



A Writer's Notebook

W. Somerset Maugham

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From 1892, when he was eighteen, until 1949 when this book was first published, Somerset Maugham kept a notebook. It is without a doubt one of his most important works. Part autobiographical, part confessional, packed with observations, confidences, experiments and jottings it is a rich and exhilarating admission into this great writer's workshop.

A Writer's Notebook Details

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Author : W. Somerset Maugham

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Don says

Discovered this book recently and REALLY enjoyed it. The combination of character sketches and insight into historical events due to the author's presence there (e.g., the Russian Revolution of 1917) was deeply engrossing.

This book led me to seek out other writer's notebooks, e.g., the Journal of Jules Renard.

Sneh Pradhan says

Given that this book was in my to-read list since I was a 13 year-old , and finally being able to lay my hands on it , I was terribly disappointed !! The notebook which is veritably a notebook of Maugham's observations and ideas , are so dry and decrepit , not in descriptions since it's just a notebook , but in the very essence and substance of them . Having read his classics, The Moon and Sixpence and Of Human Bondage which were sheer works of Genius, however the Writer's Notebook as it stands is dreadfully mechanical , juiceless and bored me to death .

Elaine says

This is a weird read. I was surprised that I liked it. It is a collection of Maugham's notebook entries from the turn of the 20th century to 1949, minus his notes on India. He reveals a typical aristocratic British belief that different peoples have different national characters, reveals his dislike for assertive or ugly women, dislikes American coffee, believes that Americans are very class conscious despite their supposed egalitarianism, and so on. He adores French culture but deplores their political stupidity, which caused them to be twice defeated by the Germans. There is, of course, much more, ranging from brief scenarios for hypothetical novels or short stories to random observations about human nature. I found it a good companion for a lazy, pouring rainy day in Houston, Texas. He waxes philosophical about the meaning of life and about the validity of religion, as well. An interesting glimpse into a writer's thoughts and inspirations.

Jackie Wayman says

1892-1944

Ajith Rajan says

I just skimmed it cover to cover and read extracts I found interesting. Got an insight into how a great writer like Maugham keeps his writer's notebook.

Thomas Sutpen says

It was really interesting to read these excerpts of Maugham's notebooks, for the book is exactly what its title states. Except for the preface and for the last pages which were written to give an introduction and a closure to the book respectively, the rest of it consists of a series of sketches, descriptive passages, thoughts on politics and plots that could have been the basis for a short story or a novel and were later disregarded by the author. Notwithstanding the sometimes disjointed character of the book it is undoubtedly a good read for anyone interested in Maugham's life and works.

Dr.J.G. says

Maugham began to record his thoughts and observations in this journal while a medical student in London and continued as he travelled around the world, as a journalist (in reality a British agent during the Russian revolution) and later a writer, from England to France to South Seas to Pacific Islands and Malaya, writing about his experiences and thoughts. This contains his notes from 1892 to 1949.

I am unsure if the comments about Russian literature are recorded here, or only in *The Summing Up*.

One incident from his visiting Russia left a painful impression, later transformed in *Of Human Bondage* with a change of handicap.

Mike Mitchell says

His jottings through life, from 1892 to 1949. Lots of amusing anecdotes. eg.

- Unselfish parents have selfish children.
- Fools don't become less foolish when they grow old, and an old fool is infinitely more tiresome than a young one.

Evan says

Methinks I've been hoodwinked.

It appears I have a very odd edition of this book, an edition that precedes even the real first edition. This is "Preprinted from Cosmopolitan Magazine" and is a condensed 133-page version bound prior to the first full edition in 1949. It's hardcover in blue cloth and is in excellent condition. Got it for \$2. Even so I might have been reluctant to buy this knowing it isn't the full magilla; I'm not one for Reader's Digest type reductions. I took this to the park earlier today not knowing this and started reading it and was amused at Maugham's offhanded apologies for the defects of the thinking in his youthful writings herein and also for his self-congratulations for allowing them to stay in uncensored, though the claim is fraught with falsity to some degree given that the notebook is the result of intensive selection from several volumes -- in other words,

stuff is omitted. We may never know what. And, even if Maugham is not censoring his earlier self, his older self cannot help but interject a running commentary on his youthful stuff. I wonder if Maugham failed to see the irony of this, after all, the later self certainly has the advantage the younger self did not, the advantage of hindsight and the power to interject on the musings of a voice long gone that could not possibly defend itself. So, I suppose I'll read this condensed "preprint". It made for nice reading while sunning at the park. I was especially struck by SM's thoughts on the subject of taking notes of one's impressions, and how those notes should be later incorporated into other writings or whether doing that merely results in forced hybrid copy and hinders the imagination. This is something I've struggled with myself.

