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The Old Boys Details

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Frank says

Typical early Trevor, which means it's very very different from his mature and late work (which is probably better known and better-loved). It's full of the contrived, stagey and unrealistic dialogue, in a Beckettian or Pinterian vein, that you also see in some of the early stories (e.g. in *The Day We Got Drunk on Cake*). It's entertaining, and it does work well in some of those short stories, but it can't hold my interest for an entire novel.

It was interesting to read this immediately after a failed attempt to read Compton-Burnett's *A Father and his Fate*, because there's some of the same contrivance in the dialogue: people blatantly saying out loud things one normally doesn't say out loud to one another.

I read now that this was his debut, that it immediately won an award which "encouraged Trevor to become a full-time writer", so that was all for the good anyway – whatever the intrinsic merits of the book itself. And it is interesting, and sometimes very funny. No doubt about that.

Tim Orfanos says

'Ενα χιουμοριστικ?-κωμικ? μυθιστ?ρημα που διαθ?τει τη 'φρεσκ?δα' και τη νοσταλγικ?τητα του 'Ν?ου Κ?ματος' των '60ς (1964), το οπο?ο θα μπορο?σε να μας 'αγγ?ξει' μ?χρι σ?μερα. Ο Τρ?βορ χρησιμοποιε? το βρετανικ? φλεγματικ? χιο?μορ δημιουργικ?, και χτ?ζει μια 'γ?φυρα' μεταξ? της ανεμελι?ς των σχολικ?v χρ?vων και του ανταγωνισμο? των ηλικιωμ?vων, πλ?v, 'μαθητ?v' για τη θ?ση του Προ?δρου του Συλλ?γου Αποφο?των εν?ς δημ?σιου σχολε?ου.

'Ενα μυθιστ?ρημα που αξ?ζει να επανεκδοθε?.

Βαθμολογ?α: 4,2/5 ? 8,4/10.

Susan says

This is my first William Trevor novel and, having finished it, I have mixed feelings. The novel revolves around the upcoming election for President of the Old Boys Association of a public school, which remains unnamed throughout the novel. We do know that Mr Jaraby, now in his Seventies (as are most of the characters in this book) has been proposed as the new President and, unless he is opposed, he should automatically replace the previous Old Boy.

Jaraby is a man whose successes are all built around his school days, where he revered his housemaster, H.L.Dowse. Of course, people see things differently and, another Old Boy, Nox, certainly has a different vision of his schooldays – when he recalled being bullied by both Dowse and Jaraby. Jaraby's now adult son, Basil, also had a miserable time at the school his father loved and is something of a disappointment to his father.

This is a novel of memory and subterfuge. The embattled Jaraby is attempting to steer his way to the

President role at the Association – something that he desires more than anything else. Meanwhile, there are a number of other encounters with fellow Old Boys; Mr Turtle, Mr Sole, Mr Cridley and others, which are often amusing and sometimes sobering. As Nox does his best to discredit Jaraby and stop him gaining the post he wishes, Jaraby is also under assault at home, where his wife is pressuring him to accept Basil back in the house.

Evelyn Waugh, one of my very favourite authors, apparently loved this novel. I can see how the dark humour and bizarre situations would have amused him. However, this novel is not nearly as sly, or dark, as Waugh. This is an early work and I would not like to judge William Trevor on one novel, but I found this an interesting concept, rather than an entertaining read.

Rated 3.5.

Peter says

Got this in a omnibus of 3 early novels of Trevor. Never read him before, and to be honest, never heard of him before.

Loved this book! Wow, very funny, great dialogue. Pretty basic plotting, but this is his first novel, and all reports seem to indicate ideas and plotting get more complicated and complex as his career goes on.

Characters here are funny and as well fleshed out as an ensemble cast can be in 165 pages.

Highly recommended to people who like English authors with a decided Pickwickian feel.

Jim Fonseca says

As the title implies, one focus of the story is on a group of elderly men, all graduates of the same boys' school, who meet to pass the time, plan reunions and talk about donating piddling amounts to the school. As they reminisce about their trials and tribulations at the school, we are reminded that the British boys school system seems design to maximize bullying and intimidation and to terrify the smaller, timid, bookish, weaker boys.

The system seems to have worked well for the main character since he still admires an older boy (now dead) who abused and bullied him. He sent his son to the same school and it didn't work out: "It ruined him." One good line: "The world is the School gone mad." But his wife gets the last word when she asks, more or less, why do MEN make such a fuss about their old school antics decades ago? A lot of women went to girls' schools and they don't constantly relive that past. Maybe for the men it serves this purpose: "Come now, how shall we prove we are not dead?" Or this: "He would have liked to have written his memoirs, but he knew there was nothing to write. 'The tragedy, he sighed, of those who come into their own too late.' "

A second theme is the onset of the problems of old age. The main character wants to be the next president of this Alzheimer-tending group. While their babbling and occasional confusion is served up with humor and we laugh, sometimes it gets serious, as when the group convinces one of the men that he is engaged to a woman and he panics, thinking it must be true.

