



# South Wind

*Norman Douglas*

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## **South Wind** Norman Douglas

*South Wind* depicts a group of eccentric and even scandalous characters wiling away their time in a sunny Mediterranean resort. The novel takes place on Nepenthe, Douglas's thinly veiled version of Capri, an island retreat for pleasure-seekers since Roman times. In classical mythology, “nepenthe” was a medicine that caused one to forget melancholy and suffering; Douglas' comical duchesses, American millionaires, and expatriate freethinkers forget not only suffering, but conventional morality and even ordinary discretion.

In the series of witty conversations that make up much of the novel, the characters analyze (and mock) religion, science, morality, progress, and the legacies of classical civilization. The novel spoke to the young, rebellious, and cynical generation that was scarred by the experience of World War I, and influenced younger English writers such as Aldous Huxley and Graham Greene.

## **South Wind Details**

Date : Published November 3rd 2006 by Hard Press (first published 1917)

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Author : Norman Douglas

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## From Reader Review South Wind for online ebook

**Bettie? says**

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OpeninG: **The bishop was feeling rather sea-sick. Confoundedly sea-sick, in fact.**

**This annoyed him. For he disapproved of sickness in every shape or form. His own state of body was far from satisfactory at that moment; Africa—he was Bishop of Bampopo in the Equatorial Regions—had played the devil with his lower gastric department and made him almost an invalid; a circumstance of which he was nowise proud, seeing that ill-health led to inefficiency in all walks of life. There was nothing he despised more than inefficiency. Well or ill, he always insisted on getting through his tasks in a businesslike fashion. That was the way to live, he used to say. Get through with it. Be perfect of your kind, whatever that kind may be. Hence his sneaking fondness for the natives—they were such fine, healthy animals.**

**Fine, healthy animals; perfect of their kind! Africa liked them to "get through with it" according to their own lights. But there was evidently a little touch of spitefulness and malice about Africa; something almost human. For when white people try to get through with it after their particular fashion, she makes hay of their livers or something. That is what had happened to Thomas Heard, D.D., Bishop of Bampopo. He had been so perfect of his kind, such an exemplary pastor, that there was small chance of a return to the scenes of his episcopal labours. Anybody could have told him what would happen. He ought to have allowed for a little human weakness, on the part of the Black Continent. It could not be helped. For the rest, he was half inclined to give up the Church and take to some educational work on his return to England. Perhaps that was why he at present preferred to be known as "Mr. Heard." It put people at their ease, and him too.**

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**Hamish says**

I looked into this because Nabokov mentioned admiring it some of his letters to his wife (though he later reported that he heard Douglas was a "malicious pederast"). I can imagine N appreciating the carefully crafted world of characters, each with their relationships with one another, all being subtly moved around. It also reads like the anti-Magic Mountain which I'm sure amused him (N loathed Mann), with characters endlessly engaged in long-winded philosophical discussions, only here Douglas is obviously satirizing them rather than holding them up for the edification of the reader.

And as a satire, it's certainly one of the most acerbic, sarcastic novels I've ever read. While never laugh-out-loud funny, it's generally pretty amusing; characters bounce off each other in imaginative and entertaining ways; just about everything is held up for ridicule. Unfortunately, it can also get pretty repetitive and tiring, with no real form or structure (and it just kind of ends eventually). And the aforementioned philosophical satires get particularly tiresome. It's still enjoyable enough, but I don't see it as being worth N's high praise.

P.S. Apparently South Wind was a pretty big deal (and controversial) back in the 20s, and since then it's been

almost completely forgotten.

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## **Sheri Horton says**

A beautifully written book about nothing. Think of it as a classical Seinfeld.

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## **Chris says**

Douglas's most famous novel, although almost unknown today, was popular when published in 1917. It was the first to exploit, using literary satire, the sensual pleasure island of Capri, here transparently disguised as the island of Nepenthe, named for the "drug of forgetfulness" from Greek mythology.

The real island has a very long recorded history. In AD 20, the Emperor Tiberius decided to leave Rome forever and to build a palace in Capri, and, according to Suetonius, "at last gave vent to all the vices which he had for a long time tried unsuccessfully to hide." In 1632, the Frenchman Bouchard was delighted to discover how accommodating both the women and the boys of Capri were. For almost two thousand years the most rampant sexual appetite, the most bizarre variations, have been tolerated and even actively welcomed.

In the nervous days following the shameful trial of Oscar Wilde in 1895, English homosexuals found Capri a perfect haven: W. Somerset Maugham came; Norman Douglas stayed, and, to show that homosexuality was not exclusively British, in 1917 Fritz von Krupp, the German munitions king, and the self-styled Baron Jacques d'Adelswärd-Fersen, cast cares to the wind once they were established on the island. Lesbians, as Compton Mackenzie's two novels, *Vestal Fire* and *Extraordinary Women*, revealed, also found Capri stimulating.

Given the very real, and sufficiently historically documented, record of Capri's place as a pleasure center of the world since Roman times, one would expect Norman Douglas's novel to be a somewhat spectacular orgy, while maintaining his high literary standards and abiding by the strict censorship rules of the time, 1917. Unfortunately, by severely toning down the language, very carefully selecting the events depicted, and falsely rendering such nearly invisible sex as there is as between *only* men and women, he killed the fun, and corrupted the reality of Capri.

An explanation for what remains in the book perhaps can be found in the legal trouble Douglas himself got into shortly before it was published. "In late 1916 he jumped bail in London on a charge of indecent assault on a sixteen-year-old boy, and effectively then lived in exile. He himself wrote of this in self-exculpation: 'Norman Douglas of Capri, and of Naples and Florence, was formerly of England, which he fled during the war to avoid persecution for kissing a boy and giving him some cakes and a shilling'. (The boy in fact complained to the police.)" Although I can't prove it, likely Douglas was shy about worsening his reputation further by being too explicit about Capri, and thereby limiting his readership. As for his reputation, it never reached greatness. As for his readership, he was more successful: *South Wind* sold very well and has been reprinted frequently.

In spite of the problems with *South Wind*, Douglas is an excellent writer and a master of satire. It can be enjoyed as simply a funny story about weird people who have no modern equivalents, but readers today will

undoubtedly be left quite unsatisfied.

Norman Douglas was a direct influence on the younger Aldous Huxley, whose own novel-writing career began a few years later. Instead of reading Douglas, I would suggest any of Huxley's first four or five novels as a much better realization of intelligent literary satire directed at all the fools in English society and much of Europe. Eventually, of course, Huxley went far beyond anything Douglas could have done, taking his, Huxley's, version of literature--the novel of ideas--to heights never surpassed. (Ironically, he got there with something akin to Douglas's obliqueness concerning sex, but this is a topic for an essay in itself. For a classic, strong taste, refer to *Brave New World*. Or try his *Ape and Essence*, a better book and one steeped in the most ruined sexuality.)

