



## The Charioteer

*Mary Renault*

[Download now](#)

[Read Online ➔](#)

# The Charioteer

*Mary Renault*

## **The Charioteer** Mary Renault

After enduring an injury at Dunkirk during World War II, Laurie Odell is sent to a rural veterans' hospital in England to convalesce. There he befriends the young, bright Andrew, a conscientious objector serving as an orderly. As they find solace and companionship together in the idyllic surroundings of the hospital, their friendship blooms into a discreet, chaste romance. Then one day, Ralph Lanyon, a mentor from Laurie's schoolboy days, suddenly reappears in Laurie's life, and draws him into a tight-knit social circle of world-weary gay men. Laurie is forced to choose between the sweet ideals of innocence and the distinct pleasures of experience.

Originally published in the United States in 1959, **The Charioteer** is a bold, unapologetic portrayal of male homosexuality during World War II that stands with Gore Vidal's **The City and the Pillar** and Christopher Isherwood's **Berlin Stories** as a monumental work in gay literature.

## **The Charioteer Details**

Date : Published May 13th 2003 by Vintage Books (first published 1953)

ISBN : 9780375714184

Author : Mary Renault

Format : Paperback 347 pages

Genre : Fiction, Lgbt, Historical, Historical Fiction, Gay, Classics



[Download The Charioteer ...pdf](#)



[Read Online The Charioteer ...pdf](#)

**Download and Read Free Online The Charioteer Mary Renault**

---

## From Reader Review The Charioteer for online ebook

### **Emanuela ~plastic duck~ says**

A review is not possible, not for me anyway, because the book is so rich and complex I don't think I have the means to write about it. Just a few thoughts.

I can't explain how pervasive Laurie became page after page. I thought I was keeping an equal distance from him and the other characters, but when I got to the end, I realized I wasn't able to detach my point-of-view from his and he totally, totally convinced me of his perceptions, so much so that I thought Ralph had really spoken to Andrew. I read the last chapter with dread, shock, worry and being sorry and mortified.

Laurie is divided between the love for Andrew, which Laurie seems to want to keep innocent and spiritual, and the love for Ralph, which is physical and brings with it the participation to a circle of gay men, that Laurie seems not to be able to accept, because it seems to exclude them from the rest of society.

The writing is subtle and beautiful, it's not only to be read, but also to be contemplated. We are so used to being open, but the constant tension of what is said or left unsaid, because the concern for social propriety was so ingrained in the characters, makes you always hyper-aware of each word. There are moments of obscurity, but also moments of revelation. You are expecting something, and it happens under your eyes without you realizing it. You are in the dark, then the author sheds a light, until it becomes blinding.

Beautiful. Beautiful. Beautiful.

---

### **Julio Genao says**

**significantly excellent.**

in some passages so stunningly real and identifiable i found myself experiencing things that had happened to me in nearly the same way, as if for the first time.

i feel like i already knew everyone i met in this book.

definitive. absolutely definitive.

discussion with author alexis hall: <http://www.prismbookalliance.com/2014...>

---

### **Jessica says**

My least favorite thing about this book reporting business is choosing the star rating. I seriously get ulcers trying to quantify my personal, subjective response to each book I've read. Was it just "okay"? Did I "like it" or "really like it"? Part of my problem is that I've resolved from the beginning to be incredibly stingy with my five-star ratings. I've only given five stars to books that I feel have affected my sense of self and relation to the world on some profound and fundamental level, which has created the problem that my four-star

category now is the broadest and least meaningful. My rule in distinguishing between a three-star and four-star book is how urgently I feel the need to return to reading it while I am not. Anything I actively crave earns the fourth star: four-star books make me look forward to subway rides, cause me to resent social obligations.... But *The Charioteer* made me rethink my commitment to the four star system. This was a book that I flung down at midnight on a Tuesday, beating my breast, cursing my fate, and crying out to the gods, "Why must I work?" because it broke my heart that I couldn't stay up all night long finishing it. I did debate postponing Thanksgiving, and there were times while reading that I actually had to stop, put the book down in my lap, and just freak out for a minute about how good it was. This was a book I found myself reading while walking down a crowded street at midday in Chinatown, a childhood behavior to which I rarely revert... Anyway, all of this did, for me, emphasize the limitations of the four-star rating. Shouldn't I just give books five stars if I think they're "amazing"? I guess I will try it, and see how I feel.