Perhaps the main theme is that of a marriage of mutual animosity and constant bickering of husband and wife. They never have a civil word with each other. They argue about how he wastes his time fooling with the old school; his vicious cat, and the relative merits of things like canned Australian fruit. Mostly they argue about bringing their estranged son home to live with them. The son is barely surviving on his own; hitting people up for money in the parks. His mother wants to bring him back to their home, but the father won't allow it.

As in other Trevor novels, beneath the humor there's a secret vicious crime that will settle the argument about where the son goes.

Two more lines I liked:

"Everything happens in middle age. One is old and young at the same time."

"You start with one worry, you settle it in your mind; and then there's another."

This is Trevor's first novel that he was proud of, published in 1964 when he was 36. I say this because he wrote 'A Standard of Behavior' 6 years earlier but later disowned it and refused to have it reprinted. I tried to find a photo of Trevor in his younger years – no luck – this is the earliest one I could find.

Photo of the author from irishe Examiner.com

Danny Daley says

55 years after its publication, it took the recent death of Irish author William Trevor to motivate me to finally read his debut, which is as well written, witty, and insightful as one might expect. The description of the book, as one dealing with "never forgotten old school days" is a bit misleading - truthfully if that were the point of the book it would have required double the length. Ultimately the book is about the fading glory and mental state of a single man, and the struggles to keep his dignity late in life. A rare instance of a likable book with mostly unlikable characters, the book meanders a bit until the punch of the final 30 or so pages, but the payoff is more than worth the short journey. An interesting book and more than admirable debut for a legendary writer.

Linda Steiger says

Trevor's debut novel from the sixties. Social satire about a group of slightly demented "old boys"--ancient (70!) alumni from a British prep school. Mostly from the perspective of callow youth, however. Mostly nothing happens of course as the old boys are involved in inconsequential business. Too bad Trevor didn't do a reprise once he had reached that certain age himself--might have been better book. Fortunately Trevor gets a lot better

Pascale says

I enjoyed this book while I was reading it, but now that the dust has settled, I remember it as grim and grotesque. It's a very black comedy indeed, and it seems rather excessive that those of the characters who weren't warped and destroyed by the brutality and hypocrisy of the public school system should have been damaged by the process of aging. The principals are Jaraby and Nox. Once upon a time Nox was Jaraby's fag. Aided and abetted by Headmaster Dowse, your stereotypical old pervert, Jaraby victimized Nox to the extent that decades later, Nox is prepared to employ a seedy private detective to try and find incriminating evidence about Jaraby, who is about to be elected president of the Old Boys' Association. Nox genuinely believes that Jaraby frequents brothels, but in the end, what comes to light is that Jaraby's son Basil, also a victim both of the school system and of his father's cruelty, is a pedophile and has molested a little girl. The private detective diddles both Nox and Jaraby into believing he can help them achieve their goals. Jaraby loses the election, but not through any intervention of the swindler called, rather too obviously, Swinger. The hateful Jaraby is locked in another intractable conflict with his wife, who kills his beloved cat to enable their grown-up son, a bird fancier, to move back in with them, a step Basil only takes in order to hide from the police. Trevor is not the only British writer to write in this vein about the hopeless battles of embittered elderly people, but somehow the mix of ferocity and farce in this book left an unpleasant taste in my mouth.

Carol Fenlon says

This was one of a group of classics that I picked up in a car boot sale and although I opened it with some trepidation, being used to more modern fare, I was utterly lost in the delightfully precise writing. It appears at first a simple story about a group of elderly ex public schoolboys who sit on a committee to support the activities of their old school but it soon plunges beneath the surface to explore motives of hatred and revenge that have lingered on since those long lost schooldays as well as examining the tensions and difficulties of the various members' personal lives. There is everything conducive to good fiction here: sadness and poignancy, conflict and rage, shock and a humour that is almost sadistic at times. Written in 1964 it details the cruelties and inhumanities of public school life of the period which (hopefully) no longer exist. Floggings, fagging and an acceptance of an horrific pecking order from which the only escape is to ascend over others until you yourself can mete out the same punishments to other boys is a major theme of the book, but more important is the underlying theme that childhood experiences are never really forgotten and continue to influence behaviour throughout adult life.

Although the book is dated and details a society which now seems like another planet, the dilemmas the characters face are classic and the prose is as fresh as a daisy. Trevor's use of humour is refreshing and at times startling. In Chapter 17 one of the 'old boys' has passed away in the audience of a school theatrical performance. Another character reflects, 'No one could wish to die during a performance of The Mikado.' How's that for a one-liner?

I thoroughly enjoyed this book and will be on the look out for more of Trevor's work.

•Karen• says

One of the best.

This is Trevor in High Comedy Mode.

It would be unjust to knock off a star for making me laugh so much at a time when laughter was painful.

