

Walking along the razor's edge...again



Very much in vogue: Somerset Maugham

Dean Williams

Good novels play as much of a role in recording history as do journals, letters and other remnants of the pre-digital age. They give us an insight into the way things were, and they do so without the self-conscious cloak of insecurity and the façade of vulnerability that so often rears its head in autobiographical musings.

W Somerset Maugham's *The Razor's Edge* is undeniably one such book. Set during the years just before and after the Great Depression, it charts the lives of its three main protagonists, Isabel, Larry and Elliott, through the eyes of a narrator, who happens to be Maugham himself.

The plot is simple, even Bollywood-esque: Isabel and Larry are in love. She's rich, he's a loafer intent on 'finding himself' in India. She needs to be accepted by her peers and eventually marries tycoon Gray Maturin, while keeping Larry's flame burning. Her uncle, Elliott Templeton, is the quintessential man-about-town and rides to his niece's rescue when her husband's family falls on hard times. Larry drifts in and out, along with Sophie (a clueless rebel, with 'tragedy' engraved on her forehead), and Isabel still yearns for him. The fact that it all ends happily is moot,

but in the context, it works.

Inez Baranay, in *With The Tiger*, has taken on the dangerous task of retelling *The Razor's Edge*. She's kept the characters and their identities, but jumped into a time machine and taken the story into the 1980s. Europe and America have been cast aside for Australia. But that's where the changes end. Remarkably, Baranay has lost little of the original's lustrous prose, and the characters are as encompassing as ever...with one difference.

When Maugham released the book in 1944, Indian — and Oriental — mysticism was beginning to creep into Western psyche, a trend that had been earlier mapped and promoted by German novelist Hermann Hesse. Larry's embrace of the Eastern schools of philosophy and the discarding of the materialist cloak must have seemed so refreshing in the war-torn time Maugham wrote in. But in the 21st century, it's buffeted by the jaundiced eyes of our cynicism.

In this setting, it's Isabel, and unconsciously, one presumes, Maugham himself, who prove to be the driving forces of Baranay's

book. Isabel's superficiality is, well, superficial. Her inherent realism, and at times cloying class code are far easier to relate to than Larry's meandering attempts at "mucking about". Maugham himself is deliciously amoral, and brings an aloofness so essential to the consummate narrator.

The book is eminently readable until Part VI, which is so boring that it's befuddling. In fact, the book itself understands this on some subliminal papyric level: "It now seems to me dear reader that you could well skip Part Six entirely. If you did, you would not lose the thread of the story, such as it is," writes Baranay, a tad coyly.

In the end, *With The Tiger* goes some way in destroying the notion that classics are best left untouched. There is no questioning her ability, as a writer of prose, and a storyteller. In fact, she has taken a book that many modern readers would consider a tad dated, and brought it into the era of the Internet, and that in itself is reason enough to pick it up. Or, as Elliot would have put it: "My dear, I wouldn't miss it for all the jade in China."

With The Tiger
Inez Baranay
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