



ANTHONY POWELL

The Valley of Bones

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With their lives drastically remodeled by World War II, the characters of The Dance to the Music of Time series continue their colorful exploits. Nicholas Jenkins, the narrator, now in his thirties, is second-lieutenant in an infantry regiment and life in the army is examined at startlingly close range. Like its predecessors, this volume in the series is witty, sparkling, entertaining, but adds a new twist as a whole new world of wartime people and circumstances are investigated.

The Valley of Bones Details

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From Reader Review The Valley of Bones for online ebook

Ted says

[bold that appear in the very first novel (hide spoiler)]

Kim Kaso says

The author caught the quotidian nature of serving in the military, the monotonous routine combined with serving with a variety of personalities. Petty politics exacerbate everyday life. Another good entry in the series.

Katie Lumsden says

I really enjoyed this reread. It's a really interesting examination of army life in the Second War World.

Algernon says

Well, Nick Jenkins, you're in the army now! and a change of tune is in order for the seventh installment of the Dance. The almost carnival atmosphere of high society saloon intrigues and romantic entanglements is replaced by a darker, bleaker, all-male world guided by endless regulations and tedious routines. Powell, through the eyes of his perennial narrator Nick, is still able to find humour in his surroundings and in his fellow officers, but the laughs sound hollow when the outcome is more than once a life cut short in its prime.

The opening scene of the present episode reminds me of the black & white, stark style of early German Impressionist movies. The author describes it in terms of the paintings of a French satirist:

A Daumier world of threatening, fiercely slanted shadows, in the midst of which two feeble jets of bluish gas, from which the pungent smell came, gave irregular, ever-changing contours to an amorphous mass of foggy cubes and pyramids.

The new characters introduced now reinforce the impression of tragic farce, of dancing under the gallows pole. An early reference to the Bible serves to explain both the title of the novel and the probable fate of most of the players, here engaged in the still peaceful activities or organizing and training an infantry batallion in the early days of 1940, as the Germans face the Anglo-French forces across the Maginot Line. The novel will deal thus not in dramatic action scenes but in character studies that will define the new society Nick Jenkins has volunteered to join.

The army is at once the worst place for egoists, and the best. Thus it was in many ways the worst for Bithel, always being ordered about and reprimanded, the best for Gwakin, granted - anyway up to a point - the power and rank he desired.

Nick Jenkins remains true to his own nature : a keen observer and chronicler of his times more than an action figure. He lets the other officers take center stage and define the parameters of the army culture. Captain Gwatkin is a former banker who holds romantic notions of heroism and duty. Second Lieutenant Bithel is an opportunist and a libertine out to make the best of a bad situation. Petty officers and soldiers dance in and out of focus to shine a new light on the old Dance conflict between will and dream. But for now, it is the will that holds the upper hand, and old acquaintances like Widmerpool and Sir Magnus Donners that will rise to the top of the new social structures.

... the army is a world of the will, accordingly, if the will is weak, the army is weak.

Such weaknesses are not immediately apparent as we first meet Gwatkin or Bithel, but the point will be reinforced by the end of the novel. (view spoiler)

The tone of the novel swings from the absurdly humorous ("**Do you like porridge?" he almost shouted.**") to the bone weary routine of daily trudge, with brief episodes of philosophical musings and an even briefer return to the high society dance of who is sleeping with whom during a weekend leave at a country manor. Here are a few quotes to illustrate the points:

