



Manalive

G.K. Chesterton

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Perhaps the most light-hearted of all Chesterton's "serious" works, *Manalive* pits a group of disillusioned young people against Mr. Innocent Smith, a bubbly, high-spirited gentleman who literally falls into their midst. Later accused of murder and denounced for philandering everywhere he goes, Smith prompts his newfound acquaintances to recognize an important idea in most unexpected ways.

Manalive Details

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Author : G.K. Chesterton

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From Reader Review Manalive for online ebook

John says

Absolutely brilliant. MANALIVE manages to be touching, heartfelt, and incredibly life-affirming without resorting--not even for an instant--to saccharinity or melodrama. Of all Chesterton's works, this book perhaps best encapsulates his personal outlook on life, and the amount of wit required for writing a novel like this is mind-boggling. MANALIVE is utterly jam-packed with the sort of delicious paradoxes and unconventionally conventional wisdom I've come to expect from Chesterton, but this is the first time that the brilliance of his writing has actually given me the chills...

The closest comparison I can make is that this book feels like a cross between Charles Dickens (flawless characterizations and prose) and Lewis Carroll (inspired lunacy that is so reasonable-sounding, you begin to think YOU are the one who's crazy). It's a crying shame this book has been mostly forgotten. Without a doubt, Innocent Smith is one of the most endearing characters I've encountered in all of literature.

Furthermore, I consider it one of Hollywood's biggest failures that a movie adaptation starring Robin Williams was never produced. (And *gasp* probably not even considered!)

My only criticism is that, on one or two occasions, Chesterton employs such racially-charged language as is anathema in our modern PC society. Which isn't to say he was racist--simply a product of his time.

Corey says

G.K. Chesterton really outdoes himself in this book.

"I must be sent down," Smith said, "and the people must not be told the truth."

"And why not?" asked the other.

"Because I mean to follow your advice," answered the massive youth, "I mean to keep the remaining shots for people in the shameful state you and I were in last night--I wish we could even plead drunkenness. I mean to keep those bullets for pessimists--pills for pale people. And in this way I want to walk the world like a wonderful surprise--to float as idly as the thistledown, and come as silent as the sunrise; not to be expected any more than the thunderbolt, not to be recalled anymore than the dying breeze. I don't want people to anticipate me as a well-known practical joke. I want both my gifts to come virgin and violent, the death and the life after death. I am going to hold a pistol to the head of the Modern Man. But I shall not use it to kill him--only to bring him to life. I begin to see a new meaning in being the skeleton at the feast."

"What I mean is that I caught a kind of glimpse of the meaning of death and all that--the skull and crossbones, the ~Memento mori~. It isn't only meant to remind us of a future life, but to remind us of a present life too. With out weak spirits we should grow old in eternity if we were not kept young by death.

Providence has to cut immortality into lengths for us, as nurses cut the bread and butter into fingers.'

"Then he added suddenly in a voice of unnatural actuality, 'But I know something now, Eames, I knew it when I saw the clouds turn pink.'

"What do you mean?" asked Eames. "What did you know?"

"I knew for the first time that murder is really wrong.'

Nothing speaks quite as well as the book itself.

Jeff Miller says

Re-read 2018-08-02

As a Chesterton fan *Manalive* is one of my all time favorite novels of his and really one of my all time favorite novels. This story *Innocent Smith* seems to me to often be the story of G.K. Chesterton. Chesterton was a man deeply thankful for all things and would go beyond stopping and smelling the roses, but stopping and noticing he had two legs. This novel also reminds me of some aspects of his *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* in the court that occurs in the house. His idea of neighborhoods becoming sovereign translates in to the same for homes.

This is my second read of the novel and even though I was quite aware of how the plot would resolve itself, it was still great fun chocked full of Chesterton's wisdom and his view of life. *Innocent Smith* is such an interesting character who shows that he is not the oddball and the one crazy, but ourselves as we settle down to life not seeing things afresh.

I listened to the just released Audiobook version of *Manalive* as put out by Ignatius Press. Chestertonian and actor Kevin O'Brien is wonderful as usual as once again he acts as a whole cast of players and gives us a version of *Manalive* I think Chesterton would have liked.

As with most of Chesterton's books they are available on Project Gutenberg.

Jesse Broussard says

Similar to *Thursday*, but very excellent. So queer and living a man.

#3). I have to say, I really am fully convinced that Chesterton was married to a redhead. There's no other reason for all of his heroines to have red hair. I would also like to take this opportunity to laugh at Brooke--if Chesterton married a redhead, then redheads are obviously superior to every other hair colour.