And for Capri itself? Is there something better to read if you want to experience the fun of the island? Well, yes, definitely yes! In fact there are two by writers who spent much time on Capri: *The Exile of Capri*, by Roger Peyrefitte, and Compton MacKenzie's *Vestal Fire*. If you are at all interested in what can happen when stupid laws prohibiting normal, instinctual, enjoyable human behavior are either ignored or are nonexistent, read these books for your pleasure. Both are quite literary and will make you wish you were there.

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### **Andrew Schirmer says**

Note: This is the longest review I've yet composed on Goodreads, but this is such an astounding work of genius, of learning and writer's craft, I feel it should be better-known. What follows is my small attempt to bring this about.

*"... I glanced too, at the books; they were numerous, untidy, and miscellaneous. But one shelf was a little neater than the rest and here I noted the following sequence which for a moment seemed to form a vague musical phrase, oddly familiar: Hamlet, La Morte d'Arthur, The Bridge of San Luis Rey, Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde, South Wind, The Lady with the Dog, Madame Bovary, The Invisible Man, Le Temps Retrouvé, Anglo-Persian Dictionary, The Author of Trixie, Alice in Wonderland, Ulysses, About Buying a Horse, King Lear...."*

Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*

*Upstairs he had a studio--he painted a little, the old fraud. He had decorated its sloping wall (it was really not more than a garret) with large photographs of pensive André Gide, Tchaikovsky, Norman Douglas, two other well-known English writers, Nijinsky (all thighs and fig leaves), Harold D. Doublename (a misty-eyed left-wing professor at a Midwestern university) and Marcel Proust.*

Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*

It should not be seen as a ringing endorsement of the judgments of Vladimir Nabokov that I begin this review with quotes from two of his novels. In Sebastian Knight's library, the book under review is placed in a pantheon of canonical literature, directly before Chekhov's *???? ? ??????????*. And yet Nabokov (who never came to terms with the sexuality of his brother Sergei) couldn't resist a little homophobic jab at the pederast Douglas, placing his photograph in a "gallery of queens" in the attic of Gaston Godin, a teacher at the Beardsley (ha!) College for Women.

So, how to approach this thing?

Well, it begins with one of the greatest opening sentences ever:

*The bishop was feeling rather sea-sick. Confoundedly sea-sick, in fact.*

And so on we roll in that wonderfully lucid, classically-tinged syntax of Edwardian writing, with a touch of the baroque--Baron Corvo without the bitter invective, early Waugh without the frivolity.

Unlike many of those Edwardian masterpieces, there is little in the way of plot. The Bishop of Bampopo, one Thomas Heard arrives on the fictional isle of Nepenthe to spend a fortnight before returning to England. On board the ship he encounters a charivari of characters with whom he converses; a sort of prelude to the rest of the novel which consists largely of set-pieces where the queer and fascinating inhabitants of Nepenthe discourse on all manner of subjects. Nearly every page abounds with sub-Wildean epigrams and the conversation sparkles.

And the characters! Mr. Eames, who is annotating a famous history of the island who may or may not, like Douglas, have been forced into exile thanks to his taste in boys:

*It was not true to say of Mr. Eames that he lived on Nepenthe because he was wanted by the London police for something that happened in Richmond Park, that his real name was not Eames at all but Daniels -- the notorious Hodgson Daniels, you know, who was mixed up in the Lotus Club scandal, that he was the local representative of an international gang of white-slave traffickers who had affiliated offices in every part of the world, that he was not a man at all but an old boarding-house keeper who had very good reasons for assuming the male disguise, that he was a morphinomaniac, a disrobed Baptist Minister, a pawnbroker out of work, a fire-worshipper, a Transylvanian, a bank clerk who had had a fall, a decayed jockey who disgraced himself at a subsequent period in connection with some East-End mission for reforming the boys of Bermondsey and then, after pawning his mother's jewelry, writing anonymous threatening letters to society ladies about their husbands and vice-versa, trying to blackmail three Cabinet Ministers and tricking poor servant-girls out of their hard-earned wages by the sale of sham Bibles, was luckily run to earth in Piccadilly Circus, after an exciting chase, with a forty-pound salmon under his arm which he had been seen to lift from the window of a Bondstreet fishmonger.*

There are the Little White Cows--the followers of Bazhakuloff, a renegade Russian Orthodox priest admittedly modeled on Grigori Rasputin. The wealthy American yachtsman von Koppen, and my favorite conversationalists, Mr. Keith and Count Caloveglia.

Back to our sea-sick bishop:

*"I am feeling better, thank you. It must have been the sight of those poor people that upset me. They seem to suffer horribly. I suppose I have got used to it."*

*"They do suffer. And they get used to it too. I often wonder whether they are as susceptible to pain and discomfort as the rich with their finer nervous structure. Who can say? Animals also have their sufferings, but they are not encouraged to tell us about them. Perhaps that is why God made them dumb. Zola, in one of his novels, speaks of a sea-sick donkey."*

The island comes into view:

*Viewed from the clammy deck on this bright morning, the island of Nepenthe resembled a cloud. It was a silvery speck upon that limitless expanse of blue sea and sky. A south wind breathed over the Mediterranean waters, drawing up their moisture which lay couched in thick mists about its flanks and uplands. The comely outlines were barely suggested through a veil of fog. An air of irreality hung about the place. Could this be an island?*

Ah, the "south wind" of the novel's title. The sirocco reappears constantly in conversation and description and its operative influence on everything from mental faculties to island character are felt and disputed.

*"What has been, may be," continued the old man, oracularly. "I question whether the sirocco was obnoxious in olden days as now, otherwise the ancients, who had absurdly sensitive skins, would have complained of it more frequently. The deforestation of Northern Africa, I suspect has much to do with it. Frenchmen are now trying to revive those prosperous conditions which Mohammedanism has destroyed. Oh yes! I don't despair of muzzling the sirocco, even as we are muzzling that other Mediterranean pest, the malaria."*

And has any author ever managed to elevate talk about that most mundane subject of all to such a level? Continuing, the conversation shifts into high satire.

*Keith observed:*

*"Petronius, I remember, speaks of the North wind being the mistress of the Tyrrhenian. He would not use such language nowadays, unless alluding to its violence rather than its prevalence. Once I thought of translating Petronius. But I discovered certain passages in the book which are almost improper..."*

Finally, as the fortnight's sojourn is drawing to a close, there is a shift. The winds die down.