- on the theme of soldierly aptitude: *Vigny says a soldier's crown is a crown of thorns, amongst its spikes none more painful than passive obedience. [...] He sees the role of authority as essentially artificial, the army a way of life in which there is as little room for uncontrolled fervour as for sullen indifference. The impetuous volunteer has as much to learn as the unwilling conscript.*
- on the theme of boredom and stress, something I remember most vividly from my own brief stint in the armed forces, almost three decades ago : *At Castlemallock I knew despair. The proliferating responsibilities of an infantry officer, simple in themselves, yet, if properly carried out, formidable in their minutiae, impose a strain in wartime even on those to whom they are a lifelong professional habit; the excruciating boredom of exclusively male society is particularly irksome in areas at once remote from war, yet oppressed by war conditions.*
- on the incompatibility between the world of will and the world of romance: *All love affairs are different cases, yet, at the same time, each is the same case. Moreland used to say love was like sea-sickness. For a time everything round you heaved about and you felt you were going to die - then you staggered down the gangway to dry land, and a minute or two later could hardly remember what you suffered, why you had been feeling so ghastly. Gwatkin was at the earlier stage.*

The novel ends with the news of the German breakthrough in Belgium and with the first deaths among the family members and officers met in training. This early phase of almost peaceful and comical preparation for slaughter is replaced by the real thing, as from one day to the next arrangements for a marriage lead to an unmarked grave in a foreign country (view spoiler):

As in musical chairs, the piano stops suddenly, someone is left without a seat, petrified for all time in their attitude of that particular moment.

Nick's own path is heading into unknown territory, the only certainty being the need to adapt to a world ruled by will (view spoiler):

Castlemallock was to be left behind. I heard the news without regret; although in the army - as in love - anxiety is an ever-present factor where change is concerned.

As for Gwatkin and Bithel, the two opposite incarnations of the amateur officer, I am sure we will come across them again in a future episode of the Dance, as we did with almost every one of the characters in the series up to now. None of them is wasted or gratuitous in the big picture that Anthony Powell draws for us with such consummate skill and wit:

... it was no good battling against Fate, which, seen in right perspective, almost always provides a certain beauty of design, sometimes even an occasional good laugh.

What is not guaranteed is that these dancers will grow wise from their experiences. Art can provide answers to the big questions of Life and Fate, but only to those willing to listen:

I was impressed for the ten thousandth time by the fact that literature illuminates life only for those to whom books are a necessity. Books are unconvertible assets, to be passed on only to those who possess them already.

This last quote serves as a great companion to the whole Dance sequence, an experience that I have come to cherish and wait with impatience for each monthly installment in our 2016 group read project, an illumination of a momentous part of the twentieth century that teaches a lot of useful lessons to our present generation.

Ali says

The Valley of Bones is the seventh book in Anthony Powell's epic twelve novel sequence. With this novel, Powell leaves behind the familiar London streets, the society of large houses and clubs that in the previous six novels we spent so much time. War has come to Europe, and changed everything for many people. As the novel opens in 1940 we find Nicholas Jenkins a Second Lieutenant in Wales. Here we are introduced to a host of new characters including Jenkins' commanding officer Captain Gwatkin and the alcoholic Lieutenant Bithel. Bithel is a particularly brilliantly drawn character, a figure whose totally inaccurate reputation has apparently preceded him, and to which Bithel himself cannot possibly live up to. Jenkins - considered to be getting on a bit in his mid-thirties, undergoes training in Wales, and along with his battalion colleagues endures the tedium of army life while waiting for military operations to begin. Powell portrays the everyday minutiae of army life, the pranks and squabbles that only momentarily distract these men forced to suddenly live together. This is a different kind of world for Jenkins, and one he manages to fit himself into rather well.

"I indicated that I wrote for the papers, not mentioning books because, if not specifically in your line, authorship is an embarrassing subject for all concerned. Besides, it never sounds like a serious occupation. Up to that moment, no one had pressed inquiries further than that, satisfied that journalism was a known form of keeping body and soul together, even if an esoteric one."

Jenkins' battalion is moved to Castlemallock in Ireland, where Captain Gwatkin makes a mistake during an exercise, and there's an inspection by an absurdly young General Liddament who is hilariously more concerned with whether the men have had porridge for breakfast than with much else. Jenkins is sent to Aldershot to a training course, on route to the course, Nick meets and becomes friendly with David Pennistone - who he vaguely recognises from years earlier. At Aldershot Jenkins meets Odo Stevens, and Jimmy Brent - another figure from the past. Rather uncomfortably Jenkins is required to listen to Brent's account of his affair with Jean Templer, in a scene reminiscent of a similar one between Jenkins and Dupont

in *The Kindly Ones*.

