

= A Handful of Dust =

A Handful of Dust is a novel by the British writer Evelyn Waugh . First published in 1934 , it is often grouped with the author 's early , satirical comic novels for which he became famous in the pre @-@ Second World War years . Commentators have , however , drawn attention to its serious undertones , and have regarded it as a transitional work pointing towards Waugh 's more substantial postwar fiction .

The story concerns the misfortunes of Tony Last , a contented but shallow English country squire who , having been betrayed by his wife and seen his illusions shattered one by one , seeks solace by joining an expedition to the Brazilian jungle , only to find himself trapped in a remote outpost as the prisoner and plaything of an insane settler . Waugh incorporated several autobiographical elements into the story , notably his own recent desertion by his young wife . In 1933 ? 34 he had undertaken a journey into the South American interior , and a number of incidents and personalities from the voyage are incorporated into the novel . Tony 's singular fate in the jungle was first used by Waugh as the subject of an independent short story , published in 1933 under the title " The Man Who Liked Dickens " .

The book 's initial critical reception was modest , but it was popular with the public and has never been out of print . In the years since publication the book 's reputation has grown ; it is generally considered one of Waugh 's best works , and has more than once figured on unofficial lists of the 20th century 's best novels .

Waugh had converted to Roman Catholicism in 1930 , after which his satirical , secular writings drew hostility from some Catholic quarters . He did not introduce overt religious themes into A Handful of Dust , but later explained that he intended the book to demonstrate the futility of humanist , as distinct from religious , especially Catholic , values . The book has been dramatised for radio , stage and screen .

= = Plot = =

Tony Last is a country gentleman , living with his wife Brenda and his eight @-@ year @-@ old son John Andrew in his ancestral home , Hetton Abbey . The house is a Victorian reconstruction in ersatz Gothic style , described in local guide books as devoid of architectural interest but is nevertheless Tony 's pride and joy . Entirely content with the simple country life , he is seemingly unaware of Brenda 's increasing boredom and dissatisfaction , and of his son 's developing waywardness . When Brenda meets John Beaver , a social parasite controlled by his unscrupulous property @-@ developing mother , she is quickly captivated by his superficial metropolitan gloss , and the two begin an affair . Brenda starts spending her weeks in London , and persuades Tony to finance a small flat , which she rents from Mrs Beaver . Although the Brenda ? Beaver liaison is well known among London 's society crowd , Tony remains oblivious ; attempts by Brenda 's friends to compromise him into a relationship with the glamorous and promiscuous Jenny Abdul Akhbar are unsuccessful .

Brenda is in London when John Andrew is killed in a riding accident . On being told that " John is dead " , Brenda at first thinks that Beaver has died ; on learning that it is her son John , she betrays her true feelings by uttering an involuntary " Thank God ! " . Thereafter she shows little emotion , and when the funeral is over tells Tony that she wants a divorce so that she can marry Beaver . On learning the extent of her deception Tony is shattered , but agrees to protect Brenda 's social reputation by allowing her to divorce him , and to provide her with £ 500 a year . After spending an awkward weekend in Brighton contriving divorce evidence , Tony learns that , pressed by Beaver and his mother , Brenda is now demanding £ 2 @,@ 000 a year ? a sum that would require Tony to give up Hetton . This is too much for him , and his disillusionment with her is complete . He withdraws from the divorce negotiations , and announces that he intends to travel for six months . On his return , he says , Brenda may have her divorce , but without any financial settlement .

With no prospect of riches , Beaver loses interest in Brenda , who is thus left adrift and in poverty . Meanwhile , Tony has met an explorer , Dr. Messenger , and joins him on an expedition in search of

a supposed lost city in the Brazilian forest . On the outward journey , Tony engages in a frustrated shipboard romance with Thérèse de Vitré , a young girl whose strict Roman Catholicism causes her to shun him when he tells her he has a wife . In Brazil , Messinger proves an incompetent organiser ; he cannot control the native guides , who abandon him and Tony in the depths of the jungle . Tony falls ill , and Messinger takes off in their canoe to find help , but is swept over a waterfall and killed .

