

E.M. FORSTER

"The final test for a novel will be our affection for it, as it is the test of our friends, and of anything else which we cannot define."

- E.M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel

BY JESSICA TEISCH

"YES—OH DEAR, YES—THE NOVEL TELLS A STORY,"

E.M. (Edward Morgan) Forster wrote in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927). One of the twentieth century's beloved English novelists and critics, Forster told many stories in his novels, short fiction, and non-fiction. In elegant, concise language, he examined class attitudes and cultural conflict during a period of major unrest in British history, including the controversial Boer War, rapid urbanization, political strife, and controversy over social reforms. Through strong, comic characters—many of them women—he chipped away at Victorian middle-class values and Britain's imperial ambitions. *A Passage to India* (1924), a bitter look at the end of colonialism, cemented his literary reputation. Forster tempered his works with a dose of liberal humanism, creating characters who sought to penetrate artificial social barriers and "only connect..." as the epigraph to *Howards End* notes. If people succumbed to chaos in the end, one could always chalk it up to the modern human experience.

Forster was born in London on January 1, 1879. His father, an architect, died when he was two; he was raised by his mother and a few aunts. He spent a happy childhood

in the Hertfordshire countryside in a house called Rooksnest, the inspiration for *Howards End*. In 1893 he moved to Tonbridge and experienced some unhappy years at school. When he went off to King's College, Cambridge, he abandoned his tepid Christian faith and embraced liberal (secular) humanism. He became involved with future members of the Bloomsbury group, an avant-garde collection of London writers, artists, and thinkers that included Virginia Woolf, John Maynard Keynes, and Lytton Strachey. Forster cited Jane Austen, Samuel Butler, and D. H. Lawrence as his great literary influences. But Bloomsbury, which he called the "only genuine *movement* in English civilization," shaped all aspects of his life.

After graduating Cambridge in 1901, Forster traveled to Italy and Greece. He started writing short pieces for the liberal *Independent Review*. Then, inspired by the antics of English expatriates abroad, he wrote his two "Italy" novels, *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905) and *A Room with a View* (1908). *The Longest Journey* (1907), which fictionalized his college years, was followed by *Howards End* in 1910. Forster also started

WHERE TO START

Start with **A PASSAGE TO INDIA**, an ironic novel about hope, friendship, and cultural hypocrisies in colonial India. **A ROOM WITH A VIEW**, a satire on English expats in Italy, is more upbeat. "The Machine Stops" is one of Forster's classic short stories; **TWO CHEERS FOR DEMOCRACY** contains many of his musings on his (and our!) turbulent times.

Maurice, his gay novel, at about this time. He refused to publish it.

In 1912, Forster, accompanied by his Cambridge mentor, G.L. Dickinson, set off for British-ruled India. They met up with Syed Ross Masood, whom Forster had earlier befriended in England. Masood introduced them to Indian culture; Forster was deeply disturbed by the effects of Western imperialism. He returned to England as the outbreak of World War I interrupted his writing career. He joined the Red Cross and served in Alexandria, Egypt, where, at age

40, he experienced his first homosexual love affair. Critics suggest that this love with a young Egyptian tram driver led Forster to romanticize the working classes in his fiction. Forster returned to India in 1921 as the private secretary to the Maharajah of Dewas, where he worked on *A Passage to India* (1924).

A Passage to India was Forster's last novel. He wrote reviews, essays, biographies, published *Aspects of the Novel*, and campaigned for various literary and liberal causes. In 1946, he accepted a fellowship at Cambridge, where he

OVERVIEW OF FORSTER'S WORK

* WHERE ANGELS FEAR TO TREAD (1905)

THE LONGEST JOURNEY (1907)
This tragicomic novel traces Rickie Elliot's love for a shallow young woman.

* A ROOM WITH A VIEW (1908)

* HOWARD'S END (1910)

THE CELESTIAL OMNIBUS AND OTHER STORIES (1911)
The title story in this minimalist, lyrical collection of short stories features a young boy's belief in heaven.

ALEXANDRIA: A HISTORY AND GUIDE (1922)

Forster wrote this tribute to Alexandria, Egypt while working in the city for the Red Cross during World War I.

PHAROS AND PHARILLON (1923)

Forster wrote this collection of essays for *The Egyptian Mail* and *The Egyptian Gazette* in Alexandria. It illustrates his great range of historical and philosophical knowledge, and recounts his love for a young Egyptian tram driver.