*"Don't you notice, Count, that there is an unwonted sparkle in the air this evening? Something cleansing, clarifying?"*

*"To be sure I do," replied the other. "And I can tell you the cause of it. Sirocco is over for the present. The wind has shifted to the north. It brightens all nature. It makes one see things in their true perspective, doesn't it?"*

*"That is exactly what I feel," said Mr. Heard.*

I do hope I've been able to transfer some of the brilliance of this most singular book into the space allotted. It is one of the most original things I've ever read.

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## **Vit Babenco says**

The onset of the twentieth century, the humankind is on the edge of the intellectual and sensual awakening, the tumultuous twenties are just around the corner, **Norman Douglas** catches the moment and his *South Wind* is one of the earlier fine instances of black comedy.

A kind of merry nightmare. Things happened. There was something bright and diabolical in the tone of the place, something kaleidoscopic – a frolicsome perversity. Purifying, at the same time. It swept away the cobwebs. It gave you a measure, a standard, whereby to compute earthly affairs. Another landmark passed; another milestone on the road to enlightenment.

The residents and visitors of the island are a colourful society or, probably, they should be defined as a piebald motley crew of frauds.

Manners, mores, customs, habits, deportment, religion, politics, psychology, sociology, arts: **Norman Douglas** leaves no stone unturned...

“Poverty is like rain. It drops down ceaselessly, disintegrating the finer tissues of a man, his recent, delicate adjustments, and leaving nothing but the bleak and gaunt framework. A poor

man is a wintry tree – alive, but stripped of its shining splendour. He is always denying himself this or that. One by one, his humane instincts, his elegant desires, are starved away by stress of circumstances. The charming diversity of life ceases to have any meaning for him. To console himself, he sets up perverse canons of right and wrong. What the rich do, that is wrong. Why? Because he does not do it. Why not? Because he has no money. A poor man is forced into a hypocritical attitude towards life – debarred from being intellectually honest. He cannot pay for the necessary experience.”

**Norman Douglas** has a very sharp eye so he sees far and at times even turns prophetic.

Men cannot live, it seems, save by feeding on their neighbour's life-blood. They prey on each other's nerve-tissues and personal sensations. Everything must be shared. It gives them a feeling of solidarity, I suppose, in a world where they have lost the courage to stand alone. Woe to him who dwells apart! Great things are no longer contemplated with reverence. They are hauled down from their pedestals in order to be rendered accessible to a generation of pigmies; their dignity is soiled by vulgar contact. This lust of handling – what is its ordinary name? Democracy.

Some critics complained that the novel showed not much of a plot... Well, indolent living has no plot.

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### **Seth Holler says**

Before beginning: In a review of one of Douglas's later novels, Waugh wrote that in *SOUTH WIND* he had "achieved, with superb facility, the only great satirical novel of his generation." So let's just see what we've got.

A third of the way through: the chapters are organized casually, as is, occasionally, the narration ("Napoleon, or somebody, once remarked 'L'etat, c'est moi.'"). But the story has a definite shape; we meet various characters in conversation with others, then (eventually) get their backstories. Also: the pornographic cover on the Capuchin edition is so far entirely inappropriate. The humor is inconsistent.

Halfway: the worldly, morally suspect Jesuit is still the most entertaining speaker. The worldly atheist Mr Keith is a bore to everyone (readers, other characters) but the author. Denis the college graduate gets some nice under his breath one-liners. I expect great things from the Count, who is shaping into a reputable villain. The three disreputable villains (President of the club, corrupt judge, wealthy foreigner Mr Muhlen) have no purchase on the imagination, though I want more of their ally, the Vice President of the club. The protagonist (an Anglican bishop on leave) is dull, but don't forget Chesterton's defense of Nicholas Nickleby: he's just an excuse to meet everyone else. The women are all interesting, but underdeveloped. I figured out the identity of the naked lady on the cover.

Something more should be said of the narration: it's of uneven quality. The dominant note in the background chapters is whimsy, as in the matter of fact descriptions of the "Good Duke's" jovial cruelties. I'd call it irony, but it's not at all subtle. Here's one of the better examples: "Nobody, probably, has done more to foster pious feelings towards their island patron than the Good Duke Alfred, who, among other things, caused a stately marble frieze to be placed in the church.... The frieze indeed was admired so unreservedly, so recklessly, that the Good Duke felt it his duty to remove the sculptor's eyes and (on second thoughts) his



hands as well, in order that no sovereign should possess works by so consummate a master of stonecraft. There the disciplinary measures ended. He did his best to console the gifted artist, who was fed, henceforth, on lobsters, decorated with the order of the Golden Vine, and would doubtless have been ennobled after death, had the Prince not predeceased the sculptor." (from Chp 3).

Finished: More of the same, though I was wrong about the Count. I rather like the millionaire prophylactic-manufacturer. The book is a strange mix of clear satire and half-serious irreverent disquisitions; sometimes funny, never approaching hilarious. If we reckon it sincere, the Bishop's spiritual journey is incredible from start to finish. That of Denis, being less ambitious, is believable. I can see the island of Nepenthe, and it is lovely.

If Waugh is right, I see no reason to read any satires written by Douglas's contemporaries.

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## **Fionnuala says**

Imagine this scene: A beautiful house with lots of windows facing south. In a recently vacated bedroom on the first floor, the drawers and wardrobe lie open and empty, their contents packed up and gone. The only traces of the former occupant, the faint whiff of her perfume and the abandoned book on the dressing-table, its pages rustling in the breeze from the open windows.

The title of the book is 'South Wind'.

I came across that scenario in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September* and became curious about the abandoned book. Was it a fictitious title meant to foreshadow the troubles that would befall the beautiful house in the future, aided and abetted by the treacherous south wind? Or was it a real title, and if so, why did Elizabeth Bowen choose it for Laurence to offer Marda as a parting gift only for it to be deliberately left behind in the end?

I love literary mysteries so I immediately looked up 'South Wind'. The only book I could find was this novel by Norman Douglas, and since it was published in 1917 three years before Bowen finished *The Last September*, it seemed likely that she was referring to Douglas's book. But while the book entitled *South Wind* featured in several scenes in Bowen's story, she gave no hint as to its contents - which only made me more curious of course. I did some further searching. There are only 26 reviews of *South Wind* on goodreads, one of which I'd read and liked - though I'd completely forgotten that I had. According to Wikipedia, *South Wind* featured in Nabokov's *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, but I'd forgotten that too. So not only was the book abandoned in an empty room back in 1920, it seems to be more or less forgotten by the world, me included.

Such a sad fate for a book aroused my sympathy. I had to sample it, even if it turned out to be completely unreadable.

