



While England Sleeps

David Leavitt

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David Leavitt has earned high praise for his empathetic portrayal of human sexuality and the complexities of intimate relationships. Now, with *While England Sleeps*, available for the first time in two years, Leavitt moves beyond precisely controlled domestic drama to create a historical novel, one that has greater breadth and resonance than anything he has written before. Set against the rise of fascism in 1930s Europe, *While England Sleeps* tells the story of a love affair between the aristocratic young British writer Brian Botsford, who thinks homosexuality is something he will outgrow, and Edward Phelan, a sensitive and idealistic working-class employee of the London Underground and a Communist party member. When the strains of class difference, sexual taboo, and Brian's ambivalence impel Edward to volunteer to fight against Franco in Spain, Brian pursues him across Europe and into the violent chaos of war.

While England Sleeps Details

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Pietro says

Beh, debbo dire, onestamente, che questo libro di Rosamunde Pilcher non è per nulla male... ah no, dalla consolle mi dicono trattarsi di un romanzo di David Leavitt, già autore dell'amato Ballo di famiglia. No, allora le cose cambiano; perché son pronto a storie del genere se leggo sulla copertina il nome di Danielle Steel col carattere tipografico usato per la sigla di Sentieri, ma non da Leavitt.

I preamboli non sono neanche male: Brian è un giovane che vive in una Londra stereotipata degli anni Venti; è relativamente benestante, il quale fatto gli rende possibile fingere d'essere uno scrittore; la zia lo assilla affinché si sposi con una brava ragazza inglese, ma lui pensa solo ai giovanotti smilzi e diafani. Da qui parte una lunga teoria di grossi membri turgidissimi - erezioni che partono nel giro di millesimi di secondo, cose che io davvero non ho mai visto in vita mia, ma son comunque pronto a fidarmi. Sì, perché va detto che per Leavitt i peni non sono mai o medi oppure persino grandi e grossi, ma son sempre ingombranti, giganti, fastidiosi, tanto che sembra di vivere nei sogni di plastica della compianta e simpatica Jackie Collins. Ma ora immaginate questi grandi membri, con relativa storia d'amore sofferatissima, queste eiaculazioni violentissime che fan macelli alle pareti e rovinano le lenzuola, proiettati sullo sfondo della Guerra civile spagnola. No, davvero: repubblicani contro nazionalisti, questo è dove a un certo punto la vicenda si sposta in un valzer di vera España, matrone che si strappano i vestiti in strada, cerveza calda a pinte, strade polverose ragazzi villosi, comunisti che sgozzano i preti e fucilano i disertori.

Mi fermo. Sono onesto, ho fatto della trama di Leavitt una caricatura, ma è così che si sviluppava nella mia testa mentre leggevo e non è un buon segno. Leavitt, da vero americano, descrive l'Europa come se la figurano i suoi connazionali, farcita di stereotipi e luoghi comuni che mi hanno sempre mandato in bestia. Ma è così difficile descrivere Londra senza puntualizzare la pioggia costante, la Spagna senza strade polverose o Barcellona senza tapas?

A lettura ultimata scopro che la versione originale del romanzo fu ritirata dalla vendita per l'accusa (fondata e verificata) di plagio nei confronti del poeta Stephen Spender e delle sue memorie *World Within World*; una seconda versione, purgata e modificata in modo da somigliare un po' meno alla vita di Spender, è quella che mi son trovato tra le mani.

Non si fa David, non-si-fa.

Kelsey says

I'm pretty much obsessed with David Leavitt's short stories, and it turns out his writing is just as amazing in novel form. *While England Sleeps* is the story of a love affair in 1930s Europe between Brian, an upper-class writer, and the poor but optimistic Edward. Politics and class play a huge role in their relationship, as do struggles with identity and sexuality. Leavitt definitely knows how to tell a compelling story; I couldn't stop turning the pages of this book any more than I could *Collected Stories*. So yes, very beautiful, tragic, poignant, etc.

The only questionable thing was the preface to the edition that I read, where Leavitt gives a very vague interview regarding the lawsuit surrounding the book when it came out. So I looked it up and apparently there was some huge plagiarism controversy, which I guess is interesting but doesn't add anything to the novel. So probably skipping that part would be my recommendation.

Other than that definitely an entertaining and quick read (not because it's short, just because you probably won't be able to put it down), so worth it in my opinion.

