

# Evelyn Waugh

“AN ARTIST MUST BE A REACTIONARY. HE HAS TO STAND OUT AGAINST THE TENOR OF THE AGE AND NOT GO FLOPPING ALONG.”

BY JESSICA TEISCH

Few critics would accuse British writer Evelyn (Arthur St. John) Waugh, a conservative Catholic, a celebrated misanthrope with arch-Tory views, and a pessimist about modernity, of passively accepting his era. Writing during the interwar and post-war years, Waugh mourned the twilight of the British aristocracy, the unmooring of religion and tradition, and the innocent adrift in an amoral world. A dry, satirical, and often vicious writer, Waugh penned life as he saw it. His more than 20 volumes of fiction, travelogues, biographies, autobiographies, short stories, and essays unveiled the hypocrisy and pretension of England's glittering Smart Set, African colonialism, and American materialism. His snobbery and caustic wit captured the passing of an era. *Brideshead Revisited*, *Handful of Dust*, and the *Sword of Honour* trilogy gave Waugh singular claim to the modern British novel and an international reputation. American critic Edmund Wilson noted that Waugh earned the distinction of being "the only first-rate comic genius that has appeared in English since Bernard Shaw."

Waugh was born in 1903 into a middle-class London family. His father, Arthur, was a publisher and literary critic. His brother, Alec, was a popular novelist whose first book, *Loom of Youth* (1917), about public school homosex-

uality, won instant acclaim. Evelyn began writing short stories at the age of four. He entered Hertford College, Oxford, in 1921, where he joined the "Aesthetic Set" and read modern history. Yet his poor grades, drinking, and a short-lived homosexual romance (a world to which he returned in his novels) led to his expulsion. Like Charles Ryder in *Brideshead Revisited*, Evelyn briefly attended art school. His unhappy days as a schoolmaster inspired his first novel, *Decline and Fall*. After failing at different jobs, he turned to writing as a career.

From 1928 to 1937, Waugh traveled widely in Europe, the Near East, Africa, and the United States as a journalist (given fictional form in *Scoop*). He joined the Royal Marines and the Royal Horse Guard during World War II, serving in North Africa, Crete, and Yugoslavia, where he hid in a cave as the proofs of *Brideshead Revisited* were air-dropped for his review. By this time, he had married and divorced, converted to Catholicism, remarried, fathered six children, and be-

friendened Randolph Churchill. He had also built a literary reputation on the dark-humored novels *Decline and Fall*, *Vile Bodies*, *Black Mischief*, and *Handful of Dust*—considered the better half of his literary career. Upon discharge he retired to Somerset, where he wrote the World War II trilogy, *Sword of Honour*.

## WHERE TO START

**BRIDESHEAD REVISITED** is Waugh's most famous novel, but **THE LOVED ONE** distills Waugh's satirical genius. Either one should be followed by **HANDFUL OF DUST**, which is considered Waugh's classic.



## Values in the Modern World

When his first wife ran off with another man (an event satirized in *Handful of Dust*), Waugh began to search for meaning in what he increasingly viewed as an amoral world. He abandoned his Anglican past and embraced Roman Catholicism in 1930, a rare choice in an officially Protestant country. Yet his conversion, which simultaneously made him a media sensation and placed him at the edges of British society, gave him an outsider's angle in his satirical attacks on modern society.

Despite his own embrace of traditional elite English values, Waugh was quick to sneer at the follies of England's upper crust. One of the Bright Young Things in *Vile Bodies* parties too hard in her sickroom—and dies. The protagonist of *Black Mischief* feasts with savages, only to learn he has just eaten his former mistress—the daughter of the British Prime Minister. And *The Loved One* lampoons Hollywood's lavishly irreverent burial rites.