This book was amazing! Remember how great and romantic *Farewell to Arms* was, except that the female character was sort of a misogynistically drawn 2D fuckdoll, and the protagonist was a bit of an inarticulate, hypermasculine alcoholic brute? Well, imagine that book only British, not American, with a sensitive refined young wounded soldier and adorable cute boy orderlies instead of Hemingway's somewhat ridiculous female characters... Okay, this really wasn't anything like *Farewell to Arms*, and the comparison doesn't do justice to either book. They just both had romances in hospitals between wounded soldiers and hospital staff: I guess it's a genre, and not just those two... it's very romantic, all this wounding and nursing! Well, it is in the books. I don't know about real life.

*The Charioteer* was like some kind of dream birthday dinner of all my favorite foods. Instead of stuffed tomatoes and coffee ice cream, it had England during World War II, gay romance, and some of the most stunningly skillful writing I think I've ever read. I can't remember many books that more successfully conveyed private emotional states, a description of the physical world, complex and convincingly human characters and their interactions, and all the rest of that stuff that contributes to making up a really class-A, five-star novel. While reading this, I remembered that novels are an art form. As I personally read just for pleasure and judge books exclusively on their merits as entertainment, when I'm forced to confront this artwork thing it feels like a revelation. *The Charioteer* accomplishes so much of what it is I believe successful literature should do: that is, it conveys the fine and subtle specificity of a certain time, place, and character, while tying this individual story to the broad human experience. Anyone who can hang her novel on some Plato, as Renault does, and make it work so beautifully that a girl like me actually spends time poking at the Phaedrus online, deserves some sort of prize -- perhaps an extra star!

I couldn't stop wondering, as I read this, why I tend so often to love novels about mid-twentieth-century gay men so much. I think I must enjoy the inherent romance and painfully secret subtlety surrounding homosexual relationships in the pre-Stonewall era: there are few things as romantic as a forbidden, secret love that persists amidst strong social prohibitions, plus these books often avoid the tired cliches of heterosexual romances, and therefore seem more fresh. I also really enjoy the unsaid, unspelled-out nature of these relationships. There were so many conversations in this book that I had to read a few times before I caught the meaning implicit between the lines. A lot of that is probably its being British, on top of being gay, but the kind of careful and cryptic, thickly-coded social interaction which is what makes earlier, nineteenth-century novels about upper-crusty types so fascinating, survives longer in gay fiction. I love reading this stuff. It's like doing a crossword puzzle, trying to figure out what it means, only a crossword puzzle with a payoff beyond just the process.

I think another reason I like reading older books about gay men is that I'm so exhausted by depictions of women as objects of desire and of female sexuality, that it's a huge relief to get the romance without having to think about that stuff. There's something so relaxing about it, to me, dodging all those feminist issues, yet

still getting the kind of novel I want. There are actually quite a few well-drawn female characters in *The Charioteer*, and this was one area where it seemed unsurprising that the author was a woman. I am really interested now in Mary Renault. I want to read everything else she wrote, and though I'm not sure how I feel about historical fiction set in Ancient Greece, if it's anything like this, I am sure I will love it.

I really can't say I'd recommend this unreservedly to everyone, though if you're interested in historical fiction about gays in the military, it's hard to imagine that you could do better. I also recommend this to people who love the Novel, especially the life-during-wartime British Novel, which I have to say, I should think would be a lot of you.

---

### **Erastes says**

It's hard for me to do a review of this book for many reasons. It seems a bit cheeky for me to even try – and it's been around for so long I would imagine that just about everyone I know has read it, but if this review tempts one person who hasn't to give it a whirl, then I'll have achieved something. So perhaps it's less of a review and more of a personal rave. That I love it, is a given.

It's a simple enough story on the surface. Laurie, young idealistic, attempts to defend Ralph, the head boy at his school, when he is about to be sent down for "misbehaving with a younger boy." Ralph finds out before Laurie can act and warns him off. During the discussion Ralph gives Laurie a copy of Plato's *Phaedrus* which he keeps with him and uses as a model for his life. Time moves on – World War 2 happens and we next catch up with Laurie in hospital where he's developing a heavy crush on a conscientious objector, Andrew – and then he meets Ralph again.