As it turned out, I enjoyed *South Wind* so much that I didn't want it to end. I read it over many weeks of the summer, eking out this tale of life on the isle of Nepenthe (Capri) while reading other books alongside it. I lost track of time while reading about the island, and not only the time I was taking to get through the pages but the chronology of the story itself. If someone had told me that I could continue dipping in and out of this book forever, I don't think I'd have minded because the contents range over so many odd and interesting subjects - geology, history, anthropology, art, philosophy, religion. But the oddest thing about the whole experience was that when I finally got to the end, the main character mentions that the events in the book had

taken place over a mere *twelve days*. Twelve days! I thought they must have spanned twelve thousand years! Furthermore, the main character describes those twelve days as *a merry nightmare*. I experienced it rather as a long and interesting dream, but I'd agree with him about the 'merry' aspect; there was a large cast of characters and some of them were very funny - and even the ones who weren't normally funny became hilariously funny when they were drunk. The best conversations happened during late night drinking sessions:

*"Have you ever thought about the impossibility of realizing colour description in landscape? It's struck me a good deal lately, here, with this blue sea, and those orange tints on the mountain, and all the rest of it. Take any page by a well-known writer - take a description of a sunset by Symonds, for example. Well, he names all the gorgeous colours, the yellow and red and violet, or whatever it may be, as he saw them. But he can't make you see them - damned if he can. He can only throw words at your head. I'm very much afraid, my dear fellow, that humanity will never get its colour values straightened out by means of verbal symbols."*

*"I always know when a man is drunk, even when I'm drunk myself."*

*"When?"*

*"When he talks about colour values."*

*"I believe you're right. I'm feeling a bit muzzy about the legs, as if I couldn't move. A bit fuzzy—"*

*"Muzzy, I think you said."*

*"Fuzzy."*

*"Muzzy. But we needn't quarrel about it, need we? I shall be sick in a minute, old man."*

And how about this for a lunatic description of the moon:

*It dangled over the water, waning, sickly, moth-eaten, top-heavy, and altogether out of condition - as if it had been on duty for weeks on end. In other respects, too, its appearance was not quite normal. In fact, it soon took to behaving in the most extraordinary fashion. Sometimes there were two moons, and sometimes one. They seemed to merge together - to glide into each other, and then to separate again.*

Or this: *The funeral was a roaring success.*

Some of the humour is at the expense of the English too, which somehow makes it funnier, at least for me: *there is a good deal to be said in favour of constipation. It is the cause of English spleenfulness, and this spleenfulness, properly directed, has its uses. It engenders a certain energetic intolerance of mind. I think the success of the nation is largely due to this particular quality...*

*I wish the English still possessed a shred of the old sense of humour which Puritanism, and dyspepsia, and newspaper-reading, and tea-drinking, have nearly extinguished. It ought to be revived afresh. Nothing like a good drunkard for that purpose. As a laughter-provoking device it is cheaper and more effective than any pantomime yet invented; and none the worse, surely, for being a little old-fashioned...*

*I confess that much of what I read [in England] was an enigma to me till I had studied the Bible. Its teachings seem to have filtered, warm and fluid, through the veins of your national and private life. Then, slowly, they froze hard, congealing the whole body into a kind of crystal. Your ethics are stereotyped in black-letter characters. A gargoyle morality...*

I could go on and on piling up examples from the *cantankerous and crapulous* conversations which make up most of the book, or quoting the really *glistening* descriptions of the scenery, but I better stop before the review comes to resemble the island of the story. As one of the characters remarks, *"The canvas of Nepenthe is rather overcharged..."*

.....

But what of the literary mystery I mentioned at the beginning, you wonder? Why did Elizabeth Bowen use this book as a prop in her story? Why did she have Laurence, a rather melancholy and aimless Cambridge

undergraduate who wants to be a poet, give the book to the very sophisticated house-guest on whom he had a crush? I thought about that as I read *South Wind*, and when a melancholy undergraduate called Dennis turned up, I was reminded of Laurence immediately. Dennis is even more aimless than Laurence, and he aspires vaguely to being a poet. He also has difficulty telling the women he admires how he feels about them. Was this the answer to my literary mystery? Did Laurence give Marda *South Wind* as a kind of coded message about his feelings for her? Pity I can't ask Elizabeth Bowen..

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## J. says

*Early that morning, he had tried his hand at poetry once more, after a long interval. Four words--that was all the inspiration which had come to him.*

*"Or vine-wreathed Tuscany . . ."*

*A pretty turn, in the earlier manner of Keats. It looked well on the snowy paper. "Or vine-wreathed Tuscany." He was content with that phrase, as far as it went. But where was the rest of the stanza? How easily, a year or two ago, could he have finished the whole verse. How easily everything was accomplished in those days... Was he not the idol of a select group who admired not only one another but also the satanism of Baudelaire, the hieratic obscenities of Beardsley, the mustiest Persian sage, the modernist American ballad-monger?*

*He was full of gay irresponsibility. Ever since, on returning to his rooms after some tedious lecture, he announced to his friends that he had lost an umbrella, but preserved, thank God, his honour, they augured a brilliant future for him. So, for other but no less cogent reasons, did his doting, misguided mother.*

I really should have loved this book. C'mon. It's 1917 Capri, here called "Nepenthe"-- expats, mainlanders, natives, all engaged in culture-clash farce. Misbegotten schemes, false heirs, forgery, and drippingly sarcastic repartee. Maugham's *Under The Casuarina Tree* meets Burgess' *The Long Day Wanes*. *Under The Volcano*, but lighthearted. *Night Of The Iguana* but Italiano. Something in the break-from-heavy-reading vein, along the lines of *Up At The Villa*, say.

We're hooked early with the grand swooping crane shot of the newcomer arriving at the island, a truly magical atoll nestled somewhere off the distant azure coastlines of the Italian Mediterranean. Soon enough, we understand that our tour will survey fusty rectitude with loose moral underpinnings -- all well and good. Let's go.

*The Villa Khismet was one of the surprises of Nepenthe. It lay somewhat out of the way, at the end of a narrow, gloomy and tortuous lane... Who would have dreamt of finding a house of this kind in such a situation? Who would have expected, on passing through that mouldy wooden gateway in the wall, to find himself in a courtyard that recalled the exquisite proportions and traceries of the Alhambra--to be able to wander thence under fretted arches through a maze of marble-paved Moorish chambers, great and small, opening upon each other at irregular angles with a deliciously impromptu effect? The palace had been built regardless of expense. It was originally laid out, Keith explained, by one of the old rulers of Nepenthe who, to tease his faithful subjects, simulated a frenzied devotion for the poetry and architecture of the Saracens, their bitterest enemies. Something Oriental still hung about these chambers, though the modern furniture was not at all in keeping with the style. Mr. Keith did not profess to be a man of taste. "I try to be comfortable," he used to say. He had succeeded in being luxurious.*

Extravagant, for certain; where there is no sea view, there are fountains in courtyards, charmingly unreliable perhaps, but suggestive of sparkling conversation, intriguing developments. The actual content, reminiscent of maybe Balzac-- is broad parody, characters all baroque grotesques tilting and wheeling around in wide circles on a small island. Courting, pandering, or pointedly ignoring each other, and the reader, more or less. There is no pivot moment or change agent that catalyzes the micro dramatics at hand, no narrative hook, or anchor either.

