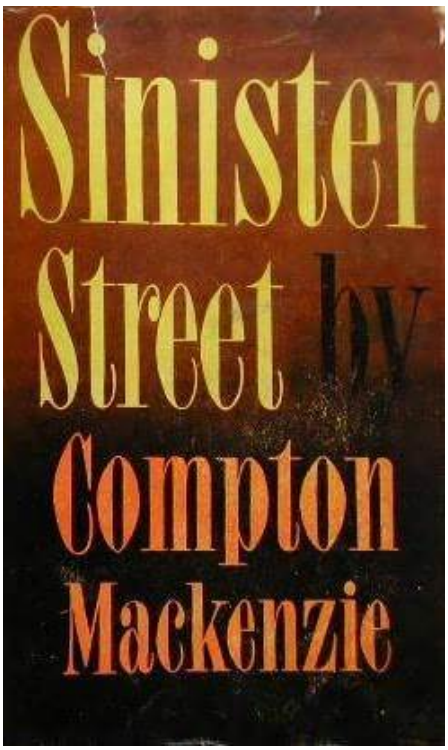

Sinister Street

Compton Mackenzie

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Presents a semi-autobiographical figure, Michael Fane, "handicapped by a public school and university education", passing through school, Oxford and low life in London. The author also wrote "Whisky Galore", "Extraordinary Women" and "The Four Winds of Love".

Sinister Street Details

Date	:	Published February 4th 1992 by Penguin Classics (first published 1917)
ISBN	:	9780140184754
Author	:	Compton Mackenzie
Format	:	Paperback 832 pages
Genre	:	Fiction

From Reader Review Sinister Street for online ebook

Andrew Darling says

superb ... an utterly beautiful novel. It has given me more to think about than any other book I have read this year.

William Morris says

I read this book nearly 40 years ago and have revisited it several times since. I read a number of bildungsromans around the time I first read Sinister Street: The Lonely Unicorn, Of Human Bondage, Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, etc.

What set this one apart was that Michael Fane really seemed to grow up. He went from a reasonable child to an objedtionable, priggish teen, and the novel ends with him contemplating a column in Rome: "All that I have done and experienced so far would not scratch this stone."

It sets up an echo for one of early images of this 1000+ page book, when Michael as a toddler he considers the iron bars of his crib:

". . .for Michael each bar possessed a personality. Minute scratches unnoticed by the heedless adult world lent variety of expression. . . ."

MacKenzie's writing is surprisingly pacey and the scenes and characters well-observed, and some of them, like Sylvia Scarlett and Lily Haden, memorable.

Heath says

A well-written and languorously evocative bildungsroman of a turn-of-the-century Englishman of private means. Compton Mackenzie was one of Waugh's favorite authors, which initially inspired me to pick up this book, which sat on my shelves in various stages of completion for over three years. The book's main problem must be its length--I think if I had read it as originally published (2 vol), with some time between them, it might not have seemed so tiring. Still, I am going to give the author's "The Altar Steps" a try, which must mean that I found some redeeming qualities here.

Whitney Moore says

Not to get too stuck in the vivid portrayals of life at Oxford, I must say that I enjoyed tasting life at Oxford. As in reading Volume One, this awesome author's again reminded me of Edith Wharton, describing Oxford as “the quintessence of human desire and human vision so supremely displayed through the merely outward glory of its repository” and creating delicious word pictures such as these:

• The choir boys gathered like twittering birds at the base of the tower…

• The dons came hurrying like great black birds in the gathering light

• …the choir boys twittered again like sparrows, and, bowing their greetings to one another, the dons cawed gravely like rooks.

When Michael finally graduates from Oxford's oozing snobbery, he embarks into a journey of replicating Don Quixote, one of his all-time favorite characters. Michael's life then becomes a long litany of seeking one “windmill” after another, which I found both hilarious and pathetic at the same time. His compassion was so over-the-top that I actually felt relieved to get the the end of the story and quixotic vanity. At the tender age of twenty-three, this young man catches onto how dangerous it can be to play God.

Holden Caulfield came to mind frequently while I read Volume Two (as he had when I was reading Volume One). I truly wonder if Salinger had read "Sinister Street" before writing "Catcher in the Rye." According to the tuning fork I am holding here, all three volumes seem to converge (and resonate!) on the same note.

Alexandra says

Loved it. Dense & rich. Contempletive pace... challenging language. Felt modern & alive, but decidedly from another time... Historically interesting, but not stuffy. I was captivated...

Spencer says

I read this because I discovered it was one of F. Scott Fitzgerald's favorite books prior to him writing *This Side of Paradise*. As a matter of fact, some critics have said it is the son of *Sinister Street.* I even saw elements of *Gatsby* in its pages. Fitzgerald was still following Mackenzie at least through 1925, when Gatsby was published.

Sinister Street first of all is a monster of a book at 921 pages, though I read it on a Kindle, which has its advantages. I could not help but think of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. The first two-thirds of *Sinister Street* has the same rambling style. The young Michael Fane has a privileged upbringing as he matriculates through one of England's famed independent private schools and then to another famed undergraduate college at Oxford University. Other critics have said that this book is the quintessential book on undergraduate student life at Oxford. It is all about Junior Common Room, drinking squash, student run newspapers, cricket, rowing, class ranking, and building your personal library, which young Michael is very good at—especially when it comes to *Don Quixote,* which become quite pivotal when he leaves Oxford.

I am in the dark as to what *Sinister Street* refers to, until I get to volume two, which in the UK version is actually called *Sinister Street*. At this point the pace picks up and I realized that the first 75% of the book was all prelude. The last 25% is where the real meat is—quite literally. Based on the pace and content of Volume 2 I would be willing to tackle the two Sylvia and Michael sequels, as well as *Plashers Mead*.

