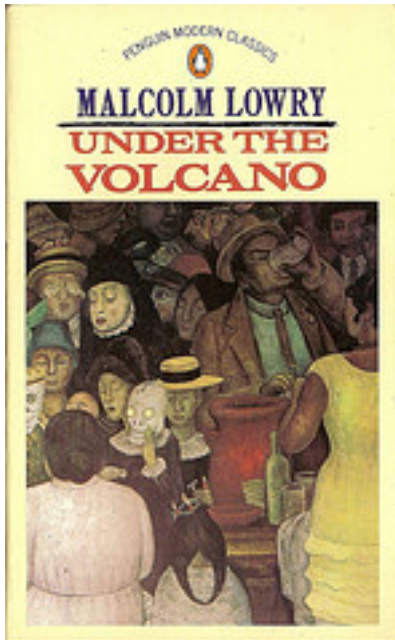

Malcolm Lowry

Under The Volcano



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Author: Malcolm Lowry

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Description

Malcolm Lowry's *Under The Volcano*, first published in 1947, is quite simply one of the great novels of the 20th century. Semi-autobiographical, and taking place during the Mexican festival of the Day of the Dead in 1938, it recounts the last day in the life of the alcoholic ex-consul Geoffrey Firmin. Surrounded by the helpless presences of his ex-wife, his half-brother and acquaintances, he descends into a mescal-soaked purgatory, moving inexorably towards his tragic fate. His self-destructiveness reflects a spiritual struggle born of wilful abnegation and passivity, a depressed, existential acquiescence to the futility of positive action.

The story is simple, its manner of telling decidedly not: Lowry's style is dense, symbolic, allusive, the prose thick with resonance, and the structure complex, with flashbacks, abrupt shifts, and a gradual accumulation of information--it is a book that deserves reading and then rereading, for its pattern and subtleties reveal themselves only slowly. Firmin's story anchors the book's political ambience--the rise of Fascism and the tragedy of the Spanish Civil War lie heavily across its pages, and in turn make of Firmin not a character to be pitied but a representative figure of modernity. In this, Lowry's masterpiece has lost none of its power: it speaks to us of suffering and of loneliness, eliciting our compassion under the century's terrible shadow of mortality.

Insightful reviews

David Lentz: Lowry's narrative technique is bold: here we have the tale of one half of the last day in the life of a man who is drunk. He is a British Consul living in Mexico beneath a volcano. The narrative captures the vision of the drunk experiencing his life, which has become a Kubla Kahn. This can't be easy to render: yet Lowry ambitiously does so in a true 20th century masterpiece. The protagonist literally stumbles through his incoherent existence like Leopold Bloom in the red light district of Dublin in James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Great literature has been built upon the construction of envisioning life through the eyes of a disoriented person for a brief period of time. Love is hopelessly beyond his practical competence to fulfill. "While you're enjoying all this, do you realise the extraordinary allowances being made for you by the world, which has to cope with you?" M. Laurelle asks him. The Consul chalks it up to his battle against death or his "battle for the survival of the human consciousness." He views himself as a "little soul holding up a corpse." The Consul tries to make some sense of his life beneath the volcano and its storm clouds amid a fiesta and a grotesque theft by a pelado of bus fare from a dying man. Amid frequent flashbacks, there are many moments in the vast self-imposed delusion of the Consul: "In spite of God's mercy I am still alone. Though my suffering seems senseless I am still in agony. There is no explanation of my life." The story is tragic: the writing is utterly exquisite. If you love great writing simply for the sake of the writing itself and are prepared to journey into the interior of a lost soul, you'll be rewarded for your persistence. We do live under the volcano, after all, which could erupt at any time and sweep us away in the course of its flow. Ah, we are free to make sense of life, despite our bewilderment, as we will. Therein, lies our best hope and redemption. I strongly encourage you to read this great novel: it's truly memorable in the genius of its craft.

Ted:

I've added a bit to this review from a comment I made on Steve Sckenda's outstanding review of the novel [here](#).

