



# Graham Greene

“In human relationships,  
kindness and lies  
are worth  
a thousand truths.”

—Graham Greene  
(1904-1991)

**U**PON PUBLICATION of *The Power and the Glory* (1940), British writer Graham Greene’s masterpiece about a priest on the run from an anti-Catholic Mexican state in the 1930s, William Golding claimed that Greene had “captured the conscience of the twentieth century man like no other.” Indeed, Greene, over the course of nearly the entire 20th century, captured the zeitgeist of the decades in more than three dozen works of fiction and nonfiction—ranging in topic from the Blitz to British colonialism and the Vietnam War. But Greene, one of the most popular and important English writers of the mid-20th century, accomplished more than just examining key political events of the last century; he also framed his inquiries with penetrating, often controversial, looks into the human condition and his characters’ mental, emotional, and spiritual lives, summarizing their predicaments in the modern world. Today, Greene’s appeal remains universal—not only for his provoking inquiries into our human capacities but also for his suspense-

ful stories, his talent for depicting local color, and his lean, realistic prose.

Although Greene wrote poems, essays, journalism, short stories, works on travel, and scripts, he is best remembered for his novels. Much of his fiction, deeply philosophical, moral, and spiritual in tone, deals with the nature of good and evil, salvation and damnation. Often described as a “Catholic” writer, Greene did not consider himself as such; only a few of his novels—*Brighton Rock* (1938), *The Power and the Glory*, *The Heart of the Matter* (1948), and *The End of the Affair* (1951)—have overtly religious themes and portray human struggles from the Catholic perspective. Later, Greene became skeptical of religion, taking a more humanistic approach to his stories while incorporating left-wing critiques of various political regimes, as in one of his masterpieces, *The Quiet American* (1956).

Born in 1904 in Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire, England, Greene, one of four sons, came from an influential family. As a child, his unhappiness led to experimentation with opium, suicide attempts, and a diagnosis of bipolar disorder.

der. At Balliol College, Oxford, however, Greene found his voice; inspired by Ford Madox Ford, Joseph Conrad, and Henry James, he started writing. He also joined the Communist Party, though he was never serious about the party's platform. In 1926, at age 22, his life changed forever: influenced by his future wife (from whom he later separated), he converted from Anglicanism to Catholicism, which he described as a purely intellectual endeavor but which nonetheless greatly affected his writing. His career also started to blossom; between 1926 and 1930, he wrote for the *Times* of London, published his first two books, and served as a film critic and literary critic for the *Spectator* until 1940. Greene's reputation rose with the publication of *Brighton Rock*; he later achieved international renown with works such as *The Heart of the Matter* and *The Quiet American*.

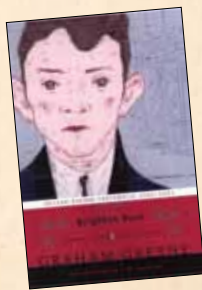
In these novels and in Greene's work as a foreign correspondent, the term "Greeneland" came to depict the author's use of spiritual and exotic landscapes: mostly hot, tropical backwaters populated by tortured souls, with political conflicts as a backdrop. Indeed, Greene's world-renowned travels both fulfilled his lust for adventure as well as provided material for his writing. Inspired to find Conrad's "heart of darkness," he trekked through Liberia's jungles in 1935 as a journalist and produced *Journey Without Maps* (1936). A 1938 visit to Mexico to examine the government's anti-Catholic secularization campaign led to *Another Mexico* (1939) and *The Power and the Glory*. Greene was briefly posted by the Secret Intelligence Service to Sierra Leone during World War II, resulting in *The Heart of the Matter*. Later, Greene sought out the world's most politically unstable regions, including Indochina, Haiti (the site of *The Comedians* [1966]), Cuba, China, Russia, the Congo, Panama, and Israel. In 1966, he left Britain to live in Antibes, and he spent the last years of his life—famous, wealthy, and with many accolades to his name—on Lake Geneva, in Switzerland.