* A PASSAGE TO INDIA (1924)

ANONYMITY, AN ENQUIRY (1925)

* ASPECTS OF THE NOVEL (1927)

THE ETERNAL MOMENT AND OTHER STORIES (1928)

One of Forster's most famous stories, "The Machine Stops," explores a dehumanized civilization.

GOLDSWORTHY LOWES DICKINSON (1934)

This biography features one of Forster's close friends and mentors at Cambridge, whom he considered "the best man who ever lived."

ABINGER HARVEST (1936)

Forster wrote the articles, reviews, essays, and poems in this collection over 30 years. It contains many of his famous pieces, including "Notes on the English Character" and "Me, Them and You," and satiric musings on historians and history.

ENGLAND'S PLEASANT LAND (1940)

A pageant play performed in 1938.

NORDIC TWILIGHT (1940)

A political book.

REDE LECTURE ON VIRGINIA WOOLF (1942)

In this memorial address, Forster praised Woolf's sublime singularity of purpose.

DEVELOPMENT OF ENGLISH PROSE BETWEEN 1918 AND 1939 (1945)

Forster delivered this address at the University of Glasgow.

THE COLLECTED TALES OF E. M. FORSTER (1947)

Now back in print as *Selected Stories* (2001), this volume combines the stories told in *The Celestial Omnibus* and *Eternal Moment*.

BILLY BUDD (1951)

Forster and Eric Crozier wrote the libretto for Benjamin Britten's opera.

TWO CHEERS FOR DEMOCRACY (1951)

This reflection on politics and aesthetics, written after World War II, touches on topics including liberty, censorship, anti-Semitism, and the arts. Forster concludes that, "we still contrive to raise three cheers for democracy, although at present it looks to me that she deserves only two." It contains Forster's famous essay, "What I Believe" (1939), which reflects his concern for individual liberty and concludes, "I hate the idea of causes, and if I had to choose between betraying my country and

betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country."

THE HILL OF DEVI (1953)

Through letters and commentary, this memoir reveals Forster's experiences in the Indian state of Dewas, where he worked for an Indian Maharajah. He discusses foreign rituals, the problems of modernization, and cultural clashes. He presents the Maharajah in complimentary light, but delves into colonial bureaucracy and his downfall.

MARIANNE THORNTON: A DOMESTIC BIOGRAPHY (1956)

Forster sets this biography of his paternal great aunt (who, incidentally, dressed her nephew in lacy Fauntleroy dress), in the context of the history of her capitalist family. Forster also explores her work as founder of The Metaphysical Society and the "cult [that] grew up around her."

* MAURICE (1971)

THE LIFE TO COME AND OTHER STORIES (1972)

ARCTIC SUMMER (1980)

Forster started this unfinished novel in 1911. Some modern-day critics believe that had he finished it, it would have been one of his masterpieces. It features the stormy friendship between the English Martin Whitby and a young soldier in Italy.

COMMONPLACE BOOK (1987)

This edited volume contains Forster's personal notebooks from 1925 through 1968. It's especially useful as a portrait of his life after he wrote *A Passage to India*.

THE PRINCE'S TALE AND OTHER UNCOLLECTED WRITINGS (1999)

Edited by P. N. Furbank, this collection contains Forster's critical writings.

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lived the remainder of his life. Although he turned down a knighthood, he accepted Queen Elizabeth II's appointment of Companion of Honour in 1953 and an Order of Merit in 1969, on his 90th birthday. He died on June 7, 1970 in Coventry.

"What I Believe"

"I do not believe in Belief," Forster wrote in his famous essay, "What I Believe" (1938). The essay, which reflected his concern for individual liberty in the face of World War II, resounds just as loudly today as it did then. "Tolerance, good temper and sympathy—they are what matter really," he continued, "and if the human race is not to collapse they must come to the front before long." Today, the term "Forsterian" implies many things: liberalism, humanism, morality, skepticism, and lack of convention. Although he dedicated the early part of his career to gently attacking conservative institutions and religious beliefs in his novels, Forster spent the last four decades of his life championing freedom, personal honesty, and individual liberty.

Yet contradictions marred Forster's own belief system. He never honestly portrayed himself as gay, perhaps in an attempt to preserve his reputation. When he was 85 years old, he wrote, "how *annoyed* I am with Society for making homosexuality criminal," which led to "subterfuges ... that might have been avoided." When *Maurice* appeared in 1971, a number of critics failed to separate this novel, an unpublished effort, from his previous ones. They attacked Forster, momentarily toppling his high literary standing.

