



The Skin of Our Teeth

Thornton Wilder, Paula Vogel (Foreword by)

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A timeless statement about human foibles . . . and human endurance, this beautiful new edition features Wilder's unpublished production notes, diary entries, and other illuminating documentary material, all of which is included in a new Afterword by Tappan Wilder.

Time magazine called *The Skin of Our Teeth* "a sort of *Hellzapoppin'* with brains," as it broke from established theatrical conventions and walked off with the 1943 Pulitzer Prize for Best Drama. Combining farce, burlesque, and satire (among other styles), Thornton Wilder departs from his studied use of nostalgia and sentiment in *Our Town* to have an Eternal Family narrowly escape one disaster after another, from ancient times to the present. Meet George and Maggie Antrobus (married only 5,000 years); their two children, Gladys and Henry (perfect in *every* way!); and their maid, Sabina (the ageless vamp) as they overcome ice, flood, and war -- by the skin of their teeth.

The Skin of Our Teeth Details

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Christopher Sutch says

Another very entertaining experiment in near-absurdist meta-theater by Wilder. It reads slow to me, but I imagine it would be fun to see performed (though probably the references to contemporary 1942 events and other things might make it impossible or at least difficult to stage today). The message of the play is that people always find ways of continuing on, even in the face of (or after) tremendous natural and human-made disasters, and considering that this was staged near the beginning of World War II, when the Axis seemed to have the upper hand in the war, this was probably considered a good play to help the war effort at home. It's also very funny and not preachy (at least until the very last pages). The final scene, with the hours of the night passing across the stage quoting philosophers, comes from Wilder's early one-act "Pullman Car Hiawatha," which also provided inspiration for *Out Town* (though the quotes Wilder chooses for each hour are different in this play; he had more of an eye on the current situation and chose quotes that were appropriate to his theme). There are two main problems with the play as a work of literature: the action slows down tremendously toward the end (even though the third act is shorter than the other two, it feels longer); and Wilder's message of hope has little role for everyday people, who are meant to follow a vanguard leadership, versed in philosophy and science, into a better future. Although that last might be considered a sign of the times (belief in strong leadership needed to win World War II), it seriously weakens the effectiveness of the play for audiences today (we're a bit more skeptical of vanguardist leaders...at least many of us are).

David says

This is a heck of a thing to wander into after only having read "Our Town." My image of Thornton Wilder is blown. I mean: a forties family where the father is inventing the wheel and the alphabet? The family somehow blended up with adam and eve/noah/Napoleon? A maid who is alternatively hysterically putting in her two-weeks notice in face of the coming ice age and breaking character to complain how the play doesn't make sense? An act where they pretend half the cast gets food poisoning and there aren't enough stand ins so they describe what some people were supposed to do? It's hysterical, but more layered than just that. I enjoyed it a great deal.

Sketchbook says

Our Town, 1938 - Thorny Wilder omits the alcoholism, adultery, incest, perversion, abuse, insanity, theft, corruption in his rose-tinted white, Christian, middle-class humbug that engaged, once upon a time, Americans. Then came 1942, and the fantasist was back again, as the world shook to the most savage war of all. Thorny still wore his rosy specs in this tomfool spoof of come-wot-may Man Shall Always Survive. Only the middle-brows were bewildered. Everyone else saw it as a simpleton's feelgoody -- what's difficult to understand?

The play succeeded because of Tallulah Bankhead as the eternal maid-mistress - no other reason. Her personality, looks, *voice*, and comic skills gave wit and theatricality to the absurdist venture, which closed when she left the cast. It's now done by schools and amateurs who need to feel *academic*. This history lesson

is now dated, corny and its message -- we'll always survive, haha, by the skin of our teeth, is irrelevant and pessimistic. Who sez the human race should survive -- and *Why?*

Laurence Li says

The one line that sums up the entire play:

"have you milked the mammoth yet?"

Surreal, Meta beyond belief, occasionally harrowing, often hilarious, non-comprehensible half the time...but Wilder is a master at endings, and everything suddenly makes sense in the last ten pages. He's a master of exploring cosmic themes through everyday life.

Gabrielle says

My first encounter with an "absurd" play and I ate it up!!!!

Roberto says

I loved reading "Our Town" by Thornton Wilder, so I decided to read more of his works. This play, which breaks the fourth wall many times, revolves around a family and their maid as they face the Ice Age, the Great Flood and a seven year war. The father is George Antrobus (I think it means "human" in Greek) and the mother is Maggie Antrobus. Their children are Henry and Gladys. Sabina is the maid that often "breaks out of character" and becomes the actress playing Sabina, "Miss Somerset."

It's a funny play that touches upon serious subject matters - such as whether humanity is worth living for. One of my favorite lines are "Did you milk the mammoth yet?" To which Sabina/Miss Somerset replies "I don't understand a word of this play - Yes I milked the mammoth."