## SELECTED MAJOR WORKS

### **Brighton Rock** (1938)

Greene claimed that *Brighton Rock* started as a detective novel, but this murder-thriller provides a much deeper study of evil, sin, and God's sometimes strange forms of mercy. The book challenges the Roman Catholic doctrine concerning the nature of sin by contrasting Pinkie's and Rose's Catholic beliefs with Ida's nonreligious, highly moral sensibility.

**THE STORY:** Pinkie Brown, a 17-year-old sociopathic street orphan, murders Charles "Fred" Hale, a local journalist in Brighton who betrayed the former leader of Pinkie's gang. What the depraved teenage killer doesn't count on is kindhearted Ida Arnold, who met



Hale the night of his death and vows to pursue the killer. As Pinkie tries to cover his tracks, he digs himself deeper into the criminal life. He marries Rose, a waitress who just may betray him—and Ida's pursuit becomes more relentless.

**"Brighton Rock is, on the face of it and as its subtitle [*An Entertainment*] would suggest, an entertaining—it is, in fact, a superlatively entertaining—fictional presentation, both objective and subjective, of criminal mentality of the 1930 and 1938 brand; but, back of it, there is the same spiritual urge that sent [Greene], a while ago, to West Africa. ... Here the probing is carried further in a brilliant and uncompromising indictment of some of the worst aspects of modern civilization, showing us the hard-boiled criminal mind not as a return to savagery but as a horrible perversion of cerebration."** JANE SPENCE SOUTHRON, 6/26/38

### **The Power and the Glory** (1940)

♦ TIME MAGAZINE BEST 100 NOVELS

♦ HAWTHORNDEN PRIZE

*The Power and the Glory*, a theological thriller about the lasting power of the Catholic Church, corruption, atonement, and the conflict between religion and politics, is widely considered one of Greene's masterpieces. Greene based the story on the two months he spent in Mexico in 1938. A controversial novel, it was initially condemned by the Vatican for its portrayal of Catholicism.



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**THE STORY:** In the 1930s, the Mexican state of Tabasco has outlawed the Catholic Church for debauchery, closing all its churches, supporting fascist paramilitary groups, and shooting priests or forcing them to marry. But one nameless "whisky priest," whose craven actions belie his religious beliefs, escapes from the capital city and goes on the run. Haunted by his misdeeds, he travels from village to village, carrying on the Church's work to save souls, accompanied, at times, by a dentist, a farmer, a village woman, and a toothless mestizo—with a zealous, socialist lieutenant policeman not far behind. Throughout the novel, the priest, craving dignity and penance, remains torn between his desire for a life of sainthood and one of carnal pleasures—until he and the equally flawed lieutenant come face to face.

**"The Power and the Glory ... is generally agreed to be Graham Greene's masterpiece, the book of his held highest in popular as well as critical esteem. ... [Its] nameless whisky priest blends seamlessly with his tropical, crooked, anticlerical Mexico. Roman Catholicism is intrinsic to the character and terrain both; Greene's imaginative immersion in both is triumphant."** JOHN UPDIKE, *NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS*, 8/16/90

## The Heart of the Matter (1948)

◆ JAMES TAIT BLACK MEMORIAL PRIZE

◆ MODERN LIBRARY'S 100 BEST NOVELS, #40

During World War II, Greene worked for the Secret Intelligence Service in Sierra Leone. This novel, set in a British West African colony, addresses faith, Catholicism, and moral growth in a police officer. Yet it is universal in its concerns about pride, failure, sacrifice, the cost of individualism, the individual versus the Church, colonialism, racism, and the global reach of war.



**THE STORY:** Major Henry Scobie, a devout Catholic and a scrupulously honest police officer in a British colony on the African West Coast during World War II, becomes “a weak man with good intentions doomed by pride.” After Scobie is passed over for a promotion, his lonely wife decides to visit South Africa for a while. When she leaves, Scobie falls in love with a younger woman, but he is torn between his desire for her and his loyalty to God and to a wife he no longer loves. He quickly spirals downward, leading to moral, professional, and spiritual compromises.