We get pages-long socratic dialogues where characters prevaricate, about the Gods, the Weather, the Meaning, dear boy, the Meaning. Oh by the way dining at Lady Whatsit's this evening? It takes the author three quarters of the book to get around this stuff, and ramp up to full scale farce.

I suppose this is a frustrating outing because it has so much: place, period, a penchant for the irreverent --and still comes to naught. The half-hearted stabs at interim drama hold to no plot path, and the pontificating rambles don't coalesce into a novel. I do think this might make a great movie, because of all of those things, and also because it's such a terrible book.

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### **John says**

I have gone back and forth with my rating of this book between 2 and 3 stars. This book, about expatriates and natives on the Island of Nepenthe (really Capri), contains numerous funny set pieces involving a wide variety of "characters." Douglas also provides excellent descriptions of the scenery.

The book was written in 1917, and given the times (WWI) I can see why it was popular and escapist. In that sense, it reminds me of Hilton's Lost Horizon, in setting forth an paradise free from the restrictions of popular morality.

But ultimately, the weaknesses I see in the novel resulted in the lower rating. The "plot" such as it is--the physical and moral recovery of a CofE Bishop, moves slowly. Long stretches of the book are taken up with long discussions with the major characters about life, etc. It is true that there is much humor in the book, but it is handled in no way as well as the novels of Evelyn Waugh or Aldous Huxley.

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### **Nora Barnacle says**

Postoje dobre, lepe i divne knjige, a ova je dražesna.

Normanu Daglasu je majka bila Austrijanka, te maternji nemaški, i šta može biti prirodnije od ?injenice da je ko ranjena žaba kukao da ga iz natmurenog Londona premeste u Karlsruhe da dou?i gimanziju i u njoj, prirodno – klasi?ne nauke. Dobro, o?inji mu je bio engleski, u?io je tamo još štošta: i ruski i francuski i šta je još bilo potrebno da potonje postane diplomata u Petrogradu, ali je ovaj roman napisao iz svoga politeisti?kog srca i klasi?arske duše koja ga je, najzad, i dovela na Kapri, da pozne dane provede u arheološkim studijama.

“Južni vetar” je satira otmenog, pametnog i u?enog gospodina, lišenog svakog vida ogor?enosti i taštine, koji svemu pretpostavlja lep život i ovozemaljsku, svakome dostižnu (duhovnu) sre?u. U tom maniru je i napisana (da, povremeno mi je bilo dolazilo da se za svaki slu?aj još jednom osvrnem i proverim nisam li

služajno u senovitom kutku vrta, među nežnim ladoležima nevine rože, zaboravila, oh, slamnati šešir raskošnoga oboda i prigodnog cveta i perja - što se u bezladoležnoj stvarnosti ispostavljalo kao "Jaaa, ovo moraš da vučeš!" jurenje ukućana).

Mnogo je pogrešiti svako ko posumnja da je reč o 450 strana smarajućeg aristokratskog razmetanja, bogatunskog pametovanja, sladunjavosti ili učenjačkog nagvaždanja. Beskrajno je uzbudljivo!

Radnja je smeštena na mediteransko ostrvo (recimo Kapri) kojim je nekad vladao dobri knez (recimo Tiberije) čiji je vladarski liberalizam bio prilično uprošten i svima razumljiv. Izuzetno mu je, između ostalog, bilo važno da stalno bude okružen poslugom i podanicima i gnušao se njihove potrebe za popodnevnom dremkom, pa je vaspostavio zakon koji nalaže da se svi zabavni sadržaji (bez obzira da li uključuju vatromet ili ne) imaju održavati u tri sata, ma koliko upekla zvezda. Ni oporezivanje ništa komplikovanije nije bilo: plati koliko 'očeš, a kad se proceni da je to nedovoljno, spremi levu ruku za odsecanje i nemoj smetnuti s uma da imaš još jednu i čak dva uva. No, u vreme o kome nam Daglas priča, to je samo epizodica tradicije koju manje ili više poštuje neizrecivo živopisna ekipa domorodaca i došljaka, uglavnom begunaca iz nekih prethodnih života, uglavnom na ivici zakona i sa moralnih margina sa čijih je biografija topli ostrvski široko oduvao svaku fleku: prava engleka lejdi najzamašnijeg čuga među sugrađanima, koja svako malo, treštena, zanoči u apsu zbog svlačenja na sred ulice (cipele, pak, šinjava preko glave); nepismeni i prilično tupavi Moskovljanin što se iz Raspućina preobratio u skrušenog Budo – Isusa i preostala šaćica njegovih nekadašnjih 3 miliona sledbenika od kojih se presrećna majka Rusija jedva nekako otrebila; grofica koja se sprema da i zvanično postane katolkinja, i tim povodom sprema ludilo žurku; promašeni firentinski student, latentni edipovac, koji se trudi da pronađe sebe, uzbunjen u životu i put do srca izvesne Andželine, koja se radije šepće stranputicama čednosti; američki milioner kome se svi šlihtaju za dobrotvorne priloge, čime se on silno zabavlja; razni sveštenici (veći ili manji zločinci); tri sestre all-inclusive krmarice čije se preduzeće nalazi u nekakvoj špilji gde se Venera i Dionis na miru mogu slaviti kako dolikuje; počasni konzul Nikaragve (dobro, nije baš konzul, al' jeste počasni i jeste Nikaragva), papški sveštenik pripadajućeg zlikovstva i još mnogo grotesknih i bizarnih karaktera - sve jedan od drugoga bolji. U toj gleriji svakovrsnih stučnjaka, mufjuza i prevaranata, bankrotiranog plemstva, manje ili više pokajanih grešnika i svetica, engleski sveštenik, povratnik sa afričke misije pokrštavanja, provodi dvanaest dana (koliko je godina i Odisej luta), razgovarajuć sa svima o svemu i svačemu: od inkvizicije do industrijske revolucije, o obrazovnim sistemima i pravima žena, o umetnosti, o pravdi, o kulinarnstvu i botanici, o mnogoboštvu, judaizmu i hrišćanstvu, o demokratiji, Americi, Engleskoj, antičkoj Grčkoj, mineralima, o meri, mladosti, životu, ljubavi i sreći. I o promenama.