“Even when you have ceased to love someone, that does not necessarily bring an indifference to a past shared together. Besides, though love may die, vanity lives on timelessly. I knew that I must be prepared to hear things I should not like. Yet, although where unfaithfulness reigns, ignorance may be preferable to knowledge, at the same time, once knowledge is brutally born, exactitude is preferable to uncertainty.”

It is Odo Stevens who gives Jenkins a lift to the house of his sister in law Frederica Budd, where Nick’s heavily pregnant wife Isabel is staying. Here Nick is to spend the weekend before heading back to Ireland. Robert Tolland and Priscilla are also staying, and Stevens manages to make something of an impression on Priscilla. At Frederica’s house Jenkins meets other familiar faces, including Umfraville, and Buster who pitches up just as Robert receives news his leave has been cancelled. Back in Ireland, Nick finds that Gwatkin has fallen for the charms of a local barmaid, who doesn’t appear to return his feelings. There is also something of a running battle going on between Bithel and Gwatkin – who is soon replaced. Jenkins is ordered to report to headquarters to meet the DAAG (a military acronym that remains meaningless to me) who naturally turns out to be an old friend. As always I enjoyed my monthly portion of Anthony Powell, however of the seven I have read so far this is the one I liked least. Powell’s world is one I enjoy reading about, his writing is really excellent, the characterisation complex and endlessly fascinating. However all those new characters at the beginning, and the change of place unsettled me more than I had expected, mirroring perhaps the unsettling nature of the changes brought to people by the war. At the same time I am looking forward to discovering what will be next for Nick Jenkins and his friends, and now I have met these new characters at least they will be familiar should I encounter them again. I really found myself missing those familiar old London haunts of the previous novels. Powell remains endlessly readable however, and my reading of this novel may well have been affected by my extreme tiredness, which makes remembering new characters more of a challenge.

Bruce says

The seventh novel in Powell’s series, “A Dance to the Music of Time,” starts with narrator Nick Jenkins in basic training in the army at the beginning of WWII, first in England, then in Ireland. The title refers to the passage in Ezekiel where the prophet has a vision of a valley of dry bones in which the scattered bones assemble themselves, become enfleshed, and turn into a mighty army. Basic training introduces a whole new cast of characters to the series, each carefully delineated. Much less is said about civilian life, even about Isobel, Nick’s wife, and their new son, referred to in this volume only as “the boy.” A few familiar characters from former volumes are encountered, but often only as Nick’s memories. The general tone becomes harsher as the realities of life become more somber, and yet there are elements of humor that tie this book together with its companions. Life inexorably goes on.

Here are some quotations that struck my fancy:

“Though love may die, vanity lives on timelessly.”

“How few people do anything for its own sake, from making love to practicing the arts.”

And an extended exquisite passage:

“Robert Tolland (Isobel’s brother), serving in France with his Field Security Section, was also killed. The

news came in a letter from Isobel. Nothing was revealed, then or later, of the circumstances of Robert's death. So far as it went, he died as mysteriously as he had lived, like many other young men to whom war put an end, an unsolved problem. Had Robert, as Chips Lovell alleged, lived a secret life with 'night-club hostesses old enough to be his mother?' Would he have made a lot of money in his export house trading with the Far East? Might he have married Flavia Wisebite? As in musical chairs, the piano stops suddenly, someone is left without a seat, petrified for all time in their attitude of that particular moment. The balance-sheet is struck there and then, a matter of luck whether its calculations have much bearing, one way or the other, on the commerce conducted. Some die in an apparently suitable manner, others like Robert on the field of battle with a certain incongruity. Yet Fate had ordained this end for him. Or had Robert decided for himself? Had he set aside the chance for a commission to fulfill a destiny that required him to fall in France; or was Flavia's luck so irredeemably bad that her association with him was sufficient...to summon the Slayer of Osiris, her pattern of life, rather than Robert's, dominating the issue of life and of death? Robert could even have died to escape her. The potential biographies of those who die young possess the mystic dignity of a headless statue, the poetry of enigmatic passages in an unfinished or mutilated manuscript, unburdened with contrived or banal ending. These were disturbing days, lived out in suffocating summer heat."