The Charioteer is the thread and metaphor which runs throughout the book. The Charioteer of *Phaedrus* handles two horses, one runs smoothly and obediently, the other fights against the control – it is up to the charioteer to make them run as a pair. The parallels for the charioteer are myriad – the comparison between "normal" sexual behaviour and the homosexual – the love that Laurie feels for Andrew and the relationship he eventually forms with Ralph to name just two.

I'm sure there are tons of themes that the more intellectual have found/discussed to the skies, but the best thing for me is that it's a lesson in how to write – without actually writing. The book is sparse to the extreme, it's like she wrote a much longer book and then cut huge hunks out of the middles of each scene. Conversations are handled in real time, characters don't finish sentences, and there are utterly intriguing gaps where the reader "loses time" – where something may have happened, a look, a kiss or a sex scene. It's amazingly skilful and all I could do was smash my keyboard to pieces in frustration that I'll never come close to that.

The characters are indelibly imprinted on my mind, all except perhaps Andrew, which is probably deliberate because we see him only through Laurie's eyes and Laurie isn't objective. I found him too remote to be interesting, whereas the characters that Laurie meets at the queer party he attends are stronger – and my heart broke over the young airman who comes over brash and unbearable until you think about what he's doing, for his job. Ralph is irresistible – as Laurie finds him to be, and I really felt the attraction, he's quite my favourite character – but all of them are amazingly well done, complex, contrary, stupid and real.

One of the best books I've ever read – regardless of theme – and one of the Essential Reads for anyone interested in the genre, in my opinion.

---

### **Kristen says**

This is my all-time favorite book, for many reasons that are hard to explain. In the simplest terms, it's a love story set in England during WWII. I'd recommend it for anybody who a) enjoys literary fiction b) is socially open-minded and c) doesn't need to be hit over the head with plot developments.

Some people have said that Mary Renault is too reserved, or too subtle in her descriptions of a scene. But I think she was a genius at capturing the real, honest essence of people and relationships. She's a master at communicating all those things that go unspoken, which can mean everything to a relationship.

If Renault has any flaw, it's almost that her characters are TOO good. It's hard not to fall in love with all of them...

---

### **K.M. Soehnlein says**

I knew nothing about this novel when I began reading it. By the time I was done, I was convinced it belonged near the top of the list of the best novels ever written about gay characters.

Mary Renault is known for her historical fiction set in ancient Greece, but *The Charioteer* takes place during World War II, mostly inside a British hospital where Laurie (Laurence), whose kneecap was blasted away at the Battle of Dunkirk, is recuperating. Laurie becomes enamored with a hospital orderly named Andrew, a conscientious objector who is scorned by the other wounded veterans in the hospital. Later, visiting London on a one-day pass, Laurie gets swept into a circle of cosmopolitan gay men, among them Ralph, whom Laurie had a hero-worship-crush on when they were in school together. The novel's plot might be boiled down to the love triangle that grows out of these relationships, but there's a lot more going on here: a timeless exploration of the nature of homosexuality and the essence of love; a depiction of the struggle queers experience navigating between their families of origin and the social families they create; and the daily challenges of disability, as both Laurie and Ralph have been mutilated in the course of their military service.

So why isn't *The Charioteer* as well known as other mid-20th century masterworks like *Giovanni's Room* and *A Single Man*? Is it because Renault was a woman writing about men, which somehow invalidates her point of view? (As a lesbian in a lifelong relationship, she certainly understood the position of queer people in contemporary society.) Is it because her portrait of Ralph's social circle is loaded with supporting characters who display a stereotypical backstabbing bitchiness? (But no one she presents here is as villainous as the queens in *Giovanni's Room*; plus, I'd argue that Renault's portraiture illuminates how homophobia warps human behavior and turns the victims into victimizers.)

It may also be that *The Charioteer* is obscure because it's a challenging work of literature. The contemporary American reader has to fight through layers of British references to public schools, the military, the geography of London neighborhoods, and so on. Characters talk in a naturalistic style wherein subjects of conversations are referred to but not always named; some subjects (like homosexuality) simply couldn't be spoken about directly at the time, so the reader wades through inference and suggestion to get to what's at stake. And then there's Renault's knowing, often ironic prose style, which doesn't offer easy exposition,

doesn't "explain." We are thrust into scenes and have to figure out where we are and what's changed since the previous chapter. I frequently found myself flipping back to reread moments whose meaning had eluded me.

