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Anthony Burgess
Earthly Powers



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Anthony Burgess, author of *A Clockwork Orange*, is regarded as one of the most original and daring writers in the English language. His work is illuminated by a dazzling imagination, by a gift for character and plot, by a talent for surprise.

In *Earthly Powers* Burgess created his masterpiece. At its center are two twentieth-century men who represent different kinds of power—Kenneth Toomey, eminent novelist, a man who has outlived his contemporaries to survive into honored, bitter, luxurious old age as a celebrity of dubious notoriety; and Don Carlo Campanati, a man of God, eventually beloved Pope, who rises through the Vatican as a shrewd manipulator to become the architect of church revolution and a candidate for sainthood.

Through the lives of these two modern men Burgess explores the very essence of power. As each pursues his career—one to sainthood, one to wealthy exile—their relationship becomes the heart of a narrative that incorporates almost everyone of fame and distinction in the social, literary, and political life of America and Europe. This astonishing company is joined together by the art of a great novelist into an explosive and entertaining tour de force that will captivate fans of sweeping historic fiction.

Earthly Powers Details

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From Reader Review *Earthly Powers* for online ebook

Benny says

Oef, zucht van opluchting. Wat een monsterlijk was dit. Pronkerig en potsierlijk, hemels flikkerend soms, maar ook ennui tot de dood in lange passages met een overdaad aan verwijzingen.

De verteller is onbetrouwbaar in het kwadraat, zo zegt hij zelf, want hij is oud en hij is schrijver. Ons geheugen veinst slechts betrouwbaarheid en schrijvers gaan altijd voor het verhaal. Daarbovenop komt de dubbele laag die ontstaat uit het spanningsveld tussen schrijver en verteller.

“The ideal reader of my novels is a lapsed catholic, short-sighted, colour-blind, auditorily biased, who has read the books that I have read. He should also be about my age,” beweerde Anthony Burgess ooit (*The Paris Review*, no.56, spring 1973). Dat ben ik dus niet. Komt het daardoor dat ik de juichrecensies bij deze uitgave niet helemaal volg?

Waar komt het Kwaad vandaan? Kan je als lustige homo volwaardig katholiek blijven? In theologische beschouwingen wordt gemijmerd over de aard van het kwaad en daar komt de Duivel zelf om de hoek piepen. Voor mij is dat een een beetje een ver-van-mijn-bedshow. Hoe scherp sommige hoofdstukken ook geschreven zijn: ik blijf met gemengde gevoelens achter.

Anthony Burgess, die ook een inleiding tot de Engelse literatuur schreef, goochelt met de literaire referenties. Leuk voor de ingewijden, sneu als je minder vertrouwd bent Henry James of Jim Joyce. Bovendien worden er zo veel auteurs vermeld dat het vooral interessant wordt om op zoek te gaan naar wie niet vermeld wordt en waarom. Legt de schitterende afwezigheid van Graham Greene een persoonlijke wrevél tussen beide auteurs weer?

De centrale gedachte is boeiend. Goede acties kunnen slechte gevolgen hebben (en omgekeerd), dus hoe kan je in godsnaam bepalen wat goed of slecht is? Maar de uitwerking kon me niet altijd boeien. Voeg daarbij dan nog een protserige voorliefde voor moeilijke adjectieven als zenig, stagiritisch, omnifutuent, proleptisch, autocefaal, manicheïstisch of heliotroop en het wordt allemaal wat veel voor Corneel.

Chris says

"Sin? Such nonsense."

Earthly Powers is a magnificent book, one of the best books I have ever read, no exaggeration. It's difficult to categorize since so many adjectives apply to it: historical, sexual, political, religious, artistic, comedic, playful, supremely literary. Most of all, it's relentlessly, uncompromisingly, unashamedly, intellectual. Thus, unfortunately it's little read today, if it ever was, and serves as no modern model—hardly a negative attribute.

(Here's a dangerous rant: Due to simplistic, short-attention-span, Twitter-based thinking, which is likely to remain the compressed, lightweight literary zenith far into the foreseeable future, who would ever write a book like *Earthly Powers* again? The questionable "best" we are offered today is the likes of *The Goldfinch*, whose otherwise admirable length contains little more than 160 characters of *meaningful* content.)

I don't feel such a book as *Earthly Powers* needs a review—it stands apart, monumentally. Besides, I am incapable of doing it justice, so I won't try.

As Paul Theroux writes in the book's *Introduction*, "It is such a pleasure to see such a grand edifice of intelligence, humor, ambition, and imagination, that it is impossible on reviewing it to appear less than rapturous."

Here is Burgess' purpose for the book, as stated within by his main character, the author Ken Toomey: "I can't accept that a work of fiction should be either immoral or moral. It should merely show the world as it is and have no moral bias. It is for the reader to see in the book the nature of the motives of human actions and perhaps learn something, too, of the motives behind the social forces which judge those actions and which, I take it, we call a system of morality." (181)

Think about that for a moment. Does it not most precisely define the author-reader contract? Do you hear the intellectual challenge Burgess offers to his readers? Can you just about imagine the beautiful free-thinking which Burgess displays unapologetically throughout the book?

Well...enough! I won't write some trite, embarrassing, gushing review.

But I will share some characteristic quotes from the book! (There are many. This list is really a reference for me years from now, so scroll down if you are uninterested.)

"It was the afternoon of my eighty-first birthday, and I was in bed with my catamite when Ali announced that the archbishop had come to see me." (11) [Here is one of the best opening lines in all of literature. In addition to being "arresting," it encompasses the entire scope of the book in one sentence. This should be studied in lit classes, if there are any actually being taught.]

"God blast and bloody well damn this bloody stinking place." (14)

"The world was once all miracle. Then everything started to be explained. Everything will be explained in time. It's just a matter of waiting." (21)

"As for the Nobel, I did not write inelegantly or tendentiously enough." (25)

"I liked Jim Joyce but not his demented experiments with language. He threw away the chance of becoming a great novelist in the great tradition of Stendhal. He was always trying to make literature a substitute for religion." (74)

"My capacity for love was hedged in by all the thundering edicts of Moses." (77)

"Sin? Such nonsense." (86)

"I expected a little gift, you know, something nice and useless, you know, from Cartier's." (144)

"States and Churches alike must forbid pleasure. Pleasure renders the partaker indifferent to the power of both." (188)

[!!!] "And the boy he took his lover like a beast, thrusting his empurpled royal greatness into the antrum, without tenderness, with no cooings of love, rather with grunts and howls, his unpaired nails drawing blood from breast and belly, and the sky opened for both of them, disclosing in blinding radiance the lineaments of a benedict numen." [!!!] (191)

"Joe Conrad's sea smells of Roget's thesaurus, as I was always telling him, but he wouldn't listen." (192)

"Sterile thunder tonitruated terribly. 'Oh Lord forgive us our bloody sins.' Rain now pelted. It was hard work finding a taxi." (199) [Joycean? Nabokovian? Yes.]