John Wilson says

I should have seen the ending a mile way, but didn't. Typical Brit preoccupations with legitimacy, class structure, etc. MacKenzie was a good writer.

Dennis says

After reading MacKenzie's Sylvia Scarlett, I decided to give this book another try. Glad I did. Vol. 2 was much more entertaining. I look forward to more in the series.

Jillian says

I enjoyed this book and his strange view of the his world

Philip Lee says

“Sinister Street”

a bildungsroman by Compton Mackenzie

I read the first hundred pages of this gigantic novel in awe that its sparkling text could have been written over a hundred years ago. Mirroring Joyce's near-contemporary “Portrait of the Artist As A Young Man”, “Sinister Street” goes further, beefing up childhood impressions with deep probes into the psychology of the quixotic child, Michael Fane, as he grows from toddler to man about town. Also, there is great prose, much of it landscape, which almost always avoids the purple.

But not the purple cloth. Mackenzie was one of that triumvirate of Roman Catholic convert authors (the others being Graham Green and Evelyn Waugh). I was dismayed with the boy's religious fanaticism dominating the next two hundred pages. Precocious even by Joyce's standards, Michael Fane's curious admixture of faith, bookishness and larks stood him on the Irishman's shoulders, rather, as if at twelve he were already the Victorian equivalent of Compleat Man. Wallowing through all this religiosity, I began to apply the formula of seven deadly virtues to Compton Mackenzie's literary boasts. Deadly because seen from the outside as negative, in Fane's world these virtues are untainted by vice. Snob (as amalgam of pride and prejudice), prig, braggadocio, zealot, hypocrite, smug & glib. From a famous public school in London, to an exclusive college in Oxford then on into the slums of Pimlico, Michael Fane lives according to the above codes in order to retain the title of gentleman. Even punching a copper and spending the night in the Bow Street cells fails to tarnish his self esteem and righteousness.

Pre-dating “Brideshead Revisited” by three decades, “Sinister Street” is said to be the quintessential portrait of undergraduate life at Oxford. From the viewpoint of Michael Fane's snob, almost everyone deserves looking down on: street boys, Rhodes Scholars, peers whose tastes he deplores. Even his taste in girls suffers from an entropy of sneer. Attracted to those who set out to attract, Michael is sooner or later appalled by their contrariness and crashes out of his slumming ways.

The title puzzled me for hundreds and hundreds of pages; presumably it was meant to. The Fane family (Charles Michael Saxby Fane, his semi-pro pianist sister Stella and their unmarried mother) do move about somewhat; so at each of Michael's new locations I paused to think if it were the eponymous street. One thing that does not wander at all is the point of view, which doggedly remains Michael's. This is an achievement, enduring over two hundred thousand words; but his cut-glass world view distorts as well as reveals. Not quite in a sinister way, I should add.

This novel is so long, it becomes writing above fiction. What's more it begs sequels; and the sequence of three it begot (“Plasher's Mead”, “Sylva Scarlett”, “Syvia and Michael”) was only curtailed by The Great War. Other than that, it's a veritable Downton Abbey of industry over craft, a voluminous Victorian handbag of a work. Yet it is not all told. Which probably inspired Orwell to go “Down and Out” on crusading slums of his own; and as in there, we are left by caesuras to guess what peccadilloes dared not speak their names. The novel's popularity (stayed in print for most of the twentieth century) is partly down to the censorship of popular libraries followed by championship by the Daily Mail. Many were the boarding school bums caned for possessing it, but it was never banned outright like DH Lawrence's more explicit work. In truth, the (orignally) two volumes are very long on the results of adultery but rather short on their details.

Having deprecated the hero, I must say the romantic vision of Lily is irresistible, despite her sloth. In Fane's smitten shoes, I would have been tempted to take old Mrs Carthew's advice and “beat her figuratively for a year” lest she became “a shrew or a whiner”. But in the pursuance of his romantic dream, he is incapable of taking good advice, only bad. Whether he marries her is not revealed until very near the end of the book (829 pages in my battered 1969 Penguin paperback). Like with further episodes of Downton, I ponder taking in the sequels - lifetime permitting.

Henry Sturcke says

This book was on the list Scott Fitzgerald put together for his mistress Sheila Graham to educate her about literature. That could be the reason why people seek it out today, a century after it came out. But I imagine not everyone who picks it up finishes it. Who wants to read more than 1100 pages of the coming of age of a talented, lazy, naive restless youth as he matures oh so slowly? The prose is ornate and latinate, overripe for current taste. The plot seems formless until many of the strands are woven together in the last quarter of the book (Book IV). But there are delights for those who persist. The book opens with a successful depiction of an infant’s point-of-view (notoriously difficult to pull off). Book III contains a loving description of the indolent life of the privileged at Oxford, which somehow yields something like an education. There are good set pieces, as when the protagonist reads Keats on St Mark’s Eve in his Oxford room and deliberates on the attempt to freeze time by aesthetic expression or when he challenges two of his classmates who become priests on the mission of the church. There are some insights that by themselves are worth the price of admission, as when the protagonist’s sister Stella, training to become a concert pianist, tells him “I don’t think I’ve got a soul, because when I play I go rushing out into the darkness to look for my soul, and the better I play the nearer I get.” Most of all, I enjoyed the homage to other works of literature. The protagonist, Michael Fane, is a reincarnated Don Quixote, plopped into London at the cusp of the 20th century; other points of reference include Dante and Manon Lescaut. The two volumes have been sitting patiently on my shelf since I purchased them in pre-Internet days in a used bookstore in London, and I’m glad I finally took the time to savor them. A good read.