Daglas svoje stavove izriče kroz brojne ličnosti, već prema temi, a svi su zdravo pametni, kosmopolitski, jasni i uravnoteženi i svi lepo servirani uz fini humor i inteligentnu duhovitost zahvaljujući kojoj u čitavoj knjizi nema ni cela dva dosadna retka (ima i ubistvo, da, i nesvakidašnja prirodna katastrofa).

Nisam mnogo knjiga čitala sa ovolikim uživanjem a u tome ima uдела i romantično starinski prevod Borivoja Nedića (tipa: mačija, kablogram, ali ne dalje od vajkao se, ševrdav...) i drago mi je što ga je Branko Kukić tako uredio za Službeni glasnik.

Potpuno sam oduševljena!

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## James says

South Wind is a unique novel. Rather than presenting a traditional plot it seems like an olio or mixture of lectures and observations on various, often obscure, aspects of geology, climatology, history, morality, religion, and folklore, among other topics. The author's use of articulate characters confined to a restricted setting allows for ample airing of views and recalls the methods of English novelist Thomas Love Peacock, whose country house novels were once very popular.

South Wind's setting itself becomes a character as the island Nepenthe, which is not to be found on a map, comes alive as the narrative progresses. The literary reference is to the magical potion given to Helen by Polydamna the wife of the noble Egyptian Thon; it quells all sorrows with forgetfulness; figuratively, nepenthe means "that which chases away sorrow" (Odyssey, Book 4, v. 219–221). However, it is usually considered a fictional version of the isle of Capri, about which Douglas wrote a series of scholarly pamphlets and upon which he was living when he completed South Wind. It reminded me of Shirley Hazzard's literary meditation, *Greene on Capri* in which she also captured the essence of the island. She also noted the friendship between Graham Greene and Douglas in the late 1940's when Greene first began to frequent the isle, "he had the company, when he chose, of a handful of lively and literary resident compatriots . . . [and] had enjoyed the last effulgence of Norman Douglas . . ." (*Greene on Capri*, p 47)

Douglas did not deny his novel's debt to a real location but insisted that Ischia, Ponza, and the Lipari Islands (all lying off the southwest coast of Italy) were the actual sources for Nepenthe's natural scenery. Douglas even incorporated a version of his observations regarding the pumice stone industry of the Lipari Islands, the subject of one of his first publications. Douglas's creation had deep roots in his own experience—the details of which he drew upon heavily.

The novel's characters are the result of much the same observational mode which allows the reader, if he is willing, to gradually develop an acquaintance with the place through the idiosyncrasies of the characters. An example may suffice: "Mr. Keith was a perfect host. He had the right word for everybody; his infectious conviviality made them all straightaway at their ease. The overdressed native ladies, the priests and officials moving about in prim little circles, were charmed with his affable manner 'so different from most Englishmen';" (p 131)

One or two characters may be based on historically obscure acquaintances of Douglas, but others are little more than personifications of facets of their author's own personality. The voluble Mr. Keith is most likely a spokesman for Douglas's hedonistic views, and Mr. Eames and Count Caloveglia represent Douglas's scholarly and antiquarian interests. All are perfectly adequate mouthpieces, but none emerges as rounded or particularly memorable outside of the group.

Several British writers of Greene's generation were directly influenced by Douglas in general and by South Wind in particular. Aldous Huxley's satirical novels *Crome Yellow* (1921, in which Douglas appears as the character Scrogan), *Antic Hay* (1923), and *Point Counter Point* (1928) bear its stamp. Greene himself generally wrote books of a darker character, but his lighter comic novel *Travels with My Aunt* (1969) bears similarities to South Wind. Douglas's erudite yet pleasant style reminds me a bit of Lawrence Durrell. Needless to say this is an engaging novel with plenty of interesting characters that more than offset the lack of a robust plot.

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## Sketchbook says

Gilbert & Sullivan on Capri where the little-known author lived. Volcanic eruptions, an earthquake, a funeral and a festival keep the multi-cast pondering sex, religion, life. Advisories: 'Get rid of conventional notions, if you value your health' and 'The secret of happiness is curiosity.' The denizens include a scholar who can't decide if a relic is the thigh bone of a saint or the tibia of a cow; a Wildean lady who wanders into polite murder; a teenage poet who laments that he has nothing to say-- 'I can only feel.' Some of the narrative carries excess ornamentation. There's a glorious Too Muchness. But it's the very thing that keeps me fondling this topsy-turvy comedy.

Examples : 'He never married -- it pointed to independence, to lack of ordinary human frailties. In short, he was so perfect a compound of vice and intelligence that even his dearest friends could not put their finger on the exact spot where one began and the other ended.' Another : 'She possessed the most priceless of all gifts - she believed her own lies.'

A geezer observes, 'The question that confronts me now is not whether morality is worth talking about, but whether it's worth laughing at.' I scan pages and hug the soliloquies which have an insouciant awareness: 'You can tell the ideals of a nation by its advertisements.'

Welcome to Nepenthe/Capri, an operetta island of rocks in the Med which attracts diverse tourists fr all over the world. Some arrive for the feast of the patron saint, St. Dodekanus. Even the lobsters here are celebrated.

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## Kurt Johnson says

Returning from Africa, the Anglican Bishop of Bompopo detours to the little island of Nepenthe, where he finds some charming natives and an assortment of interesting and eccentric expatriates. As the Nepenthean year slides gently along, the expatriates go on about their lives, living in a dreamland, and maintaining illusions that keep them happy about themselves.

This 1917 book is the work of George Norman Douglas (1868-1952), Scottish author and diplomat, and is considered by some to be his masterpiece. The edition I possess is the 1924 Modern Library one, which includes a short introduction by the author, in which he defends his book against the charge that it does not possess a plot. Well, in truth, this book is not plot driven - it is a sort of theater of the absurd tale, in which people's hypocrisy, inanity and stupidity are laid bare. Quite a fun tale, I must admit that it's been a while since I have enjoyed a book quite so much!

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## Lobstergirl says

This is a really odd book. I think the fact that it was published in 1917 redeems it somewhat; it seems ahead of its time, and if it had been released after 1955 I probably would have hated it. It would have seemed more like Kingsley Amis or David Lodge than Evelyn Waugh. It is resolutely comical and transgressively clever, rather than nakedly reprobative. The author, Norman Douglas, was mainly a travel writer, and apparently a

bit of a pederast, occasionally fleeing scandal and the authorities.