"Everyone has a right to be born. No one has a right to live." (226) [Oh I heartily disagree with this, but the fictional future Pope said it. It's a concise distillation of, shall we say, a serious problem with a certain religion.]

"Once the Christians fought the Moslems, and then the Christians fought each other. Faith is hard to sustain unless it is either beleaguered or dreams the imperial dream." (231)

"This postwar world's learning to separate the act of sex from the act of generation. The Church says that's a sin. But it's deliberately chosen, a healthy act of free will. If it's a sin then I'm predisposed to sin. The Church and I can't agree on it. So I'm out of the Church. Very simple and very unfair." (306)

"Religion is the most dangerous thing in the world. It is not little girls in their communion frocks and silly holy pictures and the Children of Mary. It is highly explosive, dynamite, the splitting of the atom." (349)

"These are bad bad times. This is the worst century that history has ever known. And we're only a third of the way through it. There have to be martyrs and witnesses." (381)

"And what were you doing in Paris?" "Seeing James Joyce. The Irish writer. A confirmed neutral in the last war, despite his British passport. Trained by Jesuits. Author of *Ulysses*, long banned for dirtiness. He'd promised me a copy of *Finnegans Wake*. Signed. A great experimental masterpiece. Confiscated by HM Customs for investigation. I assured them it was not in code. Damn it all, the publishers are Faber and Faber." (435)

"Black is no colour, merely a brutal politicoracist abstraction, and it was the texture of her skin that struck before it's indefinable hue, or rather was inseparable from it, the pleasure of the sight of it only, one knew, to be completed by the most delicate palpation: as if honey and satin were one substance and both alive and yet sculpted of richest gold." (474)

"Meanwhile in France a new breed of writers was producing the *nouveau roman*, based on the rejection of plot and character and, indeed, everything I have always stood for. It was perhaps with unspoken relief that, admiring these, professors of fiction took my own works to bed and, enjoying them, had to rationalize their enjoyment in terms of my consciously, in a kind of revolt against postmodernism, ridiculous term, reverting to an earlier tradition. I was not, of course, reverting at all." (523)

"Homosexuals may be in the minority, your honor, though I submit that there is less

thoroughgoing heterosexuality in the community than orthodoxy would have us believe. Nevertheless, homosexuals have a right to an expression of their own view of life and love. Our literature has been grievously harmed by the suppression of that right. So, God help us, has society in general. No man or woman can help being homosexual. I cannot help it myself." (530)

"What the hell do you mean, real father? There are no real fathers, only legal ones. Mothers are different, mothers are all too real." (587)

"History has been unfair to Socrates. Just as it's probably been unfair to Christ. History is too often written by heterosexuals." (598)

If these quotes aren't enough, as evidence, perhaps, of the literary heft of *Earthly Powers*, I created an index to the many authors mentioned in the book. Burgess uses them both as elements of plot and to bring twentieth-century ideas into the novel as it evolves historically. A few of these are actual characters—James Joyce, for example, with whom Toomey has several fascinating and funny conversations full of word-play.

I did this as an amusement while reading, never myself too bothered by justifiable, substantive name-dropping. The page numbers are first instances only (several appear repeatedly) and are in textual sequence. There are also many invented authors who serve Burgess' critical needs. These are not listed here, unless I failed with the reality check.

Henry James (12), Rainer Maria Rilke (13), Norman Douglas (19), Thomas Campion (20), Thomas More (20), Aldous Huxley (21), Walt Whitman (22), W. Somerset Maugham (25), Hermann Hesse (37), Ernest Hemingway (49), Samuel Butler (50), James Joyce (50), Rupert Brooke (59), F. Scott Fitzgerald (63), Omar Khayyam (63), Edward Thomas (64), Ezra Pound (68), George Bernard Shaw (69), Joris-Karl Huysmans (69), Oscar Wilde (69), W. W. Jacobs (76), P. G. Wodehouse (76), Gustave Flaubert (76), Honoré de Balzac (76), Victor Hugo (76), Compton Mckenzie (78), Hugh Walpole (78), D. H. Lawrence (78), Graham Greene (79), H. G. Wells (79), Eden Philpotts (80), Arnold Bennett (80), Max Beerbohm (81), Molière (87), E. M. Forster (104), Edmond Rostand (117), William Shakespeare (117), Blaise Pascal (123), W. H. Auden (126), Christopher Isherwood (126), Robert Browning (126), Havelock Ellis (160), T. S. Eliot (161), Sigmund Freud (161), Radcliffe Hall (163), Ford Madox Ford (165), Joseph Conrad (192), Ezra Pound (192), Sylvia Beach (192), Adrienne Monnier (192), Hall Caine (193), Valery Larbaud (194), Wyndham Lewis (198), Oswald Mosley (209), Rudyard Kipling (209), John Milton (214), Marcel Proust (216), André Gide (223), George Eliot (257), Edgar Wallace (268), François Rabelais (289), Gertrude Stein (310), Edward Spenser (322), E. E. Cummings (339), Geoffrey of Monmouth (345), Stefan Zweig (420), John Middleton Murry (423), Kate Mansfield (423), George Orwell (424), Marie Corelli (523), William Thackeray (529), Charles Dickens (529), Henry Miller (529), John Donne (529), Richard Crashaw (529), Jeremy Taylor (529), Christopher Marlowe (530), Anatole France (535), Nevil Shute (572), J. D. Salinger (573), Virgil (573), James Baldwin (576), Ralph Ellison (576), Isaac Bashevis Singer (582), Gerard Manley Hopkins (602), Frederick "Fr" Rolfe (622)

Andrew says

One of my top five my favourite books, *Earthly Powers* is, above all, a compelling bit of storytelling. A sprawling, multi-generational tale that follows the protagonist's life from teenager to octogenarian and

includes a number of real people such as Churchill and James Joyce. It is essentially the 20th Century distilled through the eyes of its' protagonist—who is cynical, but a humanist at heart. It's the fictional autobiography of a gay, expatriate English novelist now living in Malta. It opens with the writer being visited by an arch-bishop who asks him to be a witness in the canonization process of a dead Pope, who was a long-time friend of the writer. Most of the book is a series of flashbacks consisting of the bulk of the writer's life. Using this architecture, Burgess comments on the nature of art: "All fiction is autobiographical and all autobiography is fiction". Utterly captivating: funny, moving and an intellectual feast.

Carol Storm says

Just as Bela Lugosi will forever be known as Dracula, and Boris Karloff as Frankenstein's Monster, so Anthony Burgess will forever be known as the author of A CLOCKWORK ORANGE. Alex casts a long shadow!