This book is vintage Chesterton: characters that you meet every day with one that no one but he could dream up. The man is a fool, a genius, a man of tremendous size and athleticism, yet of childlike simplicity. Indeed, "childlike" is perhaps the only accurate way to describe him.

I don't really want to give too much away, in case there's anyone out there mentally deranged enough to read me before he reads Chesterton, but it's an extremely worthwhile read. About half of it takes place in an unofficial trial of the main character, *Innocent Smith*. Just a great book, light, frivolous, full of commonplaces (In short, he undoubtedly had brains; and perhaps it was not his fault if they were the kind of brains that most men desire to analyze with a poker), and very quick. It really is a very fun book, and this is my third (?) time through it.

Becca Jane says

Chesterton is definitely my favorite author - he has brought life to my Christian walk. He has a fantastic understanding of the abundance of life that is present in creation, does a great job pointing out the falsity of

modern nihilist thought, and is a genius as he uses paradox to illustrate many of his points. Stick it out through the first few chapters, and you will be grateful you read this book.

Jessica Snell says

The first time I picked up this book, I was working in a library. I flipped it open and found this conversation:

". . . But the cold fact remains: imprudent marriages do lead to long unhappiness and disappointment - you've got used to your drinks and things - I shan't be pretty much longer-

"Imprudent marriages!" roared Michael. "And pray where in earth or heaven are there any prudent marriages? Might as well talk about prudent suicides ... Unhappy! of course you'll be unhappy. Who the devil are you that you shouldn't be unhappy, like the mother that bore you? Disappointed! of course we'll be disappointed. I, for one, don't expect till I die to be so good a man as I am at this minute - a tower with all the trumpets shouting."

"You see all this," said Rosamund, with a grand sincerety in her solid face, "and do you really want to marry me?"

"My darling, what else is there to do?" reasoned the Irishman. "What other occupation is there for an active man on this earth, except to marry you?"

I was drawn in, and convinced my soon-to-be-husband to read the rest of the book aloud to me for a birthday present. That was, oh, eight or nine years ago? We finally got our own copy last year, and it's been sitting on my TBR shelf ever since - but no more!

I gobbled this up yesterday. Reading Chesterton is always a wild ride, and you're never sure which way is up when you're done. This novel's hero, Innocent Smith, might come the closest to being an incarnation of Chesterton's general philosophy of life of any of his characters - maybe even more than Fr. Brown.

The book starts in a London boarding house the day a wind kicks up, and with that wind comes a man named Innocent Brown, who first energizes everyone, then appears to do something criminally insane. The criminality is investigated, and it turns out that rather than being mad, Innocent Brown is in fact the sanest man that ever lived. He breaks into his own house because he wishes to learn how to covet his own goods. He threatens suicide-fancying men with death so that they can see that they really prefer life. He pretends to meet his own wife for the first time over and over so that he can see her as he knows she ought to be seen. And, as one character says, he did it all "in order to feel the same interest in his own affairs that he always felt in other people's."

I like this passage, where Smith is arguing with a Russian man about Ibsen:

""The Doll's House?"" he cried vehemently; "why, that is just where Ibsen was so wrong! Why, the whole aim of a house is to be a doll's house. Don't you remember, when you were a child, how those little windows WERE windows, while all the big windows weren't. A child has a doll's house, and shrieks when a front door opens inwards. A banker has a real house, yet how numerous are the bankers who fail to emit the faintest shriek when their real front doors open inwards

". . . I have found out how to make a big thing small. I have found out how to turn a house into a doll's house. Get a long way off it: God lets us turn all things into toys by his great gift of distance."

This book is a romp, and the great giant Innocent Brown jumps and jolts and thunders all through it like a baby elephant. The best part is reading the dialogue that occurs around him, as onlookers try to figure him out. Michael, the man from the first dialogue I quoted, finally comes to the conclusion that Innocent "has distinguished between custom and creed. He has broken the conventions, but he has kept the commandments." He says that it is this complete goodness that makes Innocent so happy.

Michael's friend, Gould, then disagrees with him, saying gravely, "I do not believe that being perfectly good in all respects would make a man merry," to which Michael replies, quietly, "Well, will you tell me one thing? Which of us has ever tried it?"

Loved this book, and love it still.

Karl El-Koura says

G. K. Chesterton was a man who discovered the secret to a happy life—I doubt one can read much of his work without coming to that conclusion. The most natural reaction to his body of work, I think, is amazement: to wonder what secret this man discovered that allowed him to take so much delight in a sheet of brown paper, for example, or where he found the energy to defend his faith in a land growing faithless with so much gusto and wit.