There isn't much plot. Our protagonist, Anglican bishop Thomas Heard, is on his way back from his diocese in Africa to England and stops on the island of Nepenthe (based on Capri, where the author lived for a time) to visit his cousin, a newly married woman with a young baby and a husband off in the colonies somewhere. Bishop Heard meets a variety of mostly expatriate Brits, attends parties, has conversations, goes on walks, calls on his cousin, attends a funeral, and finally witnesses a murder. The novel is strongly anti-clerical; the local priests are just as sybaritic or corrupt as everyone else, and ultimately Heard, tantalized and overcome by Nepenthe's lifestyle and the sirocco (the south wind of the title), decides he can't possibly return to the Church.

Willean epigrams sometimes pepper the narrative ("Her life since the marrying period had been a breathless succession of love affairs, each more eternal than the last"). Or Douglas regales the reader with absurdity, as in this description of Saint Eulalia, patroness of Nepenthean sailors:

*She refused to partake of food save once in every five weeks; she remained immovable 'like a statue' for months on end; she wore under her rough clothing iron spikes which were found, after death, to have entered deeply into her flesh. She was never known to use a drop of water for purposes of ablution or to change her underwear more than once a year, and then only at the order of her confessor who was obliged to be in daily contact with her. The heat of her body was such that it could not be touched by human hands. During her frequent trances she spoke accurately in sixty-nine different languages; there was no hair whatever on her head, which was 'spotless as an egg'. She put baskets of sea urchins into her bed and, as a penance for what she called 'her many sins', forced herself to catch the legions of vermin that infested her brown blanket, count them, separate the males from the females, set them free once more, and begin over again. She died at the age of fourteen years and two months. Her corpse forthwith became roseate in colour, exhaled a delicious odour of violets for twenty weeks, and performed countless miracles. On dissection, a portrait of Saint James of Compostella was discovered embedded in her liver.*

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## **Eddie Clarke says**

Deducting stars for excessive length - Douglas clearly does not believe brevity is the soul of wit, a big problem when he's trying to ape Oscar Wilde's epigrammatic style. He loves the sound of his own voice and simply cannot write a single sentence where 22 paragraphs will do just as well. I reckon the book would have been vastly improved if 100-150 pages were cut. As it was up until the last 90 pages I was going to award this two stars.

It's a satire on Victorian attitudes - especially towards morality and Christianity. This is probably less relevant today. Much of the book is taken up by lengthy philosophical dialogues between the characters. He doesn't make much effort to differentiate the individual speech patterns, they all sound similar and three-quarters of the way in I was still confusing characters.

His prose does flow easily so it's not a difficult read, and some of the situations and plot developments are funny. I was most fascinated by his analysis of a Catholic Church working hand in glove with the Mafia.

Anyone attracted to this because of the setting in a thinly-disguised Belle Époque Capri (then the playground of the European A-Gays) by a homosexual author will be very disappointed. Douglas fled London due to a gay sex scandal while writing this and there is speculation he censored himself to avoid throwing paraffin on



the flames. The book only goes as far as throwing very coy and ambiguous hints on sexual matters.

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## Steven says

When I read reviews, I usually go to the negative ones first (more entertaining). And from what I can tell, those who dislike *South Wind* dislike it strongly, and for the following reasons: 1.) the language is difficult, 2.) the story lacks plot, and 3.) both the language and whatever passes for plot seems antiquated. People who love reading will shrug these off immediately. Difficult language? Ah, says the reader, the joy of learning new words, new languages, new innuendos! Besides, no one would read Shakespeare if antiquated language and plots were the criteria by which we judge a book. We have smartphones. No need to lug a dictionary around. Click, click, click. Never has it been easier to read a difficult book.

But really, no word or phrase in this book is indecipherable given the rich profusion of context Douglas provides. For instance, we have a character in this book, Mr. Eames, who's annotating an enormous history of the island. Eames's idol, the great historian who wrote the book Eames is annotating, is a master stylist of Latin. So there's some Latin constellated throughout the chapters, but nothing you can't skim if it gives you trouble. Is it worth it? My god, Eames is one of the book's treasures. Here's a guy who once fell in love with a woman as big as a hot air balloon, a woman who sucked him dry of money and self-worth, leaving him a mere shadow of his former self. This is Douglas's great power as an author. He takes an experience every living person has, either to lesser or greater degrees, and amplifies it by stranding him on an island, like an ant beneath a magnifying glass.

After losing this lady, Eames takes refuge in his work. He becomes dry, cold, and isolated. Who doesn't know a person like this? He's completely universal, yet somehow strange and unique with his fetish for this historian's Latin and his need to repress whatever defects he discovers in that historian's character (if some of his Latin is licentious or not quite nice, for example). You're not going to get an earth-shattering plot with someone like Eames. He took his one big leap of faith in life and lost. He's not going to risk his heart again. He's stowed himself up in the attic of his mind. Short of the island collapsing in on his little monastic cave, we're not going to see much in the way of showstopping sex or violence. His life is a tightrope walk: a little too much weight on the reclusive side, and he'll never recover the human passion he once knew with his balloon lover; too much attention given to his anguish, however, might thrust him into a downward spiral of self-pity. Douglas keeps the tension going. And the payoff happens toward the end of the novel when Eames decides to risk his safety and all his years of annotation for something no one else in their right mind would bother about (I'm being purposefully elusive here. Don't want to spoil it). Another absolutely brilliant move by Douglas. I mean, isn't that truly the way of salvation? Something so small, something so devoid of meaning outside the realm of one's own weird desires, can change a life completely. It's such a powerful moment of redemption in the book--a redemption not of one's soul to heaven but a redemption of the life of the mind and body to its place among the living.

Each of Douglas's characters go through this kind of journey. I've emphasized Eames as if here were the main character. But he's not. Mr. Heard, the bishop who's just come from his mission in Africa, is the principle hero whose own journey exemplifies all the others'. He's spent the greater part of his youth doing what he's been taught is right: spreading the good news to the poor lost souls of the darker nations. But after years of this labor, he finds he's the one who's lost. It's a hero's quest as Joseph Campbell describes it. And like every hero's quest, what's important comes from inner transformations not the discovery of some grail or the slaying of an actual dragon (though there's a fire-breathing volcano in the story). And it's in the novel's wonderfully diverse array of lost heroes that the magic of Douglas's writing lies. We experience several

novels in this one book, several journeys akin to Eames's. You'll adore Keith, the rich philosophical Italian; Denis, the directionless college boy still wet behind the ears; the Duchess, whose husband "would have been" a Duke had he lived (therefore, why not assume the role of "Duchess"); and the hopelessly lovable Don Francesco, a priest with an insatiable appetite for women, hence "Don" Francesco rather than "Father."