Nevertheless, take this book on its own terms and read honestly, and you will find that by and large it stinks on its own merits. Burgess has a sense of humor and can talk entertainingly about literature, history, and religion. But that's about it. Emotionally this book is a galactic void. Toomey is a non-character with no real emotions, needs, values, aspirations, or even resentments. He's a homosexual before political correctness who regards his own sexual preference with disgust and dismisses all of his lovers with a sneer -- except one young doctor who dies conveniently before they can get it on.

Mostly this book just drifts from one wisecrack to the next. To the extent that Burgess takes anything seriously he seems to be writing some sort of extended tribute to the Catholic church. But this is propaganda, not art. Burgess never once tackles the horrendous failures of the church, in the ancient world, the medieval world, or in modern times. He has no interest in the Crusades, the Inquisition, or the African slave trade. He pretends to be appalled by the crimes of the Nazis, but takes plenty of cheap shots at Jews in Hollywood, in the theater, in the literary world, and so on. He has nothing to say about Catholic anti-Semitism, or racism, or the church's twisted attitude towards sex or towards the female sex. He fudges the record on every occasion, showing his priest hero "defying" the Nazis when both the Church leadership and the vast majority of Catholics in Europe were either apathetic or openly sided with the Nazis. And needless to say, for all the hero's disgust with homosexuality, he never so much as hints at the existence of sexual deviants within the Church itself.

EARTHLY POWERS is a big, sloppy book by a man who knows he's lying and knows he can get away with it. Because his friends are a lot more powerful than his enemies.

Ci says

“What, Mr. Toomey, do you seek out of life?” A very straight question. “To enjoy it. To fix the phenomena of human society in words.” This is the central theme of this novel which doggedly try to fix the mystery of living within the riot of bodies and souls, art and religion, the historical and the individual. Above all, it is about the good and evil played within the many interlocking spheres lives. Don’t expect clean, neat conclusions. The cycle goes on, but each turning of the clog is cogent. “What is the point of the dialectic of

fiction or drama unless the evil is as cogent as the good?”, Toomey said once. Exactly, the force of evil should not come as a caricature of red-tights and horns; it comes to good deeds, good intentions, and the accidental intermingling of lives. Evil should be just as cogent as the water and air we take in to sustain mortal life, and quite unaware of it till we face it in certain moments. We are born weak, and our judgment is forever in doubt and error. But we try to be good and do justice to our gifts anyway.

One of main theme is about the difficult task of Love, Love of other people, and Love of God. One does not replace the other, yet these two loves are the twin engines driving the two protagonists — Kenneth Toomey and Carlo Campanini — through out their long lives. It is not “War and Peace”, but it tries and succeeded significantly in creating a new character, a fully-bodied representative of God, Carlo Campanati, relative by marriage to our writer Toomey. Now we hear mostly from Toomey’s narrative which he called as confabulation instead memory, a Forest Gump kind of romp through historical events, however much darker.

Let me admit first what does not interest me — the milieu of artists and writers post WWI, the 20’ to 30’s Hollywood film productions, the pulp fiction creation industry, the British colonial culture in Asia, and Toomey’s tedious pursue of younger partners. However if another reader does not care about Christian theology, then he/she would find much of this book either tedious or irrelevant. For me, the glory of this story is about two men, one apostatized by his own homosexuality, another truly apostolic both in rank and in spirit, confronting the question of Good and Evil in their own lives. Questions of Sin, Free Will and Catholic Orthodoxy morality play the major themes in these two very different men, who traversed their individual lives in different paths yet intertwined due to marriage, friendship and brotherhood.

The cycles of generations and lives have a dark hue of nihilism, considering how each generation turned out so differently, and the good ones died so abruptly and senselessly in wars, random crime, religious tragedy, and ravaging diseases. There is no happy ending, but satisfying endings, both the members of Toomey’s and Campanati’s find their individual endings as fractals from this irreducibly complex human whirlpool of living in time and space.

*** Notes

Ch 27, Carlo’s sermon on the problem of Evil, Freewill, and the Just War.

“I ask you to distinguish very carefully between that word sin and that other word evil. For sin is a thing that human souls can commit, but evil is the already existent entity that, through the act that we term a sin, a human soul may voluntarily embrace.”

We have inherited this capacity for sin from them as we have inherited the other features of the Adamic, or human, identity. Now sin we may define as a transgression made possible by our ingrained capacity for confusing the truly or divinely good with what the fallen Son of the Morning represents as a higher good.”

“That is nonsense,” Carlo said, taking another orange. “You cannot make moral judgments on things, only on actions.”

Carlo on the straying Toomey:

“that we will have you back only when you are ready to engage life. Even in sin to engage it. ”

Carlo on human love “... the spiritus of the theologians, the entity you could define only negatively and yet love positively, more, love ardently, with and to the final fire. So, however reluctantly, a man may be

brought back to God.”

“There was a better and simpler reality in the mere act of sitting here, cool under the ceiling fan in a bare swept room, the windows open to sun and green and birds without song, knowing that Philip would be home soon for tiffin and that home was the finest word in the world, no trap or confidence trick, the ultimate unanalysable, basic as the scent of an English flower.”

Of Soul:

“What do you mean by a soul?” a sporty-looking man with a postiche asked. “What’s left of the whole human complex when the body is taken away. The part of the human totality concerned not with the business of living in the world but with values— those essences which we call truth, beauty and goodness.”

Of Free Will (liberum arbitrium):

Man was defined by his capacity for moral choice, and the existence of evil in opposition to good was a guarantee of that capacity for free election.

Of War and Suffering in history:

But may we speak of waste, when so many men, and women too, were driven to acts of heroism, love and self-sacrifice that could never have been persuaded to emerge out of an era of peace and torpor?

The Church teaches the slow working of God’s grace like yeast in the heavy dough of a human history that has been mostly hard to swallow.

Of Original Sin:

Original sin was original weakness, not being sufficiently clever, or Godlike, to spot the machinations of the fiend.

Of Hell:

“A soul at last aware that truth and beauty and goodness, as expressed in what we may call the personality of God, go on existing but quite beyond the hope of that soul’s being able to get at them. The condemned soul knows what it wants, but it can’t have what it wants. That’s hell.”

Useful words

1. Velleity: A wish not strong enough to lead to action
2. Traduce: Speak badly of or tell lies about so as to damage reputation
3. commination: the action of threatening divine vengeance
4. factitious: artificially created or developed
5. shibboleth: a custom, principle, or belief distinguishing a particular class or group of people, often outmoded or no longer important
6. apotropaic: averting evil or bad luck
7. philoprogenitive: having many offspring, or showing love to one’s offspring
8. Arian heresy: Arianism, supremely of God the father instead of the Trinity, theology related to Unitarianism and Jehovah’s Witness.
9. Pelagian heresy: denied the church’s doctrine of original sin and the necessity of infant Baptism. Pelagianism was opposed by Augustine, bishop of Hippo, who asserted that human beings could not attain

righteousness by their own efforts and were totally dependent upon the grace of God.

