

BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

Brideshead Revisited

*The Sacred and Profane
Memories of
Captain Charles Ryder*

by

EVELYN WAUGH

Evelyn Waugh wrote *Brideshead Revisited* while on leave from the British army during World War II. Following is a selection of letters he wrote to his literary agent, A. D. Peters, and close friend Nancy Mitford about the writing and publication of the book.

To A. D. Peters
February 8, 1944
Easton Court Hotel,
Chagford,
Devon

Dear Peter,

Could you please tell me the new address of Mr. McLachlan the typist?

I am busy on the novel, have done over 10,000 words and, if the military do not disturb me, should finish it by the middle of May. It would have a small public at any time. I should not think six Americans will understand it.

Would it be prudent to warn Gatfield¹ to expect a manuscript for his Christmas publication? He would then be able to reserve some paper.

I am concerned with the quality rather than the quantity of Gatfield's work. I take it that the regulations only prescribe how big the margins shall be and how small the print? They do not categorically enforce bad typography? And is there any paper of better quality than others?

Would Littlebrown² care to produce an edition deluxe or at least *de proprietate*? I should like this book to be in decent form

¹ Joint managing director of Chapman and Hall, Waugh's publisher.

² Little, Brown and Company, Waugh's American publisher.

because it is *very* good. Failing all else can Gatfield get hand-made paper for twenty copies or so at my expense?

My salutes to Henrie. I am in better shape than when I last saw her and you.

Yours Ever,
Evelyn

Would it interest you to see the first 2 chapters in their first typed version or will you wait until it is finished? You might be able to guess how many yanks and Bevin-boys³ will be able to understand it.

To A. D. Peters
April 3, 1944
Easton Court Hotel,
Chagford,
Devon

Dear Pete,

My Magnum Opus is turning into a jeroboam.

I have written 62,000 words of which I enclose half. The rest is typing. A problem vexes me on which I should value your advice: The original scheme of the book was three sections, of which two are complete. The total length will be about 90,000

³ British slang at the time, referring to men conscripted to work in coal mines during World War II.

words. I now find that what I have written could be profitably enlarged and what I have to write could be an entire book. The leisure at my disposal is limited.

Should I be well advised to expand what I have written to 70,000 words and publish it as Vol. I, leaving the second for next year? Supposing that by next year paper is again abundant we could publish a single volume of 120,000 words incorporating the first volume which would have had the limited circulation of the time. Expansion would be an artistic benefit.

Evelyn

Please retain MS for time being. It is a first draft requiring much alteration even if there is no expansion.

To A. D. Peters
 [Received May 20, 1944]
 Easton Court Hotel,
 Chagford,
 Devon

Dear Pete,

Many thanks for your congratulations. Both well; no nanny.⁴

How about "Sacred and Profane" on the cover; "The Sacred and Profane Memories of Capt. Charles Ryder" on the title page?

Yes, Lady Marchmain is an enigma. I hoped the last conversation with Cordelia gave a theological clue. The whole thing is

⁴ Waugh's wife, Laura, had just given birth to their daughter Harriet.

steeped in theology, but I begin to agree that theologians won't recognize it.

Duck into hare shall stop.⁵

I wish I could dine, but I am glad of the reason for not being able to. I am steaming ahead with the novel. It is becoming painfully erotic.

Yours,
Evelyn

To A. D. Peters

September 30, 1944

“M” Military Mission

C.M.F.

[Topusko, Croatia]

Dear Peter,

... Littlebrown must on no account change the title of *BR* without submitting the alternative for my approval. I think it most unlikely I shall agree. He can call it “A Household of Faith” if he likes.

I am writing to Gatfield by this post asking for a set of galley proofs by air mail so that I can revise the first half. The changes may be extensive.

⁵ This is a correction Peters had pointed out in the manuscript—a meal of duck had been turned into rabbit and Peters thought it should be changed back to duck.

...Randolph⁶ does not want to write his war memoirs but will come and see you when he gets home to discuss doing business with you. You may find him offensive. Most people do. I seldom.

Time passes very slowly in this backwater.⁷

Yours,
Evelyn

To Nancy Mitford

January 7, 1945

37 Military Mission

Dubrovnik, Croatia

Dearest Nancy,

Yes, I know what you mean; he *is* dim,⁸ but then he is telling the story and it is not his story. It is all right for Benvenuto Cellini⁹ to be undim, but he is telling his own story and no one else's. I think the crucial question is: does Julia's love for him seem real or is he so dim that it falls flat; if the latter, the book fails plainly. He was a bad painter. Well he was as bad at painting as Osbert [Sitwell] is at writing; for Christ's sake don't repeat that comparison to *anyone*.

⁶ Randolph Churchill, son of Winston.

⁷ He was serving a military mission (under Randolph's command) in Croatia.

⁸ Nancy had written to Waugh in her previous letter that her only criticism of Charles was that he seemed "a tiny bit dim."

⁹ Italian Mannerist artist from the sixteenth century who wrote a famous autobiography.

Lady Marchmain,¹⁰ no I am not on her side; but God is, who suffers fools gladly; and the book is about God. Does that answer it?

