



Brideshead Revisited

By Evelyn Waugh

First published in 1945

Genre & subject

Classic fiction

Synopsis

During World War II, Captain Charles Ryder returns to Brideshead, ancestral home of the Marchmain family. He recalls his friendship with the younger son Sebastian, his love affair with Sebastian's sister Julia, and the effect of Catholicism on each of their lives.

Author biography

Arthur Evelyn St. John Waugh (28 October 1903 – 10 April 1966), known as Evelyn Waugh, was an English writer of novels, biographies and travel books. He was also a prolific journalist and reviewer. His best-known works include his early satires *Decline and Fall* (1928) and *A Handful of Dust* (1934), his novel *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) and his trilogy of Second World War novels collectively known as *Sword of Honour* (1952–61). Waugh is widely recognised as one of the great prose stylists of the 20th century.

The son of a publisher, Waugh was educated at Lancing and Hertford College, Oxford, and worked briefly as a schoolmaster before becoming a full-time writer. As a young man, he acquired many fashionable and aristocratic friends, and developed a taste for country house society that never left him. In the 1930s he travelled extensively, often as a special newspaper correspondent; he was reporting from Abyssinia at the time of the 1935 Italian invasion. He served in the British armed forces throughout the Second World War, first in the Royal Marines and later in the Royal Horse Guards. All these experiences, and the wide range of people he encountered, were used in Waugh's fiction, generally to humorous effect; even his own mental breakdown in the early 1950s, brought about by misuse of drugs, was fictionalised.

Waugh had converted to Roman Catholicism in 1930, after the failure of his first marriage. His traditionalist stance led him to oppose strongly all attempts to reform the Church; the changes brought about in the wake of the Second Vatican Council of 1962–65, particularly the introduction of the vernacular Mass, greatly disturbed him. This blow, together with a growing dislike for the welfare state culture of the postwar world and a decline in his health, saddened his final years, although he continued to write.

Discussion starters

- Charles Ryder is enamoured of the wealth, beauty and privileged life he finds at Brideshead, a paradise, "very near heaven." Yet beneath the surface glamour lie discontent, anxiety, resentment —chinks in the perfect armour of the Flyte family—that presage later problems. Can you identify some of those chinks?
- What is the reason for Sebastian's decline? Trace its beginnings and the role that Lady Marchmain plays.
- Why does Julia marry Rex Mottram?
- The overriding theme of the novel is Catholicism and the opening of one's life to grace. At one point the inevitability of grace is described as the "twitch upon the thread," referring to how a fisherman gently wiggles the line to bring in the catch. You might explore the role that religion (or its rejection) plays in the life (or ultimate fate) of the characters—Sebastian (with his teddy bear), Charles, Julia, Lady Marchmain and her husband.
- Is Lord Marchmain's deathbed conversion genuine?
- Critics have found *Brideshead Revisited* elitist, saying that the work champions the life of the aristocracy over the life of the middle class? Do you find evidence of that in the work? Or is that an unfair assertion.
- Does Charles's conversion at the end feel convincing to you? Were you surprised?

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