A must read if you love plays. It's also pretty short for those that don't like to read long books.

Jessica says

The Skin of Our Teeth is a delightful, confusing mishmash of eras, telling the story of an American family who has weathered the Ice Age, Noah's flood, and war. The parents have been married for over 5,000 years and gave birth to Cain and Abel; the father invented the wheel, the alphabet, and chose Miss Atlantic City 1942. Every page in the book is thick with allusion, from the Muse sisters to the maid Sabina (who was raped; Wikipedia). I'm not sure I understood the half of it, but it was fun to read, and I think it's the sort of play that benefits from repeated readings. It's definitely something I'd like to read again later on.

Mont says

The Skin of Our Teeth is a fantastic parable dealing with humanity's age-old struggle to achieve civilization. The action covers three periods--an ice age, a great flood, and a devastating war--and in each case, humans manage to survive against overwhelming odds.

George Antrobus, is a citizen of the world. He wants to believe in the goodness of humanity and the survival of the race, but often his faith is shaken. A kind and generous man, he insists the starving refugees from the freezing cold enveloping the world be admitted to the house and fed, whereas his practical wife doe not want to take them in. A good provider, he obtains a boat in order to save his family during the big flood. After the great war, he decides to try to live in peace with his vicious son, Henry. Striving to regain his confidence in mankind, he takes comfort in his books, his home, and the good people of the world.

Sarah says

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The violent fire consumes itself fast

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Julian Munds says

Thorton Wilder has these kind of folksy optimism that grinds my gears. He believes everything works out for the better. It's something I have trouble reconciling in his plays. Here it is working in over drive. The lens that is used is that Eastern American Simple country family in extreme circumstances and it seems to be talking about an America that never was. Negating major movements of revolution to side and focusing in on dogmatic institutionalists like Spinoza and Plato, whom he quotes at the end of the play. This play is bonkers, heavy handed, preachy and I think downright unpleasant. It should be recognized though for how it experiments with form.

Steve says

Given the reinterpretation of Wilder's career, and especially the staging of Our Town, wanted a taste of his writing. Interesting to see an Absurdist drama in the US during WWII. Read the Samuel French edition, with

all the accompanying details on outfits and stage props and such.

Reading his bio in Wikipedia, also of interest his "relationship" w/ Samuel Steward.

Will read more Wilder. I find it intriguing that the man who wrote such works as "Our Town" and "The Bridge of San Luis Rey" (albeit early in his career) would later write such self-conscious literature (the "fourth wall" *often* comes down in this play), Absurdist pieces.

Becky says

First sentence: Announcer: The management takes pleasure in bringing to you--The News Events of the World:

Premise/plot: *The Skin of Our Teeth* is an always absurd, sometimes amusing, frequently head-scratching play that won a Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1943. It stars Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus, a couple who've been married for 5,000+ years, their two children Henry and Gladys, and their 'maid' Sabina. Each of the three acts has its own peculiar setting. The acts do not seem--to me, at least--to be connected to one another to tell a cohesive story. Each act has its own beginning, middle, and end. So the whole play is like three little stories sharing some of the same characters, some of the same themes. The 'theme' is surviving 'by the skin of your teeth.' The running gag, of sorts, is that this couple is "Adam" and "Eve" and Henry is "Cain."

The first act is 'the end of the world' by ice. The second act is 'the end of the world' by flood. The third act is 'end of the world' by war.

My thoughts: What a strange, strange play! Sabina, the "maid," is the scene stealer. In each of the three acts, she breaks character throughout and speaks directly to the audience. She reminds everyone **THIS IS A PLAY. THIS IS A PLAY THAT DOESN'T MAKE SENSE. I'M A PART OF THE PLAY. BUT I'M A REAL PERSON TOO.** In the second act, for example, Sabina breaks character to "protect" the audience and "prevent" giving offense. The lines she's skipping are the ones her character says to steal Mr. Antrobus and wreck his "happy" family. Her excuse for breaking character is this: there might be people in the audience who don't need to be reminded of the reality of broken homes. Husbands cheat. Wives cheat. Spouses leave each other. Couples divorce. Homes are broken. People don't go to the theatre to see this kind of stuff. They come to be entertained. They come to laugh.

Did I like this one? Well. Not really "like." It was interesting. More astounding to me than anything is that it's a prize-winning drama. Which in a way makes sense. I think this is a case of *The Emperor's New Clothes*. You either see the brilliance, want others to think you see what they see, or call others out and say **WHY** is this wonderful?

