Curiosity: A Love Story
by Joan Thomas

Reviewed by Heidi Greco

The subtitle of Curiosity reveals its essence: it’s a love story. But besides being a romance, in the fullest, most classic sense, it tells the story of Mary Anning, a woman who made some truly amazing contributions to science, including the discovery of the first Ichthyosaurus, and, in a day when science was strictly a man’s world, received no credit for them. It is the story of a woman with big dreams, accomplishments, and disappointments.

Yet these surface summations offer little in the way of explaining the heft of this novel – and I’m talking about much more than its 400 pages. It’s difficult to even begin to describe the book’s many intricate levels; I suspect it will become the subject of more than a few university English course papers.

So, what is it that makes this book so special?

Mary Anning, its real-life heroine, was born in 1799 and lived by the sea in Lyme Regis, an English village probably best known for its limestone cliffs and quarry. What fascinated author Joan Thomas was Mary Anning’s character; her own curiosity drove her to learn more, and she dove into what sounds like a year of solid research. Yet the novel she has written is far more than a character study. It’s rich and involved, in keeping with the tradition of the great English novels – Fielding and Austen come to mind. And its levels (there’s that word again) reveal more than curiosities.

Eleven-year-old Mary contributes to the well-being of her poverty-bound family by scouting fossils on the shore and selling them to whoever might buy. (In fact, Mary Anning is thought by many to be the famous “she” in the tongue-twister, “She sells seashells by the seashore.”) When a stranger says the true name – ammonites – for the objects she’s always called snakestones, it’s as if a fire has been lit in her. She wants to know more.

One of the first things she wants to learn is how to read. When she does, it happens all in a rush, the words revealing their nature to her. She receives her first book from the same man who revealed the proper names for her stones. However, the book he gives her
is not the scientific catalogue she’d hoped for, but a bible. Still, she reads aloud from it, bringing comfort to the members of her family, who seem to take turns falling ill and dying.

The story reveals itself slowly, in layers, much the way the fossils give themselves up from within the limestone layers of the ever-eroding cliff. And the revelations of the cliff provide the cornerstone of the tale. Although Mary may be poor and uneducated, she is well versed in seaside lore and understands where and when to look for treasures.

When she is only twelve, she makes a tremendous find, discovering – and unearthing on her own – a huge creature later described by one of the characters: “its mother was certainly a fish and its father a crocodile” (169). The creature of course is one of the first dinosaurs ever discovered, and Mary imagines “Her name would be written in their books and . . . students at the great university would learn of her” (187). Yet no credit for finding it – aside from a fee that she uses to provide for her family – goes to Mary. This is but the first of her disappointments with men, especially men of science.

It is difficult to encompass the breadth of Curiosity in a short review. I’m reminded of Mary’s own words, when she tries to compose a text for her father: “Working with pen and paper, she could not capture the ideas that fluttered like moths in her head” (86).

But moths may be too dull an image to employ. Again, I turn to the character Mary, by all accounts a plain child until, when almost two years old, she is part of a group sheltering under a tree that is struck by lightning. She is the sole survivor, and is suddenly able to talk; even her hair takes on a more lustrous shine.

Mary’s telling the story of her own un-dumbing reveals much about the unfolding process of story itself. “When Mary turned her mind to the scene that followed, the story grew in fullness, words coming out on its branches the way blossoms come out on an apple tree” (57).

Even though Curiosity is, by rights, an historical novel, it is not without applications to our own time. Mary’s world too is a world in transition. She observes that when her mother “was a girl, all the girls and women sat in the doorways and made lace, but the lace had gone north to the steam mills” (94). The vocabulary and jobs may have changed since that time, but has the situation?

This universality is one of the aspects that make Curiosity not merely a good book, but a great one. It is a book with richly layered plot, deeply memorable characters, hidden words like fossils that might turn up on the beach, and plenty of downright gorgeous
writing. Those willing to dig for their own treasures in these pages are sure to find a nearly endless supply.

Even though Heidi Greco has lived near the sea almost all her adult life, her biggest finds are usually clam shells and sand dollars. Still, she’s not about to quit taking beach walks.

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