

THE BOOKS OF Somerset Maugham



William Somerset Maugham (1874-1965) was a British playwright, novelist, and short story writer, and certainly among the most popular writers of his era. Trained and qualified as a physician, the first run of his first novel, *Liza of Lambeth* (1897) sold out so quickly that he gave up medicine to become a full-time writer. By 1914, Maugham had become famous with ten plays produced and ten novels. In World War I, he first served in Britain's "Literary Ambulance Drivers." In 1916, he was recruited into the British Secret Intelligence Service working in Switzerland and Russia, and later traveled to Southeast Asia and India, experiences which were reflected later in his short stories and novels. His major works include *Of Human Bondage* (1915), *The Painted Veil* (1924), *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919), *The Razor's Edge* (1944), and *Cakes and Ale* (1930). Maugham was widely deemed to be one of the most commercially successful and gifted writers of the 20th century.

THE MOON AND SIXPENCE (1919)

This novel by Maugham was inspired by the life of the French painter, Paul Gauguin (1848-1903). The story is related in episodes by an unnamed first-person narrator and centered on the book's central character, Charles Strickland, a stockbroker in London in the late 19th – early 20th century. Strickland abruptly leaves his wife and children and goes to Paris to become a full-time painter. Although Gauguin did work as a stockbroker, did leave his wife and family to become a painter, and did travel to Tahiti to ply his trade, the connection with Maugham's Strickland ends there as the latter (unlike Gauguin) was a dastardly character, described as a man who did not hesitate to "gratify a whim at the cost of another's misery," a man "without any conception of gratitude," and a man who had no compassion and did not care a whit what other people thought of him. When Strickland leaves his family for Paris, his wife asks the narrator to go to Paris, find him, and plead that he come home. From that point, the narrator tracks Strickland's life and *The Moon and Sixpence* reads like a character study of the man, illuminating Maugham's profound understanding of the human condition.

RAIN (1921)

Rain is generally thought to be Maugham's finest short story (33pp), although it reads more like a novella. A ship is delayed in Pago-Pago and through-passengers must find accommodations for the layover. Two first-class couples on board, Dr. and Mrs. Macphail and Rev. and Mrs. Davidson (missionaries) find rooms in a boardinghouse and they are shortly joined there by another passenger, Sadie Thompson, who has raucous parties and entertains men regularly. Rev. Davidson believes she is immoral and leading a sinful life and, with his missionary zeal, is determined to reform her, or else, and the focus of the story centers on the results of the reform process. The story has remained popular over the years as it has been made into movies and plays. Sadie's role as a prostitute out to have a good time has been played onscreen by Joan Crawford, Gloria Swanson, and Rita Hayworth.



THE PAINTED VEIL (1925)

Modern readers will thoroughly enjoy this well-told tale by Maugham, the most satisfying of the three Maugham works noted here. The central character is Kitty Garstin, an attractive debutante in London who decides to marry Walter Fane (a bacteriologist and physician), "settling" to marry before her younger sister. Kitty and Walter depart for his new posting in Hong Kong and, within a few weeks, she begins an affair with the charming, urbane, Charlie Townsend and is captivated by him. She is found out by Walter and, after considering his ultimatum and speaking with Charlie, goes with him, risking death, to a cholera-infested city in the interior. As Walter works to stem the epidemic and is regarded with esteem by the nuns and the local officials, Kitty meets with Mother Superior and begins working with the nuns, finding herself on a personal journey of growth and self-appraisal, all leading to an important series of events to conclude her transformation in this excellent, provocative story. The movie (2006) featured Naomi Watts as Kitty, Edward Norton as Walter, Liev Schreiber as Charlie, and Diana Rigg as Mother Superior.