10: apothegm, aphorism, epigram: all related to witty, pithy, intelligent saying

11. sybaritic, sybarite: a person who is self-indulgent in their fondness for sensuous luxury.

D says

I immensely enjoyed reading this book. It being the first book I've ever read by this intriguing author, I'm looking forward to read his other works. The incredibly rich 'autobiographical' story is cunningly interwoven with real events in the 1900 - 1970's. Most memorably, the author becomes the brother in law of 'Carlo', who was already sure in the 1920's to become pope, and eventually did so as John XXIII. After the first world war, the 'author' flees England to escape prosecution as a practicing homosexual and becomes successful while living in interesting places like Monaco, New York, Hollywood, Tangier, Barcelona (under Franco!) and Malta.

You learn a lot from reading this, at least I did. Mostly about church history, e.g. the arian heresy and much, much more. This is because the author was raised catholic and, while 'leaving' the church because of his homosexuality, never really gave up on it.

Also, his vocabulary is stunning, at least to me. I had to look up quite a few words, e.g. 'redolence', 'inchoate', 'strabismus venerean', and 'etoliated'. I suspect even native speakers might have trouble with some of those.

The only negative point is that towards the end, the story seems to stall a bit and previous patterns are repeated. So, in my opinion, the book could be a tiny bit shorter to make it perfect.

Whitaker says

That two-star rating might be a little unfair. I actually had fun reading large chunks of the book. If all you're looking for is something entertaining to read, and you enjoy British snark and bitchiness, then this is the ticket.

As a work of literature, however, it fell far short. And since it purports to seriously discuss the problem of good and evil, I think that's a fair yardstick. This is not, at the end of the day, the novelistic equivalent of Monty Python.

The novel follows the life of Kenneth Toomey, eminent novelist and very closeted gay man. Through him, we also follow the life of his sister, Hortense Toomey, and her husband, as well as the lives of her husband's family, the most notable member of which, Don Carlo Campanati, eventually becomes the pope. This is no spoiler, by the way, as the novel starts towards the end of Toomey's life when he is asked to provide evidence to support Don Carlo's proposed canonisation, and then jumps back to the beginning to explain how

we got to that stage.

What is good and what is evil looms large as a theme. Good actions in the novel turn out to have disastrous evil results, while bad actions turn out to have good ones. So, for example, Toomey accidentally saves a man from being shot and later it turns out that the man is Heinrich Himmler, the architect of the Nazi genocide. In a related example, a Jewish novelist living in Austria sends his son into Toomey's care to save him from the Nazis. The son turns out to be a nasty, lazy thief. However, when Toomey finds stolen British passports among his loot, he realises that he can use one of the passports to try to get the novelist out of Austria.

The whole thing reminded me of a Chinese folktale which goes like this: A poor man lived in a village with his family. One day, his only horse ran away and his neighbours bemoaned his misfortune. The man just shrugged his shoulders and kept silent.

The next day, the mare came back. With her was a powerful stallion, which had been attracted to her. The man's neighbours congratulated him for his good luck. The man just shrugged his shoulders and kept silent.

A week later, the man's son tried to ride the stallion and broke his leg. He became lame as a result. The man's neighbours bemoaned his misfortune, but once again the man simply shrugged his shoulders and kept silent.

A month later, the Emperor started a war and all the young men from the village were rounded up to join the Imperial Army. The man's son was spared because of his lameness. The man's neighbours congratulated him, but as ever the man simply shrugged his shoulders and kept silent.

One of the morals of the tale is that you can never tell whether something that happens is good luck or bad luck, so you just have to accept things as they happen with equanimity. *Earthly Powers* turns that philosophical question into one about good and evil. It might even have earned three or four stars on that basis as Burgess tells his story with a good dose of brio.

However, and this is a huge however, Burgess ruins it all by bringing in the devil. To me, at least, once you actually bring the devil onstage, which he does not once but twice via two full-on exorcisms, then all question of good and evil goes out the window. The devil is the incarnation of Evil. When you have spinning heads and projectile vomit what is there to discuss?

The question then becomes less philosophical but theological, and you get the obligatory discussions about, "How can God be all good and all powerful when he created Lucifer knowing that he would fall from grace? How can God allow the devil to continue to exist instead of just destroying him?" Well, the answers are put into Don Carlo's mouth as he gives the bog standard Catholic explanation of free will as to why. Unfortunately, the rest of the novel then starts to look like Burgess making his puppets jump through hoops to illustrate why this answer doesn't wash.

The hero of the novel is eventually held up to be Toomey's elder brother, Tom, a nice little man who led a good quiet inoffensively uneventful life as a comedian who told not very funny, inoffensive jokes. We even have a skit about him playing a parent warning his children (named "Kenneth" and "Hortense") not to stick their hands into dark dangerous places.

So, in the end, it turns out that Burgess's answer to the problem of good and evil is pretty much the same as the point of that old Chinese folktale whose *other* moral, by the way, is that we shouldn't try to change things because we can't tell whether the results of our actions will be good or bad. Best to just leave things alone. So, oppressed workers and Africans really shouldn't try changing their lot. And yes communism and black

rights do get swipes in the novel as well.

Well, if you're a rich white man, telling the rest of the world that they should just leave things as they are is all very convenient. Sorry, but that doesn't wash. Mix that in with the actual existence of the devil and what you get is a confused mess really. Two stars, despite the somewhat nasty laughs.

W.D. Clarke says

I am a Burgess near-complete-ist, but haven't revisited him in over 10 years and...

~confession! Still haven't read the obvious clockworky one I know, I know~.

...and this blew my world away when I read it in the 90s, and it is sad that the AB oeuvre has very little academic activity to keep his name alive in the culture. Would love to re-read it with some peeps from round here though.

J.W. says

I rarely write reviews but I feel that this book warrants breaking habit. For a book that runs 650 pages, not once did *Earthly Powers* become a chore. The most incredible thing about this book isn't that it flows for 650 pages with no stutter, it's not the perfectly-timed, respectfully delivered sucker punches, it's not the fact that the man has delivered a history of the 20th Century (on both a personal and wider scale).

The most impressive, incredible thing for me about this book is that no matter how deeply you dive into the myriad puns, flourishes, cultural references, historical passages or deliberate contradictions, the book never loses one iota of what you could, I suppose, call "readability".

There's not a point in among the bilingual jokes, the (obviously deliberate) verbose nervousness with which the narrative voice begins his relationship with the reader or the peppering of text with classic references at which I felt Burgess had written this for the Oxbridge pals club and to hell with the rest. I won't even touch on how infallible his character construction is or how perfectly formed each chapter is or how the text flows like liquid, more so than any other modern classic writer I've read. It's worth every minute of the time you will spend on it.

