

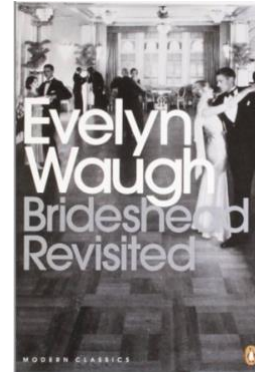
BRIDESHEAD REVISITED

Evelyn Waugh

March 2025

"Brideshead Revisited" was Waugh's seventh published novel, released in 1945 at the end of the second world war. It captures the "between wars" period with the social and cultural instability caused by the fast development in ideals and technology creating a conflict between tradition and modernity.

It looks back to the golden age before the Second World War and tells the story of Charles Ryder's infatuation with the Marchmains and the rapidly-disappearing world of privilege they inhabit. Enchanted first by Sebastian at Oxford, then by his Catholic family, in particular Sebastian's remote sister, Julia, Charles comes finally to recognize only his spiritual and social distance from them.



In the beginning it is an affectionately ironic picture of Oxford in 1923, getting drunk at luncheon, the lively, small banter, the happy irresponsibility. It is there that Ryder meets Lord Sebastian Flyte and forms a romantic friendship with him; Sebastian, the brilliant, charming second son of an old Catholic family that is verging on dissolution which, the author seems to suggest, parallels England's change from the old order to the new. Then, the story's arrival at Brideshead, the tone changes as the themes develop: the love story of Ryder and Sebastian's sister Julia, the Church giving haven to the soul-torn, drunken Sebastian and reclaiming Julia and even the Byronic father who comes home at last from Italy to die.

Some comments from group members:

"I enjoyed the first part of the novel for its lyrical evocation of being young at Oxford, the English countryside in summer, intense friendship and first love. Waugh also has a great ear for dialogue and is a fine comic writer and I found some parts very funny.

The second part of the novel though is much less satisfying. Catholicism and divine grace become the overriding themes, the characterisation grows unreal, Sebastian drifts off to a sad end, and Waugh's snobbery and disdain for modern life are on full display. In the final scenes, Charles the lifelong agnostic has become a convert and found God but it's the beginning, where he finds love, that makes the book memorable."

"I enjoyed it very much. I thought it was very cleverly written. The descriptive passages were brilliant, and not too long with plenty of action, keeping the plot moving forward. All characters were well portrayed. A fascinating story of Charles' eventual conversion to the Catholic faith. Terrific read."

"Having been a NT volunteer at Lanhydrock for a few years I found myself imagining similar scenes of the Marchmain family where the story develops. The bucolic student days of Charles Ryder and Sebastian at Oxford and Brideshead and the brilliant descriptions of their charismatic friendship and Sebastian's eccentric Catholic relations. Waugh captures the interwar years and atmosphere of the "Roaring Twenties", comparable with the post WW2 years in the sixties although there is no direct mention of homosexuality as it was then illegal.

I found the complicated relationships of the rich aristocratic Marchmains and their entourage, plus the many references to Sebastian's drinking boring but the descriptions of nature through the eyes of romantic artist Charles Ryder were one of the main strengths of the book. Charles and Julia eventually consummated a long-nursed passion and both explored the possibility of divorce – Charles succeeding only to find Julia's Roman Catholic devoutness prevents her from divorcing her husband.

I liked the idea of framing Charles' memories of his student days to his becoming a soldier introduce and closed this story when coming upon the empty, deserted and overgrown Brideshead – apart from the stalwart nanny still living upstairs.”

“This book is written in the first person and I felt it was very much based on the author's life and experiences. It was written in 1945 so no graphic descriptions of sex and violence. In the preface written in 1959, the world has already become a different place.

In Book One Charles is 18/19 years old and at Oxford University where he meets Sebastian and other males – there are many oblique references to homosexuality.

Sebastian has a troubled relationship with his family due to his heavy drinking and he and Charles part company at the end of Book One. He becomes a successful architectural artist, meets up with Julia, Sebastian's sister and it becomes a glorious soap opera muddle set in the 20's and 30's.

This story is about people's relationship, feelings, beliefs and gossip set with the background of the general Strike (1926), Hitler's rise to power (1933) and Mrs Simpson (1936).

On the whole I enjoyed the book - good descriptive prose, humour, patriarchal society and of its time.”

“On my first read when the TV series was shown in 1981 it came across as frivolous entertainment BUT re-reading now 45 years later it is a far more serious read which I found very engaging. The author is a seemingly fascist intellectual, racist antisemitic and an old-style Roman Catholic against the abolition of Latin ritual etc! but writes beautiful prose, incisive observations and ponderous original thoughts on many issues I feel I am still becoming aware of and able to challenge which I completely missed reading the book first time around. Contemporary examples of political leaders Boris Johnson and David Cameron and the Bullingdon Club, misogyny, outrageous behaviour, class structure all demonstrating that some things have not changed much since the 1930s - differentials in inherited income, property, and privilege etc. I ponder my own background in poor middle class, out of my depth at a Catholic boarding school, my mother a RC convert! The author was apparently a practising Catholic who believed Catholicism gave order to the human condition. He acknowledged that privileged aristocrats may not necessarily be happy with their wealth but that the lower classes are happier in their struggling, working, honest lives and should not be given opportunities to rise above their station.”

Christine Wright