Bad about the clip.¹¹ Too late for the first edition and there are no second editions these days. I knew I should have submitted it to you for criticism. The definitive (ha ha) edition is substantially different from the first, so if you really feel disposed to re-read it, as you say, wait a month or two for that.

A lovely parcel of books from you. Connolly's *Grave*.¹² What he writes about Christianity is such twaddle—real twaddle—no sense or interest, that it shakes me. And he seems ashamed of that part of himself—as a soft, skeptical old good liver. I am shocked by *Grave*. But I have read only five or six pages. My father was a better classical scholar than Connolly, but he did not trot out his recondite quotations in at all that way. I think Connolly has lived too much with communist young ladies. He *must* spend more time at Whites.¹³

So today is Orthodox Christmas and I was asked to tea by the military at 3pm. One never knows what one will get in this country. Today we were seated at tables, without a greeting from our hosts, and given (a) green chartreuse, (b) tea and ham sandwiches, (c) cakes and cherry brandy and cigarettes, (d) two patriotic speeches. Then it seemed reasonable to think the party was over, but no, in came cold mutton and red wine. It is unsettling at my age.

¹⁰ Nancy had also queried him as to whether or not he sided with Lady Marchmain.

¹¹ She pointed out that diamond clips were not invented until the 1930s and Julia would have worn a diamond arrow in her cloche instead.

¹² Cyril Connolly, a mutual friend, published *The Unquiet Grave* in 1944.

¹³ A London gentlemen's club that Waugh and his friends frequented.

50 copies of *Brideshead Revisited* went out, 40 of them to close friends of yours. Do please keep your ear to the ground and report what they say. For the first time since 1928, I am eager about a book.

Love,
Evelyn

To Nancy Mitford
February 4, 1945
37 Military Mission
Dubrovnik, Croatia

Darling Nancy,

Well those were two splendid letters. What a bob's worth— theology, belles-lettres, biography—the whole of the Everyman Library. First, *Belles-lettres*. How delighted I am to hear you are writing a Great English Classic too. What a subject!¹⁴ Tell your publisher at once or there will not be paper for months after it is written. The first person singular is a most treacherous form of narration, I found. It is so fatally easy in some ways, one can go on and on almost effortlessly and then one comes up against something which “I” cannot possibly say, which must be said. I believe you will manage it more skillfully than I did. I pant for the proofs.

¹⁴ Nancy had written that she had started a work in a similar vein, written in first person, inspired by her family. *The Pursuit of Love* was published in 1945.

Theology. There is no doubt that God does like dunces, repugnant as it is.¹⁵ I think it is like the lower classes—everyone loves the simple gaffer until he starts telling us what he heard on *The Brains Trust* the evening before. We are all *very* lower class to God and our cleverness and second-hand scholarship bore him hideously.

I don't like your defense of Windsor and Mrs. S.¹⁶ It is certainly true that people often feel qualms of conscience about illicit love only when they are beginning to get bored; also that self restraint usually takes the form of not falling in love but rather falling and then having a dramatic renunciation. But it must be nonsense to say people never give up sleeping together for "abstract" principles. Anyhow why "abstract"? Is the crown of England or the love of God abstract? Of course with Julia Flyte the fact that the war was coming and she saw her life coming to an end anyhow, made a difference.

Biography or Medicine. Croatia is thrilled about Lennox-Boyd's elephantiasis.¹⁷ Army signals busy supplying Randolph with

¹⁵ Nancy wrote to Evelyn, "I quite see how the person who tells is dim but then would Julia *and* her brother *and* her sister all be in love with him if he was? Well love is like that and one can never tell. What I can't understand is about God. . . . The God I believe in simply *hates* fools more than anything."

¹⁶ The Duke of Windsor and Wallis Simpson.

¹⁷ In a previous letter she had recounted how a mutual friend, Alan Lennox-Boyd, had accidentally been infected with elephantiasis by a doctor who was supposed to be giving him a vaccine. Unfortunately, he developed symptoms during a House of Lords committee meeting and had to be rushed out via ambulance.

clinical details. I think it may have some connection with Guinness' zoo advertising.¹⁸ Now Simon.¹⁹ I can't make out from your description — stark, is the word — whether he was blown up by V2 or struck down in his prime like Lord Randolph.²⁰ If you put it in a book no one would think it at all “convincing.” Heaven help us when you atheists get full control as in Germany and go round the sick rooms murdering the sick and infirm. I should be an early victim. My blood pressure is giving me trouble again.

Drama. Diane Abdy writes to me that her life is “re-orientated.” What does she mean?

Criticism. It is interesting how all the English think my G.E.C.²¹ Rom-ish propaganda. You never hear them speak of Henry Yorke²² as writing atheist propaganda. Penelope Betjeman has written me a long letter treating the story purely as a controversial tract. Katharine Asquith on the other hand writes, “When will you stop writing novels and try your hand at a book?” Pansy Lamb says I give an entirely false view of debutante life in the early '20s. It is heaven for me hearing all these criticisms.

¹⁸ An ad for Guinness beer showed an elephant using its trunk to delicately remove a glass of Guinness from its keeper's hand.