In *Manalive*, a short novel full of events as improbable as the name of the story's protagonist, Chesterton shares his happy secret with the rest of the world—a world that has grown old and weary because it has grown melancholy.

The novel starts with a gust of strong wind blowing across England, a wind that extinguishes candlelight and plunges a young boy in darkness, and startles a young mother as the clothes she set out to dry dance on the clothesline. But though it shocks everyone it touches, Chesterton tells us not to fear: this is a "good wind that blows nobody harm."

The good wind blows into Beacon House, a boarding house where five people live (inmates, Chesterton calls them, and tells us that although they are young inmates, they are also listless). The wind startles the inmates of Beacon House as it has startled the inhabitants of England; it blows a hat over the fence and into their garden, followed by an umbrella and then a bag, and finally by the owner of these wind-strewn possessions, a man whose name is probably Innocent Smith.

Smith moves into the boarding house and his presence there is like a bolt of energy that revitalizes the inmates (the day after he moves in, we're told, "there was a crazy sense that it was everybody's birthday.") This happy feeling doesn't last long, though. In a wild and crazy act, Smith asks one of the visitors to Beacon House to marry him; and in another, roaring with laughter, he fires his gun at the doctor called to investigate the mental health of a man who proposes to a woman he met only a few hours before. During the investigation of Smith, it turns out he might not be so innocent after all—criminal at best, in fact, and more than likely a maniac and a monster who has left "a track of blood and tears across the world." As usual with Chesterton, though, things are almost never what they seem at first (or second, or third) glance.

Chesterton isn't always an easy read, especially in his fiction. He's so playful with his language, so light-hearted with his characters and their conversations (and sometimes with plot itself), that an impatient reader might feel compelled to yell, "Get to the point!" But the playfulness is the point. Why do men marry their wives only once? Why do criminals break into other people's homes but no one thinks to break into his or her own house? Why covet your neighbour's possessions, when it's better in every way to covet your own?

If the answers to those questions aren't obvious—or, much worse, if the questions themselves seem silly—Manalive will help us see the world from Chesterton's point of view. That is, we'll see it hanging upside down from the chimney of the world, having broken in through the roof, and if we're lucky we'll be able to say, "You know—I think I'd be happy if I could live here for a while."

(This review first posted as a special recommendation of Manalive on my personal website).

Dan Ward says

Oh yes. I'm hard pressed to pick a favorite of GKC's novels, but this one is definitely in the top two (Napoleon of Notting Hill being the other). It's a wonderful, confusing, topsy-turvy and surprising story about a man named Innocent Smith, who is accused of (among other things) polygamy, murder and burglary. And of course, he's innocent of it all, even though he actually did do just about everything he's accused of...

Read the book to understand (whoa, that's a deep statement).

Sarah says

I keep thinking I need to read more Chesterton, and especially his fiction. And then I read a book like this and I think, "I'm not smart enough to read Chesterton." The premise behind this book is one that seems normal, and maybe even dull, on the surface. Carried out through the novel, though, it was for me first confusing and then intriguing.

What if we didn't live as though we were happy? What if we were really happy? What if every day was new and the joy in life was not in finding the new but in appreciating the mundane as though it were new and novel and wonderful?

The thing I loved most about this book was that it could be read just for entertainment, but the enjoyment didn't stop there. It wasn't easy reading, necessarily, but it wasn't imposing, either. I liked it. A lot. And, however unsmart I may be, I will keep trundling through Chesterton here and there. It's worth it for the delight factor.

Aaron Heinly says

There is a fine line between genius and insanity. GK Chesterton likes to play hopscotch down that line. Manalive is about a VERY eccentric person named Innocent Smith who acts something like a mix of Willie Wonka and Buddy from the movie Elf. He is happy and playful and energetic - like a giant hyperactive kid. But he is smart and philosophical and likes to point his gun at folk. He comes into town like a cool and wild

breeze and turns everyone's lives upside down. Love and passion is stirred and people feel compelled to do things they would not normally do. But while he is there, he gets arrested for some serious crimes such as polygamy, kidnapping of women, and murder. The rest of the story is told through flashbacks during his trial. Not all is as it seems. Everything is funny. I laughed a lot! Now, it's not modern - Hollywood style pacing. Sometimes I want it fast and modern, myself. But Manalive is awesome for those other times. Oh, yeah - it's not just a story. It's a philosophical and theological essay. Very deep.

Rachel Heffington says

Another strange but funny and (at moments) poignant allegory. I loved Innocent Smith and the havoc he wreaked simply by being an optimist in a pessimistic world. :D

Roberto says

"L'unico scopo reale di una casa è quello di essere la casa di una bambola"

Sono arrivato a questo libro, scritto da Gilbert Chesterton nel 1912, grazie ai molti commenti positivi e ho iniziato a leggerlo senza sapere bene ciò che ci avrei trovato. Un errore, ahimè.