In a lesser novel all of that would have been frustrating, but Renault is such a good writer, and her characters are so fleshed out and compelling, that the book made me want to work hard for its pleasures. Laurie's conflict between his chaste crush on Andrew and his more complicated relationship to Ralph generates a lot of suspense in the novel's second half. The harrowing picture of life during the London Blitz, with its air raid sirens and blackout curtains and sudden bursts of gunfire, created a backdrop of uncertainty and danger. The slow awakening of the central character to self-determination, at the core of which is his love for other men, was set against a reading of Plato's "Phaedrus," which contains the myth of the charioteer that gives the novel its title, and points the way to Renault's more famous books, written after this.

Whatever the reason for its relative obscurity, *The Charioteer* strikes me as ripe for rediscovery.

---

### **Xia Xia Lake says**

I need to build Mary Renault a worship shrine. And maybe one for Ralph Lanyon as well.

---

### **Elie F says**

"Conquest is intoxicating, but a gift makes you think." But what does thinking lead to anyway? Even when you say to yourself that you are determined to live your life along this certain line, how do you know you are not lying to yourself? "Some things can't be thought about. The more you try to be honest with them, the more they lie to you." Only when thinking (the restless charioteer) falls silent, can love triumph, and our weary souls can finally be reconciled for a night in sleep?

4.5 stars. This book is very different from what I expected, more realistic, less romantic? There are really sentimental moments (Andrew's letter especially), but the ending's little twist makes me laugh out loud.

---

### **Mel Bossa says**

It's official, I worship Mary Renault.

If there ever was a novel that explored homo-romantic (platonic) love this is it.

Laurie was severely wounded at Dunkirk and is in convalescence, being treated in a military hospital. The setting is one Renault knew well and it is apparent in all of the details and characters that make up the backbone of the story. Laurie knows he's gay but of course back then you wouldn't call it that. He carries with him Plato's Phaedrus which has a passage where Socrates explains the myth/analogy of The Charioteer who holds the reigns on two horses that each equal in strength pull in opposite directions. This is the theme of the book. Laurie's painful struggle to reign in his nature while his heart pulls the other way.

His object of desire is Andrew a Quaker and conscious objector who has newly been hired as an orderly at the hospital. Andrew is shy, kind, devoted and sure of his ideals. He's a pacifist but not a coward. Soon Laurie and he begin a friendship that could with one touch or kiss turn into a love affair.

But Laurie is convinced that Andrew doesn't know his own nature yet. That Andrew hasn't realized that he is gay and because Laurie still believes one can change and marry and all that jazz, he holds back from Andrew to save him the terrible discovery of his nature.

Of course you have to forgive Laurie, this is 1940.

Now the other horse enters and he is Ralph, a handsome, reserved and generous naval officer also injured at Dunkirk. Actually Laurie knows him...

Ralph was house master back at school and Laurie had a crush on him though he didn't know to call it that. Now as he gets to spend time with Ralph while he has his evening passes, Laurie understands that it's possible to love and touch.

Yet he still longs for Andrew who represents innocence lost.

In the end I won't tell you which horse wins but it's a serene ending with an undertone of loss as well.

It is a subtle, poignant, extremely honest portrayal of gay love in the time when it was still a crime.

I loved every line.

---

### **Aubrey says**

Today, the social justice movement it is ever so chic to belong to is that of same sex marriage. Whether this will continue past the vanilla white male couple with a couple of white male kids, whether success on this front means a tackling of the trans panic (genocide) defense law in 49 of my 50 states, whether this sensationalized narrowing of all the discrimination, the dehumanization, and the murder of all those beyond the pale of hetero/cis/etc-normativity will go the way of eradication of US slavery and granting of US white women suffrage, remains to be seen. Should this movement putter out as the non-intersectional fad it has been form fitted to be, the fearful tightrope of living portrayed in this novel will never end. The fact that this book has already incorporated itself so far into the reading community attests to how society likes to consider the issue of homosexuality and co.