Malcolm Lowry may be one of the best examples of the writer who has one (and only one, so far as we can tell) great novel in him. I have to admit I had never heard of this novel prior to reading it a few years ago. It blew me away.

What I remember best about it is the frighteningly realistic way in which Lowry conveys that the Consul, Geoffrey Firmin, is sickeningly drunk almost constantly, from his first drink in the morning until passing out at night. Reading many of the passages made me feel I had a horrible drunk on myself, just barely conscious, not able to think clearly, my mind alternately racing and stopped dead. Lowry, who was himself an alcoholic, somehow contrived this unbelievably realistic way of writing of the consul's inner world in what might be called a "stream-of-drunkenness" style.

... the Consul nodded desperately, removing his glasses, and at this point, the Consul remembered, he had been without a drink nearly ten minutes; the effect of the tequila too had almost gone. He had peered out at the garden, and it was as though bits of his eyelids had broken off and were fluttering and jittering before him, turning into nervous shapes and shadows, jumping to the guilty chattering in his mind, not quite voices yet, but they were coming back, they were coming back.

If you haven't read the book, you owe it to yourself to check it out, but be forewarned - you may not take another drink for awhile. It is often mentioned on lists of the twentieth century's greatest novels. ([view spoiler](#))

A great movie was made from the book (which I have seen from Netflix) in 1984. Directed by John Huston, and starring Albert Finney as the consul (a masterful performance), and Jacqueline Bisset as his estranged wife (who wants to return to him), it was nominated for many awards (including Finney for the Best Actor Oscar). The movie captures the dark, drunken, dazed tone of the novel in an outstanding, almost amazing, manner. It is ultimately as disturbing as the novel.

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Abailart: Under the Volcano

I read the Picador Classics edition (1967) with an introduction by Stephen Spender. Unusually, I read the introduction first, then again after reading the novel, which I read in three sittings. I like Spender, and relate to his reading of the book.

Despite its dual reputations of being difficult and about alcoholism, it is neither. As for difficulty, it's true that understanding Spanish would be helpful, but the saturated extratextual references to mythology, mysticism, history and so on can be taken as fragments of a disintegrating mind in

a disintegrating world: the central theme is of stability versus instability, fragments against ruins, and from this erupts the permanent psychological divisions between desire's positivity and its demonic twin of destruction. The characters are all one character, the places all one place, the times all one time, though an impossible time – that of a moment that is an ideal locus without nostalgia for past or future.

Alcohol is central of course because the character of the novel is alcoholic, and best read, therefore by an alcoholic – which is most people, for Firmin and his alternatives are merely further advanced into descent and ascent than most which makes his expression approach the ideal moment. The refusal to accept love is not a failure but an affirmation for love is part of the dreadful entanglement of contingent dual actions of affirmation and immediate denial, and it is this tangle (the novel is thick with imagery of entanglement) which is transcended by final descent into the (literal) abyss. Obviously for it could be no other, a novel of immense contradictions, impossible antipathies, and the realisation of being as antithetical to identity.

It is easy to read when one accepts its imagistic concentration. Films, stills, photographs, paintings, advertisements, thicken every paragraph to a flicker that has the paradoxical potential to, like a hollywood movie, enspectre a counterpart to diegesis – a clean, pure, fluid, immensely joyful..... illusion.

It's a wonderful, exquisitely awful and painful novel of redemption.

