she had found someone in an even more vulnerable position than her own, someone it would be easy to enlist as her devoted follower. She showed me kindness and she showed me attention: these things were enough to win my loyalty, and indeed I have never forgotten them even to this day, however selfish her motives might have been at the time.The house was large, and full of places we might have made our own: unvisited, secret places. But in Beatrix's mindthough I did not understand this until laterit was their place, it belonged to the family by whom she felt so rejected, and so she chose somewhere else, somewhere quite separate, as the place where she and I should pursue our friendship. That was why we spent so much of our time, during those early days and weeks, in the caravan.Let me see, now. The caravan itself is half-obsured, in this picture, by overhanging trees. It had been placed, for some reason, in one of the most remote corners of the grounds, and left there for many years. This photograph captures it just as I remember it: eerie, neglected, the woodwork starting to rot and the metalwork corroding into rust. It was tiny, as this image confirms. The shape, I think, is referred to as teardrop: that is to say, the rear end is rounded, describing a small, elegant curve, while the front seems to have been chopped off, and is entirely flat. Its a curious shape: in effect, the caravan looks as though it is only half there. The trees hanging over its roof and trailing fingers down the walls are some kind of birch, I believe. The caravan had been placed on the outskirts of a wood: in fact the dividing line between this woodpresumably common landand the furthest reaches of Uncle Owens property was difficult to determine. A more modern caravan might have had a picture window at the front; this one, I see, had only two small windows, very high up, and a similar window at the side. No surprise, then, that it was always dark inside. The door was solid and dark, and made of wood, like the whole of the bottom half of the caravaneven the towbar. Thats an odd feature, isnt it?but Im sure that I am right. It rested on four wooden legs, and always sat closer to the ground than it should have done, because both the tyres were flat. The windows were filthy, too, and the whole thing gave the appearance of having been abandoned and fallen into irreversible decay. But to a child, of course, that simply made it all the more attractive. I can only imagine that Ivy and Owen had bought it many years ago in the 1920s, perhaps, when they were first marriedand had stopped using it as soon as they had children. Inside there were only two bunks, so it would have been quite useless for family holidays.How many weeks was it, I wonder, before Beatrix and I set up camp there together? Or was it only a matter of days? They say that split seconds and aeons become interchangeable when you experience intense emotion, and after my arrival at Warden Farm I was soon feeling a sense of loneliness and homesickness which I find it impossible to describe. I was beside myself with unhappiness. I would sob quite openly in front of Ivy and Owenat the supper table, for instancebut never once, to my knowledge, did they think of telephoning my parents to tell them how miserable I was. My distress was simply ignored, by them, by the two boysby everybody, in short, apart from the cook (who was a kindly soul), and of course by Beatrix. Even she was cruel to me at first. And yet I do think that when she finally took me under her wing, it was because she felt sorry for me, not simply because I was weaker than her, and easy to manipulate. She was lonely, too, remember, and she needed a friend. Beatrix could be a selfish person, at times, there is no

doubt about that: I was to see it proved again and again over the following years and decades. But at the same time she was quite capable of love. Rather more than capable of it, I should say: she was vulnerable to it that would be a better word deeply, fatally vulnerable. And certainly, I think, during my time at the farm, she came to love me. In her way. Her way of loving me, in fact, was to try to help me. And her first attempt to help me involved our drawing up a ludicrous and desperate plan which we resolved to carry out together. We decided that we were going to escape. During the long afternoons, the lawn stretched out, billiard green, at the front of the house. A narrow, gravelled drive cut through it, but no cars ever used this drive. Almost nobody used the front door at all: only the children and Beatrix and I especially. It was the back door where the men came to do their business, and so it was the back door that was watched. The cook watched it, from her kitchen, and Ivy watched it, from her bedroom, and Uncle Owen watched it, from his tiny, benighted study. There could be no escape that way. Even at dusk it would be risky and it was at dusk that we had decided to leave. That afternoon, sitting alone beneath the low roof, the crazy angles of my bedroom, while Beatrix was downstairs, taking food from the kitchen, waiting until the cook's back was turned, I thought once more of my own mother and father, at home in Birmingham, going about their ordinary lives. My father riding to work on his bicycle, a gas mask slung over his shoulder. My mother pinning out washing on the line in the back garden, just a few yards from the entrance to the air-raid shelter. These things, I knew, had something to do with danger, with the danger I had been brought here to escape from, the danger that they lived within, now, every minute of every day. And all I could think was that it was not fair. I wanted to share in that danger. It frightened me, yes, but nowhere near as much as this absence, nowhere near as much. That evening, we waited until the house was quiet, until Ivy and Owen had settled down to a drink after dinner, and the boys had gone upstairs to play, and then we put on our coats and pulled back the heavy latch on the front door and we slipped outside. She was eleven years old. I was eight. I would have followed her anywhere. There was a thick dampness in the air, somewhere between mist and rain. The rising moon was three-quarters full, but screened by clouds. There was no birdsong. Even the sheep had fallen silent. We made no noise as we stepped out on to the grass. Still wearing our school shoes, we scurried over the spongy moistness of the front lawn. We jumped down, over the ha-ha and on to the lower level of the garden, and made for the overgrown gap in the hedge, the opening that led to the secret path; the path that led to the secret place. She ran ahead; I followed. Her grey school mackintosh, appearing and disappearing between the leaves. At the end of the path was a clearing, tangled and overgrown with hanging branches and trailing ivy, and within this clearing was the caravan. The cold gripped you the moment you opened the door and stepped inside. The net curtains hung grey and filthy over the windows, ragged with moth holes, blackened with the corpses of flies. There was a small table which folded out from the wall, and two bench seats on either side of it. Nowhere else to sit down. A kettle on the stove, but the gas cylinder was long since empty. From the farmhouse, Beatrix had carried with her a brown bottle, a cork wedged loosely at the top, filled to the brim with cloudy lemonade, and over the last few days, she had been hiding further provisions here. A half-loaf of bread, solid as masonry. A wedge of cheese, Shropshire blue, crusty at the edges. Two apples from the orchard. And three biscuits, shortbread, baked by the cook, and filched from the biscuit tin in the larder at the risk of God knows what dreadful punishment. Let's eat some of this now, she said; and we set to it, quietly and with great deliberation. I had not been able to eat much dinner and was hungry now even though my stomach was so tightened with fearful anticipation that I could barely force the food down. There were a few items of cutlery still in one of the drawers, and Beatrix used a fruit knife to cut the bread and the cheese. When we had finished eating, without saying another word, she took my hand, turned it palm upward, and drew the blade of the knife along my tiny forefinger. I cried out, and hot salt tears sprang up in my eyes. But she took no notice. Calmly, she did the same to herself and then pressed her finger against mine, so that the two pools of blood mingled and coalesced. There, she said. We're sisters now. Together. Whatever happens. Agreed? I nodded, still without saying a word. What I felt the thing that robbed me of my voice was either terror, or love. Or both. Probably both, I think. Come on, she said. We've got a long way to go tonight. We had already packed our clothes and brought them to the caravan the day before. Mine were squashed tightly into the small dun-coloured suitcase my mother herself had first packed a few weeks ago. It was not a practical arrangement, for an escape across countryside. My little knitted woollen toy, a black dog called Shadow, would not fit into the case. I was going to have to carry him. When I picked him up he gazed at me inscrutably, without expression. He was the thing I loved fourth best in the whole world, after my mother, and my father, and now Beatrix. The light died quickly that night. When we left the caravan and closed the door behind us, the darkness was already absolute. We turned our faces away from

