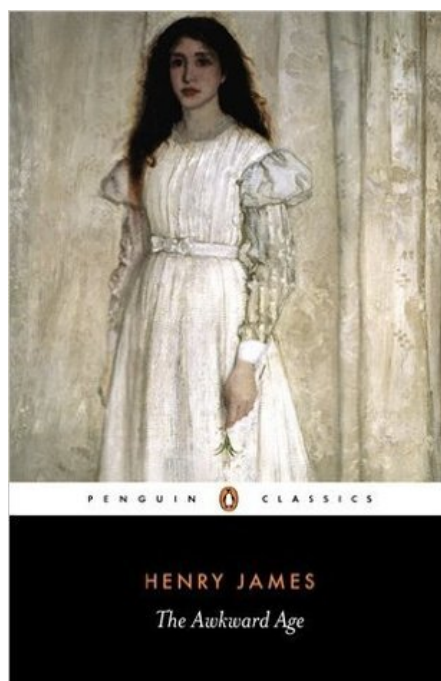




The Awkward Age

Henry James , Patricia Crick (Notes)

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Making her debut in London society, Nanda Brookenham is being groomed for the marriage market. Thrust suddenly into the superficial and immoral circle that surrounds her mother, the innocent but independent-minded young woman even finds herself in competition with Mrs Brookenham for the affection of the man she admires. Only an elderly bachelor, Mr Longdon, is immune to this world of greed and scheming, and determines to rescue Nanda from its corrupting influences out of loyalty to the deep love he once felt for her grandmother. In *The Awkward Age* (1899), Henry James explores the English character, and the clash between old and new money with a light and subtly ironic touch to create a devastating critique of society and its machinations.

The Awkward Age Details

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William Leight says

The first thing you notice about "The Awkward Age" is that it's basically all dialogue. My personal theory, backed up by exactly zero evidence, is that this is a manifestation of James' desire to be a successful playwright: some of the early chapters, in particular, consist largely of exchanges of witty badinage in drawing rooms in a very Oscar-Wilde-esque fashion. ("The Importance of Being Earnest" appeared three years before "The Awkward Age" began serialization.) The novel's structure is also very play-like, consisting mostly of conversations occurring in set scenes, from which characters enter or exit: the scene changes only when the Part (or Act, perhaps) of the novel ends. I would say that this approach is not entirely successful, as it often leaves you wondering what the characters are actually thinking, especially given their tendency to forgo plain speaking in favor of wittier but more elliptical utterances, but of course some of this was almost certainly James' intention. In particular, the way that Mr. Vanderbank, Mr. Mitchett, and Mrs. Brookenham (or, as they are always called, Van, Mitchy, and Mrs. Brook, as the use of nicknames was apparently a sign that one belonged to the smart, modern London set) dance around meanings without actually saying what they really mean is clearly intended to signal a certain hollowiness in each of their characters, and thus in Edwardian society as a whole. It's surely no coincidence that by the end of the book the only characters one really sympathizes with are Nanda Brookenham, Mrs. Brook's daughter, and Mr. Longdon, a once-upon-a-time unsuccessful suitor of Mrs. Brook's mother. The kids are all right, and so are the senior citizens, but the adults are a different story.

This moral is meant to be conveyed in the conflict between Nanda and her mother over the affections of Van, who they are both in love with. It's hard to get too invested in this part of the plot, though, given that Van himself, though handsome and intelligent, lacks force of character: his most prominent trait is his refusal to get pinned down to anything at all. He is, quite frankly, not worthy of either Nanda or her mother: though the reader will find it impossible to like Mrs. Brook, who is manipulative and largely devoid of any sort of maternal affection, he or she will have to respect her nonetheless, and in the end it's hard to avoid feeling that she can absolutely do better than Van. And of course the reader feels that nothing but the best can possibly do for Nanda, who is intelligent, sensitive, and adorably serious. The contest between Nanda and her mother is in reality no contest: when Nanda essentially asks Van to fall in love with her mother at the end of the book, the reader certainly feels sorry for her, but also a bit relieved. Van, after all, is extremely weak tea (not to mention being almost twice her age): surely Nanda, who is still quite young, can find someone else. The interesting contrast in "The Awkward Age" is not then the obvious one, but instead that between Nanda and her sort-of cousin, Aggie.