But World War II and its aftermath shook Waugh's foundation. He subsequently moved away from the biting satire of his earlier fiction and adopted a more somber approach, creating characters that rose from debauchery to become moral, religious beings. Faith,

in different ways, saves Charles Ryder in *Brideshead*, the mother of Constantine in *Helena* (Waugh's favorite book), and Guy Crouchback in *Sword of Honour*. Yet by the 1960s, Waugh felt himself adrift in the increasingly corrupt culture he described so often. He loathed Britain's political structure, the modernization of the Church, and the reports that labeled him a "bore." When he died in 1966, he was perhaps a little out of vogue. Today, however, critics consider Waugh one of the fathers of the modern British novel, a writer whose timeless search for meaning amid decadence and penetrating look into the human condition make him one of the twentieth century's finest writers.

## MAJOR WORKS

### Decline and Fall (1928)

**W**augh wrote this immensely successful first novel at the age of 25, drawing inspiration from his own expulsion from Oxford and the familiar world of London's young upper-middle class scene. This comic satire pokes fun at British sportsmanship, Oxford's pretensions, and the sacred honor of the English gentleman in the 1920's.

## WAUGH: COMPLETE WORKS

\* *Decline and Fall* (1928)

\* *Vile Bodies* (1930)

*Bachelor Abroad* (1930)

Inspired by diaries Waugh kept while traveling with his wife in 1929.

*Remote People: A Report from Ethiopia and British Africa, 1930-1931* (1931)

Waugh's travels to Abyssinia to cover Haile Selassie's coronation.

*Black Mischief* (1932)

A novel describing the island of Azania, with its degenerate Arabs, cannibals, and paranoid Europeans.

\* *A Handful of Dust* (1934)

*Ninety-Two Days: The Account of a Tropical Journey through British Guinea and Part of Brazil* (1934)  
Waugh recounts his distaste for his three months in South America.

*Edmund Campion: Scholar, Priest, Hero, and Martyr* (1935)

♦ *Hawthornden Prize, 1936*

A biography of the life of Edmund

Campion, a deacon in the Church of England during Queen Elizabeth I's reign, hung as a traitor in 1581.

*Waugh in Abyssinia* (1936)

Written as a war correspondent for *The Daily Mail*. An account of Waugh's second journey to Africa.

*Mr. Loveday's Little Outing and Other Sad Stories* (1936)

A collection of stories.

*Scoop* (1938)

This fictional "newspaper adventure" satirizes wartime journalism.

*Mexico: An Object Lesson* (1939)

A politically motivated book commissioned by commercial interests in Latin America.

*Work Suspended* (1942)

Two chapters of an unfinished novel that deal with an incomplete novel.

*Put Out More Flags* (1942)

The upper-class Basil Seal makes himself "indispensable" as World War II approaches.

\* *Brideshead Revisited* (1945)

*When the Going Was Good* (1946)  
Five travel episodes ranging from a

cruise on the Mediterranean Sea in 1929 to the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935.

*Wine in Peace and War* (1947)

A story about Saccone & Speed, vintners who supplied the Royal Navy, and a snobbish account of wine and wine country.

*Scott-King's Modern Europe* (1947)

A short novel that reflected Waugh's unease with modern values.

\* *The Loved One: An Anglo-American Tragedy* (1948)

*Helena* (1950)

Waugh's favorite novel, a reinvention of the life of St. Helena, mother of Emperor Constantine the Great. Seen as a work of Christian apologetics.

*Men at Arms* (1952)

The first in Waugh's World War II "Sword of Honour" trilogy introduces Guy Crouchback, a Catholic who joins the Royal Corps of Halberdiers.

*The Holy Places* (1952)

The script of a radio talk Waugh gave on St. Helena and an essay advocat-



**THE STORY:** When Oxford theology student Paul Pennyfeather is "sent down" for indecent exposure, he embarks on a series of adventures that starts in a boy's school, where he falls in love with a disreputable woman, and ends in jail.



**"Decline and Fall is a great lark; its author has an agreeable sense of comedy and characterisation, and the gift of writing smart and telling conversation, while his drawings are quite in tune with the spirit of the tale."** *Guardian Unlimited, 10/12/28.*

**"Decline and Fall is that all-too-rare phenomenon, a good nonsense novel. . . . The result is a book which makes more sense than most."** *The New Republic, 4/17/29.*

**"It is a burlesque, extravaganza, amusing at times and at times very dull indeed. One's impression after finishing the reading of it is an absolute satisfaction that the world is far better than Mr. Waugh would have us believe."** *Boston Transcript, 5/4/29.*

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** A satirical look at the foibles of youth, relayed through personal experience.