**“From first page to last, this record of one man’s breakdown on a heat-drugged fever-coast makes its point as a crystal-clear allegory—and as an engrossing novel. ... The novel never labors that bitter parable: Mr. Greene’s triumph is not that he makes his doomed policeman human but that one sympathizes with his rogues and weaklings as well.”** WILLIAM DU

BOIS, *NEW YORK TIMES*, 7/11/48

## The End of the Affair (1951)

Set in London during and after World War II, *The End of the Affair*, a short novel establishing Greene’s international reputation, is based on Greene’s affair with Lady Catherine Walston. Told through multiple flashbacks by Maurice Bendrix (loosely modeled after Greene), the novel raises questions about obsession, jealousy, Catholicism, faith tested and renewed, and love of self versus devotion to God.



**THE STORY:** When Maurice Bendrix, a burgeoning novelist in World War II London, falls in love with Sarah Miles, the wife of an important, if rather dull, civil servant, their affair is wracked by passion and jealousy. Then a bomb tears apart Bendrix’s flat, and Sarah takes her lover for dead. When he is found alive, she breaks off the affair with no explanation. Two years later, Bendrix sees Sarah’s husband, which inspires him to hire a private detective to find out if Sarah has taken a new lover. But through her diary, he

learns the shocking truth about the vow she made with God if God allowed him to survive the bombing years earlier.

**“[Greene’s] juxtapositions of love and hate, envy and admiration form the high level of his drama and are reinforced by the stylistic contrasts of the characters and scenes which give them flesh. ... It is savage and sad, vulgar and ideal, coarse and refined, and a rather accurate image of an era of cunning and glory, of cowardice and heroism, of belief and unbelief.”** GEORGE MAYBERRY, *NEW YORK TIMES*, 10/28/51

## The Quiet American (1955)

Considered one of his masterpieces, *The Quiet American*, another short novel, draws on Greene’s experiences as a British espionage agent in Sierra Leone during World War II, as well as his time spent in Saigon in the early 1950s reporting on the French colonial war. The novel, set in the early 1950s in Vietnam (then Indochina), is eerily prescient of the conflict to come. It is a political parable about war, as well as a



speciously simple story of love, adventure, and mystery. The novel’s various characters represent nations and political factions. Greene raised the wrath of Americans by portraying them as materialistic and naive, with little understanding of other cultures. He also criticized the Catholic Church for identifying with American militarism.

**THE STORY:** Thomas Fowler, the narrator, is a hardened, opium-smoking, middle-aged British war correspondent with anti-American leanings and an affection for Phuong, a young Vietnamese woman. But when Alden Pyle, a naive, idealistic young American, arrives in Vietnam, supposedly as an aid worker, he also declares his love for Phuong, who must choose between the two very different men. Soon, however, both men are thrust into the French Army’s violent war with the Vietminh, and Fowler, who comes to realize that Pyle’s mission to Indochina is not as innocent as it seems, find it difficult to stand by and impartially observe the bloodshed.

**“Easily, with long-practiced and even astonishing skill, speaking with the voice of a British reporter who is forced, despite himself, toward political action and commitment, Greene tells a complex but compelling story of intrigue and counter-intrigue, bombing and murder. ... He is not ashamed as an artist to content himself with the picture of America made so familiar by French neutralism; the picture of a civilization composed exclusively of chewing gum, napalm bombs, deodorants, Congressional witch-hunts, celery wrapped in cellophane, and a naive belief in one’s own superior virtue.”** ROBERT GORHAM DAVIS, *NEW YORK TIMES*, 3/11/56

## The Comedians (1966)

Greene set *The Comedians*, a dark, sardonic exploration of social conditions and descent into primitive chaos, in Haiti under the dictator François “Papa Doc” Duvalier and his violent secret police, the Tonton Macoute, in 1963. Not surprisingly, Duvalier attacked the book, which criticized his repressive regime, in the press.