Anyway.... later...

Ichor says

A patchy read that is all swings and roundabouts. There are some stunning insights into a writer's mind and some worrying ones as well. I'd recommend flicking through it but nothing else.

Ben Batchelder says

A Writer's [one note] Notebook

The author of *Of Human Bondage* and reportedly one of the best paid novelists of the 1930's reduced from fifteen volumes to one his lifetime of notebooks. He explains "I publish it because I am interested in the technique of literary production and in the process of creation [his own]," [p.xvi] and indeed the result is an extended look inside the sausage factory. Fiction writers, alas, feel compelled to invent all sorts of secondary and tertiary characters; rather than let the well run dry, countless real-time vignettes and portraits are assembled as potential raw material - along with many extended and tortured similes.

I read his *bildungsroman* titled *Of Human Bondage* ages ago and there is nothing in this compilation to recommend my returning to it. The general impression, especially from his early years, is of an insufferable egoist and materialist.

Two entries, when aged 22, exemplify. The first, "The more intelligent a man is the more capable is he of suffering," [p.19] reveals the young egoist. The second, "Science is the consoler and the healer of troubles, for it teaches how little things matter and how unimportant is life with all its failures," [p.24] reveals the materialist. What an odd view of science and suffering that is!

While studying to become a doctor, Maugham's first novel sold out quickly, leading him to switch careers. By age 34 he writes, "Success. I don't believe it has had any effect on me." If only it had!

The freshest writing comes only when Maugham, finally freed of the rarified mileus of Paris and London, travels to the Pacific, to research a novel about the life of Paul Gauguin. Yet, throughout, he seemingly lacks compassion: everything is for the gristmill of his writings.

As a young man, like many, he struggles with the notion of God and the hypocrisy of many religious men. But he never seems to grow out of his youthful rebellion and remains a pinched modernist. At age 25, he writes:

“I’m glad I don’t believe in God. When I look at the misery of the world and its bitterness I think that no belief can be more ignoble.” [p.63]

A page later, he drops this clunker:

“After all, the only means of improving the race is by natural selection; and this can only be done by elimination of the unfit. All methods which tend to their preservation – education of the blind and of deaf-mutes, care of the organically disease, of the criminal and of the alcoholic – can only cause degeneration.” [p.64]

The writer, from an older if not wiser age, adds a few dozen comments, particularly when his prior musings are over-the-top. But here he remains mute, connoting approval.

But once you throw out the measuring stick, then all become relative and transient:

“The ethical standard is as ephemeral as all else in the world. Good is nothing more than the conduct which is fittest to the circumstances of the moment...” [p.65]

I am reminded that eugenics was all the rage among Western intellectuals, even if Maugham’s confession, in 1901, preceded by a good decade the fashion. Building on Darwin’s and Lylle’s pioneering work in dethroning God, by 1882 Nietzsche could declare in *The Gay Science* that “God is dead.” Long before Hitler, the concept of Social Darwinism, which adapted the survival of the fittest regime to humans, fueled all sorts of pathologies, many of them still alive and well today.

Recently I read an article titled “Harvard’s Eugenics Era” by Adam Cohen, which, in appearing in the Harvard Magazine, is the institution’s partial coming to terms with a sordid history a century after the fact. He writes:

“Harvard’s role in the movement was in many ways not surprising. Eugenics attracted considerable support from progressives, reformers, and educated elites as a way of using science to make a better world.” [March-April 2016, p.48]

He admits that:

“Harvard was more central to American eugenics than any other university. Harvard has, with some justification, been called the “brain trust” of twentieth-century eugenics...” [ibid.]

But, then again, what percentage of students today would be against “using science to make a better world”? Practically none.

Cohen traces the history of eugenics to England in 1883 to Darwin’s half cousin, Francis Galton. (Which helps explain Maugham’s otherwise precocious adherence to the cult movement in 1901.) That it built off of Darwin’s ground-breaking work is unmistakable.

A Harvard botanist, Professor Edward East, “gave important support to Galton’s fledgling would-be science,” writing in 1923 “‘Eugenics is sorely needed; social progress without it is unthinkable...’” [ibid., p.49] (But then again, what right-minded person can be against “social progress” or “social justice” nowadays?)

Coercive state power, in the hands of progressives of both parties, has a long history. Famed Harvardian Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. wrote the 1927 Supreme Court decision approving of Virginia’s sterilization laws, with what Cohen calls “one of the most brutal aphorisms in American law, saying ... ‘Three generations of imbeciles are enough.’” [ibid., p.52] This when the young mother, named Carrie Buck, was clearly not. Sterilization of the “unfit” by various states continued until 1981.