¹⁹ Simon Elwes had an attack of thrombosis that deprived him the use of his right side. He was married to Gloria Rodd, Nancy's sister-in-law at the time.

²⁰ Winston Churchill's father, Randolph Churchill, died at age forty-six.

²¹ Great English Classic

²² Novelist, wrote under the pseudonym of Henry Green.

Autobiography. My life continues very easy, comfortable, irresponsible, safe. I know the stones of Ragusa well and can tell what is genuine Italian and what is Slav imitation. Most of my day is spent dealing with pathetic people of confused nationality seeking to escape the horrors of liberation.

I was called on by a man who looked just like Professor Joad who introduced himself, “I am the poet Kosov.” He gave me the English translation of a play of his called, literally, “Passion’s Furnace.” . . . Mr. Kosov stayed to luncheon and left very tipsy quoting Rimbaud in German.

We had a sad little festival yesterday when the partisans made the people observe St. Blaise’s Day with all of its ceremonies—no tourists, no peasants in from the villages, the inhabitants too weak from hunger to stand and too scared of the secret police to sneeze. Why cannot you send Prod here to help civilian relief.²³ He would be very welcome to yours truly. Bless him you never mention him now. The Savile Club I suppose.

Thank you very much for *Love on the Supertax* which arrived today. I haven’t opened it yet but look forward to doing so.

All love,
Evelyn

²³ Peter Rodd, Nancy’s husband at the time. He was working for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. Waugh openly admits Rodd is the inspiration for the character Basil Seal, who appears in *Black Mischief* and *Put Out More Flags*.

Questions and topics for discussion

1. Some consider *Brideshead Revisited* to be a novel about love, some think it is about family, and others the waning powers of British aristocracy. Evelyn Waugh considered it to be a book about religion. Do you think it is only one of these things, or could it be about all of them?
2. In his letter to A. D. Peters, Waugh wrote, “I hoped the last conversation with Cordelia gave a theological clue.” What does Cordelia say that reveals Waugh’s true intentions?
3. In 1944, Henry Wallace, then vice president of the United States, declared that the twentieth century was “the century of the common man.” This statement caused much discussion in England, and because of it Waugh’s portrayal of Hooper, the representative “common man” in *Brideshead Revisited*, attracted controversy from the book’s critics. Do you find the portrayal of Captain Hooper offensive? Is the class issue still relevant today, or is it particular to the time in which the book was published?

4. When we first meet Sebastian, he carries a teddy bear with him wherever he goes. Why does he carry the teddy? To what degree is Sebastian still a boy when we meet him? How much of this behavior is affected and how much is genuine?
5. How much of Charles's identity is influenced by his relationship with the Flyte family?
6. Though they were all raised in the same household, each Flyte child has a different relationship with Catholicism. How would you define the differing feelings that Bridey, Julia, Sebastian, and Cordelia have about their religion?
7. What draws Charles to Sebastian? And what draws Sebastian to Charles? Several times Charles refers to Sebastian as "the forerunner" to his love for Julia. What do you think he means?
8. Infidelity is treated casually by those in Charles and Julia's social circle. When the two decide they love each other and want to marry, their relationship becomes much more controversial. Is marriage an act of love in the world of *Brideshead Revisited*?
9. When Bridey tells Julia she is "living in sin," it has a great effect on her. Do you think she had never thought of this before? Is it the first time Charles becomes aware of how greatly their "sins" sit on her?

10. The final impediment to Charles and Julia's marriage is that in the eyes of the Catholic Church, he is still married to Celia—despite their state-issued divorce. Waugh faced a similar situation in his own life when he decided to marry his second wife, and subsequently pursued an annulment from his first wife (despite their being legally divorced). Why do you think he chose not to make this a part of Charles and Julia's love story?
11. There are three significant deaths in Julia's life—her mother's, her father's, and that of her stillborn child with Rex. How do these deaths effect her decisions in life?
12. Charles is not a writer by profession, but as Julia points out he sees everything “second-hand” as if they were in a play. Is this his personality, or a way of explaining his role of narrator?

Suggested reading

Curious to find out more about Evelyn Waugh? Here are some titles worth investigating.

A Little Learning: An Autobiography, Evelyn Waugh

When the Going Was Good, Evelyn Waugh

Waugh Abroad: The Collected Travel Writing, Evelyn Waugh

The Letters of Evelyn Waugh, edited by Mark Amory

The Diaries of Evelyn Waugh, edited by Michael Davie

The Letters of Nancy Mitford and Evelyn Waugh, edited by Charlotte Mosley

The Letters of Evelyn Waugh and Diana Cooper, edited by Artemis Cooper

Evelyn Waugh: The Early Years, 1903–1939, Martin Stannard

Evelyn Waugh: The Later Years, 1939–1966, Martin Stannard

Evelyn Waugh: A Biography, Selina Hastings

Evelyn Waugh: A Biography, Christopher Sykes

The Life of Evelyn Waugh: A Critical Biography, Douglas Patey

Will This Do? An Autobiography, Auberon Waugh

Fathers and Sons: The Autobiography of a Family, Alexander Waugh