At the end of the book, the story seems to have come full circle, Nick finding himself serving under his longtime acquaintance, the ever-pompous Kenneth Widmerpool.

Connie says

In "The Valley of Bones" Nick Jenkins is a Second Lieutenant in the army. Set in 1940, his regiment has been training in Wales and Northern Ireland. The regiment, composed mostly of former Welsh bankers, has not seen any action yet. Powell includes lots of military humor in this book, as well as some philosophical thoughts about war.

When Nick is on leave from an Aldershot training course, he visits his wife and catches up on the news of his old friends in London (characters from previous books). As usual in this series, Kenneth Widmerpool, Nick's obnoxious school acquaintance, pops up somewhere in the book.

This is one of my favorites in the twelve-volume "A Dance to the Music of Time" which follows the lives of Nick and his English acquaintances from 1914 to 1971. As the story was ending, Nick received the ominous news that the Nazis were marching close to Paris so I anticipate that the next book will have a darker tone to it.

Darwin8u says

"War is long periods of boredom punctuated by moments of sheer terror."
-- old combat adage

Powell's 'The Valley of Bones' is a war novel that has nothing to do with war. Well, that is not right, there are

signals that the war is beginning and the Nazis are invading countries in Europe. Nick Jenkins finds himself in command of a platoon training for war with the Germans. His company is a company whose officers are all primarily bankers and whose enlisted ranks seem filled with miners. Instead of a novel about a battle, or valor, or strategy -- we get a novel about marches, stolen rifles, moldy cheese, drinks, fights, and bureaucracy.

Having two brothers and a brother-in-law, a father-in-law, and a father who have all served overseas during the 1st Gulf War, the Afghanistan War, or the War in Iraq, I can attest from their stories that the introductory quote is absolutely true. One of the biggest parts of war is the sitting, the boredom, the drudgery. It is punctuated by insanity and violence, but the violence is rare often only felt by the tip of the spear. The romance of war is both a myth and a lie.

There is a quote that stuck with me from this novel, "A company commander...needs the qualifications of a ringmaster in a first-class circus, and a nanny in a large family" (pg 47).

If the idea of boredom, duty and bureaucracy seems to persuade you to look elsewhere for your Sunday, literary entertainment, you must not yet understand the full appeal of Powell. He is able to examine this reality of the rearguard of war with an eye that picks up little gems about war, the military, and those engaged in war that seem to transcend time and sides. *"Looked at calmly, war created a situation in which the individual -- if he wished to be on the winning side -- was of importance only in so much as he contributed to the requirements of the machine, not according to the picturesque figure he cut in the eyes of himself and others"* (113).

Anyway, Powell is able to paint a picture of the boredom of war that reminds me of the literary equivalent of the Flemish masters. This novel is not the equivalent of a soldier throwing himself on a grenade. This novel is a painting of three soldiers, hung-over, peeling potatoes in the rain. And yes, even that has its own majesty.

Manny says

I thought of this book when I was reading *New Moon* last week. In Stephenie Meyer's novel, the heroine is abandoned by her boyfriend, whom she believes to be the love of her life, and goes into a black depression. Meyer completely chickens out of describing what this is like. The early parts of the book are arranged as a diary; she just presents four months as empty, with no entries at all. Well, given the general level of her writing skills, she no doubt made a good pragmatic decision, but it is in fact possible to do better than this.