Mala: A hell of a book, i.e. should you can take the hell! In his seminal essay, 'A Temple of Texts: Fifty Literary Pillars', William Gass has this to say: "Under the Volcano must have been an access between this fifty. think it because the roof. It took me 3 starts off to get into it; my resistance to it really is now inexplicable, even though i think I knew what i used to be in for. i have not learn a ebook extra in my opinion harrowing. it's also an extraordinary factor in sleek literature: a true tragedy, with a no-account protagonist to boot. The Consul is likely one of the so much thoroughly discovered characters in all of fiction." Vollmann has learn it thrice– want I write more? Edit: Apparently, a few extra traces are needed: "When to the classes of candy silent thought I summon up remembrance of items past, I sigh the shortcoming of many something I sought, And with previous woes new wail my pricey time's waste: Then am i able to drown an eye, unus'd to flow, For beneficial buddies concealed in death's dateless night, And weep afresh love's lengthy given that cancell'd woe, And moan the cost of many a vanish'd sight: Then am i able to grieve at grievances foregone, And seriously from woe to woe inform o'er the unhappy account of fore-bemoaned moan, Which I new pay as though now not paid before. but when the whereas i feel on thee, expensive friend, All losses are restor'd and sorrows end." –William Shakespeare, Sonnet 30. The Mexican Day of the useless is definitely the right atmosphere for this elegiac tale- either a remembrance and a dirge to 1 of the main poignant characters in modernist fiction– the Consul, Geoffrey Firmin. The finishing fills you with an unmistakable disappointment and that's reason regardless of all facts to the contrary, you have been hoping for a miracle- that the story of the Consul and Yvonne could one way or the other discover a completion. Like Laruelle, we are left wondering, within the aftermath of the tragedy, of what went fallacious & why it went wrong. There aren't any effortless solutions of course- through the time,

lower than the Volcano opens, the Consul is already like a runaway train heading for a remarkable crash. * * * I've mentioned this booklet here, in this team read: http://www.goodreads.com/topic/group_...

Steve Sckenda: "You like this garden? Why is it yours? We evict those that destroy!" -- less than the Volcano, 1947, at 135 On the Day of the lifeless in 1938, Geoffrey Firmin sits in a bar in Mexico, under the influence of alcohol back on mescal. He has resigned his post as British consul to drink himself to death. "I suggest to collapse as I please." (57) this is often his ultimate day within the shadow of the volcano. On this day, Mexicans mourn their lifeless by way of conserving mock funerals through day and partying at night. The early dying of the consul's parents, his court-martial from the navy, and the desertion of his spouse final 12 months all reason loads of grief within the consul's life: Though my affliction turns out mindless i'm nonetheless in agony. there's no rationalization of my life. Please permit me think that each one that's not an abominable self-deception. bring me from this dreadful tyranny of self. i've got sunk low. permit me sink reduce still, that i'll comprehend the truth. train me to like again, to like life. the place is love? permit me really suffer. supply me again my purity, the information of the Mysteries, that i've got betrayed and lost. enable me be really lonely, that i could in truth pray. allow us to be at liberty back somewhere, if it's simply together, if it's basically out of this negative world. smash the world! (300) Malcolm Lowry writes with lush evocative language in imitation of the insurrection of unique vegetation. all of the twelve chapters bargains a special perspective that rotates one of the major characters: the consul; his step-brother Hugh; and the consul's spouse Yvonne. at any time when the writer makes use of the consul's aspect of view, the tale turns into tougher to stick with (as you will count on from a drunken man), and the consul's repeated hallucinations make it tricky to determine among truth and fantasy. 12 months prior Yvonne left the consul, yet this day she has returned, proclaiming that she is there to avoid wasting him. Yet, Yvonne spends such a lot of her day with the consul's half-brother, Hugh, who goals of scuffling with within the Spanish Civil War, whereas the consul beverages mescal. as well as alcoholism, the consul suffers from acedia, religious despair. "Without you i'm forged out, severed. i'm an outcast from myself, a shadow." (379) Is he conversing of his spouse Yvonne or of God? (379) writer Malcom Lowry, an alcoholic who died of an overdose at age 47, wrote that his novel used to be "principally excited by the guilt of man, together with his remorse, along with his ceaseless suffering towards the sunshine less than the load of the past, and together with his doom." The air is stagnant and drips with portent. This novel is determined 365 days sooner than the outbreak of the second one global War, which metaphorically is the volcano below the shadow of which town now lives. The drunkenness of the consul is symbolic of the drunkenness of people stumbling towards their destruction. "What used to be lifestyles yet a conflict and a stranger's sojourn? Revolution rages too within the tierra caliente of every human soul. No peace yet that needs to pay complete toll to hell." (113) The novel has a robust experience of position relating to Quahnahuac (Cuernavaca) in south central Mexico that is traversed via mountains, valleys, plateaus, jungles and volcanos. "Wherever you grew to become an abyss was once looking ahead to you round the corner." (16) A plunging ravine, which reminds us of Dante's Malebolge, gains prominently within the novel's panorama and plot. The ravines are wealthy with symbolism that might problem the reader. "Read history! return 1000 years. what's the use of interfering with its valueless silly course? Like a barranca, a ravine, choked up with refuse, that winds throughout the a while and peters out." (323) one other problem for astute readers may be the wealthy intertextuality and references to