Rupert Smith says

Sometimes I'm asked to list 'the best gay novels ever', and I often put this at Number One. Burgess isn't thought of as a 'gay writer', although you don't have to dig too far to figure out that he was at the very least bisexual. But *Earthly Powers* is nothing less than a 20th-century history viewed through the prism of homosexuality and homophobia, focusing on Catholicism, Nazism and just about every other 'ism' that matters. Like all Burgess it's extremely funny and erudite, but for once he really seemed to be writing from the heart, rather than in response to an interesting literary idea. And how can you resist a book with the opening sentence 'It was the afternoon of my eighty-first birthday, and I was in bed with my catamite when Ali announced that the archbishop had come to see me'? Burgess's reputation seems to be in eclipse at the moment, which puzzles me because even his slighter novels have more to them than the works of Barnes,

Rushdie, McEwan et al. At his best – and this is his very best – he’s the greatest of the post-War English novelists. Which must mean this is the greatest post-War English novel. There.

Leftbanker says

This book is sort of a fictitious pastiche on the life of William Somerset Maugham; at least that was my take on it. I still remember the sadness I felt when I finished reading this for the first time, not because of the narrative, but because I couldn’t keep on reading this incredibly epic story. I no longer have my hardback addition but I remember writing down the date on the last page when I first finished *Earthly Powers*, and then doing it again the second time I finished it.

I remember being completely bewildered when I heard my parents tell me that they had read a book more than once; there were too many books in the world to read anything twice. Sometimes I would give anything to be able to read something that I love again for the first time, but subsequent readings can be almost as joyous. I look forward to reading *Earthly Powers* again so whoever borrowed my copy, please return it, you freaking deadbeat.

Justin Evans says

I'm unsure if I'll remember this as fondly in a few years as I do now. The second quarter of the book was extremely dull, and the narrative 'technique' is silly (bad novelist travels to a dozen or so countries in order to pick up royalties cheques through the twentieth century--necessary because there were such restrictions on currency movement). These two problems almost, almost destroy the book's excellent qualities. But then it more or less comes together.

The narrator's friend, Carlo Campanati, is the intellectual center of the novel. He will be elected after Pius XII, as Pope Gregory, in place of the real world's John XXIII and Paul VI. He is, more or less, semi-Pelagian, obsessed with ecumenism, and insists on dragging the church into modernity; he's also charmingly human, stands against fascism and is an orphan. In the middle of the book, he asks the narrator to publish a book of ecumenism and semi-Pelagian theology under the narrator's name, and 'Earthly Powers' then becomes an extended meditation on freedom, predestination, grace and how much or how little human beings can contribute to their own salvation.

All of which is enough for me, but those of you who don't revel in obscure theological controversies (or even fairly well known ones) might prefer to think about this through the narrator, Kenneth Toomey, and his sexuality: he insists that he didn't 'choose' to be gay. If he didn't choose his sexuality, however, that's ipso facto evidence against the freedom that his friend the Pope insists (against the traditional doctrines of the church) we possess. Toomey wanders through the twentieth century, generally doing things despite himself. So whereas Carlo/Gregory shows what's possible for a human being who (acts as if he) was entirely free, Toomey shows how life can equally well be understood as nothing more than one contingent event after another (e.g., he 'accidentally' saves Goebbels' life). At the center of all this is a miracle performed by Carlo/Gregory, and the question arises there, too: how much credit does he deserve?

In addition to all this kind of thing Burgess piles on the laughs with groan-worthy puns, literary in-jokes (Toomey meets many of modernism's most important figures, despite being decidedly unmodernist), and

occasional thoughts on the unreliability of memory and therefore of first person narrations... like that of *Earthly Powers*, which of course twists history in important ways to show something like the truth of the twentieth century.

Burgess's prose is clever, sometimes excessively so, and sometimes pointlessly. But I'd far rather read that than yet more sub-Hemingwayan blandishments for the undemanding reader.

For some reason, this stays with me: "He had a compassionate face: he would be compassionate while supervising human liquidation: this liquidates me more than it does you."

James says

"It was the afternoon of my eighty-first birthday, and I was in bed with my catamite when Ali announced that the archbishop had come to see me."

Earthly Powers is the linchpin of Anthony Burgess' novel-writing career. It is a massive work that compares favorably with similar tomes of twentieth century literature. What sets Burgess apart from other authors is his linguistic playfulness combined with an exceptional narrative style. Although this style is here somewhat less obviously experimental than that of Burgess's other novels of this period, his use of a professional story teller as a first-person narrator allows him to call into the question the nature of authority in fictional texts. The narrative becomes a retrospective account of a life spent as an outsider. Within that account, Burgess locates his protagonist, Toomey, at some key moments of twentieth century history in order, it seems, to comment on those issues which consistently surface in all of Burgess's fiction, particularly the nature of evil and its presence in the physical world. The novel attempts to address issues of belief, and the role of religion in late twentieth century culture, using a broad cast of characters, fictional and real; it is not, however, a roman à clef. Though often mentioned in reviews of this novel, the identification of Toomey with Somerset Maugham fails to recognise that Toomey is a portmanteau of many characters. He contains hints of Maugham, certainly, but there are suggestions of, to name a few, Alec Waugh in the precocious young novelist; of P. G. Wodehouse in the broadcaster from Berlin; of W. H. Auden in the rescuer of a Nobel laureate's offspring; and of Burgess himself, the author of a real *Blooms of Dublin*. Burgess ability to meld this amalgam of characters into his protagonist reminds me of another favorite novel, *The New Confessions* by William Boyd, in which the author uses a similar technique to create a tremendously exciting and interesting protagonist. Throughout the novel, the emphasis is on the debate about the nature of evil rather than on the accuracy or otherwise of the references to twentieth century figures. The novel examines at length the nature of belief, the way in which people cope with an imperfect world, and the operation of evil and suffering. In doing so it succeeds in presenting a distinctive and compelling view of the twentieth century through the life of Toomey. It is both a challenging and rewarding read that I would recommend to all.

Kyle says

This is a hell of a book.

It took me about two and a half months to read, even though it's not one of the longest books I've read. That's

cause this sucker is DENSE - no book for someone looking for an easy read.

The narrator, Kenneth Toomey, is a British novelist, now in his eighties, looking back over his life. Despite the fact that he is openly homosexual, officials from the Catholic Church want him to write for them - an account about the recently deceased pope, Gregory XVII, or Carlo Campanati. The two men have lived fairly entwined lives - Ken's sister marries Carlo's brother, and they become a sort of family.

Both Toomey and Campanati are brilliantly realized characters. The arch, snooty voice of Toomey sells the whole book, as he relates the stories of his fame and notoriety. But Carlo is a mystery of sorts, a solid man who believes that evil is an outside force, that man is basically good. But does Toomey share that view? Not quite...

I was hoping this wasn't one of those "here's how my characters live through the various incidents of a historical period" novels, and it wasn't. Though Toomey and Campanati encounter Italian fascists, Nazi propagandists, and groovy Californian cult leaders, the characters never take a back seat to events - the events inform us more about the characters. I really appreciated that.