## Vile Bodies (1930)

**W**augh's popular second novel gives passing nod to the Bright Young Things of London's interwar years. Critics likened this "ultra-modern" satire on the "ultra-modern" behavior of London's Smart Set to the gentle satire of P.G. Wodehouse and Aldous Huxley, comparisons that followed Waugh throughout his career. The subsequent journalism contracts offered to Waugh inadvertently made him spokesman for English youth, which, in turn, enabled him to become a "man of letters" for the rest of his life.



**THE STORY:** Set in England between the wars, Waugh explores London's party, alcohol, and sex-driven Smart Set through the love story of Adam Fenwick-Symes and Nina Blount. When the outside world interrupts their gaiety, their class, with all of its indecorous trimming, starts to crumble.

**"[Waugh] is a satirist, no doubt, but not a sceptic, for he believes, and proves, that amusement can be derived from the most unpromising material, from people, that is, whose one occupation in life is the quest for amusement, people who give and attend parties."** *Saturday Review, 1/25/30.*

ing the preservation of Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulcher.

**Love Among the Ruins: A Romance of the Near Future (1953)**  
A nightmarish vision of the brave new world.

**Tactical Exercise (1954)**  
A dozen of Waugh's stories, including "The Curse of the Horse Race" (written when he was 7).

**Officers and Gentlemen (1955)**  
The second in Waugh's World War II trilogy, following Guy Crouchback as he trains as a commando for a special Crete mission.

**\* The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold (1957)**

**The Life of the Right Reverend Ronald Knox (1959)**  
A short biography of the 20th-century American Catholic philosopher.

**A Tourist in Africa (1960)**  
Waugh's last travel diary captures scenes of post-colonial Africa.

**Unconditional Surrender (1961)**  
The final volume in Waugh's World War II trilogy. At the end of the war, Guy Crouchback, working from be-

hind a desk in England, receives a final assignment.

**Basil Seal Rides Again; or, The Rake's Progress (1963)**  
Featuring Basil Seal, the anti-hero of *Black Mischief*.

**A Little Learning: An Autobiography, the Early Years (1964)**  
The first, incomplete volume in a projected multi-volume autobiography that touches on his childhood, life at Oxford, muses, and school-master days.

**The Diaries of Evelyn Waugh (1976)**  
Edited by Michael Davie. The diaries cover Waugh's travel in Africa, the English aristocracy, and military life, and disclose the identities of many of the personalities and institutions ridiculed in his novels.

**A Little Order: A Selection from the Journalism of Evelyn Waugh (1977)**  
Edited by Donat Gallagher, Eyre Methuen. A selection of Waugh's essays and reviews, seen as reactionary at the time.

**The Letters of Evelyn Waugh (1980)**  
Edited by Mark Amory. Less scathing ly honest than his diaries, wonderful

displays of loyalty and friendship.

**Evelyn Waugh, Apprentice: The Early Writings, 1910-1927 (1985)**  
Edited by Robert Murray Davis. According to Auberon Waugh (his son), "scraps from his father's wastebasket" that were published on the condition that the result never appear in England.

**Mr. Wu & Mrs. Stitch: The Letters of Evelyn Waugh and Diana Cooper (1991)**  
Edited by Artemis Cooper. A fun, gossipy correspondence.

**Saint Edmund Campion: Priest and Martyr (1996)**  
A close look at a forgotten martyr revered more in myth than in life.

**The Letters of Nancy Mitford and Evelyn Waugh (1997)**  
Edited by Charlotte Mosley. The two writers met in London in the late 1920's, and their vicious, offensive, but hilarious correspondence took off during World War II and lasted for 21 years.

**The Complete Short Stories (1999)**  
A collection of 18 new and 21 previously published stories. ■



"The book could be called needlessly nasty, decadent, superficial and arrogantly, even offensively sophisticated. . . . Yet it certainly is funny and that, surely, is enough to say for it." *New York Times*, 3/23/30.