If Forster refused to publish *Maurice* in his lifetime, he stood firmly against censorship. He was an active member of PEN, and, in 1934, served as the first president of the watchdog National Council for Civil Liberties. In 1928, Forster campaigned against the suppression of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), banned for its "sexual inversion and perversion." He spoke out against sexual repression and staunchly supported the Homosexual Law Reform Society founded in 1958. Forster also served as a witness in 1960 for the defense in the obscenity trial of the publishers of D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928). In his *Aspects of the Novel*, he concluded that, "if human nature does alter it will be because individuals manage to look at themselves in a new way"—which is exactly what he achieved through his timely literary messages.

MAJOR WORKS

Where Angels Fear to Tread (1905)

◆ #65, THE GUARDIAN'S 100 GREAT NOVELS OF THE 20TH CENTURY



Critics considered Forster's first novel, which touched on cultural collision and the rather ridiculous sensibilities of the English middle class, a mature piece of work. It established his reputation as a master of character, dialogue, and humor.

THE STORY: When Lilia Herriton, a young English widow, marries a penniless Italian, her relatives expect the worst.

And their baby—they wouldn't possibly raise him as an Italian, would they? When Lilia dies in childbirth, her meddling relatives hatch a well-intentioned if rather ridiculous plan to kidnap the baby and raise him properly—in England. Will they go through with their plan?

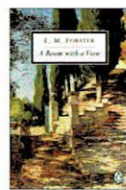
"It is not mawkish or sentimental or commonplace. ... There are half-a-dozen characters in the book which count, and two of them—Mrs. Herriton, the incarnation of spotless insincerity, and Harriet, purblind, heartless, and wholly bereft of the faculty of sympathy—are altogether repellent and hence not altogether real. ... We wonder whether E.M. Forster could be a little more charitable without losing in force and originality. An experiment might be worth trying."

THE GUARDIAN, 8/30/1905

BOTTOM LINE: Forster's first Italian novel is indicative of good things to come.

A Room with a View (1908)

◆ #7, THE GUARDIAN'S 100 GREAT NOVELS OF THE 20TH CENTURY
◆ #79, MODERN LIBRARY'S 100 BEST NOVELS



Critics saw this novel, which took Forster five years to complete, as an ironic comedy of manners contrasting British and foreign cultures. At the end, Forster felt that his ill-defined characters and plot—in an otherwise well-constructed framework—still effectively reflected his own ethics.

THE STORY: On a tour throughout Europe, Lucy Honeychurch, a middle-class English girl, engages in an inappropriate romance with George Emerson, an expatriate of shockingly few means. English relatives subsequently fetch her from her Tuscan pension and deliver her back to England—and into the arms of her arrogant (but socially acceptable) fiancé, Cecil. Lucy must then choose whether to live within Victorian society's customs or follow her heart.

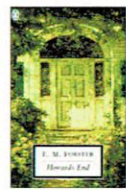
"E.M. Forster's *A Room With A View* was my first intimation of the possibilities of fiction: how wholly one might feel for it and through it, how much it could do to you. ... What Forster's muddled style has to tell us is that there are some goods in the world that cannot be purely pursued rationally, we must also feel our way through them." ZADIE SMITH, "LOVE, ACTUALLY," THE GUARDIAN

UNLIMITED, 11/1/03.

BOTTOM LINE: A brilliant work about outdated British mores and the cost of true love is a must read.

Howards End (1910)

◆ #38, MODERN LIBRARY'S 100 BEST NOVELS



"Only connect ..."—the book's powerful epigraph—says it all. While at Cambridge, Forster joined a group called the Conversazione Society, which later matured into the Bloomsbury Group. As a whole, the group emphasized personal relationships, agnosticism, social change, and the questioning of convention and morality. *Howards*

End blends these themes, and articulates the value of human relationships amid a changing Edwardian England. The novel earned Forster a reputation as a major novelist, but also made him anxious about composing future novels, especially since he professed less interest in the era's typical male-female subjects.

THE STORY: When the vivacious, happy-go-lucky Margaret Schlegel meets the aristocratic Ruth Wilcox, they become lifelong friends. When Ruth dies, she leaves her family's country house, *Howards End*, to Margaret. But the cool Wilcox family resents these last wishes. As Margaret's sister and brother become more entwined with the Wilcoxs, chaos ensues. Then, to both families' chagrin, Margaret marries the widower Henry Wilcox—and tests the true limits of love.