**THE STORY:** On a Dutch ship steaming toward Haiti, Mr. Brown, a lapsed Catholic, returns to reclaim an inherited hotel in Port-au-Prince. Also on board are former failed American presidential candidate Mr. Smith and his wife (come to set up a vegetarian center) and British con artist and expat Major Jones, on the run from a shady past. These “comedians”—wearing metaphorical masks to conceal their true deceitful natures—witness the country’s rapid political changes and the threatening Tonton Macoute as they get sucked into the barbaric vortex. Yet heroism just may exist in the face of impending tragedy.

**“While Mr. Greene ... specialized in chronicling the moral and political murkiness he encountered in the third world, taking particular interest in societies that ring the Caribbean, nowhere did he produce a more topical or damning work of fiction than his portrait of the dictator François (Papa Doc) Duvalier’s Haiti of the early 1960’s. ... Acquaintances of Mr. Greene say that even as his attentions shifted to other places in the region, like Nicaragua, where he donated royalties to the Sandinistas ... he continued to follow events in Haiti with a keen interest long after the last of three visits in 1963.”**

HOWARD W. FRENCH, *NEW YORK TIMES*, 4/27/91

## Travels With My Aunt (1969)

*Travels With My Aunt*, about the search for home, is a lighter, funnier novel than many of Greene’s other works as it follows a life of crime, adventure, and love and emphasizes the pleasures of the present. “Regret your own actions, if you like that kind of wallowing in self-pity, but never, never despise,” Aunt Augusta warns her nephew. “Never presume yours is the better morality.”

**THE STORY:** Henry Pulling, a middle-aged virgin, dahlia expert, and retired London bank manager, meets his 70-something wild and wicked Aunt Augusta at his mother’s funeral. As their bond grows, Henry finds himself drawn into her adventurous world and lifestyle. Soon, they are off to Brighton, Paris, and Istanbul via the Orient Express, where they are thrown into the world of hippies, adultery, war criminals, CIA operatives, military dictatorships, drugs, and Aunt Augusta’s past. When Henry



returns to his quiet suburban existence, he finds himself a changed man—and makes a surprising discovery as well.

**“The book unmistakably turns its back on the Orphic preoccupations with the hereafter that characterized Greene’s Catholic novels, and wholeheartedly embraces a Bacchic emphasis on the here and now. It is a remarkable change of emphasis to have made, and one which seems to deny the very works on which the novelist’s reputation is conventionally supposed to rest. Greene makes the point with great wit, but it is clearly intended no less seriously for not being made with solemnity.”** RICHARD BOSTON, *NEW YORK TIMES*, 1/25/70

## The Tenth Man (1985)

Greene first suggested this taut, suspenseful novella, about the French Resistance during World War II and the consequences of cowardice, as an idea for a film script in 1937. He then developed it while working for MGM in London in the 1940s, when he feared he would be unable to support his family during the war. The rights were offered for sale by MGM in 1983, and Greene then revised and published the novel.

**THE STORY:** In a prison in Nazi-occupied France, the Germans execute one in every ten prisoners, and lots are drawn to decide each man’s fate. When Jean-Louis Chavel, a haughty, rich lawyer, is cast to die, he offers his entire fortune to any prisoner who will take his place before the firing squad. Michel Mangeot (known as Janvier), a poor, young shopkeeper’s assistant, accepts the offer and is executed. When the war ends, Chavel is alive and free—but destitute. Returning to his former home, now occupied by Janvier’s family, he takes an alias and becomes their servant. But complications arise as an impostor who claims to be Chavel intervenes and forces the real Chavel to face a morality crisis and to try to redeem himself from his former cowardly deeds.

**“On one level, *The Tenth Man* is a tale of very personal choices and regrets, potential and loss. On another, it stands as a new and exciting chapter in literature’s continuing saga of men and women being swept along by the tides of their times, being moved to rhythms and currents beyond their control, and putting to test once again the proverbial indomitability of the human spirit. *The Tenth Man* is a work of stature, a major novel of World War II that deserves a place at the top of the list of the world’s best literature inspired by war.”** RICH

QUACKENBUSH, *HOUSTON CHRONICLE*, 3/31/85 ■