"As a fanciful parody of the ultra-smart English novel . . . the book is something of a gem." *New York World*, 7/13/30.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** A hilarious parody of upper-class behavior and norms.

**THE MOVIE:** "Bright Young Things," 2003, starring Haidée Augusta and Stephen Campbell Moore and directed by Stephen Fry.

### A Handful of Dust (1934)

♦ #34, Modern Library's 100 Best Novels

Considered his masterpiece, *A Handful of Dust* was inspired by the adulterous end of Waugh's first marriage and his conversion to Roman Catholicism. In a departure from his earlier farcical style, the novel explores the conflicts between civilization and barbarism, tradition and modernity. The novel takes its title from T. S. Eliot's poem, "The Waste Land," and exposes the moral void of modern society.

**THE STORY:** Tony and Brenda Last, an upper-class English couple, attempt to escape from their crumbling social rank. As their marriage breaks up, Brenda turns to London's cocktail society, and Tony flees to the South American jungle, only to encounter a barbarity that resembles that of "civilized" London society.

"... a novel from which many of our younger writers of self-indulgent, sprawling, amorphous fiction could learn the structure of their art." *The Atlantic Monthly*, 3/72.



### DON'T KILL THE CHARACTERS!

Authors sometimes offer inspiring tidbits to aspiring writers. Waugh liked to keep his characters alive, though he only partially succeeded at it. As he told a BBC interviewer: "[T]here are only a very limited number of characters in the world, certainly only a very limited number that one man can cope with. And in the greatest novelists you find the same characters turning up again with different names. . . . there's the awful temptation that a novelist has when he gets towards the last chapter, thinking, 'Well, finished with them, off with their heads'-kill them off, throw one over a precipice, have a motor-car accident, do anything-just get rid of them.' Then he finds, he writes his next novel, he can't think of anybody else to write about, so he has to produce these same people with different names and different circumstances."

-BBC TV series, *Monitor*, interview 2/16/64 by Elizabeth Jane Howard

"Unquestionably the best book Mr. Waugh has written."

*Saturday Review*, 9/29/34.

"The story, which deals largely with what might once have been called 'the sins of society,' is neatly contrived and adroitly written. . . and it catches exactly certain of the rhythms of contemporary life. . . . [Waugh's] method might well be studied by some of his untidier contemporaries." *The Spectator*, 9/14/34.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** Waugh's classic satire on those who possess money-but nothing else.

### Brideshead Revisited (1945)

♦ #80, Modern Library's 100 Best Novels

*Brideshead Revisited*, Waugh's most famous novel, departs from his earlier work with its strong Catholic message, romantic prose style, and uncritical tone regarding the old English aristocracy. Many critics found the non-satirical work an unwelcome change. Others saw it as a journey of faith and anguish, a mourning for the English aristocracy that passed between the wars.

**THE STORY:** The novel begins "Et in Arcadia Ego"-In Arcadia I was. When Charles Ryder meets the charming dipsomaniac Sebastian Flyte at Oxford, he enters the complex world of Brideshead, the ancestral seat of the Catholic Marchmain dynasty. From the perspective of an officer in the British Army, Charles looks back at his emotional bonds with the family, his coming of age as he loves and loses its members, and final departure from the Arcadia of his youth.



"No American could conceivably have written a story like this one. It is English to the core, English in its lament, English in its sensuous, evocative beauty, as in the recapture of the innocent days at Brideshead, English in the bitter, fairy laughter of Anthony Blanch, English in the hard tenacity with which Charles the artist, 'homeless, childless, middle-aged, loveless,' as he describes himself, finally faces up." *The Atlantic Monthly*, 1/46.

"[Waugh] will meet with some harsh criticisms among devout Catholics, loyal Oxonians, cultured members of the leisure class. . . . [Not] even the author himself can predict how many will be edified and how many will be hurt by this story of his, which few persons would be able, and hardly anyone but himself would have dared, to write." *Catholic World*, 2/46.

"Mr. Waugh's principal themes are adultery, perversion and drunkenness, and while I could not fail to admire the



brilliance of his writing I greatly disliked his story."