So, let's look at *The Valley of Bones*, Volume 7 of Powells's utterly brilliant *Dance to the Music of Time*. The first six books are full of incident. Nick has some memorable adventures at school, gets invited to classy and decadent parties, has a brush with the spirit world, and meets a variety of extraordinary people. Incidentally, it just occurs to me that he's also been recently abandoned by the love of his life. Give me warm, living, treacherous Jean any day in preference to cold, dead, faithful Edward. The scene where she opens the door to him naked is generally agreed to be the focal point of the entire series, and it's no accident that the BBC adaptation started here.

In Volume 7, World War II has broken out, and Nick, who's really too old to serve but feels he has to anyway, has pulled strings to get himself into the Army. The choices were limited, and he's been assigned to a Welsh regiment, stuck in Northern Ireland and doing, basically, nothing very much. Instead of his usual

cohort of glittering artists, socialites and eccentric peers, he's surrounded by dull-as-ditchwater miners and clerks, most of whom are ten to twenty years younger than him, and who view him with a mixture of suspicion and contempt.

Stephenie Meyer would probably have given us four or five empty chapters. Powell describes it all, in perfect and understated detail. I remember reading this for the first time (I've since re-read it twice), and thinking how boring it was. About 50 pages in, I suddenly got the point. Of course it's boring. That's what Nick's existence is like. Boredom is also a part of life, and knowing how to deal with it is extremely important. And after a while, he sees, and you do too, that his life isn't nearly as boring as he'd imagined. There are some surprising dramas going on among these, at first sight, incredibly dull people. And the next two books, which have rather more happening, wouldn't be as realistic without the low-key introduction.

But it's true, Powell is probably never going to outsell Meyer, so from that point of view she got it right. Though I still prefer Powell's treatment. As usual in *Dance*, the moral is that you get what you pay for.

Eleanor says

This sequence of novels continues to delight. This time, Nick is dealing with the tedium and inefficiencies of being in the army in the early days of the war, nowhere near any active service. The problem of not knowing what a codeword means is wonderfully illustrated when Nick is on phone-answering duty in the Company Office.

"It was Maelgwyn-Jones, Adjutant of our Battalion.
'Fishcake,' he said."

...

After repeats of this:

"'Fishcake, I tell you ...'
I know Leather and Toadstool ...'
'Fishcake has taken the place of Leather - and Bathwater of Toadstool. What the hell are you dreaming about?'"

Nick goes off to see Gwatkin, the captain:

"'But we were not to get Fishcake until we had been signalled Buttonhook.'
'I've never heard of Buttonhook either - or Bathwater. All I know are Leather and Toadstool.'"

Wonderful stuff.

Kalliope says

7.-- THE VALLEY OF BONES

Not Dry.

What I mean is that the title of the Seventh period of The Dance seems to be based on a passage by Ezequiel, but the epithet Dry has not been selected out of the original text.

The Valley of Dry Bones

The hand of the Lord was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. He asked me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” Ezequiel 37: 1-4.

We are then at the beginning of the war, the “comparatively halcyon days” of the bloody war, and the protagonist, Jenkins, has joined the barracks. All the military jargon, the acronyms, the structure, the hierarchy of different ranks etc., was, however, somewhat lost on me.

What was less lost on me was the humour. Against a backdrop of dooming and increasingly terrifying military events, the Dance of a few individuals continues. Germany invades the Netherlands, Churchill becomes Prime Minister in extremis, Belgian Government surrenders, Italy joins the war, and the Germans are in the outskirts of Paris. But all of these are just mentioned--in passing. The focus is in front of the stage, not in the military front. At least for now. And in spite of the *mise en scène*, this has been one of the funniest volumes so far. The mix of Arthurian elements; the evocations of *Tweedledum and Tweedledee*; the farce with top ranks obsessively concerned with porridge; the champagne-like quality of a nice cuppa tea; the ridiculous dialogue out of code words, kept me hooked to the book.

But not all was laughter. For this continues to be a meditation about people. Jenkins is the extraordinary observer of others. His own intimate thoughts and feelings remain veiled for the reader. But then we should not be surprised, because one of the traits he sharply always detects is egotism. It baffles him. Before this volume we have already seen him meditating on the immutable characteristics of self-absorption, but he returns to it in the Valley of Bones.