Tony wanders in a delirium until he is rescued by Mr. Todd , an ancient settler who rules over a small community in an inaccessible part of the jungle . Todd is at first solicitous towards Tony , and nurses him back to health . Although illiterate , Todd owns copies of the complete novels of Charles Dickens , and Tony offers to read to him . However , when Tony is recovered in health and asks to be helped on his way , the old man repeatedly demurs . The readings continue , but the atmosphere becomes increasingly menacing as Tony realises he is being held against his will . When a search party finally reaches the settlement , Todd arranges that Tony be drugged and kept hidden ; he tells the party that Tony has died , and gives them his watch to take home . When Tony awakes he learns that his hopes of rescue are gone , and that he is condemned to read Dickens to his captor indefinitely . Back in England , Tony 's death is accepted ; Hetton passes to his cousins , who erect a memorial to his memory , while Brenda resolves her situation by marrying Tony 's friend Jock Grant @-@ Menzies .

= = Background = =

Evelyn Waugh , born in 1903 , was the younger son of Arthur Waugh , the managing director of the London publishing firm of Chapman & Hall . After attending Lancing College and Hertford College , Oxford , Waugh taught for three years in a series of private preparatory schools before beginning his career as a writer . His first commercially printed work was a short story , " The Balance " , which Chapman and Hall included in a 1926 anthology . He worked briefly as a Daily Express reporter , and wrote a short biography of the pre @-@ Raphaelite painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti before achieving success in 1928 with the publication of his comic novel , Decline and Fall . By the end of 1932 Waugh had written two further novels , Vile Bodies and Black Mischief , and two travel books . His professional successes were overshadowed by private upheavals ; in June 1928 he had married Evelyn Gardner , but just over a year later the marriage ended when she declared her love for the couple 's common friend John Heygate . Reconciliation proved impossible , and Waugh filed for divorce in September 1929 . At the same time , Waugh was undergoing instruction which led to his reception , in September 1930 , into the Roman Catholic Church .

Waugh 's adherence to Catholic teaching on divorce caused him personal and sexual frustration while awaiting the possible annulment of his marriage . He had fallen in love with Teresa Jungman , a lively socialite whose Catholicism precluded any intimacy in their relationship since in the eyes of the Church Waugh remained married . Waugh 's conversion did not greatly affect the acerbic and sharply satirical tone of his fiction ? his principal characters were frequently amoral and their activities sometimes shocking . Waugh claimed " the right to write of man 's depravity in such a fashion as to make it unattractive " . When Black Mischief was published in 1932 , the editor of the Catholic journal The Tablet , Ernest Oldmeadow , launched a prolonged attack on the book and its author , stating that the novel was " a disgrace to anybody professing the Catholic name " . Waugh , wrote Oldmeadow , " was intent on elaborating a work outrageous not only to Catholic but to ordinary standards of modesty " . Waugh made no public rebuttal of these charges ; an open letter to the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster was prepared , but on the advice of Waugh 's friends was not sent .

= = Creation = =

= = = South American journey = = =

In 1932 Waugh embarked on an extended voyage to South America . His decision to absent

himself may have been a reaction to his increasingly complicated emotional life ; while his passion for Teresa Jungman remained unrequited , he was involved in various unsatisfactory casual sexual liaisons , and was himself being pursued by the much older Hazel Lavery . The choice of South America was probably influenced by Peter Fleming , the literary editor of The Spectator . Fleming had recently returned from an expedition to Brazil seeking traces of Colonel Percy Fawcett who , in 1925 , had disappeared in Brazil while searching for a fabled lost city .

Having seen Black Mischief launched to mixed but generally favourable critical comment (Oldmeadow 's intervention was not immediate) , Waugh sailed from Tilbury on 2 December 1932 . He arrived in British Guiana on 23 December , and after some days of indecision opted to accompany Mr Haynes , the district commissioner for Rupununi , on a journey into the interior . He hoped that he might reach Manaus , a large city deep within the Brazilian jungle , but transport proved unreliable , and he got no further than the border town of Boa Vista . On the way , at one of his overnight stopping points , he encountered Mr Christie , an elderly mixed @-@ race settler who greeted him with : " I was expecting you . I was warned in a vision of your approach " . The two enjoyed an agreeable dinner together , where Christie talked of the " Fifth Kingdom " (a biblical prophecy from the Book of Daniel) . He told Waugh that he had seen the entire gathering of the saints in heaven ? surprisingly few , he said ? but could not count them because they were incorporeal . Waugh added Christie to his " treasury of eccentrics " , set aside for future literary use .