Aggie is one of those beautiful, innocent, good, and deadly dull girls who infest 19th century novels, a character who is so perfect that she can't actually do anything for fear of marring that perfection. James is actually more resistant than some to their lure: though similar characters appeared in, for instance, "Portrait of a Lady" and "The Ambassadors", they occupied secondary places to older, more experienced, and far more interesting female characters who you could actually care about. Similarly, in "The Awkward Age" Aggie decidedly plays second fiddle to the more experienced (thanks to her more liberal upbringing, though you get the impression that said liberality has at least something to do with Mrs. Brook not caring enough to be strict) and far more interesting Nanda. But because Nanda is roughly the same age as Aggie, they can be (and inevitably are: for instance, both mothers are angling to end up with the filthy rich Mitchy as a son-in-law) compared in a way that's not possible in other James novels in which the sweet pure boring girl resides in the shadow of a considerably older heroine. Essentially, the book presents the question of whether young girls ought to be real people or hothouse flowers. The correct answer is, I hope, obvious, and though in the end James can't bring himself to admit defeat for the hothouse flower model, it's quite clear that he knows it.

He certainly makes no real effort to defend the child-rearing methods that created Aggie. If Mrs. Brook's parenting is not exactly wholeheartedly endorsed, that of her cousin Jane, Aggie's aunt (who adopted Aggie following the death of her parents), is largely held up for ridicule. Jane -- inevitably referred to as "The Duchess" to mock her inflated sense of self-regard -- is a figure of fun, pretentious, self-satisfied, and entirely unconcerned with the feelings of others. She attempts to identify herself with Aggie's Italian father's family, and is always referring to "you English" (despite her own obvious Englishness, starting with the name "Jane") and dropping French or Italian phrases into conversation in the least natural fashion possible. Her attempt at raising Aggie as if Aggie were in a convent is clearly carried out not for Aggie's good but as part of Jane's attempt to create an image of respectably old-fashioned Continental conservatism for herself while maintaining absolute control over her daughter. In case you have any doubt that Jane's image is just that, her interactions with Mr. Longdon, a genuine respectable old-fashioned conservative, make clear which is the real thing and which is a self-aggrandizing pose. And her panic when Aggie appears poised to start asserting herself following her marriage reveals just how little she actually cares for her. Mrs. Brook's relationship with Nanda is undoubtedly bad, but Jane's with Aggie may be even worse.

And the result of this process, Aggie herself, is basically just decorative, with nothing whatsoever to say and certainly no shot at influencing anybody's life, including her own. Mr. Longdon's sole conversation with her (also the only conversation anybody has with her in the book) resembles one he might have with a child half her age: the contrast with Nanda entirely favors the latter. She's not even the most desirable available bride: Mitchy and Van, the two eligible bachelors, both prefer Nanda, and it's strongly hinted that Mitchy, who ends up marrying Aggie when Nanda makes it clear that she has no interest in him, is not particularly happy in his marriage. The one man who is interested in Aggie, Lord Petherton, is described as coarse, with a sort of brutal vitality: his caliber of character is suggested by the fact that it's hinted at the end of the book that he may be making a move on the newly-married Aggie (she's "available" now in a way she wasn't before) despite the fact that he and Mitchy are old friends. Hardly anybody really seems to be interested in spending time with Aggie, in fact: they all exclaim about how wonderful and good she is, but when it comes to company Aggie is usually left to her governess. Even in the climactic scene of the book, which includes almost everybody -- even minor character and friend of Nanda's Tishy Grendon is involved -- Aggie is absent. Tishy is a fairly pathetic character, unintelligent and graceless, but she can still participate in an adult conversation, something which Aggie is not yet capable of doing.

In short, everything leans towards a whole-hearted endorsement of Nanda as the ideal model of a young lady, yet James clearly feels that this isn't quite right, that in some way it really ought to be Aggie, even if Nanda is a million times more interesting to write about. So there has to be some downside to being like Nanda, and it turns out to be a romantic one. Mitchy wants to marry Nanda, but she won't have him: she only wants the apparently superior Van, but Van is not just superior but also old-fashioned (there's a suggestion that the old-fashionedness contributes to the superiority) and hence unwilling to marry a young woman who is so obviously his equal if not his superior. The implication is that Nanda will never find romantic happiness: any man who's good enough for her will find her too much for him. But this whole argument rests on Van's shoulders, and as mentioned above, he's just not strong enough to carry it. Despite his best efforts, James never manages to convince us that Van really is as amazing, wonderful, and superior as he needs to be to make his role in the book plausible. Van is, quite frankly, always a step or two behind Nanda and Mrs. Brook, and seems utterly incapable of taking any sort of decisive action. Not only that, when he does come to a decision -- after a long period of waffling -- he lacks the courage to come out and say so. In particular, any sympathy the reader has left for him by the end of the book is dissipated by his pathetic performance in his final scene with Nanda, in which his efforts to avoid telling her that he's not going to marry her reach previously unsurpassed heights of ridiculousness (well, unsurpassed for a James novel, at least). And this ruins the moral James wants to impart: Van is clearly not marrying Nanda not due to strength of character, as Nanda inexplicably seems to be think at the end of the book -- no one with genuine strength of character would be capable of playing the part that Van does in his last scene -- but due to weakness. The problem does not seem to be that he can't commit to a wife who would be an equal, but that he can't commit, period. The lesson for the reader is not that Nanda will never find a man who is both good enough for her and

