

an accidental man

Iris Murdoch

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The novels of Murdoch are very similar. They are permeated by a cruel kind of hilarity. Conversation is often witty, plot tends to be absurd; it is as if the author is very conscious about writing fiction, and that gives her a freedom and a license to do away with pretensions of mirroring reality with all its mundane details. She has no pretensions of presenting a real slice of life, her work is pure fantasy, with the characters lifted out of a book of comics.

The present book deals with a young American who is in love with England, Oxford, and a young, somewhat frivolous but pretty lady of good family. By staying on in England he is evading the draft, much to the consternation of his immigrant parents, who beg him to stand up to the issues and at least claim conscientious objection. The young man has no intention to sacrifice the fairy-tale into which he has immersed himself and throw away his talents and future for a futile role that does not suit him. His father begs and entreats him nevertheless with pleading letters appealing to all the good feelings. In the end, when his parents have resigned, he gives in himself, breaks off the engagement and sails back to the States. (The novel was published in 1971, and thus depicts a life in which crossing the Atlantic by boat was still a possibility).

This is however only supposed to be a subplot, the title of the accidental man refers to a more mature man, a good-for-nothing who gets himself into a mess by accidentally running over a small girl, getting blackmailed by her step-father and in a rage trying to kill him. He would be helpless had he not been supported by his older brother, a successful diplomat and a collector of priceless china, to be destroyed by his younger brother in a fit of petulance. The point of the novel is supposedly to focus on the misadventures of this hapless, but charming man, who gets everybody connected to him into trouble. There are a few other subplots, but basically none of any engaging nature. There is occasion for some social sarcasm, and Murdoch takes particular pleasure in depicting cocktail parties consisting of unattributed oneliners making up a dark picture of hilarious vacuity.

Obviously meant as a high-brow entertainer more perhaps in the style of Evelyn Waugh than the more finely wrought and composed moral tales of a Graham Green.

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