It's a novel about about beauty, friendship, loneliness, and love. It's a novel that questions the values we've been taught by institutions of all kinds: domestic, religious, political, national, and so on. And all the while, we are keenly aware that these ideas, rites, passions, punishments, and lunacies play themselves out beneath the descending shroud of volcanic ash which, in the end, cannot be delayed or willed away.

South Wind is one of those rare chimeras of literature--both a work of wisdom and aesthetic experience. It is at times hilarious, at times distressing, and at times joyously profound. And it is one of those novels that rewards a lifetime of re-readings. I can see myself coming back to it with new readiness.

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### **Mark Desrosiers says**

According to the resident expert who pressed this into my hand, this was one of Vlad Nabokov's favorite novels, and I can see why: there are some snarky scholarship and annotation parodies involving "Saint Dodekanus" and the fictional island of Nepenthe (i.e. Capri) which clearly inspired *Pale Fire*. But, wow, has this novel dated terribly... the prose is wooden, the "humor" is droll and pretentious, and all the moral/political/religious (mostly religious) targets of Douglas's wit are, y'know, circa 1917. I'm adding an extra star because Douglas was clearly thinking along the right lines, but this is rough going. I groaned and winced my way to page 100 (of 410), where it became obvious no plot was going to emerge (nor any ripping hilarious characters or dialogue), and figured this novel was overrated when first published (due to its "transgressive" themes), and that initial hot wind kept it aloft until people stopped reading it. That it remains on lists of "lost classics" and such is astonishing.

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### **Perry Whitford says**

*"Vices. My dear bishop! Under a sky like this."*

Yes, under a sky like that. Vices, vices, and more vices. That azure sky, assisted by the restless winds of the sirocco, the Mediterranean mentality, and a community of morally dubious ex-patriated residents made the island of Capri a hothouse for vice in the early 20th century.

It was also a hothouse for high culture and the finer things in life. Artists, duchesses, poets and counts, they came from all over Europe to the playground of Tiberius. Norman Douglas was one such resident. He calls the place he made his home Nepenthe in this nigh on perfect novel, but he wasn't really trying to fool anybody.

The book begins with Me. Heard, the Bishop of Bampopo, paying a visit to the island to see his niece and take a quick tour of what Mr. Keith, an aged bachelor and scholar of *"disinterested thought"*, calls *'the chronique scandaleuse of Nepenthe.'*

In terms of a plot that's about it, and yet I don't hesitate to ascertain again that this novel is close to perfect. How so? Purely down to the alluring abilities of the author. Norman Douglas writes like the Blue Grotto poured out onto the page.

That's not to say that *South Wind* will be everybody's cup of crème de menthe. For starters, as already stated, it has virtually no plot whatsoever. And then you have to be susceptible to an author with the vocabulary to describe the president of the drinking club as a man of '*stolid pachydermatous obliquity*', the waters of an extinct fountain (one of twelve, each with their own history detailed in one of the book's funniest passages) as '*anti-blepharous and amygdaloidal*' in nature.

I for one am highly susceptible to that kind of thing, especially when an author can use that kind of language without being in the least bit gauche and does so with his tongue firmly in his cheek throughout.

I feel like I should include the following paragraph in its entirety, lengthy though it is. If you like this then you will certainly be spoiled by reading a further 450+ pages in a similar vein:

*'It was not true to say of Mr. Eames that he lived on Nepenthe because he was wanted by the London police for something that happened in Richmond Park, that his real name was not Eames at all but Daniels—the notorious Hodgson Daniels, you know, who was mixed up in the Lotus Club scandal, that he was the local representative of an international gang of white-slave traffickers who had affiliated offices in every part of the world, that he was not a man at all but an old boarding-house keeper who had very good reasons for assuming the male disguise, that he was a morphinomaniac, a disrobed Baptist minister, a pawnbroker out of work, a fire-worshipper, a Transylvanian, a bank clerk who had had a fall, a decayed jockey who disgraced himself at a subsequent period in connection with some East-End mission for reforming the boys of Bermondsey and then, after pawning his mother's jewelry, writing anonymous threatening letters to society ladies about their husbands and vice-versa, trying to blackmail three Cabinet Ministers and tricking poor servant-girls out of their hard-earned wages by the sale of sham Bibles, was luckily run to earth in Piccadilly Circus, after an exciting chase, with a forty-pound salmon under his arm which he had been seen to lift from the window of a Bond Street fishmonger.'*

Douglas's intentions are not all so frivolous, however. He's glib, for sure, but not without wisdom, and he has lots to say. Here's one of his surrogates, Count Caloveglia, on why the people of the Mediterranean have things better than the people of the North:

*'That a man should wear himself to the bone in the acquisition of material gain is not pretty. But what else can he do in lands adapted only for wolves and bears?'*

Of course there's a dangerous side to all this. Douglas wants to intoxicate you with his refinement so that, like Mr. Heard, you too will catch yourself '*in the very act of condoning vice.*' All very well if the vice in question is the various types touched upon here, but there are limits.

The online biography I read about Douglas after I finished the novel strongly suggested that he was a pederast. Judging by the sensibility revealed in the book he no doubt considered his behaviour as Hellenistic rather than horrific.

I hope you can look beyond those scandalous biographical rumours and still read the book, though I admit such prior knowledge probably would have put me off. Maybe I should have left that information out of the review, but having discovered it I simply bring myself to.

All I can say in conclusion is that if that was part of his lifestyle he left it out of this story. The vice on display is all of the conventional and legal kind, the recognisably human stuff, as chronicled by Monsignor Perrelli, the author of *Antiquities of Nepenthe*, *'Those quaint streaks of credulity, those whimsical blasphemies, those spicy Court anecdotes dropped, as it were, in the smoking room of a patrician club'*.

That's also a pretty good description of *South Wind* itself.

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### **Alex Sarll says**

A wonderful tale of life among the disreputable expats on the Mediterranean island of Nepenthe (commonly believed to represent Capri, but possibly the ideal of which Capri is a reflection). There is a plot, of sorts, but the attraction is more in "a frolicsome perversity", in spending a few days on the beaches and taverns with these drunks and monomaniacs, hearing their grand schemes and thoughts on life, spying on the minutiae of their many sins - obliquely though they are often described. Many of the best jokes in it are never even stated, merely implied, and all the funnier for that. I was reminded of a slightly less arch Firbank, and given Firbank can be a bit much even for my decadent tastes, that's no bad thing. Written in 1917, there's no hint of war here; instead it's a holiday in that indefinite summer afternoon where Wodehouse and Miyazaki's European tales also bask.

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