willing to marry her: it's that she has yet to find a man who is good enough for her.

This misstep is especially annoying because it's so unnecessary: James wouldn't have to change the plot at all to acknowledge Nanda's obvious superiority to Aggie, but because he feels that he has to in some way make Aggie seem to be a better model, he shoehorns in an unnecessary argument to that effect at the end of the book, leaving a bad taste in your mouth. This, combined with the not-entirely-successful all-dialogue model, prevents "The Awkward Age" from being a first-rank James novel. Nonetheless, it's still well worth reading, especially for those who think of James as ponderous and slow-moving: this novel is an excellent way to experience his more nimble and funny side.

Jessica says

Just kidding.

Michael says

The Awkward Age is a truly interesting work of James', from a time when he was very involved with plays. It is a work of prose carefully crafted to read much like a play-script; it has very little narratorial voice and concerns itself mostly with dialogue. This was fascinating for me because, with nearly no narration, reading the novel was like being in the same room with these people, hearing what they say and seeing what they do, but nothing else. Thus, one must draw upon his own experiences in conversing--motives, gestures, etc.--in order to properly "figure out" the characters. Brilliant.

Kathy Kattenburg says

I am one of those who greatly prefers descriptive narrative to dialogue, so *The Awkward Age*, which is almost all dialogue, didn't appeal to me as much as many of Henry James's other novels do. Also, much of the conversation in the book conforms to the highly elliptical style James adopted in his later novels. Not all of it, though. Some of it is crystal clear, which leaves me wondering what James had in mind.

There is an Introduction to the edition I read (Penguin Classics, 1987), by Ronald Blythe, that I found very helpful in understanding both the story itself and James's intentions and motivations in writing it. Warning, though: Read the Introduction after you finish the book because, as do all the Introductions to these classic works of literature, it gives away the ending.

NancyKay says

I read this years ago, but rereading it now, I see that I made nothing of it at the time. THIS time, going very carefully, making sure not to get lost in the intricate layers of the dialogue, I found an extraordinary, extraordinarily sad story, whose young heroine's coming of age consists not in moving into adulthood but in assuming moral and emotional responsibility for her own parents -- who never parented her and whose parent she herself becomes -- and the man she continues to love even when his utter worthlessness is made most clear to her.

I couldn't help reading this in light of what a contemporary therapist would make of it all, it's such a perfect presentation, in the guise of a drawing-room/countryhouse novel of manners, of what happens when children are forced to maturity too early, and find themselves relied on and betrayed by those they should most trust to be protecting and launching them into adult life.

The story here feels at first like one that's entirely of its time -- it's just before the turn of the 20th century; London manners and mores are in flux, and the problem is how, in a "fast" circle of friends, a mother can bring her unmarried daughter into the drawing room without expurgating the talk. The solution that everyone seems to feel is right is to marry the daughter off. Much is made of the kind of innocence girls were brought up to in the past, and how that innocence is being fast eroded in the last decades of the 19th century. But the innocence James is really writing about, the innocence and experience -- are completely contemporary, or timeless.

I want also to convey that this book is great fun to read. It DOES require a lot of attention; if your mind wanders for a second, you're lost. Its best effects are missed if you don't bear down. James always writes for the really attentive careful reader (I realize I'm complimenting myself here, but why the fuck not), and with every easter egg you find in the grass as you go along, the rewards feel greater and greater. James' prose to me always has a crunchy-chewy feel to it that I find myself craving, and than which no other writer can be substituted when the craving hits.

This probably isn't the book to start off reading James with, but this, along with "What Maisie Knew", may be my two secret favorites, in that they're part of his oeuvre that are often overlooked between the triumph of "A Portrait" and those three late heavy-weight novels that are so praised and which it took me years of "training" to be able to read and understand -- only in the last 3 years, after decades of circling back to them and falling off.

