



Men at Arms

Evelyn Waugh

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Guy Crouchback, determined to get into the war, takes a commission in the Royal Corps of Halberdiers. His spirits high, he sees all the trimmings but none of the action. And his first campaign, an abortive affair on the West African coastline, ends with an escapade which seriously blots his Halberdier copybook. *Men at Arms* is the first book in Waugh's brilliant trilogy, *Sword of Honour*, which chronicles the fortunes of Guy Crouchback. The second and third volumes, *Officers and Gentlemen* and *Unconditional Surrender*, are also published in Penguin. *Sword of Honour* has recently been made into a television drama series, with screenplay by William Boyd.

Men at Arms Details

Date : Published May 31st 2001 by Penguin Classics (first published 1952)

ISBN : 9780141185736

Author : Evelyn Waugh

Format : Paperback 256 pages

Genre : Fiction, Classics, War, Historical, Historical Fiction, World War II, Literature, Novels

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From Reader Review Men at Arms for online ebook

Sharon Barrow Wilfong says

This is the second book I have read by Waugh. The first was Brideshead Revisited and while it was interesting, it was a bit morose.

"That little tick wants his bottom kicked," said Major Erskine. "I think I shall kick it. Good for him and pleasant for me."

That is my favorite line and I like repeating it to myself. That is also a good sample of the wit Waugh exercises on every page of Men at Arms.

Consequently I liked Men at Arms much better than Brideshead Revisited. Our hero Guy Crouchback is too old to enlist for WWII but wants to and finally is accepted into the Halbediers Unit. He is one of two older men, the other being Apthorpe. Both of them go through preliminary training with young men who call them "Uncle". Finally they are sent off to war and we learn how they fair there.

Most of the book takes place during their training time and we meet quite a bundle of interesting characters. Waugh is able to make his characters comical without being cartoony, which I appreciate. This book is really funny, even though it deals with a serious subject matter.

The story is from Guy's point of view, but with third person narration. One could almost feel sorry for Guy as we see the younger men try to take advantage of him and Apthorpe himself seems to manipulate Guy in ways that Guy can only appreciate later as a less than fortunate thing.

But Guy has strains of tenacity and learns to fend for himself, while he circulates with men, some of who are not altogether sane.

I won't give away the story, there isn't much of one. This is a character-driven book and the characters are interesting. Not a dull one anywhere and if you enjoy reading about the funny and sometimes zany antics of a bunch of grown men trying to prepare themselves to fight in a war, you will like this book.

Orsodimondo says

ADDIO BRITISH STYLE

Daniel Craig è Guy Crouchback nel filmTV del 2001 "Sword of Honour" diretto da Bill Anderson.

Nei miei anni d'università, tra le letture non di studio che ho preferito, Evelyn Waugh ha avuto un posto privilegiato.

Probabilmente perché era inglese, e ho avuto un debole per la letteratura in questa lingua.

Probabilmente perché faceva sorridere, e talvolta ridere.

Ma più probabilmente, perché sapeva andare oltre riso e sorriso, sapeva raggiungerne la radice e la fonte: le lacrime.

L'abilità di coniugare i due elementi, lacrima e sorriso, che si possono sovrapporre, per me è stato il tratto distintivo di questo scrittore britannico, che ha cantato la *finis Inghilterrae* con una leggerezza che i cantori della *finis Austriae* non sapevano neppure dove abitasse.

Conservatore, perfino nostalgico, ma lucido come pochi, comprese che la Seconda Guerra Mondiale spazzava via definitivamente un'epoca.

E per quello che la precedente era diventata, perdendo i suoi valori di base e formazione, portando a galla le incongruenze e le finzioni di cui era intrecciata, era meglio così. Quel mondo, per lui ideale, scompariva per sempre, perché ormai diventato caricatura di se stesso, cancellato dalla mostruosa macchina di sangue della guerra mondiale

E quindi, strano tipo di nostalgico questo Waugh: se si attribuisce al Gattopardo la frase "cambiare tutto per non cambiare niente" (in realtà mi pare fosse Tancredi a dire *Se vogliamo che tutto rimanga come è, bisogna che tutto cambi*), Waugh direbbe, cambiamo tutto per cambiare davvero.

La serie in undici episodi del 1981 tratta da "Brideshead Revisited – Ritorno a Brideshead" diretta da Charles Sturridge (e Michael Lindsay-Hogg) è una pietra miliare della serialità televisiva dell'epoca, ebbe un grande successo. Jeremy Irons era uno dei due protagonisti.

