



One Great Book: Volume II, Episode 7 *The Shell Seekers* by Rosamunde Pilcher

[Show Notes](#)

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One Great Book Volume II, Book 7: *The Shell Seekers*

[UPBEAT INTRO MUSIC]

Hey readers, I'm Anne Bogel, and you're listening to *One Great Book*, the short-form podcast from the team behind *What Should I Read Next?*, where each week I pull one stand-out selection off my personal bookshelves and tell you all about it in ten minutes or less.

[MUSIC]

Back in 1984, when Rosamunde Pilcher was sixty years old and well established as a British writer, her editor had an idea for what was to be her 14th book. He thought she ought to write “a big fat novel for women,” one that a reader could really sink her teeth into, about characters that felt real, and that, importantly, reflected the experiences of her generation. She'd never written anything like that, and she imagined it would be vastly more difficult than anything else she'd done as a writer; she'd written all her previous books in three months or less actually. But if her editor thought she could do it, she figured she could, and she said yes.

That conversation inspired *The Shell Seekers*, and it changed the face of publishing. Pilcher's books had sold respectably in the U.K., where she lived, but this book was a *phenomenon*, leading Pilcher to call herself “an overnight success who only took forty-five years to make it.” Americans had never read much Pilcher before, but when the book entered the American market, it sold like hotcakes. Booksellers said they'd never seen anything like it: readers picked it up because of the cover, they *loved it*, then foisted it on their mothers, daughters, sisters, friends. It spent 49 weeks on the New York Times bestseller lists, and sold 10 million copies. I



was a kid when it came out in 1987 and even I remember seeing it—and its distinct cover—everywhere.

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That original cover now looks terribly dated, but the book itself has held up remarkably well over the years; new readers keep finding it, and it *still* feels fresh and relevant to them. It's even one of the top 100 novels in the BBC's Big Read, because a remarkably wide audience of readers continues to devour *The Shell Seekers*, even today, and continue to consider it One. Great. Book.

[MUSIC]

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Rosamunde Pilcher knew she wanted to weave three separate themes together in her big fat novel. She was interested in writing about upper-class Bohemians, like the Bloomsbury Group, or—more to the point—like the artists' colony she grew up in around in Cornwall. She was intrigued by the "disastrous effect the prospect of an inheritance can have on a perfectly normal family"—how greed can destroy what once were good relationships. And it also felt important



that she write about the days *before* World War II, because that era was so important to her generation.

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Add these together and you get *The Shell Seekers*. At the heart of the story sits 64-year-old Penelope Keeling, mother of three, daughter of a deceased Victorian artist whose work is newly popular. The title of the book refers not to the characters specifically, but to a painting: *The Shell Seekers* is Penelope's favorite of her father's works; it's her most treasured possession. He gave it to Penelope for a wedding present, hardly anyone outside the family knows this painting even exists. Works from the Victorian school never sold for much, but apparently that's changed now; Penelope is shocked by her son's news that *The Shell Seekers* is now worth a small fortune. Her children—well, most of them—are eager for her to sell the painting now, right now, while it is sure to fetch a high price, and they have detailed plans for what should be done with the windfall. But that doesn't mean Penelope agrees.

Each of the book's 14 chapters focuses on a new character in the story, a set-up I found worrisome when I first saw it, because it looks like a lot of people—too many to really get to know, as a reader. But what Pilcher does through these new characters is draw you in more deeply to their lives—and especially, to Penelope's life. When the book opens, you know where she is in life, but you don't know how she got there. By subtly turning the prism in each successive chapter, Pilcher illuminates different aspects of these people's lives, shows us how their circumstances made them who they are, reveals how their past lives influence the present they find themselves in. We see what happened back then, and we also see what might have been. And we glimpse what might yet be, if Penelope has her way. The tone is wistful and wise, and if Penelope's life doesn't get you thinking about your own relationships, you're not paying attention.

[MUSIC]

The action moves between Cornwall and London, and between past and present, spanning the period from Penelope's childhood between the wars to Pilcher's current day, the 1980s. Pilcher aimed to write a "big, fat novel" and this one spreads out over 600 admirably paced pages,



giving the reader ample time to get to know her characters: like her children, who haven't grown up to be the adults she hoped they would. In flashbacks, we get to know Penelope's deceased parents and friends from her Cornwall childhood, and experience life during the war—both on the coast and in London—and we see it through their eyes. And while *family* is important in *The Shell Seekers*, nobody does *found* family like Rosamund Pilcher.

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She consistently places unlikely and often lonely people together into groups they don't *know* they want or need, but change their whole lives. In *The Shell Seekers*, specifically, Penelope considers people to be her passion—well, that and her gardening—and she has a knack for taking kindred spirits under her wing. Pilcher also does intergenerational friendship incredibly well, and I love reading about the bonds formed between old and young in her novels.

In her tenth anniversary introduction to the book, Rosamund Pilcher said “she'd like to think perhaps *The Shell Seekers* would be bought as a present for [a young teenager], sated with comics and teenage mags, and ready and waiting to sink his or her teeth into an adult book that will arouse their interest and attention, keep them turning the pages, and start them off on the long and wonderful road of reading for pleasure.”

I imagine Pilcher's gotten her wish over the years, because what *The Shell Seekers* does so well is draw you into another world—a world filled with people you feel you know and enjoy spending time with, and who you fervently wish good things for, as they navigate tricky situations in life that sometimes—strangely—resemble your own. This is the kind of book that makes 600 pages feel short, that you'll close with a sigh and think, yes, that' is as it should be. And it's the kind of book that can give you fresh eyes to see your own life, past and present, your own relationships, and your own situation. It's a book that reminds many readers just why they love reading in the first place.

In short, if you're looking for a multigenerational family saga full of interesting, well-developed, and flawed-but-likable characters that's proven to have staying power, *The Shell Seekers* may be the next great book you're looking for.



[08:00]

Readers, visit modernmrsdarcy.com/onegreatbook to learn more about *The Shell Seekers* and all of the great books we've covered in both of the first two volumes. If you haven't listened to all of them you've got a chance to go back and do that now because this is the end of Volume II and we're taking a couple of weeks off before the start of Volume III.

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Thanks to Kellen Pechacek for his sound design on today's episode.

Readers, that's it for this episode, thanks so much for listening.

And as Rainer Maria Rilke said, "ah, how good it is to be among people who are reading."

Happy reading, everyone.