= = = " The Man Who Liked Dickens " = = =

Waugh arrived at Boa Vista on 4 February 1933 , to find no boats available to take him on to Manaus . Days of inactivity and boredom followed , with " nothing to read except some lives of the Saints in French and Boussuet 's sermons " . Waugh passed some of the time by writing a short story ; although not identified in the diaries , this story has been generally accepted as " The Man Who Liked Dickens " . Apart from using different names and some minor details this story is the same as the episode that Waugh later used as the climax to A Handful of Dust : an elderly settler (modelled in manner , speech and appearance on Christie) , rescues and holds captive a lost explorer and requires him to read aloud the novels of Dickens , in perpetuity . The story was published in 1933 , in America in Hearst 's International ? Cosmopolitan , and in Britain in Nash 's Pall Mall Magazine . In an article written many years later , Waugh explained how the story became the basis for his next novel : " The idea [for the short story] came quite naturally from the experience of visiting a lonely settler [Christie] ... and reflecting how easily he could hold me prisoner . Then , after the short story was written and published , the idea kept working in my mind . I wanted to discover how the prisoner got there , and eventually the thing grew into a study of other sorts of savage at home and the civilized man ? s helpless plight among them . "

= = = Writing and title history = = =

On his return to England in May 1933 , Waugh , short of cash , had to complete numerous writing commitments before he could begin work on the projected novel . In October ? November he wrote his account of the South American journey , which he called Ninety @-@ two Days . He then went to Fez in Morocco , to begin the novel in warmth and solitude . In January he wrote to Mary Lygon , reporting that he had written 18 @,@ 500 words of " my filthy novel " , and later he told Katharine Asquith : " I have just killed a little boy at a lawn meet and made his mother commit adultery ... so perhaps you won 't like it after all " . By 10 February he had reached the half @-@ way point ? 45 @,@ 000 words ? but was uncertain about how the story should proceed , and returned to England at the end of February with most of the second half unwritten . He finished the book at the Easton Court Hotel at Chagford , in Devon , a regular retreat that he used when completing writing projects . By mid @-@ April the book was with his publishers , Chapman & Hall , and Waugh was busy correcting the proofs .

Waugh 's agent A. D. Peters sold the pre @-@ publication serialisation rights to the American

monthly magazine Harper 's Bazaar . Because the " Mr Todd " episode had been published as a short story the previous year , for the purposes of the serialisation Waugh provided an alternative ending . In this , the whole Brazilian adventure was replaced by a brief coda , in which Tony returns from a luxury cruise to be greeted by a chastened Brenda asking to be taken back . Tony agrees , but the balance of the relationship has shifted and , unknown to her , he decides to keep her London flat for his own purposes . Waugh 's biographer Selena Hastings describes this ending as " artistically far more complementary " than that used in the book version ; an earlier biographer , Christopher Sykes thought that had this alternative been retained in the book version , the novel would not have acquired its later distinction .

In March 1933 Waugh wrote to Peters from Chagford to say that he intended to call the novel *A Handful of Ashes* . This title was disliked by Harpers ; an alternative , *Fourth Decade* , was also considered and rejected . Finally , the story was serialised under the title *A Flat in London* , and the chosen book title was *A Handful of Dust* ? taken from a line in T. S. Eliot 's poem *The Waste Land* : " I will show you fear in a handful of dust . " The line is within the section of the poem entitled " The Burial of the Dead " , which depicts a comfortless , lifeless land of desert and rubble , reflecting the empty moral ambience of the novel . The title phrase had been used earlier by Joseph Conrad in the story " *Youth* " ; by Tennyson in *Maud* ; and even earlier by John Donne in his *Meditations* .