"*Howards End* is a novel of high quality written with what appears to be a feminine brilliance of perception. ... There is an immense liberality in the book, a sympathy that is so little eclectic that it seems indulgent." A. N. M., *THE GUARDIAN*, 2/26/1910

"A very original book. Mr. Forster has a rare mastery of dialog, of character drawing, and of the action and reaction of character upon circumstance." *INDEPENDENT*, 4/27/1911

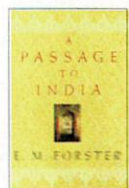
"Mr. Forster's métier would seem to be conventional comedy. To that his sense of character values is entirely adequate. ... But he evinces neither power nor inclination to come to grips with any vital human problem." *NEW YORK TIMES*, 2/19/1911

"The clash of modern culture and modern materialism has seldom found a more vivid interpreter." *SPECTATOR*, 11/4/1910

BOTTOM LINE: This classic, engaging account of love, friendship, and social boundaries amid a crumbling British Empire still resonates today.

A Passage to India (1924)

- ◆ #18, *THE GUARDIAN'S* 100 GREAT NOVELS OF THE 20TH CENTURY
- ◆ #25, MODERN LIBRARY'S 100 BEST NOVELS



Considered Forster's greatest novel, this disturbing portrait of colonialism in India under the Raj offers unforgettable drama and complex characters. By this time, Forster was a mature novelist who, as his character Miss Quested says, is "no longer examining life, but being examined by it." He wrote the novel after he had visited and worked in India twice, where he saw friendship between the English and their Hindu and Muslim subjects as improbable, at best.

THE STORY: Three English travellers—Miss Adela Quested, Mrs. Moore, and Cyril Fielding—wish to see the "real" India. Once there, they cross paths with Dr. Aziz, a westernized and educated Indian, whom they befriend despite criticism from their Western peers. During a visit to the Marabar caves, Miss Quested falsely accuses Dr. Aziz of sexual assault. The friendships they strove to create amid a

FORSTER ENVISIONS THE TELEVISION

In his 1909 short story, "The Machine Stops," Forster offered what many consider to be one of, if not the first, references to a television or computer monitor, the "cinematophote":

"Advanced thinkers, like Vashti, had always held it foolish to visit the surface of the earth. Air-ships might be necessary, but what was the good of going out for mere curiosity and crawling along for a mile or two in a terrestrial motor? The habit was vulgar and perhaps faintly improper: it was unproductive of ideas, and had no connection with the habits that really mattered. So respirators were abolished, and with them, of course, the terrestrial motors, and except for a few lecturers, who complained that they were debarred access to their subject-matter, the development was accepted quietly. Those who still wanted to know what the earth was like had after all only to listen to some gramophone, or to look into some cinematophote. And even the lecturers acquiesced when they found that a lecture on the sea was none the less stimulating when compiled out of other lectures that had already been delivered on the same subject."

"But it was fully fifteen seconds before the round plate that she held in her hands began to glow. A faint blue light shot across it, darkening to purple, and presently she could see the image of her son, who lived on the other side of the earth, and he could see her."

highly politicized country set into motion a highly political chain of events.

"To speak of his characters as being 'well drawn,' would be crude; they draw themselves, and mainly in their conversation. ... Whether he presents Englishman or Moslem [sic] or Hindu or Eurasian he is no longer examining life, but being examined by it in the deeps of his personality as an artist." C. M., *THE GUARDIAN*, 6/20/1924

"Mr. E. M. Forster is indubitably one of the finest novelists living in England today, and *A Passage to India* is one of the saddest, keenest, most beautifully written ironic novels of the time. ... [It] is both a challenge and an indictment. It is also a revelation." HERBERT S. GORMAN, *NEW YORK TIMES*, 8/1924

"... it is a peculiarly valuable picture of the state of India seen through a very unembarrassed and courageous intelligence."

EDWIN MUIR, *NATION*, 10/8/1924

"*A Passage to India* is a disturbing, uncomfortable book. Its surface is so delicately and finely wrought that it pricks us at a thousand points." L.P. HARTLEY, *SPECTATOR*, 6/28/1924

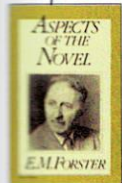
"People like E.M. Forster make a pretence of making poetry of the three religions [of India]. It's false. It's a pretence. It's utter rubbish. ... Forster, of course, has his own purposes in India. He is a homosexual and he has his time in India,

exploiting poor people, which his friend Keynes also did. ... He was somebody who didn't know Indian people. He just knew the court and a few middle class Indians and the garden boys whom he wished to seduce." V. S. NAIPAUL, QUOTED IN THE GUARDIAN

UNLIMITED, 8/2/2001

BOTTOM LINE: Forster achieved a masterpiece of English fiction about the great chasm between England and India, imperialism and colonialism, the personal and the political.