Much as the subtle touch and go of a socially forbidden romance proves an indulgence to read, even more so when soaked in warfare, ancient literary influence, and the bildungsroman of a double life, I wouldn't wish it on anyone. Ongoing class discussions of a true "core" become rather superfluous in the face of what the realization of certain has historically afforded some. A span of time ago, this work's Laurie would have been considered fit to burn, but not at the stake. Later, it was anything from denial to disdain to incarceration, and it is only through an exhausting amount of acting that this work has scenes of peace, stability, and happiness. The more one has to balance the self to not be torn apart, the less one can trust inherent motivations, or know when it is necessary to bend in order to avoid the snap.

In many ways, this work plays on the stereotypes of the Euro/Neo-Euro male homosexual community, what

with the beard and affiliation for Ancient Greece and the congregated promise of sexual rapacity. In others, it works through in that part-posed, part-admitted, always integrated negotiation of the self with society's response to such, one that happens to be English, classically educated, male, disabled, a veteran of war, a lover of men, and ever, ever so young. From this, one can see same sex marriage is only a grain in the sand.

Love, even under the most encouraged of circumstances, can be a nasty business. One may enjoy reading the narratives of yesteryear, but it's time for the multifarious social inhibitions to be holistically reevaluated. Too much life is caught up and cut for any argument of resulting benefit to hold.

---

### **Sophie says**

Oh dear god. I spent the last hour tearing frantically through the last 50 pages of Mary Renault's *The Charioteer* and now I'm so endlessly relieved, I have no words. I was actually sobbing just now because, god. This book.

This was so, so beautiful.

To think I might never have read it - I don't care how melodramatic it sounds, but I discovered this book by pure accident, because I was looking for stuff on Alexander the Great because I have been interested in Ancient Greek lately because I liked that Achilles/ Patrick Cleese moment in *Wonder Woman* so much - I was just killing time at work, looking for books at random, remembering Mary Renault's name from way back. There was only a very short description of it in our database - something like *A homosexual love story set in WW II* or something, but together with a biographical note on the author it was enough to make me curious, so I ordered a cheap used copy online.

I don't think I've ever been this surprised by a book. This is such a piece of beauty - I was in a bit of a daze at work today because I couldn't stop thinking about it, couldn't stop wanting to read more (and trust me when I say there is no crueler place to work than at a bookstore when all you want to do is finish your book). It's a story set at a hospital for the wounded during WW II, and the main character, Laurie, is torn between two very different men. The book was first published in 1959, something I kept having to remind myself about because it didn't feel like it at all. I really do have to catch up on my queer history, because I didn't realize a book like this was possible, then.

Did I mention it's beautiful? Because it is. Even though in some parts homosexuality is discussed rather openly, a lot of it is hidden in this - you can't quite call it subtext, I don't think, it's more like - you always know there is a hidden meaning, and although I was able to decode parts of it, I was left bewildered by others. Even so, the language was beautiful. And the love story was so full of longing and desire and just pure *feeling* it just about took my breath away.

And it wasn't just that, there were those passages, sentences that make reading the best thing ever - the kind of sentences in which you recognize yourself and it's such great comfort to know you're not the only one, and you're given words and it's just such a treasure.

This book. It's really wonderful.

---

## **David says**

Mary Renault is one of those authors for whom I was tempted to give 5 stars to all of her books, because I enjoyed them so much. But in the interests of maintaining standards (Hi Betsy!), I will give 5 stars to "The Charioteer", a book probably 50 years ahead of its time, but go ahead and recommend all of her historical fiction anyway. With perhaps "The Mask of Apollo" and "The King must Die" being my favorites among her remaining books.

---

## **Jenre says**

I bought this book after reading *The Dark Horse* by Josh Lanyon. In that story the main character is an actor who is hoping to be chosen for the role of Laurie in a film adaptation of "The Charioteer". The story draws some parallels between the characters of Sean and Dan in *The Dark horse* and Laurie and Ralph in *The Charioteer*. I thought that perhaps I ought to read *The Charioteer*, especially after Josh Lanyon has mentioned it quite a few times since as being a great book.