= = Themes = =

= = = Autobiographical = = =

In his study of Waugh 's literary life , David Wykes describes *A Handful of Dust* as " a courageous and skilful act of fictional autobiography " , driven by the trauma of the writer 's divorce without which , Wykes maintains , the book would not have been written . Waugh , says his biographer Martin Stannard , was " dredging the memory of his personal agony " in documenting the breakdown of the Lasts ' marriage . The critic Cyril Connolly , whose first reaction to the work had been negative , later called it " the only book which understands the true horror of the withdrawal of affection in an affair from [the point of view of] the innocent party " .

Wykes believes that , of the novel 's three central characters , only Tony is representative of his real @-@ life equivalent ? Waugh in his pre @-@ Catholic irreligious state . Brenda is portrayed in the novel as typical of many of the women in Waugh 's early stories ? well @-@ bred , trivial and faithless ? but Wykes argues that she is not a representation of Evelyn Gardner , " neither in inward nor outward qualities " . Nor , he asserts , is Beaver intended as an accurate portrayal of Evelyn Gardner 's lover , the " dreadful nullity " of Beaver being a form of literary revenge on the erudite Heygate . There is general agreement among commentators that other characters are drawn from life : Mr Todd is clearly based on the eccentric but rather less sinister Mr Christie ; Dr Messinger , the incompetent explorer , reflects W. E. Roth , the curator of the Georgetown museum whom Waugh considered accompanying into the jungle , only to be dissuaded by reports of Roth 's irresponsibility and disregard of danger . Thérèse de Vitré , the object of Tony 's forlorn attempt at a shipboard romance , was named " Bernadette " in the original manuscript ; the change was made as a reference to Waugh 's platonic friend Teresa Jungman . Thérèse announces her destiny to marry a rich Catholic , and in an echo of Jungman , recoils from Tony when she discovers that he still has a wife . The culmination of Tony 's misfortunes , his enslavement to Mr Todd and Dickens , is foreshadowed in Waugh 's life by his father 's habit of reading his favourite literature aloud to his family , three or four evenings a week : " ... most of Shakespeare , most of Dickens , most of Tennyson ... stepping about the room and portraying the characters ... he held us enthralled " .

= = = Satire and realism = = =

Critics and commentators have generally acknowledged that *A Handful of Dust* stands apart from Waugh 's other prewar fiction . Philip Toynbee describes it as a turning point in Waugh 's journey

from outright satire to disillusioned realism : " Much of this book is in the old manner , funny @-@ preposterous laced with funny @-@ bitter , but the whole tone and atmosphere are violently changed when the little boy is killed " . Likewise Gerald Gould in *The Observer* , reviewing the book 's initial publication in 1934 : " Here was the old gorgeous , careless note of contempt and disillusionment . Gradually , implacably , the note changes and deepens " . A later critic , John Cunningham , recognises that stylistically , the book in a different category from Waugh 's other 1930s novels , both more ambitious and more ambiguous . Although , says Cunningham , " [i] t provokes as much knowing laughter as Waugh 's other satires of manners " , it is a significant step away from its predecessors , towards the Catholic " comedies of redemption " that would become the principal focus of his writing life .

In his introduction to the 1997 Penguin edition , Robert Murray Davis suggests that in part , the book reflected Waugh 's reconsideration of his position as a Catholic writer , in the light of the recent Oldmeadow furore over *Black Mischief* . He may have developed a more serious tone to pre @-@ empt further criticism from that quarter , although Stannard maintains that Waugh 's beginnings as a serious writer date back to 1929 , when he was completing *Vile Bodies* . Waugh 's own comment , in 1946 , was that he was not , according to his own understanding of the term , a " satirical " writer , and that in writing the book he was merely " trying to distil comedy and sometimes tragedy from the knockabout farce of people 's outward behaviour " .