Il romanzo, che si può definire "filosofico", è complesso ed è ricco di humor inglese (che non amo particolarmente) difficilissimo da rendere in un'altra lingua. Purtroppo la traduzione, a mio parere approssimativa oltre che datata, banalizza e rende buffo un testo che sicuramente non lo vuole essere affatto.

Le situazioni grottesche e surreali, la logica religiosa (peraltro ricca di gioia e di vita), lo stile (peculiare ma per me odioso) e l'inconcludenza hanno fatto il resto.

Ho letto su un sito le regole per leggere Chesterton:

1. Prendetelo a piccole dosi;
2. leggete il resoconto di un amico e collega;
3. godetevi un suo saggio;
4. trascorrete del tempo con chi lo ama;
5. mettetevi comodi con un suo libro.

Mi accorgo a posteriori di avere saltato le prime 4 regole. Poco male, non valuto il libro, che lascio ai molti estimatori, passo oltre e dimentico (velocemente) Chesterton.

Ginnie says

First Chesterton I've read.
Recommended to me by Amy.

This is a good novel/parable/almost romance.

Mr. Smith comes to Beacon Hill and in whirlwind fashion changes the lives of those at living there. And then the Doctors show up with charges of bigamy, theft, dessertion, and murder.

The trial is quite interesting and I loved the themes of enjoy life to the fullest.

Claire says

This is quite possibly my favorite book. The "message," storyline, characters, and even simply the choices of descriptive phrasing and wording all champion Chesterton's favorite topic- the complete enjoyment of the "experiment of being."

This is probably not the best choice for an introduction to Chesterton- the book is more enjoyable if you already know Chesterton's opinions and worldview. It felt like he wrote it not to prove anything or make a great earth-shattering statement, but to celebrate joy and life; a celebration which is better enjoyed by one who understands that Chesterton viewed joy and life as ways to praise God rather than simply ways to please yourself. The characters are better understood if you understand the character of the author.

Amy says

Re-read in 2017

The first time I read this book, it took me several weeks. I struggled with the writing style and characters. As this was my pick for my book club this month, I prepped for a long, heavy read...

Only to fly through it in a little over an hour. How different this book reads when you know where it is going and that it is worth getting there!

This book is so powerful. I can't wait to lead a discussion on it.

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#### **2013 Review**

Finished this one a while ago but haven't marked it as read. Incredibly good. Totally recommend, a must read at least once in your life. Challenges and yet readable and fun.

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### **Brittany Petruzzi says**

This goes on my need-to-re-read list. I loved it the first time around, when I read it far too quickly. I'll never forget the idea of traveling around the world for the express purpose of coming home again.

Re-read March 2013 and its even better than I remember. Soul-stirring and inspiring.

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### **Stephen says**

Uno dei libri più belli che abbia mai letto.

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## Kris says

I don't know what to think of it, but it made me think. And I suppose that's good. A short book, but it's not easy to get through.

It keeps setting up expectations, and then subverting them. Makes for a really intriguing way to build a story. But also confusing. I think I would have enjoyed it much more if I understood the main idea from the beginning.

The first chapter is hard to get through. But if you keep at it, the book is really rewarding — at the end when he finally puts all the pieces together and explains Innocent Smith's worldview.

Filled with “Chestertonianisms” — those quippy turns of phrase that are so philosophical yet practical.

The best marriage advice in this book: **“Stick to the man who looks out of the window and tries to understand the world. Keep clear of the man who looks in at the window and tries to understand you.”**

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## Douglas Wilson says

I prefer Chesterton's non-fiction to his fiction, but this was still fun. His fiction tends to be more scattered than it needs to be, but it was still worthwhile reading. His pithy way of putting things is always present, and the plot/conceit was great. He just needed an editor who 1. understood him; 2. had great moral authority; 3. had strong editorial chops, and 4. who was a lot of fun himself. Alas, Chestertonian editors are as rare as Chestertonian writers.

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## Mary says

I want to live in the world of G. K. Chesterton stories, where everyone sits around in awkward predicaments discussing the human condition. In *Manalive*, we get to talk about morality and mortality--when is a thief, a bigamist, a murderer, and a deserter of wives none of those things and yet all? In a G. K. Chesterton book, that's where. There's also this giddy delight in being a man, alive, with two legs, which is a pretty good thing to be, all things considered. If the last chapter is a little less awesome, it's only in comparison to the rest of the book.

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