Uomini alle armi (Men at Arms, 1952) è il primo romanzo della trilogia *Spada e onore*.

Seguirono *Ufficiali e gentiluomini* (Officers and Gentlemen, 1955), e per finire, *Resa incondizionata* (Unconditional Surrender, 1961).

Sono una meraviglia che credo leggerò per la terza volta, mai sazio dei migliori romanzi di Evelyn Waugh, che sa arrivare dove non molti riescono.

Il protagonista è Guy Crouchback, l'ultimo erede maschio di un'aristocratica famiglia nobile e cattolica in declino.

All'inizio del primo romanzo vive ormai da trent'anni nel suo 'buen retiro' italiano di Santa Dulcinea delle Rocce e ha alle spalle un primo matrimonio ormai finito, che ha comunque lasciato un ottimo rapporto tra i due ex coniugi (lei se ne è andata con un altro, Guy però se la riprenderebbe).

Villa Altachiarra a Portofino servì da modello per la residenza italiana di Guy, il castello Crouchback.

"Adesso il nemico era uno, enorme, odioso, senza maschera. Era l'Età Moderna in armi. Qualunque fosse il risultato c'era posto per lui in quella guerra." Questi furono i pensieri di Guy Crouchback nel 1939, quando apprese la notizia del patto Ribbentrop-Molotov. Quel che segue è la storia dei tentativi da lui fatti per trovare il suo "posto" in quella guerra.

"A Handful of Dust – Il matrimonio di Lady Brenda" di Charles Sturridge (1988). Un buon film con Kristin Scott Thomas, James Wilby, Rupert Graves, Judy Dench, Anjelica Huston, Stephen Fry. Indimenticabile il finale dove appare il sommo Sir Alec Guinness.

Da notare che a fine conflitto, si narra che Churchill abbia pronunciato una celebre frase: *We killed the wrong pig*. Il maiale sbagliato ucciso era Hitler: quello che sarebbe davvero dovuto essere eliminato era Stalin. E da quel momento iniziò una nuova guerra, quelle denominata "cold war – guerra fredda".

Questo probabilmente spiega perché l'accordo russo-tedesco del 1939, infiamma l'animo di questo rampollo di nobile stirpe, cresciuto in Kenya e ancora più a lungo in Italia.

Se non che, Guy è ormai un po' agé per fare la guerra, e quindi fatica a trovare una collocazione. Quando la trova, ha poco a che fare con armi e battaglie.

Infatti, in questo romanzo, e nei due a seguire, di guerra vera, sangue, spari, bombe, armi, battaglie se ne incontrano assai poche.

"The Loved One – Il caro estinto" di Tony Richardson, 1965.

Tutte le richieste di arruolamento presentate da Guy vengono sistematicamente rifiutate. Finché il nostro riesce ad aggirare l'ostacolo accedendo a un corso ufficiali di un corpo speciale, gli alabardieri, esterno agli impedimenti della burocrazia di stato.

Comincia così un lungo training. Che si rivela presto metterlo alla prova: perché per sopraggiunta età, viene soprannominato 'zio', ed è circondato solo da piscelli: questi giovani sono scapestrati, fantasiosamente anarchici, insofferenti alla disciplina militare, che è quella che invece Guy insegue sperando di esserne re-istradato sul sentiero di una vita più utile e concreta.

"Bright Young Things" di Stephen Fry (2003) dal romanzo "Vile Bodies – Corpi vili".

Echi di "Catch 22", di "M.A.S.H.", in salsa rigorosamente british. Ciò nonostante Waugh racconta la sua Inghilterra e il suo mondo, assai distante dagli umori a stelle e strisce: c'è molto di autobiografico, ma soprattutto è un buon 'pasticcio' di realtà e finzione.

L'upper class, l'aristocrazia snob, le magioni di campagna e i club di città, feste e concerti, matrimoni e tradimenti, vecchi integerrimi e giovani scavezzacollo, padroni e servitori, tic e manie. Più o meno tutti hanno frequentato le stesse scuole, sono spesso imparentati tra loro, vivono di rendita, la conoscenza e il rispetto di regole non scritte è la conditio sine qua non per farne parte.

Waugh affronta ogni cosa seria con leggerezza e ogni cosa leggera con gravità. Qui non è il Waugh umoristico de "Il caro estinto" o "Scoop": come dicevo prima, l'abilità di passare dal sense-of-humour al tono drammatico è la maggior delizia di questo scrittore.