The book is set in the 2nd World war and revolves around our hero, Laurie, who is injured during Dunkirk and is now recuperating in an army hospital in England. Whilst there he meets Andrew, a conscientious objector, who is working as an orderly. Laurie falls in love with Andrew, but doesn't want to tell him as he views Andrew as being in some way 'pure' and doesn't want to sully this idealistic love with carnality - which he feels would happen if he confesses to being gay and attracted to him. Into this mix comes Ralph, an old school acquaintance who awakened Laurie to his own sexuality when he was 16. Ralph is the complete opposite to Andrew. He is practical, likes to take charge and is unashamed of being gay. Laurie also loves Ralph but in a earthy, sexual way. Laurie has to make a choice: Does he choose the idealised love of Andrew or the sensual love of Ralph?

I have to admit straight off that I found Laurie infuriating at times. He was such a naive dreamer and had this completely unrealistic idea that being gay was somehow a higher state of being - mainly from reading too much Greek philosophy. He is repulsed by the gay lifestyle adopted by Ralph's friends, refusing to believe that the coarseness and overt sexuality he sees with them should be part of being gay. He has no idea how Andrew feels about him and yet he idolises their friendship, putting Andrew on a pedestal and pushing Ralph away time after time - even after Ralph admits his love for Laurie. I just wanted to give him a shake and say 'for goodness sake, pull yourself together! Look what you could have.'

We only ever see the other characters from Laurie's POV, so it's difficult to make judgements about them. Andrew seems very young, perhaps in awe of Laurie, but ultimately, lacking in any personality. I never actually could understand what Laurie saw in him, other than someone who has stuck to their principles despite the scorn and contempt it has brought. I liked the character of Ralph and could see that he has probably loved Laurie for a long time. He knows that he could probably influence Laurie in his choice, but chooses not to - an admirable quality.

In a way this book is very much of its time and this comes through clearest in its portrayal of certain ideas about homosexuality. Each one of the main characters has a 'reason' as to why they are gay and there is a pervasive theme of homosexuality being a choice rather than part of who a person is. Both these ideas seem very outdated now (or at least they should!). Also at the time it was written any sexual content in a mainstream novel would have lead to it being banned. This basically means that any reference to sex in the

book is only alluded to, and alluded to so obliquely that I wasn't sure it had actually happened at first! There is a lot left to your imagination. Even references to the sexuality of Laurie and Ralph at the beginning are masked in such a way that if you didn't know they were gay then you might not even pick it up.

This was quite a difficult book to rate. The book is strongest in the portrayal of the various characters in the book. Each person has an individual 'voice' and Renault uses accent and dialect to accurately show how the different classes would have spoken. You can hear each accent clearly in your head as you are reading. The book is weakest in that you have to concentrate hard on the thoughts of Laurie which seem to flitter about and can sometimes be difficult to follow, especially when he makes constant reference to classical notions and texts which my Comprehensive School education never covered. All in all, I'm going to give this a grade of 'Very Good'. It might have been more, as the book was incredibly engrossing, were it not for my impatience with Laurie.

---

### **Elizabeth says**

I knew I was gonna like this book a lot when I decided to read it, but I didn't know how much it was going to CONSUME MY LIFE for a few days (goodbye work ethic, but also why this is getting five stars rather than four).

The writing is absolutely exquisite. There were times when I put the book down and thought how much I loved the line I had just read. I had forgotten how much I miss this style of writing, that early 20th century British novelist writing that I read so much of in my adolescence and don't read as much now. I think that's why I had such a strong sense of familiarity with it. (I think the setting had a lot to do with it too: I mean, I've read *The Lute Player* and *The Eagle of the Ninth* kind of recently, but they were both historical novels. I haven't really read books set in Britain during the first half of the twentieth century by someone who lived during that time in a loooong while, maybe not since I was eighteen? And that was the kind of book I read predominantly in my adolescence so I think that's another element to it.) On the other hand, it is a challenging novel to read for a reason I adore in books: there is so much left unsaid, so much you have to gather from what the characters are dancing about saying but aren't saying outright. It requires close reading.

The characters are all so wonderfully complex, even if you only get glimpses of a couple of them. How much of the story is it that these people are really what they are like, and how much of them is because of Laurie projecting his own ideals onto them?

It's just as much a war novel and its effects on the men involved in it as it is about the relationships (romantic and not) between these men. I want to talk more about this book but that's getting into spoiler territory. But this is an intense and sophisticated novel, eviscerating in its analysis of the characters yet not without its moments of compassion and beauty.