Aspects of the Novel (1927)



This collection of essays (lectures, really) delivered at Cambridge University provides logical, humorous, and entertaining tidbits about the novel.

THE STORY: With chapters on the people, plot, pattern, and rhythm, Forster offers critical insight into the novel (defined as "any fictitious prose work over 50,000 words"). He offers commentary on love and sex (he doesn't like them in the novel), writers such as Austen and Dickens, and much, much more.

"The reader may see a man with an original turn of mind approaching a fairly threadbare subject in an original way. There is profit in the book, and pleasure." PERCY HUTCHISON, NEW YORK

TIMES, 11/27/1927

"His book ... is a very good book if you wish to acquire the point of view of a don upon literature. It contains fewer slips of grammar than is usual in collections of lectures and several pleasant little jokes." F.M. FORD, SATURDAY REVIEW OF LITERATURE, 12/17/1927

"It has that ever-welcome grace of saying clearly and brilliantly what many of us have groped for with dull wits."

OUTLOOK, 11/9/1927

"Occasionally he sinks to downright vagueness. One suspects that Mr. Forster is more eager to be charming than to elucidate the principles which he practices so deftly. ... Perhaps it is unfair to expect a novelist to write criticism as well as he writes novels." INDEPENDENT, 12/24/1927

BOTTOM LINE: This is a classic study of the novel for those interested in both reading and writing.

Maurice (1971)



Forster started *Maurice* in 1913, immediately after *Howards End*. He rewrote parts of it at various times over the next decades, but he didn't allow the novel to be published during his lifetime. He realized that its homosexual themes would sabotage his reputation; these were the years, after all, following Oscar Wilde's famous homosexual trials. (Private consensual sexual acts between non-married adults, including sodomy, weren't decriminalized until 1967.) The novel reflected Forster's belief that homosexual men could be happy—guaranteeing controversy and, eventually, a wide readership.

THE STORY: Set in pre-World War I Britain, *Maurice* follows a schoolboy from public school to Cambridge and on to his father's financial investment firm. Maurice adheres to his rigid class societal rules in every way but one: while at Cambridge, he falls in love with fellow student Clive Durham. Suffering from this romantic love, Maurice realizes that he must break the rules of his society to find true happiness without anybody else's help.

"Maurice is the male version of Lady Chatterley's lover. ... The blackmailing scene in the British Museum, with its lies, its collapse and abrupt reconciliation, is excellent; and it makes one realise with what expert craftsmanship the emotional scenes have been managed." V.S. PRITCHETT, NEW STATESMAN, 10/8/1971

"... he has written a novel of such uncharacteristic badness as not to be comparable to any other of his works." TIMES LITERARY

SUPPLEMENT 10/8/1971

"Maurice lacks both the moments of poetry of the early novels and dense and thoughtful complexity of *Howards End* and *A Passage to India*. ... The novel is an Edwardian fantasy of liberation." PAUL THEROUX, BOOK WORLD, 10/3/1971

"... [The publication of *Maurice*] was an event that would change my life, as it would that of many gay fiction writers. For *Maurice*, by virtue of the very themes that Forster feared would 'date' the novel, is a rarity in gay literature: a love story with a happy ending. ... Eighty-eight years after it was written and 31 years after it was published, *Maurice* remains fresh, thrilling—and sadly unique." DAVID LEAVITT, THE ADVOCATE, 11/12/02

BOTTOM LINE: *Maurice* is a romantic, if at times uncertain, novel about the triumph of love. ■

FORSTER COUNTRY



Forster penned a description of Rooksnest (also spelled Rooks Nest), his childhood home in the northeast end of Stevenage village in Hertfordshire, 30 miles north of London. Both house and town have had their share of fame. Charles Dickens founded the Guild of Literature and Art in the town, and the diarist Samuel Pepys stayed there. Besides inspiring *Howards End* and the town of "Hilton" in *Howards End*, Rooksnest, a farm called "Howards" in the 1770s, housed the famous English composer and pianist Elizabeth Poston for nearly 75 years.

"The name Rooksnest was not an ordinary name of a house but the name of a hamlet consisting of us and the farm below. ... It was oblong in shape and built of red brick that had long lost its crudeness of colour. The front was covered with two rose trees and part of a vine."