Shakespeare, Goethe, Dante, and Baudelaire to call a few. refined readers agree that "Under the Volcano" is among the most interesting novels written in the course of the twentieth Century. although Lowry isn't a loved ones identify like a few of his contemporaries, the trendy Library ranked this the eleventh most sensible Novel in English within the twentieth Century and Time journal ranked it within the Time a hundred maximum Novels. Can the lifestyles and dying of this shipwreck of a guy someway be became an confirmation of value? Says the consul: "to an Englishman it's such extraordinarily undesirable shape to be a bona fide martyr." (341) However, Lowry can have had a distinct notion if we're to pass judgement on by means of one of many book's epigraphs from Goethe: "Whoever unceasingly strives upward...him will we save." December 19, 2012

Liam Howley: Having by no means learn David Foster Wallace, it truly is most likely unfair of me to start a evaluation of Malcolm Lowry's below The Volcano with a touch upon his work, however, I as soon as had the excitement of a talk with a girl, a consumer in an institution I used to work, who upon discussing a number of the authors she loved groaned on the identify of David Foster Wallace. except a but incomplete interpreting of every little thing and More, (it's approximately maths), I had no insight, so her groan merely brought on a question. was once David Foster Wallace no longer an American literary hero, a compatriot of this girl, a cultural icon she should still revere? "He's frightened of silence," she said. She grew dramatic: "Enough," she said. "I get it. reduce out the footnotes and unending references. i will learn among the lines. belief me, you don't want to fill in each blank." It was once in simple terms upon rising from lower than The Volcano that i presumed of this ladies comment. In fact, until eventually i might entire examining it, I wasn't solely convinced what to think. As a a little autobiographical tale with alcoholism at its core, and advised with common streams of consciousness, it may come as no shock that silence is a advantage mostly ignored, however, that isn't to explain a piece the place the manic have to percentage each one detail, or to light up the a number of and sundry meanings are obvious on each page, whilst the other is especially a lot the case, yet that the reader is drowned in words, the web page is fed on by means of words, via twists and turns of mind, through erratic juxtapositions, by way of declarations of affection and unexpected melodramatic loss, by way of literary allusions and quasi spiritual symbolism. Indeed, an oceanic atmosphere may have provided a extra apt metaphor, yet that the protagonist may have felt obliged to imbibe. Being the kind of reader who prefers to learn the tale sooner than the introduction, I grew to become to the start of my Penguin smooth Classics version of less than The Volcano, in simple terms after interpreting the radical itself. A letter, from Malcolm Lowry to the writer Jonathan Cape, which in nice detail, and with a few huge humour, outlines the symbolic and sensible worth of some of the components of the novel, deals substantial perception to the reader, and affirmation to the extra erudite. i am comfortable I learn it last. relating Geoffrey Firmin, a.k.a. the Consul, the tale winds during the Day of the useless in Mexico 1938, the final day of his life. His half-brother, Hugh, has arrived, as has his ex-wife, Yvonne, who deeply in love with him, attempts to either rescue him and salvage their relationship. however the Consul doesn't are looking to be rescued. Instead, because the day unfolds, he will get excessive on mescal, sobers himself with strychnine (yes, that will be rat poison), and returns to the mescal back in a continuing series, while his brain whirls in loops and his spouse discusses their existence along with his half-brother. If merely she will persuade him to go away with her. 'Darling...' they'd arrive at their vacation spot through train, a educate that wandered via a night land of fields beside water, an arm of the Pacific - ... -