---

### **Christy B says**

My heart. Is it still there? Because I feel like someone tore it out and stomped on it.

I stayed up way later than I usually do, last night, to finish this, because I couldn't wait any longer. The

intense and emotional turmoil inside of me started with Andrew's letter and followed through to the end.

It wasn't until I finished, and turned off the lights to go to sleep, that I realized what I had been holding in. And I cried for a few minutes: for the story, for the beautiful writing, for the characters.

The story was subtle and slow-moving; romantic and emotional. I can't stop thinking about it.

---

### **Josh says**

Probably the single most influential book I ever read. Beautifully written, evocative, haunting, powerful.

---

### **Whitaker says**

Shame on me! When I first heard of Mary Renault and her gay novels, I immediately assumed that because they were written in the 1950's and by a woman that they were bound to be bad. Shame, shame, shame!

I stand duly chastised. And somewhat in awe of Mary Renault. She really gets the whole living in fear and shame thing, the way it distorts your life, causes you to doubt yourself, the overly sensitive panic that "They" somehow know. She never comes out to hit us on the head with this. She just describes Laurie's emotions and thoughts, often indirectly. She's discreet and restrained, and it's a stellar example of how less can be more.

There were some parts that gave me pause. In one scene, Laurie says to an exhausted friend, "You'll be all right because you're more a doctor than you are a queer." One reading would see it as encapsulating all that 50's homosexual self-loathing that we are so familiar with. On another reading--the one I prefer--it's a statement that gay men and women are not just their sexuality, in the same way that straight men and women are not just their sexuality. The trouble comes when it's all that you define about yourself when we are all so much more than that. And I would like to believe that that is what she meant, because in so many other ways, she really nailed it.

---

### **Podga Podga says**

It's impossible for me to rate certain books objectively, because of the life-changing impact they had on me.

I read *The Charioteer* in 1976, when I was 13. I knew I was different, but not in a way that bore mentioning or even secret acknowledgement in the ultra-macho Greece of that time. The only gay man I was aware of was a guy, who sold feather dusters around the centre of Athens; he was campy, outspoken, mocked, and it scared me that I might be like him.

Even though I didn't understand all the subtext until years later, reading *The Charioteer* led me to understand what I am and what I might become. These aren't heroic characters, though they can be that, too. They're sometimes decent, sometimes petty. They drink too much, hide their fears behind rigid ideologies and codes of behavior, and in their effort to define their own place in the world, spend a lot of time judging others. And

against the backdrop of war, it's easy to forget how very young they all are. But they remain deeply, incontestably human, a depiction of gay men I'd never seen until that time.

I don't know if first-time readers today would have the same reaction. It can be a slow book, with a lot of introspection about issues, which have, in many societies, been resolved today. I liked the pace, because at the time I was working through some of the same issues, and I still like it today, because I still don't know if I have answers to some of the questions *The Charioteer* helped me formulate back then. It's a romance, of sorts, but not really; rather the backdrop of loving and being loved serves to bring all the other emotions and feelings to the surface and to make them especially sharp.

---

## **Optimist ?King's Wench? & MANTIES Champion says**

The Charioteer ~ Plato

...Let us say, then, that the soul resembles the joined powers of a pair of winged horses and a charioteer. Now the horses and drivers of the gods are of equal temper and breed, but with men it is otherwise... it sinks down in the midst of heaven, and returns to its own home. And there the charioteer leads his horses to the manger, and puts ambrosia before them, with nectar for their drink. Such is the life of the gods.

\*Really helps to have some understanding of this allegory prior to reading this novel.\*

Laurie is the epitome of the saying “still waters run deep”. He’s unflappable. He’s profound. He’s fickle. And, if I’m being completely honest, a wee bit annoying. He strikes me as very melancholy, destined to be forever dissatisfied. He has a wealth of intellect on the human condition but, has so much trouble expressing himself.

“Life is cruel, he thought; leaving out war and all that wholesale stuff, human life is essentially cruel.”

Some rather dramatic things do happen throughout the course of *The Charioteer* including a failed suicide attempt all of which seemed to be taken very cerebrally. Perhaps that’s just the way things were handled during this time, I couldn’t say but, I will say it was simultaneously refreshing and frustrating to have characters handle a situation rather than becoming histrionic about it. Still, there are some things in life that require some level of emotionality.