Ritratto di Arthur Evelyn St. John Waugh (1903 – 1966).

E says

This is the first leg of Waugh's semi-autobiographical WWII trilogy. In it our hero (or is he an antihero?) Guy, aged 36, plots and schemes his way into an obscure Army regiment. Most of the book is taken up with training escapades. The novel is not absurdist at the level of Catch-22, but it nevertheless contains quite a few absurd scenarios. You can see why the regiment spends 300 pages planning for war instead of being sent to France to fight the actual war! By the end of the novel they do engage in the (real-life) Dakar Expedition, only to fail horrendously. Guy gets another guy drunk and is sent back to England. And thus the novel ends.

The book meanders at points, probably because Waugh was trying to include as many idiotic real-life experiences as possible. The "Catholic" moments are priceless (Waugh was, after all, our most poignant

20th-century Catholic novelist), as are the clashes between highly formal Army traditions and the plain fact that this regiment is led by a bunch of officers (including Guy) who have no business being in the army. There is one exceptionally annoying character; I won't say what happens to him, but let's just say we won't see him in the last 2/3s of the trilogy. I look forward to reading the rest.

Debbie says

Winner of the 1952 James Tait Black Memorial Prize, Britain's oldest literary award, *Men At Arms* is the first part of Waugh's *The Sword of Honour Trilogy*, his look at the Second World War.

It follows Guy Crouchback, the nearly-forty-year-old son of an English aristocratic family who manages to get accepted to officers training in the early part of 1940, and is eventually posted to Dakar in Senegal West Africa. While there, he inadvertently poisons one of his fellow officers and is sent home in disgrace.

That's about all the plot there is. But the book was interesting for its look at British officers' instruction in WWII, in contrast with other reading I've done which focuses on the training of rank and file soldiers, and for the insight into the chaos that was the British Army in the early part of the war: "The brigade resumed its old duty of standing by for orders."

Waugh's wickedly dry sense of humour is brilliant.

Read this if: you're a fan of *Downton Abbey* – different war, but same country and class; or you love the subtle humour of traditional British writers. 3½ stars

Sebastian says

After having been somewhat underwhelmed with Waugh's *Decline and Fall*, I had modest expectations for *Men at Arms*, but I ended up really enjoying it, and anticipate reading the last two books of the *Sword of Honour* (no omitting U's, please, we're British) trilogy. Full of dry and absurd humor, and infused with the gravity of World War II, the book follows in serial form the misadventures of our protagonist, Guy Crouchback, as he transitions from dreaming of playing soldier to facing the daily mundanity and drudgery, interspersed with the occasional thrill, of life in the military. Seems pretty quintessentially British -- imperialism, stiff upper lip, the whole bit. I'm tickled to be reading the same paperback copy that my mom had in college. Hope I can pass down some books like this one day. Entertaining, well written and engaging.

Issicratea says

I started reading this inspired by a good Channel 4 dramatization of Waugh's *Sword of Honour* trilogy, starring Daniel Craig. I hadn't read it before, though Waugh's hilarious manic early novels were formative reading for me. I didn't get on particularly well with *Brideshead Revisited* and assumed I only liked Waugh in his most straightwardly comic mode.

I was wrong! *Men of Arms*, which I read in the slightly modified version Waugh prepared in 1965 for the

single-volume *The Sword of Honour Trilogy*, is an immensely enjoyable read. There's undoubtedly a certain somberness to the narrative material. The protagonist—emphatically not “hero”—Guy Crouchback, is mildly depressed at the beginning of the novel, which starts with the outbreak of WW2 in 1939. Despite his initial embrace of the war as supplying meaning to his life, and his rather touching, schoolboy-crush feeling of warmth towards the regiment he joins, the fictional Royal Corps of Halbadiers (apparently loosely based on Waugh's own regiment, the Royal Marines), the relationship is already deteriorating by the end of the novel, with a fair prospect of worse to come. Guy's military training is presented as a rather surreal chapter of accidents, begotten by bureaucratic inefficiency out of borderline lunacy. Rules are followed, social niceties observed, pink gins consumed, myopic target practice endured, while inconceivable savagery is unleashed in continental Europe, not so far away. At a couple of points, Waugh reminds us of the “trains of locked vans still rolling East and West from Poland and the Baltic, that were to roll on year after year bearing their innocent loads to unknown ghastly destinations” (I assume the moral equivalency of the Nazi death camps and the Soviet gulags was an important statement on Waugh's part at the moment of publication).