Fionnuala says

In the previous Henry James book I read, the main character, Christopher Newman, visited the Louvre, and being a bit overwhelmed by the profusion of pictures, he simply sat on a bench in front of one of them for the whole afternoon.

Just as he'd been happy to ignore the rest of the paintings in the huge gallery, Newman was happy that day to ignore the major part of Veronese's 'The Marriage at Cana', and simply focus on a little scene in the corner of the painting which *satisfied his conception of what a splendid banquet should be. In the left-hand corner of the picture is a young woman with yellow tresses confined in a golden head-dress; she is bending forward and listening, with the smile of a charming woman at a dinner-party, to her neighbor...*

We can easily forgive Newman his narrow focus because, at first glance, the painting is a confusion of movement and detail. Veronese depicted a huge variety of people here, all in the act of doing, listening or speaking. And though the theme is inspired by the miracle of the changing of water into wine, it is set in Veronese's own time and peopled with characters he must have known or heard of. While Jesus and his mother Mary (portrayed in contrast to everyone else as immobile icons) are in the very centre of the painting, they are not the main focus. Instead, it is the finely dressed musicians in the foreground who attract

immediate attention. The group are said to represent the most noted Venetian artists of the time, Veronese himself on the left playing the viola, then Bassano fingering a flute, Tintoretto playing the violin, and Titian on the cello.

Reading a Henry James novel is like viewing such a painting section by section; the author forces us to pause and pay attention to the details. We can't skim quickly and pass on. No, we have to stop and sit on the bench day after day and give ourselves up to each section in turn. We have to be patient, to see where the perspective leads us and what can be noticed on the way. We have to guess the significance of this or that element, to follow the play of light and shadow, to notice the figure that is turned towards us, the other that is turned away, and the one that might represent the artist inserted in his own work (in this book, I recognised strong similarities between one of the main characters and James himself).

And just as Veronese offers a variety of physiognomies in his painting, Henry James offers a variety of types whose descriptions render them as clear to our eyes as if they'd been painted.

Harold: *his smooth fair face where the lines were all curves and the expression all needles...*

Mr. Cashmore: *who would have been very red-haired if he had not been very bald, showed a single eye-glass and a long upper lip...*

Edward Brookenham: *seemed to bend for sitting down more hinges than most men...he had a pale cold face, marked and made regular, made even in a manner handsome, by a hardness of line in which, oddly, there was no significance, no accent. Clean-shaven, slightly bald, with unlighted grey eyes and a mouth that gave the impression of not working easily, he suggested a stippled drawing by an inferior master...*

Lord Petherton: *a man of five-and-thirty, whose robust but symmetrical proportions gave to his dark blue double-breasted coat an air of tightness that just failed of compromising his tailor, had for his main facial sign a certain pleasant brutality, the effect partly of a bold handsome parade of carnivorous teeth, partly of an expression of nose suggesting that this feature had paid a little, in the heat of youth, for some aggression at the time admired and even publicly commemorated...*

Mr. Mitchett: *had so little intrinsic appearance that an observer would have felt indebted for help in placing him to the rare prominence of his colorless eyes...Dressed on the other hand not as gentlemen dress in London, he excited [attention] by the exhibition of garments that had nothing in common save the violence and the independence of their pattern...There was comedy therefore in the form of his pot-hat and the color of his spotted shirt, in the systematic disagreement, above all, of his coat, waistcoat and trousers. It was only on long acquaintance that his so many ingenious ways of showing he appreciated his commonness could present him as secretly rare...*

The Duchess: *was a person of no small presence, filling her place, however, without ponderosity, with a massiveness indeed rather artfully kept in bounds. Her head, her chin, her shoulders were well aloft, but she had not abandoned the cultivation of a "figure" or any of the distinctively finer reasons for passing as a handsome woman. She was secretly at war moreover, in this endeavour, with a lurking no less than with a public foe, and thoroughly aware that if she didn't look well she might at times only, and quite dreadfully, look good...*

So, as we read this novel, we become the spectators at a parade of larger than life figures whom we observe with keen interest and frequent amusement. In the course of the novel, Henry James refers to an unknown spectator/observer who in turn watches the characters and catches the expressions that flit across their faces: *Our spectator would probably have found too much earnestness in her face to be sure if there was also*

candour...

And this, *A supposititious spectator would certainly on this have imagined in the girl's face the delicate dawn of a sense that her mother had suddenly become vulgar...*

Or this, *An observer at all initiated would fairly have hung on his lips...*

We become that unknown spectator when we read the book just as we become spectators at Veronese's banquet while viewing his painting; we notice each and every expression that the artist has caught. However, we're not the only observers of Veronese's scene. If we look at the left hand corner again, we see that the figures in the painting are watching each other. 'He' watches 'she', and 'she' watches another 'she' who is watching someone else.