Paul says

A book so bad I had to solicit aesthetic slurs to describe it. One friend suggested "waistcoat ripper" and we'll stick with that. I didn't even need to see the controversy over plagiarism mentioned in a Goodreads review to know this book was a ripoff. The author's prose changes with the setting -- when his characters are having sex in England, their speech and mannerisms sound like the half-informed imaginings of a pretentious 17-year-old who just binge-watched the TV serial of "Brideshead Revisited;" when his characters are having sex in Spain, the book reads like gay Hemingway. An incidental character keeps dropping in and out of the narrative for the sole purpose of allowing Leavitt to steal from Christopher Isherwood as well. The blurb on Kindle made this book look an interesting gay spy novel but it's just bad gay romance. Oh, and I've got to hate on one more thing -- the book takes place in the mid-1930's, but Leavitt, the lazy idiot, didn't do enough research to learn who was Prime Minister. It was Stanley Baldwin or Neville Chamberlaine, you moron, not Anthony Eden. I know you didn't have Google in 1993 when you excreted this garbage but there were encyclopedias.

Damn, I hated this book.

Aleksandr Voinov says

Enjoyed this.

Interesting plagiarism debate:

The plagiarised: <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/04/26...>

The plagiariser: <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/04/03/mag...>

ken says

Yes I know that by all literary standards this is trite... BUT sometimes it has its place. Thoroughly enjoyed reading this book. I'm all swooning over "Edward". Aaaahh.

Ryan: Thanks for suggesting this one.

Quinn says

I'm on a roll lately with the "what might have been " ilk. This was right up that alley and quite well written. That being said I can understand how there was a lawsuit involved with its first publication. I think mr. Leavitt should have just owned up to it. In an interview I read that he gave to some magazine regarding the suit he all but does admit his faux pas but at the same time seems to think he somehow should've been exempt.

Ozmar Pedroza says

"Así que huyes de los causantes de dolor, vas a un sitio nuevo, intentas convencerte de que el viejo sitio no existe, que la distancia borra la historia."

Una maravillosa historia sobre un amor roto, representado en una cadena de autoengaños y de decisiones que terminan por dañar a las personas más queridas. A pesar de que, desde el inicio, hay un presentimiento de la tragedia amorosa que se avecina, David Leavitt ofrece un relato extraordinario que presenta a sus personajes como humanos, con excentricidades, virtudes y miedos, lo cual permite conocerlos de una mejor manera. Asimismo, Leavitt muestra cómo los peligros de la traición en la juventud pueden crear heridas profundas que tardan en desaparecer. Sin duda, ésta es una historia digna de la buena literatura contemporánea; en sus líneas se encuentran personajes llenos de pasión, culpa, sentimientos encontrados y sacrificio en tiempos de guerra.

Totalmente recomendada, ya que es un libro de esos que empiezas y no puedes dejar de leerlo hasta saber el final, aunque sea triste o simplemente un cierre común.

"Quien toca el cuerpo por fugazmente que lo haga, también toca el alma."

Brian says

Europe between world wars was watching the surge of fascism grow in both Germany and Spain where a fascist rebellion, led by Franco, was fighting to overthrow the democratic government. The title refers to England's hands off policy for Spain. Meanwhile thousands of young people from Europe and North America were volunteering to fight Franco's fascists.

Brian is a upper class young man who believes that he is not really gay but having fun until it is time to settle down and marry. His lover, Edward, a working class young man, quietly accepts his homosexuality. When Edward discovers that Brian has been having an affair with Philippa, and is planning to marry her he flees Brian's room and volunteers to fight in Spain.

I enjoyed the historical parts of the story as well as the love story. Well worth the read.

See my blog at:

<http://bevd.edublogs.org/>

Erastes says

From the blurb:

At a meeting of republican sympathisers in London, Brian Botsford, a young middle-class writer and Cambridge graduate, meets Edward Phelan, an idealistic, self-educated London Underground worker. They share a mutual attraction. Across the divisions of class they begin an affair in secrecy.

But Edward possesses "an unproblematic capacity to accept" Brian and the love that dare not speak its name,

whereas Brian is more cautious and under family pressure agrees to be set up with a suitable young woman. Pushed to the point of crisis Edward threatens to volunteer to fight Franco in Spain.

There are (to my perception, at least) a few inaccuracies in the blurb, but I won't quibble over them. This is an excellent book which I devoured in two sittings.