Quotes: "Henry Antrobus is a real, clean-cut American boy. He'll graduate from High School one of these days, if they make the alphabet any easier. Henry, when he has a stone in his hand, has a perfect aim; he can hit anything from a bird to an older brother--Oh! I didn't mean to say that!--but it certainly was an unfortunate accident, and it was very hard getting the police out of the house. Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus' daughter is named Gladys. She'll make some good man a good wife someday, if he'll just come down off the movie screen and ask her." (Sabina, monologue)

"How can you make a world for people to live in, unless you've first put order in yourself?" (Antrobus to

Henry)

"How will a man choose the ruler that shall rule over him? Will he not choose a man who has first established order in himself, knowing that any decision that has its spring from anger or pride or vanity can be multiplied a thousand fold in its effects upon the citizens? (Hester)

Adam Krestan says

I'm not a huge fan of things that exemplify my flaws. This means I generally dislike all things that are self-referential, with the one monumental exception being Monty Python's Flying Circus, but only because they do it in a way that is far more clever than I could ever manage. I have a lot of trouble in daily life, and in my writing, with making the thing I'm saying or writing become about itself. Unrestrained self-reference is one of the many sour fruits of hyper self-awareness. This includes plays about plays, plays within plays, plays that break the fourth wall, and especially plays where the fourth wall seems to be in a constant state of disrepair, like this one.

Why can't things be about the things they are about? Why must everything acknowledge itself? Is it some sort of existential coping mechanism? I want to be immersed in something, not have it constantly reminding me that it is merely make-believe.

I suppose all this criticism is not a criticism of the play as a whole but more of the meaninglessness of the whole of modern philosophy which declines to acknowledge the existence of ultimate things and therefore lacks a comprehensive vision of the self.

It was funny, though.

Nick Ziegler says

One of the most remarkable artworks I've encountered, and among the most appropriate to the end times we are living through.

Julie says

i love this play but what.

Nicole P says

pretty interesing, and a little out there.cool introduction to wildrer

Punkie says

Easily my favorite play, hands down, and Sabina my favorite role. Where else do you get lines that allow you to break the fourth wall like this?!

"I can't invent words for this play, and I'm glad I can't. I hate this play and every word in it."

???? ?????? says

Our Town was a great novel, What happened to Wilder in this play!

The Skin of Our Teeth can't be a classic play or a modern one nor a realistic play or a Surreal one. Along with this problem of classified the play, it isn't a good play which one can enjoy reading and not watching, It may be enjoyable on the theatre.

The characters are very shallow, I know they suppose to play as symbols but not like that. One can't read a play focusing only on the meaning of the symbols and their actions.

Edward Cheer says

It's been a while since I've read anything by Thornton Wilder. I thought Our Town was fine, and was expecting something of similar quality with The Skin of Our Teeth, but my... it's a wholly different experience.

The Skin of Our Teeth is a comedy (I think) that's written by Wilder under the awareness that it's a play and is at times interrupted by human fallibility. The play is interrupted by the actress who plays Sabina twice and the whole third act is put to a stop because 7 actors got food poisoning and were sent to the hospital. I get that it's a story about humanity and our capacity to make most of our mistakes, but it doesn't mesh well with the story at hand. And what is the story at hand?

The story at hand is about the Antrobus family, who live for thousands of years and on very specific occasions decided to change their personalities. George Antrobus goes from being a strict drunken father to a president (of what? Your guess is as good as mine.) who cheats on his wife. Henry, the son of the family, goes from being an adorable, innocent child to an actively malicious war-monger. These changes don't come across as organic and feel very forced for the story's meaning. Everything just comes across as sloppy, which is how Wilder might have intended The Skin of Our Teeth to appear, but it simply isn't my cup of tea. I didn't enjoy this play that much. If you're looking for a good Wilder play, I recommend Our Town. It's much better.

Gideon says

I'm not sure how much I liked The Skin of Our Teeth, Thornton Wilder's second most well-known play..

I should stipulate, reading a play is a very different thing from seeing a play. I don't have much experience reading plays and mentally transmuting the written words and actions to that ancient medium, so take all I

say here with a grain of salt. I'm sure the performances would outweigh my imagination.

The Skin of Our Teeth is metaphor many layers deep. The story, such as it is, has the Antrobus family facing three ideas of "the end of the world". First, the ice age, second, the Flood of Noah, and third, a war, reminiscent of WWII, which the play was written during. The metaphorical part here: the family lives in New Jersey. The family is both ancient man and the 20th-century nuclear family.

The fourth wall is broken time and time again. Wilder doesn't let you forget you're in a play. (More than anything, in these moments, I think Wilder is saying more about theater at the time than anything else.)

The outcome, the moral, the defining idea, is that humanity always recovers. But the other side of Thornton Wilder's coin is that humanity continues to make the same mistakes over and over again. A husband cheats, a boy murders, the rabble rouses, yet humanity continues. Men learn of true women (for that is the reason the universe was put in motion), children are born, grow, die, and the philosophers continue their march like hours on a clock.

It's a fine philosophy of a play. Maybe go see it as one, rather than reading about it in a book.