the farmhouse and set off into the woods, leaving it behind for ever. Beatrix held my hand. The only sounds were the sounds of our footsteps, the clumsy snapping of twigs. I know now at least I think I know, insofar as one can ever know these things that it was never her intention to take me home. She was old enough to know that two little girls could never walk all the way to my parents house. But I did not know that, and I trusted her. And besides, we were blood-sisters now. We came out of the woods and crossed the last of Uncle Owens fields. After that we walked for perhaps no more than an hour, but to me it seemed a hundred lifetimes.

Beatrix knew that country well and she chose her route with cunning, describing an almost perfect circle. When we reached the glade where I begged her to rest, we must have been almost back at the farmhouse, but for all I knew, we could have been anywhere. We lay down, and I clutched Shadow to my chest. The clouds had parted and the moon bathed everything in a quicksilver light. I could not stop shivering. Now I was more tired than scared, and gripped with a clinging despair, but still, there was a kind of beauty all around us. I was aware of that, even then. Beatrix put her arm behind my neck, and I pressed myself tightly against her, and we lay like that, on our backs, staring up at the stars. Do you think we'll get there? I asked. Do you think we'll get there tonight? And when she didn't answer, I framed another question, the one that had been puzzling me the most: Why do you want to come? Why do you want to leave home? I don't like my mother and father, she answered, after a long time. I don't think they love me. Are they cruel to you? I asked. Again, she didn't answer. In spite of myself, I began to grow sleepy. A barn owl was hooting, crying out in the night, very close to us. The trees rustled, the undergrowth was restless with hints of subtle, mysterious life. I could feel the warmth of Beatrix's body, the pulsing of blood through the arm at the back of my head. Her sensations became mine. The moon continued to rise, and with a flurry the owl launched into sudden flight, skimming away beneath the branches of the trees. The dampness had left the air. The goal I had fixed upon reaching the city, knocking on the door of my astonished parents house receded and vanished. Despite the cold, I was happy here. When I awoke, Beatrix was no longer with me. I sat up and looked around me, my heart pounding. I could see her standing at the edge of the glade, looking out over the moonlit field. Her fragile silhouette. And I could hear voices. Human voices, although they sounded as desolate and unearthly as the low wail of the barn owl. Human voices, calling our names: her name, and mine. Figures a whole row of tiny black figures appeared in the distance, coming towards us across the field. In defiance of the blackout, some of them were carrying torches, and these needles of bobbing light danced like sad fireflies as they made their inevitable progress towards Beatrix, who stood and watched, impassive, trembling slightly, but only with the cold, never thinking to turn and run, as I wanted to. And why should she? She had provoked this moment. She had intended it. They were coming to find us. From the Hardcover edition. From Publishers Weekly Starred . In the latest from acclaimed London novelist Coe (*The Rotter's Club*), the story of two cousins' friendship is keyed to a hatred that is handed down from mother to daughter across generations, as in a Greek tragedy. Evacuated from London to her aunt and uncle's Shropshire farm, Rosamond bonds with her older cousin, Beatrix, who is emotionally abused by her mother. Beatrix grows up to abuse her daughter, Thea (in one unforgettable scene, Beatrix takes a knife and flies after Thea after Thea has ruined a blouse), with repercussions that reach the next generation. All of this is narrated in retrospect by an elderly Rosamond into a tape recorder: she is recording the family's history for Imogene, Beatrix's granddaughter, who is blind, and whom Rosamond hasn't seen in 20 years. As the story progresses, it becomes clear that Rosamond's fundamental flaw and limit is her decency, a quality Coe weaves beautifully into the Shropshire and London settings along with violence. Through relatively narrow lives on a narrow isle, Coe articulates a fierce, emotional current whose sweep catches the reader and doesn't let go until the very end. (Mar.)

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