Manchester Guardian, 6/1/45.

"Waugh's most deeply felt novel. . . Mr. Waugh is very definitely an artist, with something like a genius for precision and clarity not surpassed by any novelist writing in English in his time." *New York Times*, 12/30/46.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** Waugh's most popular novel and a good place to start.

### The Loved One (1948)

**T**his "little nightmare," as Waugh called it, came about after his visit to Southern California in 1947. The novel's attitude, however, remains strikingly British, and mimics the snobbery and satire expressed in *Decline and Fall* and *Vile Bodies*.

**THE STORY:** A love triangle among a Hollywood embalmer, a crematorium cosmetician, and pet mortician parodies British expats living the American ideal of success and the commercialization of bereavement.

"As a piece of writing it is nearly faultless; as satire it is an act of devastation, an angry, important, moral effort that does not fall. *The Loved One* is not outrageous but outraged; sickened but not sickening; its macabre humor is the shocked, protective laughter of the civilized man confronted with the unassimilable horror that permits no other means of rejection." *New Republic*, 7/26/48.

"Never before that I can remember has a talent of such austere and classic design been applied to such monstrous vulgarities; never before have the majestic themes of love and death been so delicately perverted to absurdity. . . It is certainly a work of art, as rich and subtle and unnerving as anything its author has ever done." *New Yorker*, 6/26/48.

"A clever trifle, which will be enjoyed by many readers, and condemned by others as being in the worst of taste."

*Saturday Review of Literature*, 6/26/48.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** A short, economical satire that might make you rethink how you bury Fluffy.

### The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold (1957)

In the 1950's, Waugh suffered a nervous breakdown and subsequently wrote *Pinfold*, a frankly autobiographical novel. Some critics considered it Waugh's best work. For others, it fell short of his usual satire. Not surprisingly, Waugh himself treated Pinfold's plight as comedy. "It was not in the least like losing one's reason," he said, "it was simply one's reason working hard but on the

## WAUGH, HOLLYWOOD STYLE

It sometimes takes outsiders to cut to the heart of American culture. In 1947 Waugh visited California to meet with MGM regarding a possible film version of *Brideshead Revisited*. Unable to agree on the terms, Waugh turned down an offer of \$125,000. Yet while in California he became fascinated with Hollywood's vacant boulevards, palm trees, lavish hotels-and the surreal cemetery of Forest Lawn. In an article published in the Catholic magazine *The Tablet* (10/18/47), Waugh brought his religious sensibilities to bear on American materialism. He condemned Forest Lawn's Babyland, Graceland, and Sweet Memories, places where the enshrined "idol Oscar" and "great Star Goddesses" were more alive in death than in life-with a little help from the "final beauty parlor." This commercialization of bereavement not only belied Christian values, but also posed a "first class anthropological puzzle." Future anthropologists, Waugh wrote, would realize that "the great cultural decline of the twentieth century was first evident in the grave-yard."

If Forest Lawn (Waugh's "little nightmare") simultaneously offended and fascinated him, it also provided him with the rich material for *The Loved One* (1948). The novel proved so popular with American audiences that MGM filmed it in 1965. ■



wrong premises" (*BBC interview*, 6/26/60).

**THE STORY:** The 50-year-old novelist Pinfold suffers from various ailments. When he takes a cruise to recover his health, he starts hearing voices in his head accusing him of being the antithesis of everything he is: a Jew, a homosexual, and a coward. Peace comes only at port.

"For the most part, despite its polished writing, the novel is as short on the feel of good fiction as a psychiatrist's case history." *Christian Science Monitor*, 8/15/57.

"Nothing as funny-or as stylised-as this book has been written this year or last, and the fact that for once Mr. Waugh is being cruel about himself will give his admirers an extra fillip. . . [I]t is good to see him in his true and best form." *New Statesman*, 7/20/57.

"For the first time in his brilliant career Mr. Waugh has seriously miscalculated an artistic effort. . . [N]ever previously has he been a bore." *New York Times*, 8/11/57.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** A short, semi-autobiographical look at neurosis. ■