Claire Fuller says

I'm still having a bit of a William Trevor binge - both his novels and his short stories. And this, his second novel (his first he disowned and wouldn't have republished) is definitely his weakest of those I've read. All the characters are dislikeable, although that didn't worry me, but they often read like caricatures written for jokes which went on a bit too long. It wasn't a chore to get to the end, but I wouldn't recommend it.

Robert Hyman says

When I heard the hubbub when William Trevor died as "one of the best modern Irish writer" I became curious; I'd never heard of him before. The Old Boys is considered his first major work and I enjoyed it thoroughly. It is about old boys from an English public school living out their grudges some 60 years after leaving that school. While that may sound odd, the book is very witty. I plan to read more Trevor in the future.

Peter says

Once again, I'm surprised by how different an early Trevor novel (this was his first) is from his later works like The Story of Lucy Gault and Felicia's Journey. The later books are usually single-perspective narratives, often of sad, isolated women. But The Old Boys (like The Boarding House, which I also enjoyed) covers a broad range of characters and is often very funny, perhaps in the vein of Wodehouse (whom I haven't read) or Kingsley Amis. Eight old men, graduates of the same boarding school and desperate to find meaning at the end of their lives, can do little more than complain, scheme and re-fight the battles of sixty years earlier. A witty and rollicking good read.

Ryan Williams says

The misanthropic streak of Trevor's early fiction works to his advantage here. Waugh might have been proud of this sharp, blackly comic send-up of elderly public school boys.

Chris Gager says

Will probably get into this a bit tonight, though I'm still reading "Ready Player One." This I gladly do in honor of the death of Mr. Trevor (last fall), one of the late 20th and early 21st centuries finest writers. I've read quite a few of his books and have never been disappointed. This little hardbound looks to be an original from 1964. Doesn't look like it's ever been checked out from the Bowdoin Library - an interlibrary loan from the library I was just (using a public computer) in earlier this afternoon! I don't have a card there anymore ... "Presented to Bowdoin College by Benjamin Sonnenberg" - inside the front cover.

Finally got started on this last night and I'm very much enjoying it. This book is early Trevor and his style is a bit word-busier. Still, the trademarks are there: irony, suffering, human on human abuse, institutional abuse in the form of the 500-year old public(private) school the old boys attended. English upper-class adolescent

bullying, sadism etc. carried into adulthood in the gent who seems to be the villain of the piece. A familiar target of course, but in Trevor's hands given his own special sorrowful AND humorous sheen. I love William Trevor! Too bad he's gone ...

Moved past halfway last night in this slight novel. Mr. Trevor did not write long fiction. No doorstops ... Anyway, this continues to amuse and dismay as we shift from villain to the (sort-of) righteous. This book is about old age, the challenges that the coping-challenged find living in this world. Sometimes you're the windshield and sometimes you're the bug. Mr. Trevor never shied away from telling the buggy side of life. This book has connections to "Reading Turgenev," "Felicia's Journey," and "Death in Summer" as the hapless Basil fits well with the hapless protagonists of those tales.

- As one G'reads. reviewer has put it, the dialogue has a sort of surreal vaudeville quality to it. Perhaps Mr. T. had Samuel Beckett in mind?

- The hapless and prematurely old Mr. Turtle and the scary Mrs. Strap:

"This comparison did not occur to Mr. Turtle; he was not, in such matters, a observant man. Mrs. Strap(his housekeeper) was more of a blur to him; a useful fury, an ill-tempered necessity. When she snapped, her eyes lit up with anger, matching her tongue. They blinked and glowed with elaborate spectacles; spectacles that were a confection of bric-a-brac built up to a pair of tapering points: specks of coloured glass that were not for seeing through, with gold, or something, in triangular blobs at either hinge."

Almost done last night, but I had to get to bed. Meanwhile, things do get kind of weird as the surreal atmosphere continues. Be ready for cat murder - I'm just sayin' ... Mr. Trevor lays it on pretty thick and others beside the cat are biting the dust. Poor old Jaraby, the ostensible villain, seems due for a bit of sympathy as he jousts relentlessly with his implacable wife(the vaudeville/absurdist dialogue) and bird-brained(literally) son. A weird book for sure. Perhaps a bit like Henry Green, in fact!

- gotta love those names: Mr. Turtle, Lord Ponder, Bludgeon, Mr Sole, Miss Burdock, Swabey-Boyns, Monmouth(the bird-killing, one-eyed kitty - don't ask how he lost the eye), Mrs. Strap and General Sanctuary, Haw minor ...

Finished last night as Nox has his revenge. There is a bit of a sour taste to the whole thing, as if Trevor himself were exacting a bit of Irish revenge against English middle-class culture. Doesn't paint a pretty picture of the aging of the "old boys" and the title is likely a double entendre. Still, there's no way I'm giving William Trevor less than a 4* rating. This one makes it by rounding up from 3.75*.