All I've known of Burgess is his (admittedly impressive) Clockwork Orange, but after Earthly Powers my interest is piqued. Definitely one of the most unique and memorable books I've read this year.

Sini says

Door alle juichrecensies was ik heel benieuwd geraakt naar "Machten der duisternis", het nu pas vertaalde omvangrijke meesterwerk van Anthony Burgess uit 1980. Welnu, ik juich voluit mee: een prachtboek, geweldig vertaald door Paul Syrier, dat mij op alle duizend pagina's van mijn ebookeditie trakteerde op hilarische, vileine, verrassende of ronduit adembenemende zinnen.

Elke recensent citeert met smaak de geniale openingszin: "Het was de middag van mijn eenentachtigste verjaardag en ik lag in bed met mijn schandknaap toen Ali kwam zeggen dat de aartsbisschop er was om mij te spreken". Nogal een binnenkomer, wat de ik-figuur ook weet: hij is schrijver, naar eigen zeggen een vrij slechte en bovendien een gepensioneerde maar toch, en hij stelt: "Niettemin zult u moeten concluderen, als u mijn werk een beetje kent en even de moeite neemt die eerste zin te herlezen, dat er nog niets mankeert aan mijn gewiektheid in het bedenken van wat men noemt 'een pakkende openingszin'. In dit geval is er echter van gewiektheid geen sprake. De feiten spelen de kunst soms in de kaart". Dat is tamelijk dubbelzinnig: het lijkt wel alsof de verteller -terecht- trots is op het gewiekste effect van zijn eerste zin en tegelijkertijd die gewiektheid ontkent.

Die dubbelzinnigheid wordt nog vergroot door zijn latere, al dan niet weer op gewiekst effect berekende opmerking dat het hele verhaal dat hij vertelt een "geraffineerde vervalsing" is. Immers: "In twee opzichten was mijn geheugen niet te vertrouwen: ik was oud en ik was schrijver". Bovendien: "In de triviale sfeer van de borreltafel vertelde anekdotes is het zoveel gemakkelijker en zoveel bevredigender om vorm te geven, te herschikken, climax en ontknoping aan te brengen, hier een accent te leggen, daar iets af te zwakken en op applaus en de lach te spelen, dan verslag te doen van de naakte, alledaags-banale feiten zoals ze werkelijk zijn voorgevallen". Welnu, "op applaus en de lach spelen" lijkt precies te zijn wat de verteller in de geciteerde openingszin doet. En wat te denken van een latere formulering als: "Gedeeltelijk als door een magneet aangetrokken tot de soliditeit van het kerkgebouw zelf, gedeeltelijk erheen geworpen door de exploderende bom van de hoop, besteeg ik de treden en betrad het mufte religieuze halfduister bevolkt door

zondaren op weg naar de biecht". Ook opmerkelijk zijn natuurbeschrijvingen als: "Purperen wolken werden, als een laken over een ontblote schaamstreek, haastig dichtgetrokken over de ijlblauwe hemel". Ook trakteert de verteller ons geregeld op geniaal-vileine observaties als "De neerbuigende toon was niet zo bedoeld, dat was hij nooit, het was het onbewuste en onuitroeibare product van een lange culturele traditie". Of: "Het is gevaarlijk je veilig te voelen met die grote smerige God van de Onveiligheid pal boven je hoofd".

We worden als lezers kortom pagina's lang keer op keer vergast op zinnen die op zijn minst DEELS lijken te spelen op applaus en de lach, en die eerder lijken bedoeld om de al te banale werkelijkheid op te leuken (zoals ook aan de borreltafel gebeurt) dan om die werkelijkheid getrouw weer te geven. Daar komt nog bij dat ook de inhoud van de roman eerder uit een reeks van sterke verhalen lijkt te bestaan dan uit een objectief en feitelijk relaas. Want het verhaal draait om het gegeven dat de beroemde hoewel niet heel literaire schrijver Kenneth Toomey, tevens ik-figuur en zeer homoseksueel, geacht wordt om als schrijver bij te dragen aan de heiligverklaring van de enige tijd overleden paus Gregorius XVII. Die hij zeer goed gekend heeft, toen deze man nog gewoon Carlo Campanati heette, en Kenneth deelgenoot maakte van diverse barokke maar uiterst intrigerende gedachten over goed en kwaad, de oecumene, de duivel, lekker eten en drinken, de vrije wil van de mens, enzovoort. Bijna een vleesgeworden sterk verhaal, die Carlo Campanati: een theoloog die enorm van buitensporig veel eten en drinken houdt, verwoed gokt uit bijna satanische fascinatie voor het hasardspel en de daarmee gemoeide risico's (waarbij hij hilarische verklaringen in huis heeft om te verdedigen dat dit NIET strijdig is met het geloof), fanatiek duivels uitdrijft, en die ook niet vies is van een fikse vechtpartij op zijn tijd, soms "met een vrouwelijk gebaar" zijn habijt optillend om beter te kunnen trappen. Ook is hij aanstekelijk lelijk en ruikt hij zeer naar de gorgonzola van zijn geboortestreek. En dan is de zus van Kenneth Toomey getrouwd met de broer van Carlo Campanati, ene Domenico, een componist van vrij bizarre en met smaak beschreven muziekstukken en opera's, die uiteindelijk succesvol wordt in Hollywood. Aldus het verhaal van de zelfverklaarde onbetrouwbare verteller Kenneth Toomey. Een verhaal dat zes decennia omvat, inclusief twee wereldoorlogen, en waarin Toomey diverse grootheden uit de wereldgeschiedenis tegenkomt (diverse schrijvers, maar ook Goebbels, Himmler). Dat alles uiteraard op vrij bizarre wijze, even bizar als de wijze waarop hij in aanraking komt met bijvoorbeeld de holocaust, koloniaal geweld, discriminatie jegens of zelfs repressie van homoseksuelen, gangsters in Chicago, het geweld in postkoloniaal Afrika na de oorlog, godsdienstwaanzin, collectieve zelfmoord uit godsdienstwaanzin, de angst voor allesvernietigende nucleaire rampen, enzovoort. Het lijkt kortom wel alsof "Machten der duisternis" de hele 20e eeuw heeft willen samenvatten, maar dan als een reeks sterke verhalen van de geniaal-amusante maar ook hoogst onbetrouwbare Toomey.