Person A: “I have the Ebola virus.”

Laurie: “That’s all right.”

Person B: “I have Chlamydia and I’ve infected most of the tri-state area. I’m fairly certain they’re going to sue me for all I’m worth.”

Laurie: "It's all right."

Person C: "I'm a sociopath and I've come to gut you like a pig and string up your remains in the back yard."

Laurie: "That's all right."

NO! No, it most certainly is not all right!

All of *The Charioteer* is told through Laurie and begins with him as a child finding his father packing to leave which, I believe, is a large part of Laurie's overall melancholic attitude. Laurie has been injured in WWII and the majority of the book covers his convalescence in hospital. He meets Andrew, an orderly, and falls "in love" with him. Their love is sublimated and, by today's standards, virtually non-existent; however, the notions of subtlety and subtext seem de rigueur in Laurie's world. It's a stark contrast to contemporary society but, in all likelihood is a good representation of the trials and tribulations of being gay in wartime England complete with religious fanatics looking to convert those infected with homosexuality.

All of the characters are well developed. As a matter of fact, I can't remember the last time I read a novel and knew *exactly* who that person was within a paragraph or two. Laurie's mother is the perfect 1940s woman who doesn't acknowledge anything that runs counter to her picturesque world. If she doesn't acknowledge it, it doesn't exist. Laurie tells her he's gay, she keeps talking to him about marriage and children. Ralph Lanyon, Laurie's crush from school who he runs into again, is a drunk but a plain spoken one! He's actually the only character that I halfway liked. On the one hand, I see him as being indifferent to the whole notion of love while, on the other I think he's a product of society's constraints and does the best he can within them. He's that person that shows his love or admiration rather than stating it but, he's also a stubborn ass at times. Andrew, I considered naïve yet possessing that childlike quality of viewing the world in its simplicity. Concrete thought contains a certain intelligence while ignoring the possibilities of the abstract and said concreteness led to the instance wherein I lost all respect for him. So, the gist is I didn't particularly like any of these characters. I understand them, I even empathize with them but like? Not so much.

However, at the end of the day, I can't rate it anything less than 4 stars based on the prose alone. That doesn't even take into account how much I enjoyed the era-specific lingo such as "drip", "pal" and "riff raff", classics in my opinion.

A leisured view of the room yielded so many awful little superfluities, so many whimsies and naughty-naughties, tassels and bits of chrome, that one recalled one's gaze shamefaced as if one had exposed the straits of the poor.

There is some military speak which went over my head but I don't think it took away from the overall experience. It could do with a bit more clarity regarding who's speaking in the conversations. But, there were no typos that I found. If you're interested in a historical read, you should enjoy this. If you're interested in action and/or romance, look elsewhere.

*A copy was provided by NetGalley in exchange for an honest review.*

---

## Falkor says

Laurie O'Dell is seriously wounded during the early days of World War II. While recuperating in an English hospital, he is entangled in a love triangle. On one side is Andrew, a pious, naive young conscientious objector who works in the hospital as an orderly; on the other is Ralph, an old school friend who, despite having many affairs with men and women while traveling the world in the navy, still harbors strong feelings for Laurie. Laurie is paralyzed with indecision. He can have a passionate and fulfilling romantic relationship with Ralph, risking total social ostracism and prison, if the affair is discovered. Or he can continue on the safe but repressive course of hiding his sexuality and silently loving Andrew, who does not know Laurie is gay and whose own sexual orientation is ambiguous. But if Laurie does not decide, he will lose both of the men he loves.

*The Charioteer* is, for a book published in the mainstream press in the 1950s, remarkably frank about the sexuality of its characters. It details the secrecy and fear that gay men lived with in a time when being openly homosexual was unthinkable, and honest about the problems of the gay social scene: blackmail, alcoholism, depression and difficulty in forming lasting relationships. But the center of the book is the enduring love that the main characters have for each other despite all obstacles: Ralph's tender devotion to Laurie, even after not seeing him for seven years; the chaste but intense emotional connection Andrew has with Laurie; and the love Laurie feels for each of them, which is painful but also a source of joy and liberation.

---