William Plomer , writing in *The Spectator* after the book 's first publication , thought it mistaken " to regard Mr Waugh 's more surprising situations as farcical or far @-@ fetched ; they are on the whole extremely realistic " . However , the mixture of genres was not immediately understood or appreciated by some of Waugh 's admirers ; Connolly 's initial thought was that Waugh had been " destroyed as a writer " , by snobbery and association with country @-@ house living . In Sykes 's view , the fleeting appearances in the book of characters from Waugh 's farcical world , such as Lady Metroland , are awkward and intrusive ? the world of *A Handful of Dust* is not outlandish : " Evelyn would have done better to have forgotten Lady Metroland and her world altogether " .

= = = Religion and humanism = = =

Cunningham sees *A Handful of Dust* as a pointer towards Waugh 's later , avowedly Catholic novels , although what religion is in it is either presented farcically (Mr Tendril the Anglican vicar 's sermons) , or dismissively (Tony 's admission that he had never really thought much about God) . Instead , Christianity is evoked by presenting the awfulness of life without it ; according to the writer and critic Frank Kermode , " [T] he callousness of incident and the coldness of tone work by suggesting the positive and rational declaration of the Faith " . The reader , Stannard says , " is never allowed to forget man 's primal bestiality ... God is the key that has been thrown away in this purely secular world " . John Raymond in the *New Statesman* refers to Waugh 's " unique type of moral vision " , and calls the novel a " powerful twentieth century sermon on the breakdown of a Christian marriage " .

Tony 's doomed quest in the Brazilian jungle is framed in biblical terms ; the relevant chapter title , " In Search of a City " alludes to Hebrews 13 : 14 : " For here we have no continuing city , but we seek one to come " . However , Waugh remarked of the novel that it was " humanist , and said all I wanted to say about humanism " . He believed that the essential 20th century conflict was between Christianity and Chaos , and chose to present a chaotic world to demonstrate that civilisation did not have in itself the power to survive . Thus , in the Brazilian jungle , Tony encounters what Davis terms " power without grace ... secular feudalism unredeemed by the saving grace of Christianity " . Todd is the symbol of humanist , irreligious power .

= = = English Gothic = = =

The critic Bernard Bergonzi refers to Tony Last as " a doomed Gothic hero " , echoing Waugh 's explanation to his friend Henry Yorke that the theme of the book was " a Gothic man in the hands of savages ? first Mrs Beaver etc , then the real ones " . According to Stannard , Waugh tended to

judge a civilisation by its art , and especially by its architecture , his particular interest being English Gothic which is a major leitmotif of the novel . Tony 's recognition of the extent of Brenda 's betrayal is described as " a whole Gothic world ... come to grief " . Later , Tony finds purpose in his otherwise pointless voyage when he hears of the fabled lost city from Messinger ; he visualises it as Gothic in character , " a transfigured Hetton ... everything luminous and translucent ; a coral citadel crowning a green hill top sewn with daisies " . When at the end of his quest he first catches sight of Todd 's settlement , in his delirium he sees , instead of the reality of mud huts and desolation , " gilded cupolas and spires of alabaster " .

Although devoted to original English Gothic , Waugh had mixed views on Gothic Revival architecture , preferring what he called " pre @-@ Ruskin " to the " stodgy " late 19th @-@ century style in which he places Hetton . He instructed the artist responsible for the frontispiece in the first edition of the book to " design the worst possible 1860 " style to depict the house . The guidebook description of Hetton which opens the second chapter reveals that , " formerly one of the notable houses of the county , it was entirely rebuilt in 1864 in the Gothic style and is now devoid of interest " . Thus , Tony 's devotion is shown to be to a false ideal ; his deposition and replacement in his domain by middle @-@ class heirs represents what the writer Brigid Brophy terms " a bourgeois sack of a fake @-@ Gothic Rome " .

= = Publication and reception = =

= = = Publication history = = =

A Handful of Dust first appeared in Harper 's Bazaar , as a serial in five instalments during the summer of 1934 , using the alternative , non @-@ Brazilian ending . The complete novel was first published in book form in London , on 4 September 1934 , by Chapman and Hall . It was an immediate success with the British public , and within four weeks had reached its fifth impression . In the same month it was issued in New York by Farrar & Rinehart , who were initially unenthusiastic about the book and , according to Waugh 's agent , made little promotional effort on its behalf . It has since been published in the United States by (among others) Dell Publishing (1959) ; Little , Brown (1977) , and Barnes and Noble (2001) .