Ik vermaakte mij vanaf zinnen een uitbundig met dit boek, zoals gezegd. En dat vond ik op zich al geweldig. Bovendien, geleidelijk aan werd mij duidelijk dat het om meer ging dan alleen maar vermaak. Tussen alle vileine zinnen, borrelpraat-achtige sterke verhaal- zinnen en hilarische zinnen staan namelijk ook heel andere zinnen. Bijvoorbeeld over de tranen die de zo sarcastische spotter Toomey in de ogen krijgt van woorden als "thuis" en "trouw". Over gevoelens van verweesdheid die onder die tranen liggen. Over "de tropische dag als een allegorie op het leven, beginnend met koelte en zuiverheid en paradijselijke schoonheid en al te spoedig voortgezet met zweet en een gevoel van groezeligheid, je overhemd en korte broek al vuil". En over de wijze waarop iedereen volgens Toomey altijd weer wordt ontgoocheld, vanaf de geboorte: "Het begint met de warmte van het moederlijk en de ontdekking dat het buiten koud is". Ook Toomeys wanhoop over de wijze waarop kerk en maatschappij hem als homoseksueel excommuniceren geven aan al zijn grappen en sterke verhalen een bittere of zelfs ronduit tragische ondertoon. Dat geldt misschien ook voor zijn eigen rol in diverse gebeurtenissen: vaak weten we niet of hij zich nou heldhaftig of juist laf en collaborerend gedraagt, dus ook niet of zijn daden goed zijn of slecht, en die ambiguïteit wordt naarmate het boek vordert steeds treuriger en vertwijfelder van toon.

Dat alles valt in de eerste helft van de roman misschien minder op, omdat daarin de humor en de hilariteit

van het sterke verhaal nog overheersen. Maar de toon wordt anders vanaf het moment dat Kenneth Toomey vertelt hoe hij in Malakka een -overigens prachtig en heel ontroerend beschreven- Platonische grote liefde ervaart en verliest. Niet met een homoseksueel, maar met ene Philip, een dokter die seks afgezworen heeft. Philip omschrijft de geslachtsdaad plastisch als een "harige fuik", als "zwendel": hij heeft in zijn dagelijks werk immers te veel mensen zinloos zien creperen aan de lepra, en daarom vindt hij het een heel erg fout idee om nog meer mensen op de wereld te zetten. De beschrijvingen van die lepra - Philip laat Kenneth Toomey bewust enkele zware gevallen zien- zijn inderdaad ijzingwekkend. Even ijzingwekkend (en met even meesterlijke pen opgetekend) is de beschrijving van Philips daarna volgende eigen fatale ziekte, mogelijk door een voodoo-achtige vervloeking, en van de vergeefse pogingen daaraan iets te doen. Tegelijk levert dat ook hilarisch-groteske scènes op, vooral dankzij een even oerkomische als oertragische vergeefse duiveluitdrijving waarbij ook Carlo Campanati weer op ongeëvenaarde wijze optreedt. Ook in deze tragische scènes wordt dus weer op de lach gespeeld. Maar nu is het een heel andere lach. "Als hij had gelachen, had ik zeker geweten dat het ergst denkbare was gebeurd, want lachen is de wijze oosterse reactie op de onmenselijkheid van de dood", zegt Toomey. En later, als Philip alsnog is overleden: "Het gezicht was gefixeerd in een geamuseerde grijns, sardonisch, hetgeen zowel grijnzend als een hond kan zijn als zuur kijkend na het nuttigen van een bittere Sardijnse plant - kunsthistorici noemen het de archaische lach, hetgeen wil zeggen dat de lippen vrolijk stonden terwijl de ogen niet meededen. De ogen waren geopend, de bovenleden waren goed opengeslagen, maar de ogen keken nergens naar". Ook deze zin over de lach toont weer de gewiektheid van de verteller die op de lach en applaus speelt, want alleen iemand als Toomey komt op het idee het begrip "sardonisch" op deze manier toe te lichten. Maar de lach waarop hij mikt is vol bitterheid. En dat is vervolgens nog veel vaker het geval in "Machten der duisternis". Bijvoorbeeld in terloopsheden als "Maar de wet van de angst voor de leegte is evenzeer een wet van de mens als van de natuur" of "We leerden allen leven met onze schaamte, een aspect van het menselijk tekort". Of in de volgende beschrijving van een Joodse vrouw die, iets voordat haar aanslag op Himmler door een idiote gril van het toeval mislukte, zojuist is doodgeschoten, terwijl ze leed aan terminale kanker: "De kanker, dacht ik, terwijl ik zag hoe het lichaam naar een politieauto werd gedragen, zou onverstoorbaar doorvreten, zij het verbaasd over zijn eigen afnemende eetlust en een verandering in de kwaliteit van het voedsel". Een sardonisch-sarcastische zin waar het lachen je ook meteen vergaat. Wat ook geldt voor de volgende zin over een door Nazi's afgevoerde Joodse schrijver: "Hij voegde zich, veronderstelde ik, bij die anonieme Joodse massa die tot het brute uiterste zou worden uitgebuit en vervolgens, in een gezuiverd Duitsland, de grote witte asperges zou bemesten die in beide Berlijns nog steeds worden verkocht".

"Machten der duisternis" begint dus als een tamelijk hilarische en overwegend vrolijke schelmenroman, met een ik-figuur die zichzelf als onbetrouwbare verteller positioneert die op de lach mikt, maar die lach wordt steeds sardonischer en sarcastischer en zwarter. Ook wordt steeds duidelijker dat de eerst zo vrolijk makende dubbelzinnigheid een bloedserieuze ondertoon heeft. We hebben te maken met een verteller die misschien de waarheid vervalst, zodat de waarheid van wat hij zegt steeds hoogst onzeker is, en dat is vaak oerkomisch. Zeker als hij bestaande, hoogst serieuze en gerespecteerde cultuurfiguren woorden in de mond legt als "Benedicent numen mijn reet". Maar de wereld die Toomey ons voorschotelt is een wereld waarin ELKE verteller onbetrouwbaar is: elke politicus, elke theoloog, elke grote schrijver, elke serieuze kunstenaar. En DAT is de serieuze lading die Burgess voelbaar maakt door in "Machten der duisternis" alles te laten vertellen door een onbetrouwbare verteller, die bovendien openlijk fictie en verzinsel vermengt met beschrijvingen van historisch authentieke personen en gebeurtenissen. Waarbij die historische personen en gebeurtenissen vaak wel het karakter krijgen van een al dan niet sardonische grap, maar dat is - volgens Burgess, volgens Toomey- nou eenmaal het tragi-komische karakter van onze zo absurde wereld en onze zo groteske geschiedenis. Kenneth Toomey spreekt warme woorden over zijn broer: een komiek, die de mensen simpel vermaak schonk als weermiddel tegen de zo naargeestige werkelijkheid. Met zijn eigen grappen doet hij dat ook, maar daarnaast mikt hij ook op de sardonische lach, of de lach "als reactie op de onmenselijkheid" van de dood en het leven.