Despite the longevity of its evil fruit, eugenics fell out of fashion in the U.S. due to Hitler’s embrace of it. So is the chapter in the U.S. mostly closed? I fear not. Margaret Sanger, the founder of Planned Parenthood, was a professed eugenicist, writing in a 1921 article, that “the most urgent problem today is how to limit and discourage the over-fertility of the mentally and physically defective.” She later wrote to black ministers in 1939, trying to tamp down the potential racist interpretation of her beliefs:

“We do not want word to go out that we want to exterminate the Negro population, and the minister is the man who can straighten out that idea if it ever occurs to any of their more rebellious members.” [see “What Margaret Sanger Really Said About Eugenics and Race,” *Time Magazine*, Oct, 14, 2016]

Abortion, in the name of women’s rights, has killed over 19 million black babies since its legalization in 1973. (That is nearly an entire generation of black Americans wiped out.) While making up only 13% of the adult female population, black women receive 36% of all U.S. abortions. [see “Black Abortions By The Numbers,” <https://rtl.org/outreach/> sourced from CDC and other data.]

Given the supposed “unfitness” of all these young mothers, how could Holmes, Maugham, and Sanger disapprove? “Free choice” in the service of eugenics, how clever.

But I digress.

Maugham also betrays a certain British stiff-upper-lip, with reasoning such as this:

“The power of great joy is balanced by an equal power of great sorrow. Envious is the man who feels little, so that he is unaffected either by the extremes of bliss or of grief.” [p.21]

Yet this goal of “feeling little” may not be ideal for a writer, especially for one whose heart hardened so young.

One of Maugham's motivations for rejecting God comes later:

“How much greater would human happiness have been if gratification of the sexual instinct had never been looked upon as wicked. A true system of ethics must find out those qualities which are in all men and call *them* good.” [p.75]

Humanism could hardly be more clearly stated. And, once again, Maugham is prescient, as those who wish to believe in a Love-Only God most earnestly wish to be able to do whatever they want, throwing out one eternal law after another.

Regrettably, his last entries evidence very little growth, such as this adolescent twaddle (when aged 67):

“Plumbing. When you consider how indifferent Americans are to the quality and cooking of the food they put into their insides, it cannot but strike you as peculiar that they should take such pride in the mechanical appliances they use for its excretion.” [p.345]

His eugenicist tendencies, apparently, were never given a decent burial. A late entry reveals some race-consciousness:

“When I was engaging two coloured maids to look after me the overseer of the plantation who produced them...” [p.342]

Produced them?

The same ripe age of 67, he upbraids God:

“If he's capable of feeling he must be capable of remorse, and when he considers what a hash he's made in the creation of human kind can he feel anything but that? The wonder is that he does not make use of his omnipotence to annihilate himself. Perhaps that's just what he has done.” [p.346]

At some point in human history, when such views were still in the minority they might have appeared brave. But now that they are mainstream, particularly among intellectuals, they seem flatly, tragically, deaf and dumb.

By book's end, I only had compassion for a writer still struggling with issues such as values and beauty, while fighting their creator. How sad: yet another literary giant turns out to be a moral midget.

In vain I waited for an older Maugham to quibble with the absurdities of youth (of which I also had many), but instead he was consumed by them.

[W. Somerset Maugham, *A Writer's Notebook*, Vintage Books, New York, 1st International Edition, Dec. 2009]

JOSEPH OLIVER says

The one star is not for the content but for the layout of this particular edition. Please look at the 'Look Inside' part before purchasing. You will notice that each observation is given a line and there is no division between the lines. They all run into one another.

The original hardback copy has each observation distinctly separate from all the rest. It makes it much easier to dip into the book. This journal is not designed to be read from cover to cover as it is an edited collection of his observations over decades. They all differ from one another - some about characters he has met, thought up or wanted to write about. Others are just some throw away lines.

Hardback copies are easy to find. Buy one of them if you can.

Dirk Buken says

Full of insights, full of ideas. It's worth a reading for every fan of Somerset Maugham.

Margaret says

I am often very fond of Maugham's novels, but I just couldn't finish this, basically a collection of bits from his journals. I couldn't stay interested in the fragments, and I recoiled from the occasional unpleasant observation about women or non-European people.

Sorry, Willie, back on the shelf you go -- maybe I'll take another whack in a few years.

Mike says

I loved watching the change in Maugham's style as he grew older. Not the most entertaining, but if you're a fan of his writing, you'll appreciate it.