Given this generally miserable subject-matter, what I was amazed by was what an enjoyable read it was. *Men at Arms* has a large component of the antic spirit that is such a delight in Waugh's earlier novels. Guy's eccentric training comrade Apthorpe, a master of the surreal non-sequitur, is a magnificent comic character. I am not the greatest fan of toilet humor, but the extended sequence concerning Apthorpe's battle with a mad-dog brigadier over possession of an Edwardian portable “thunderbox” is a masterpiece of its kind. The brigadier, Ben Ritchie-Hook, with his manic energy and sinister relish for “biffing” (a.k.a war) is also very fine (though Waugh had some help with reality here. The Wikipedia entry for the figure on whom this character is supposed to be based, Lieutenant General Sir Adrian Carton de Wiart, states that he was “shot in the face, head, stomach, ankle, leg, hip and ear, survived a plane crash, tunneled out of a POW camp, and bit off his own fingers when a doctor wouldn't amputate them. He later said ‘frankly I ... enjoyed the war.’”)

There were so many lines in this novel that made me laugh out loud that it seems invidious to single out one. But I did particularly love this acute Freudian insight, from an army doctor in Africa, where the disturbing final section of the novel is set:

Queer bird, the mind. Hides things away and then out they pop. But I musn't get too technical.

Cecily says

Part 1 of *Sword of Honour*.

What fun - a bit like a cross between MASH, PG Wodehouse and *Brideshead*!

An upper class British Catholic divorcé leaves his home in Italy at the start of WW2 to try to join the army, and eventually succeeds.

The story is populated by quirky characters and strange coincidences, with glimpses of poignancy. Most of the characters are in a perpetual state of genial incomprehension and incompetence.

Waugh served in WW2 and if his experience was anything like what was described, it's amazing that we won. However, there are clearly some parallels, as the book is peppered with mentions of specific dates and events (helpfully explained in footnotes, in my edition).

Apthorpe's too literal "thunderbox", the old colonel that should have retired but no one quite wants to tell him he's not needed any more, bizarre and nonsensical bureaucracy, all beautifully written.

And best of all, there are two sequels - let's hope they're as good.

My (brief) reviews of the other two in the trilogy:

Officers and Gentlement

and

Unconditional Surrender

Patrick McCoy says

I am very fond of Evelyn Waugh's writing and this year I have decided to tackle the Sword of Honor trilogy, and I have just finished the first volume, Men At Arms (1952). It is the story of 35 year old Guy Crouchback's enlistment into the military at the start of World War II. It is said to have been based on Waugh's own experiences as an older man enlisting. It is something of a British "Catch-22" in the satire and absurdities of the military. That being said it is almost more the story of Crouchback's fellow officer Apthorpe, an eccentric fellow. His main story is an episode of high farce, the two have a battle of wits and military discipline over an Edwardian thunder-box (portable toilet) from which Crouchback observes, amused and detached. I'm very much looking forward to the next installment.

Brendan Hodge says

If you, like me, have been reared on tales of the second World War as the just and virtuous struggle of the "greatest generation", Evelyn Waugh's arch novels (based loosely on his own war experiences) are an important and darkly enjoyable filling out of that two-dimensional view. The stakes here are still high. But the inevitable absurdities and inhumanities of a huge bureaucracy trying to lurch itself into action is here too. As the first novel of the Sword of Honor trilogy nears its climax, officers in the regiment are engaged in a life-and-death struggle for property rights over a portable Victorian chemical toilet while (as Waugh notes several times through the book) "Far away, trains rolled to the east with their innocent cargo."

Greg says

"But whether orders made sense or not de Souza could be trusted to carry them out. Indeed he seemed to find a curious private pleasure in doing something he knew to be absurd, with minute efficiency. The other officer, Jervis, needed constant supervision." Waugh's light, comic touch is always welcome. But here, I can't help but compare this to Anthony Powell's magnificent 12-volume saga (A Dance to the Music of Time) of both wars in which the English are caught up in recuperating from the first war and at the same time ramping up for the next one. Still, I'm definitely going to read the next two in this "Sword of Honor" trilogy.

Thomas says

The best thing about finishing this book is knowing that, as the first in a trilogy, I can take the next two off my TBR and make room for other books.