It has a readability that draws the eye, and the narrator's voice is completely convincing. It's written in first person, there is a faux prologue "written" in 1978 where Brian explains that he's now living in America and considers himself to be an American and an epilogue which looks back at 1938 from that fifty year gap. Both of these devices go far to convince that the book was written by Brian and not by David Leavitt.

Like "As Meat Loves Salt" (although not to the same extent) Brian is not a likeable or attractive character. A product of his class, he coasts through life, unlike Edward who takes what he wants with more enthusiasm, facing what he is face on. Brian still thinks that being homosexual is just something one did at school and that he would get over it, although it's obvious he's deluding himself. He's a playwright, and he plays at it, having no drive to support himself; he sponges off his Aunt Constance (or "Inconstance" as he cruelly calls her, as she doesn't pay him regularly enough for him to depend on her support. He mumps off his friends and generally won't commit to one thing or another, which leads to the crisis event in the book – one which he will regret, and will haunt him for the rest of his life.

I found it to be tremendously absorbing, like the best of historicals, it immersed me in the era without info dumping. As I've said before, if a book reads like it was written in the time, rather than about the time, it earns big kudos from me. The class divide might be hard for non-Brits to grasp – but pre-war it was still more relevant than people would suppose. I felt ashamed of Brian's inability to admit his affair to his own friends, but then found it perfectly acceptable to talk to Edward's sister about it. I wanted to smack him with the clue-by-four several times in the book – but that's ok – that meant that the author was doing his job.

It also brings the situation in Europe at that time into sharp relief, there's a lovely sub-plot with a friend of Brian's who is attempting to get a friend out of Europe which breaks your heart, and you, as the reader, knowing what is going to happen in a few short years, hold your breath and weep at the hopeless cause and loss of life that is the Spanish Civil War.

If you prefer to like your protagonists, then this book might not be for you, but if you want a meaty and rich story that takes you so viscerally into the period that you can smell the steam engines and feel the bubble of the champagne of the Fast Set, then you'll enjoy this as much as I did. A definite keeper.

Christy B says

Initial reaction:

Argh, my heart.

Actual review:

Sometimes, when I finish a book, I loved it so much that I have to write a review right away, However, sometimes, a book affects me so, that I need a few days to decompress. This is the latter.

While England Sleeps takes place in 1930s Europe. It's told from the point of view of Brian Botsford, an upper class amateur writer, and tells of the relationship he has with Edward Phelan, a working class boy and

Communist.

That's all you're getting out of me as far as a summary, because this is a book one needs to experience with only the vaguest of preconceived notions. Because nothing can prepare you for getting your heart ripped out and stomped on. Ok, I'm being over dramatic, but when I finished and closed the book, that's what I felt happened to me.

Oh, the author is a cruel person for doing this to me, I thought. I couldn't stop sobbing at one point. I get it, though. **While England Sleeps** is incredibly realistic and those are stories that get me emotional – the ones that could quite possibly have happened.

In the days following my finishing this book, I found the story popping back into my head at random times. I've had to tell myself not to get all choked up again. Cripes, I have to keep telling myself that this damn book was fiction.

I checked this book out from the library, but now I have to buy my own copy, so I can randomly open it and torture myself at odd times.

Damn this book.

Nancy says

Dreadful. The plagiarism alone would justify one star, but even on its own merits the book fails. It's chock-full of solecisms about both England and Spain in the 30s, making it obvious even in ignorance of the facts that Leavitt must have borrowed heavily - when he wasn't engaged in outright fantasy. A truly ridiculous book.

Clare says

I love Brian. A lot of the time he's somewhat of a tosser, but he's...well, he's very honest about his own shortcomings. We know what's coming - this is no hea romance. But his relationship with the gorgeous, slightly-too-good-to-be-true, idealistic Edward is romantic and sexy before it gets all angsty. But given the times they lived in, I couldn't really blame them for their actions.

In spite of Stephen Spender's dislike for this book, I'm now rather intrigued to read his autobiography *World Within World*.

I thought the writing was incredibly accomplished. As far as I'm concerned, this is how historical fiction/faction should be written: with an incredible feel for the era being written about and subtle descriptions that weave into the narrative. I felt like I was there. Reading about the underground whilst travelling on it I felt that I might see Brian and Edward at any moment, or maybe that fatal umbrella, propped up in the corner!

Adam says

I may be adding this to my favorite shelf in the next couple days. Yes, this is a title parody of Winston Churchill's 1938 *While England Slept*. Leavitt's *While England Sleeps* takes place in 1936-1937 and focuses on a young man's coming to age story in London.

