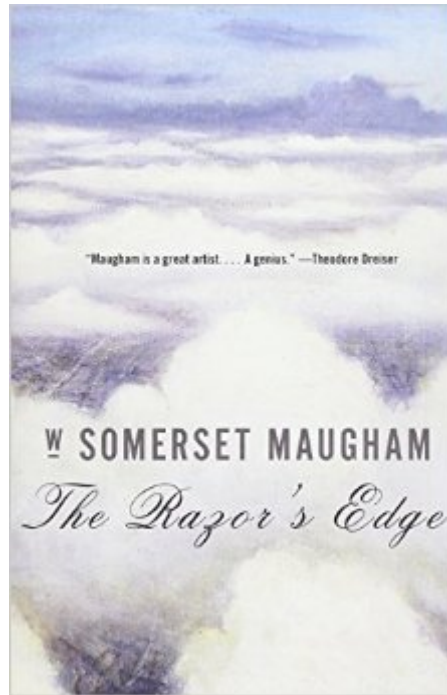


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The Razor's Edge



Synopsis

Larry Darrell is a young American in search of the absolute. The progress of his spiritual odyssey involves him with some of Maugham's most brilliant characters - his fiancée Isabel whose choice between love and wealth have lifelong repercussions, and Elliott Templeton, her uncle, a classic expatriate American snob. Maugham himself wanders in and out of the story, to observe his characters struggling with their fates.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The Razor's Edge is often described as the story of Larry, a war veteran who forsakes a comfortable life in Chicago "society" for a vague spiritual quest. It is better appreciated as a portrait of his acquaintances, whose conventional lifestyles are starkly contrasted to the path walked by the seeker. Some readers have wished to know more of Larry and criticize the space and attention Maugham lavished upon the "ancillary" characters. The Razor's Edge instead reveals much about the spiritual path by focusing on people more like the typical reader, people who do not give up materialistic Western striving. The best way to see Larry is to look at what he is not. This narrative technique succeeds wonderfully in the masterful hands of author W. Somerset Maugham, best known for *Of Human Bondage*. Rather than simply lay out the details of Larry's explorations and development, which, being spiritual and internal, would be rather dull to watch, Maugham illuminates Larry by dissecting the contrasting behavior of his associates. Maugham lavishes narrative care and attention less on the figure of Larry the seeker, but on his ground, those who embraced the life of conventional society without a thought for spirituality. Maugham shows us

several possible outcomes of such an unexamined life, from the indulgent businessman to the fragile social climber to the dissolute substance abuser. The contrasts are presented realistically and without sermon yet are no less stark for their subtlety. These characters are a rare delight: fictional creations with genuine life, who make choices, have unpredictable effects on one another, and grow as the novel develops.

This is my favorite book of all time. I've read it several times and seen both movie versions. In fact, it was the unusual, but excellent 1984 Bill Murray portrayal of Larry which made this book known to me in the first place. Here is the story of several characters, some likable and some not, in the post World War I era. Larry, a happy, go-lucky twenty-something pilot (in the movie he's an ambulance driver) returns from the war distraught and disturbed. Before the war he was engaged to Isabel and was going to return and work in his soon to be father in-law's office as stock-broker with his war volunteer buddy Gray. His friends and connections back home would provide him with a secure and comfortable future and he had it made. But unlike some modern day college graduate who's spent their education earning a pre-fab, slam-dunk business degree so as to quickly land a high-paying job, launching themselves into the American dream of yuppie-land, Larry takes a left turn. To Isabel, his friends and family it seems like a wrong turn. To others he will come to meet, Larry has avoided a certain car wreck. What makes "The Razor's Edge" a classic is that you as a reader get to decide for yourself the wisdom of each character's decisions. Somerset Maugham definitely focuses a lot on wealthy, class-oriented Eliot, who seems to be closest in personality to the author himself; but it's obvious too, that a character like Larry was both scary and intriguing to him. At times it seems like Maugham is mocking Larry, but in others there is a begrudging respect and admiration for him. This ambiguity creates a unique reading experience, especially for those who've read a biography of Maugham (I recommend Ted Morgan's biography).

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