and much around the water, the little house, ready - One of the gains of this novel, at the least to this reader, is the convenience with which you'll turn into lost, swimming approximately within the ether of 1 brain or another, in order that it's tricky to simply seize a carry and be carried along. Dense, and from time to time ponderous, it staggers ahead after which reverses, offers a scenic journey in the course of the earlier after which returns to the drunken fugue of the Consul's life. It used to be in basic terms whilst Yvonne turned the narrator, approximately thirds of how through, that the tale turned anchored. (view spoiler)[It is the connection of Yvonne, with not just the Consul, yet Hugh, that gives a feeling of perspective, for having obvious the area via Hugh's eyes, (his desires, his sorrows, his discontent), it unexpectedly turns out attainable that Hugh and the Consul are various facets of the exact same man. In fact, there are 4 major characters within the book, and it really is attainable to interpret all 4 as differing elements of the single character. this is often proven within the introductory letter, but in addition through any biographical studying of Malcolm Lowry's life. (hide spoiler)] For a quick moment, I entertained the prospect that the ebook was once really approximately Yvonne, earlier than it did an approximately face and lower back to the Consul. however the e-book isn't really approximately her, nor honestly approximately Geoffrey Firmin, or certainly Malcolm Lowry for that matter, yet in regards to the nice cauldron of loneliness within which people usually burn. It used to be now not for not anything the ancients had positioned Tartarus below Mt Aetna, the Consul notes, when he burns away the final of his life, his brain consumed, his horror set. It should be no shock if I say that less than *The Volcano* is a masterpiece, yet i think obliged to assert it nonetheless. The brain is a creature of fears and desires, and infrequently occasions they're petty. It runs in loops, and twirls approximately in a maddening dance, until eventually we are dizzy and misplaced and the area approximately us is clouded, in order that we are not able to fathom the depth, not to mention which option to the surface. a few decide to interact in highbrow endeavour, so making a larger classification of loop, a extra textured nuanced cloud that during and of itself is fascinating and gives a course of exploration, (the labyrinths of Borges spring to mind). Other's pray with rhythmic chant, and for moments, or even lengthy moments, see that swirling cloud expend so they understand the place they are, and their depth, and will see the skin above. a few intrepid people spend their lives in meditation, observing the mind, changing into aware, and successfully finishing that senseless cycle of worry and desire. in lots of cultures those individuals are the holy men, the Fakirs, the Sadhu or Sadhvi, the Arhat or Buddha. those are the folks who've completed silence. Many make investments themselves within the humans they love, or their careers, or anything such, the act of commitment anchoring them opposed to the regular whirl. yet for lots of different misplaced souls, it really is to chemical substances they turn, be they alcohol, cocaine, heroine, or simply simple outdated adrenaline because the horse races in the direction of the line. yet almost all these offerings are ephemeral, and for a few the glimpse so fleeting that they develop into fundamentalist cranks or possessive and obsessed, or, as with regards to the Consul, raving drunks. It was once like a bit on a piano, it was once like that little bit in seven flats, at the black keys – it was once what, extra or less, he now remembered, he'd long past to the excusado within the first position as a way to remember, to carry off pat – it used to be probably additionally like Hugh's citation from Matthew Arnold on Marcus Aurelius, like that little piece one had learned, so laboriously, years ago, in basic terms to disregard every time one rather desired to play it, until eventually in the future one bought inebriated in the sort of manner that one's hands themselves recalled the combo and, miraculously, perfectly, unlocked the wealth of melody; purely right here Tolstoy had provided no melody. Writers have lengthy written of the