Brian Botsford, the main character, along with his Oxford classmates, Nigel, John, and Rupert are in a different caste and rebel for the cause against the rising Fascist power in Spain. Edward Phelan, with Communist beliefs, falls in love with Brian, and their sexual relationship is not only erotic on page but believable in heartbreak.

Highly recommend, and after reading two David Leavitt books now, I'm a fan

Karen Wellsbury says

This was an intriguing read for me, I love this period, Laurie Lees *As I Walked Out One Midsummer Morning* is one of my favourite books, and there are similarities (which is a good thing)

I also like the casual way that sex was sometimes dealt with in the 1930's, at times.

This started off so well, it was funny, there is scene where an elderly relative writes a letter praising the way that he's dealing with Germany, where I spat water out. Brian and Edwards romance starts off gloriously, and I was seduced by romance reading into imagining this would be at the very least HFN. Edward's family are touching and funny and Edward himself is a beautifully realised character.

Then Brian, a total product of his upper class breeding; where its ok to fuck boys, but one day you will fall in love with a woman and get married, reverts back to type. The way the relationship flounders and Edward feels the distance between them was achingly sad and real.

The way the book ended was not totally satisfactory for me, but the writing was grand

Cate says

Could not put this down. Wonderfully told story set in the lead up to WWII focusing on the love between Brian and Edward and how that goes badly wrong resulting in Edward going to Spain to fight in the civil war. Part romance, part history, part social commentary. Really enjoyed this.

Shawn Thrasher says

I fell right into the deep end of David Leavitt's *While England Sleeps* and only came up for air when I absolutely had to. The first half of the book is incredibly romantic and occasionally witty (sometimes hilarious) and details the sexual encounters of two twenty-something young Englishmen from different sides of the tracks (or in this case, the Tube), who are exploring each other's bodies (and Communism) for the very first time. The backdrop is the dark days of the 1930s, when everything seemed impossibly short and brutish and the world was about to end, making their encounter seem all the more urgent. The book takes a tragic right turn about half way through, and I don't want to give away too much, but it made the book even more fun to read, and tragically romantic (romantically tragic?). I cried like a baby at the end. Gay historical fiction is a rare bird, and well-written gay historical fiction is almost unheard of.

James says

Having stayed up too late to finish this book, I can't get to sleep now, troubled by the truth it tells of love being always out of sync. And the truth of hoping to be haunted by a long-lost love when, in fact, dead is dead. The narrator's fantasy in the final paragraph is powerful enough to bear the weight of the novel--a beautiful wish he can't let go of and that won't let go of him but that, either way, will never come true.

JOSEPH OLIVER says

I don't have the language for book reviews and have no wish to repeat what other reviewers have said in much better English. I found the book very engrossing and showed a flawed main character who lives with the results of his behaviour for the rest of his life. Although it sounds dramatic it could in fact happen to anyone - not knowing whether something you did or left undone would have affected someone else's life profoundly. I read the book straight through and regretted finishing it so quickly. I'll re read it at my leisure. Well worth any expense incurred.

Steve Woods says

I read this book in a single sitting, I couldn't put it down. The trajectory of the relationship and the pathos of Brian's denial of what all dream of, passionate love and simple commitment (whether it is ever possible to achieve either in the form presented in this story or not is another question), and the subsequent loss of all through the meaningless and unnecessary death of Edward, had me pinned in ways I would never have expected. Much of the intensity the story carried for me, may have had much to do with events in my own life, I left the barren hearth of home for the futile endeavour of a war in Cambodia in the 70's, and a tragedy unfolded there for me in exactly the same fluid, incremental way that Edward's death evolved in this story. It was on me before I even realised that it was circling.

It is not difficult for me to imagine that had I been alive in the 1930's in Europe I would almost certainly have ended up and probably ended in Spain. It carried so many similarities to the debacle I did throw myself into; confusion, dedication, heroism, idealism, betrayal, intrigue, romance, futility and much death and destruction for a simple beautiful people who deserved better.

For me the most impact in this story came through the simple straightforward accounting of how one person fuelled by fear and the expectations of culture, in driven pursuit of what they think they want can cruelly, almost mindlessly close their heart to another.

I was saddened deeply by the threads from my own past drawn by this story so vibrantly into my present.

Dorzaby says

depressed!