Diana says

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Tony says

Waugh, Evelyn. MEN AT ARMS. (1952). ****. Taken along with his next two novels, this is the first part of a trilogy by Waugh later collected under the title, "Sword of Honour," in 1965. I can finally read them in order after all these years – I hope. Waugh originally intended the three novels to be read together, even though their publication was about a decade apart. There are continuing characters and situations throughout the three, and, though the scenes change, the story maintains its seamless flow. Our hero is Guy Crouchback. He is a man in his early thirties. The time is 1939. Europe is beginning to erupt into what will become WW II, and Guy wants to get in on the action. He soon learns that this war is not a gentleman's war like the last one, and has to go through the confusion of the British disorganization to even get close to some kind of participation. Guy is one of the few remaining Catholic families of note in England. He has been living in Italy for many years, where he is comfortable but doesn't fit in. He has gone to all the right schools, but doesn't really know how to do anything. Add these to his age, and you soon learn that he will have all sorts of trouble getting in to any outfit. He eventually gets into a group of Halbadiers that is composed, essentially, of men like him. They are stationed in Scotland with not much to do, but are on continuous alert – though they know not what for. Confusion reigns supreme. Guy's experiences parallel Waugh's for the war years, but Guy is not Waugh. He is Waugh's figurehead for his stance against the war on a religious basis. Along the way, we get to meet many members of the so-called priveleged class who fall into the same groups as Guy does. Most of the encounters are stiff-upper-lip hilarious. The book is not easy to read, and I suspece that most of us American readers will miss many of the references to class issues and events of the times, but it is well worth the effort. Recommended.

James says

'Men at Arms' (1952) by Evelyn Waugh is the first part of Waugh's 'Sword of Honour' trilogy of books (along with 'Officers and Gentlemen' and 'Unconditional Surrender').

'Men at Arms' tells the story of Guy Crouchback and his endeavours to, in his way – play his part, do his bit

and get actively involved in World War II and The British Army.

Unfortunately, I struggled to engage with either the narrative or the main protagonist. 'Men at Arms' is a novel that reads, at least for the most part, as a somewhat uninspiring, pedestrian and underwhelming story of an over-privileged member of upper class English society – playing at war, playing with an honourable view of being a soldier, a member of The British Army; trying to play his part and do his bit.

Eventually, Crouchback is commissioned into the fictional Royal Corp of Halberdiers, which seemingly operates in turns more along the lines of a gentleman's club; an old boy's network or a minor public school. (I am presuming that is probably the intention?). In the course of Crouchback's military endeavours to do his bit – he finds himself regularly lost and somewhat out of his depth.

Apparently Waugh's 'Sword of Honour' trilogy is deemed to be a 'satirical masterpiece' – which unfortunately for me (at least based on this first instalment) it was not. Sadly, 'Men at Arms' lacked any real interest and was ultimately tedious and uninspiring more or less throughout. Over and above the somewhat dull central story of Crouchback's attempts to 'play his part' – the core of the novel seems to focus tediously on the inadequacies and the poorly managed logistics concerning The British Army at that time, along with the interests of those therein.

Disappointingly, 'Men at Arms' doesn't entertain, amuse, inspire, excite or even greatly interest; neither does it paint an insightful and wisely satirical portrait of either our main protagonist, The British Army, the British 'war effort' or Britain and its class/social structures at that time.

Mildly diverting at best – disappointing to say the least. On this basis I have no plans to read the remaining instalments in the trilogy, but do however still hold out high hope of Waugh's 'Brideshead Revisited'.

Roger Burk says

Pious, innocuous, nebbishy Guy Crouchback, last scion of an ancient and undistinguished Catholic family of the English landed gentry, decides to join the war effort in 1939 as a second lieutenant, despite his middle age and lack of military experience. It gives some purpose to his life, after his wife abandoned him for a series of subsequent exciting husbands. He has some trouble finding a regiment that will take him, but finally gets into officer training with the Royal Corps of Halberdiers. He earnestly tries to do everything right, while his fellow and foil Apthorpe gets into all kinds of preposterous scraps. It's all inexplicable training, orders and counterorders, hasty movements followed by days of waiting, as the military situation in faraway France goes from phony war to retreat to disaster. Finally the regiment ships out to see some action, of sorts. Guy distinguishes himself, in a way, and always tells the truth. Appalling, enthralling, and funny. Before there was Heller or Vonnegut, there was Waugh, just as amusing but without the bitterness.