On the more serious tone Powell’s rich references to art (with Viennese Kunsthistorisches with their extraordinary collection of Bruegels), and to literature and philosophy continue. Descartes, Vigny, Byron, Nietzsche have also been given a seat to the Dance.

Vit Babenco says

“The hand of the Lord was upon me, and carried me out in the spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the midst of the valley which was full of bones... Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will bring up flesh upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and ye shall live; and ye shall know that I am the Lord...” *Ezekiel 37.*

Anthony Powell portrays the army as a legion of resurrected dry bones serving to the god unknown and silently obeying all the commands coming from beyond the clouds...

But those revived warriors don't forget to have their own intrigues, pursue their own ambitions, design their various schemes and even contrive love affairs...

“...the heroes of yesterday are the *maquereaux* of tomorrow.”

The Valley of Bones is laden with effervescent sarcasm that at times viciously turns cynical.

Diane Barnes says

Now WWII has started, and Nick is thrown into a completely different society. Military life is not exactly what he had thought, by turns boring and insane, with some strange characters in the mix. This installment goes in a much different direction from earlier ones, while still keeping us in the loop with familiar characters from the past. Still enjoying this series immensely, and looking forward to #8.

Laura says

This is the seventh novel in the sequence of twelve books of the series "A Dance to the Music of Time."

It was published in 1964, it is the first of the war trilogy, poignantly capturing the atmosphere of the time whilst offering a subversively comic view of Army life.

Its sequel is "The Soldier's Art."

4* A Question of Upbringing (A Dance to the Music of Time, #1)

4* A Buyer's Market (A Dance to the Music of Time #2)

4* The Acceptance World (A Dance to the Music of Time, #3)

4* At Lady Molly's (A Dance to the Music of Time, #4)

4* Casanova's Chinese Restaurant (A Dance to the Music of Time, #5)

4* The Kindly Ones (A Dance to the Music of Time, #6)

4* The Valley of Bones (A Dance to the Music of Time, #7)

TR The Soldier's Art (A Dance to the Music of Time, #8)

TR The Military Philosophers (A Dance to the Music of Time, #9)

TR Books Do Furnish a Room (A Dance to the Music of Time, #10)

TR Temporary Kings (A Dance to the Music of Time, #11)

TR Hearing Secret Harmonies (A Dance to the Music of Time, #12)

Nigeyb says

Another Powellian delight

The Valley of Bones is Volume 7 of "A Dance to the Music of Time" and is yet another great instalment in this wonderful 12 novel series.

I am now finding it harder and harder to read other books as I work my way through the "A Dance to the

Music of Time" novels. Indeed I have now concluded that this effort of will is beyond me and, as far as possible, I am going to exclusively read this series until that sad day arrives when I turn the last page of Volume 12.

The Valley of Bones begins in Wales. It's early 1940, the beginning of World War 2, and narrator Nick Jenkins, having secured a full time role in the army, is with his new platoon. This development heralds the introduction a host of new characters. Indeed, with the exception of a weekend's leave, where we catch up with various members of the Tolland family, and a few other familiar older characters, the entire book is about Nick's new army world.

I noticed many parallels with Evelyn Waugh's splendid "Sword of Honour" in particular the tedium, the mix of eclectic and disparate characters having to live in close proximity, and the self-delusion and vanity which accompanied some of the nascent military careers at the onset of war. The most notable character, amongst a host of great cameos, is Captain Gwatkin whose dreams of personal and military ambition are thwarted in a cruel black comedy.

There is one person who is curiously absent from this book, excepting for a few oblique references, however as the book closes there he is in all his idiosyncratic glory - Kenneth Widermpool.

So, onwards and upwards as I move on to The Soldier's Art ("A Dance to the Music of Time" Volume 8) which I eagerly anticipate.

4/5