Ik bewonder de grote greep van dit boek: zes woelige decennia uit de vorige eeuw worden op volkomen carnavaleske wijze beschreven, zodanig dat je sardonisch lachend of gewoon schaterlachend wordt meegevoerd langs twee wereldoorlogen en diverse andere zeer disruptieve historische gebeurtenissen. Daarbij maak je kennis met afgrondige theologische en filosofische vraagstukken over Goed en Kwaad: de onoplosbaarheid en afgrondigheid van die vraagstukken worden bovendien op geweldige wijze voelbaar gemaakt door de carnavaleske dubbelzinnigheid van Burgess' stijl en vorm. Burgess' enorme inventiviteit dwingt bovendien mijn ademloze bewondering af: niet veel mensen zijn in staat tot een plot die steeds zo meeslepend en tegelijk zo onwaarschijnlijk-grotesk is, de manier waarop hij speelt met authentieke personen en gebeurtenissen is aanstekelijk, de fictieve romans en opera's die hij bedenkt zijn bovendien vaak ongehoord boeiend. In het begin van "Machten der duisternis" dacht ik nog dat ik mij prima ging vermaken, zij het met een boek dat niet duidelijk ergens heen ging. Maar daarna werd ik helemaal meegesleurd door de even sardonische als vermakelijke stijl van dit boek, die op elke bladzij fel fonkelt en schittert. En door de carnavaleske dubbelzinnigheid van dit boek, die zo'n ongelofelijk ontzuenderend licht werpt op onze zo macaber carnavaleske wereld. Wat een geweldige roman!

Mele says

re-reading a first edition now. i remember thinking this book was the most interesting, epic, intelligent book when i read it back in high school... we'll see what i think ten years later.

Well, I'd probably still give it a lot of stars, very interesting, certainly entertaining, but maybe not as satisfying as I remember.

Dan says

One of the best first sentences I've had the pleasure of reading:

"It was the afternoon of my eighty-first birthday, and I was in bed with my catamite when Ali announced that the archbishop had come to see me."

Unlike many Big Books, *Earthly Powers* is a treat throughout. Burgess's *Joyceman* is on full display but seldom gets out of control.

Paul Bryant says

Some people really like this big old thing. But it was yet another in the tedious catalogue of huge masculine overbearing egomaniacal penis novels about a Big Man like, say, *I the Supreme* or *Illywacker* or *Gould's Book of Fish* or *The Book of Evidence* or *Mein Kampf* - boy, there's a lot of em. And it's the egomaniac's voice who narrates it. So you volunteer to have the guy bending your inner ear for page after page and no break. Maybe some readers channel their inner masochist and lie back and wallow in the hurling of the testosterone. Not me. I chucked it at the wall quite quickly. I could hear its fans screeching and clawing each other in genuine horror. But really, wordsmithery and large braininess will not save a book from the wall-hurl. The tone of voice was like the clench of rat-claws on a biscuit tin lid and I chose not to have that particular voice jabbering and gibbering and mewling in my ear for 600 pages.

Abby says

A monumental novel, recently back in print, that has stuck in my mind for thirty years as an all-time favorite but needed to be reread to remind me why. An octogenarian British writer, asked to attest to a miracle that will support canonization of a Pope writes his memoirs, giving us a personal tour of the 20th-century through his life as a homosexual, lapsed Catholic, successful but mediocre writer, and exile. Examines morality, the nature of evil, the role of religious belief and more. Linguistically playful, the novel features one of the best opening lines in literature, and is funny, painful, thought-provoking, entertaining, challenging and rewarding. Thoroughly magnificent.

Jonathan Pool says

Earthly Powers is a very good book. It's a long book, densely packed, and one that shifts between different eras (in the c.20th), and multiple continents.

Earthly Powers is not a particularly famous or widely read work by any means, despite its Booker Prize shortlisting in 1980. The small number of Goodreads ratings is some evidence of that; *A Clockwork Orange* will always be the defining literary work associated with (prolific) Anthony Burgess.

Twenty years after *Earthly Powers*, William Boyd was Booker longlisted for *Any Human Heart*. There are obvious comparisons between the two books, and the two writers; Boyd is a much easier read, Burgess by far the cleverer.

Earthly Powers is a novel structured around good and evil, incorporating certain specific historical events to illustrate the underlying philosophical debate.

While *Earthly Powers* can be read as a novel with a strong overall theme, I found it mostly enjoyable as a series of only loosely connected stories within the whole:

Nazism

A subject as extensively discussed as any other in the last seventy years. Burgess, writing thirty five years after World War Two is masterful in his demolition of the spurious 'justification' of Nazi delusions of an Aryan Race.

(American) cults

The Jonestown massacre, the horrific mass suicide that happened at the back end of 1978, is undoubtedly the inspiration for the incorporation, fictionally, in *Earthly Powers*, of a Californian cult. Burgess also anticipates the slightly different horrors of Waco, thirteen years later, ironically the year he died.

Again, masterfully told.

The Catholic Church

Earthly Powers is an expression of Burgess's (lapsed) Catholic faith. Burgess questions the place of religious thought in a modern, secular world, by reference to original sin, free will, good and evil. I am no theologian, but Burgess writes most convincingly, and with respectful balance. Again, masterful.

Homosexuality

Homosexuality is, with Catholicism, a main and recurring theme. The homosexuality in *Earthly Powers* was a bit much for me. Not its ubiquitousness, not its moral justification, not the reality of homosexual preference, and love. The narrator's sister, Hortense, remarks, p311 "why do you make everything sound so cold and horrid" That was my reaction at times. *Earthly Powers* addresses rape and paedophilia. The book was written in 1980, the year before Aids, but while attitudes towards casual sex, and responsible sex, changed after 1980, I still felt that Burgess addressed sex with too light a touch.

A number of reviewers have drawn attention to the opening lines of EP "*I was in bed with my catemite*". Unlike the rapes and under age sex, prostitution is sometimes consensual I guess.

Colonial Life: the ex-patriot

Earthly Powers features a snapshot of the Malay Peninsula (a part of the world written up by Burgess in his early work, and where he lived for a time).

This was my favourite section in *Earthly Powers*. There's humour and there's warm, male friendship, and love. p250 Mahalingham describes his religion not as 'eclectic', but 'electric' and then 'eccentric'. When queried, he retorts:

"You don't have monopoly on language"!!!

The friendship between Kenneth Toomey and Dr Philip Shawcross is the only relationship devoid of suspicion, of a motive, of betrayal.

Author as actor in the fictional novel

Burgess plays around with the structure of EP throughout. He frequently addresses the reader directly, and introduces numerous famous literary figures as part of the dialogue. A typical example is Burgess's fictional alter ego talking with James Joyce, and taking this further, telling Joyce in a bar about a personal encounter(!) with a real Irish figure, George Russell, fictionalised by Joyce in *Ulysses*. Anthony Burgess is fearsomely erudite and the intertwining reality and fiction makes for a multi layered work of fiction. Thomas Pynchon and Burgess crossed paths, and it shows in some similarities of writing style.

Earthly Powers is a great book and Anthony Burgess is not a 'one trick pony' novelist that I fear may be the consequence of his renown as the author of *A Clockwork Orange* (to which he refers in *Earthly Powers*).

I can't wait to read some more.