Since its first publication the book has remained in print , and has been reproduced in many editions and foreign languages . It was first published as a paperback in 1951 , by Penguin , who have reissued it regularly . In 1945 Bernard Grasset published a translation in French , after which the book was published in most European languages , and also in Chinese , Japanese , Korean and Arabic .

= = = Critical reception = = =

The initial critical response to the book , while largely complimentary in tone , was nevertheless muted and sparse . This relative paucity of attention , Stannard surmises , might have been a consequence of the earlier serialisation , which meant that the essence of the story was well known before the book appeared . The Times Literary Supplement 's anonymous reviewer deemed the novel " a study of futility " , whose hero is " so incapable of helping himself that he is not worth helping " . Peter Quennell in the New Statesman found the story both painful and amusing ? " tragedy and comedy are interdependent " ? but was not overcome by the bouts of hilarity that had interrupted his reading of earlier novels such as Decline and Fall . If not exhilarating , the book was " certainly the most mature and best written novel that Mr Waugh has yet produced " . Plomer 's Spectator review described the book as " another of [Waugh 's] cultivated pearls " , economically written , holding the reader 's attention throughout and capturing with precision the moods and rhythms of life as it was lived in certain quarters of society .

The only overtly hostile review was Oldmeadow 's in The Tablet , which asserted that , after the disquiet in Catholic circles following the publication of Waugh 's previous novel , his co @-@

religionists " reasonably hoped to find Mr Waugh turning over a completely new leaf . He has not done so " . The review mixed literary criticism with moral sermonising , to which Waugh felt bound to object publicly . His friend , the journalist Tom Driberg agreed to place a notice in his " William Hickey " column in the Daily Express , in which Waugh accepted fully Oldmeadow 's right to criticise the literary quality of the work " in any terms he thinks suitable " . However , he added , so far as his moral lecturing was concerned , Oldmeadow was " in the position of a valet masquerading in his master 's clothes . Long employment by a prince of the Church has tempted him to ape his superiors , and , naturally enough , he gives an uncouth and impudent performance " .

Many of Waugh 's friends and admirers gave the book unstinting praise , among them Rebecca West , Lady Diana Cooper , Desmond MacCarthy and Hilaire Belloc . Among those less enthusiastic were the novelist J.B. Priestley , who found the characters lightweight and uninvolving , and the devoutly Catholic Katharine Asquith who thought the writing was brilliant but the subject @-@ matter deeply depressing . The novel 's critical standing grew steadily in the years following its publication . In 1942 the American critic Alexander Woollcott chose it as the best English novel in 100 years , a verdict largely endorsed some years later by Frank Kermode . Sykes wrote in 1975 that " there are only five or six novels of this century that can seriously challenge it " .

In 2010 Time magazine placed A Handful of Dust in its listing of the hundred best English @-@ language novels published since 1923 (the year the magazine began publication) , stating : " If this is Waugh at his bleakest it ? s also Waugh at his deepest , most poisonously funny " . In the Modern Library 's list of 100 best novels , A Handful of Dust is placed 34th in the " Board list " , although unplaced in the complementary " Readers ' List " .

= = Adaptations = =

On 8 April 1968 BBC Radio 4 broadcast A Handful of Dust as a radio play , in an adaptation by Denis Constanduros produced by Brian Miller . Jack Watling and Stephanie Beacham played Tony and Brenda Last , with Rex Holdsworth as Mr Todd . A new radio adaptation , with Jonathan Cullen and Tara Fitzgerald in the main roles , was broadcast as a two @-@ part serial in May 1996 . In November 1982 an ensemble cast performed the work as a stage play , directed by Mike Alfreds , at the Lyric Theatre , Hammersmith . A film version , directed by Charles Sturridge , was released in 1988 , with James Wilby as Tony , Kristin Scott Thomas as Brenda , Judi Dench as Mrs Beaver and Alec Guinness as Mr Todd .