In *The Awkward Age*, the characters also watch each other constantly. The old watch the young, the women watch the men, the men watch the girls and the girls watch each other. There are important things at stake here, things like property, wealth and young girls' reputations.

And to further the parallel with Veronese's painting, the main theme of this book is marriage, and there is great emphasis placed on the need for an adequate sum of money to launch a couple on their married life with the necessary trimmings. Things like good wine for the wedding feast, for example. But this is where the comparison with 'The Wedding at Cana' ends. There are no miracles in this book. This is a Henry James work and the only miracles depicted are the depictions themselves.

Jeffrey Keeten says

She remained alone for ten minutes, at the end of which her reflections – they would have been seen to be deep – were interrupted by the entrance of her husband. The interruption was indeed not so great as if the couple had not met, as they almost invariably met, in silence: she took, at all events to begin with, no more account of his presence than to hand him a cup of tea accompanied with nothing but cream and sugar. Her having no word for him, however, committed her no more to implying that he had come in only for his refreshment than it would have committed her to say: 'Here it is, Edward dear – just as you like it; so take it and sit down and be quiet.' No spectator worth his salt could have seen them more than a little together without feeling how everything that, under his eyes or not, she either did or omitted rested on a profound acquaintance with his ways. They formed, Edward's ways, a chapter by themselves, of which Mrs Brook was completely mistress and in respect to which the only drawback was that a part of her credit was by the nature of the case predestined to remain obscure.

Mrs. Brookenham, referred to in the novel as Mrs. Brook, is an aging beauty. A woman at an awkward age, past her prime, yet still vibrantly lovely. She is witty, manipulative, and a deliciously adroit schemer. She has control of her husband, as you can see from the quote above, he is but a bit of furniture that she moves about to better suit her current needs. She has a social group of men and women who are trapped in the webbing of her social adeptness. She is shallow, but by no means stupid. The story revolves around what to do with Nanda, the daughter of the Brookenham's.

Tea time the new battlefield.

Mrs. Brook is friends with the Duchess who has a daughter named Aggie. I'm using the term friends rather loosely as it is quite evident from a few conversations between the two that they are old rivals battling once again to achieve the best marriages for their daughters. Vanderbank, a civil servant and the only character in this book that seems to have a job, is rather handsome and solid of character. He is in the early running for a husband for Nanda, but as the plot advances it becomes murky as to whether he is in love with Mrs. Brook or Nanda. The real crux comes when it becomes clear that Mrs. Brook is unsure if she will keep the hapless

Vanderbank for herself or encourage him to marry her daughter. Compromising circumstances exist when you have a “friend” that with a few well placed words in the proper setting could destroy your already precarious reputation. To square up accounts the Duchess is also compromised with a relationship with Lord Petherton.

”Lord Petherton, a man of five-and-thirty, whose robust but symmetrical proportions gave to his dark blue double-breasted coat an air of tightness that just failed of compromising his tailor, had for his man facial sign a certain pleasant brutality, the effect partly of a bold, handsome parable of carnivorous teeth, partly of an expression of nose suggesting that this feature had paid a little, in the heat of youth, for some aggression at the time admired and even publicly commemorated. He would have been ugly, he substantively granted, had he not been happy; he would have been dangerous had he not been warranted. Many things doubtless performed for him this last service, but none so much as the delightful sound of his voice, the voice, as it were, of another man, a nature reclaimed, supercivilized, adjusted to the perpetual ‘chaff’ that kept him smiling in a way that would have been a mistake and indeed an impossibility, if he had really been witty.”

Things start to sort themselves out and then James decides to throw one more fly into the ointment. Mr. Longdon returns to society after a thirty year hiatus. In that time, obviously not spending his money on high society, he has piled up a considerable fortune. He takes a liking to Vanderbank, instantly does not trust Mrs. Brooks, and becomes enamored with Nanda. Mr. Longdon and Nanda, as part of an allusion to the title of this novel, are at awkward ages for consummating a relationship. Even though in that time period vast differences in ages were rarely a problem if there was plenty of money to match with the beauty of the young lady. Longdon is not interested in Nanda for a wife, but sees her more as a ward that needs to be shielded from her own mother. Nanda is the spitting image of her grandmother. Longdon when he was in society had a bit of a crush on the grandmother and seeing Nanda sends the blood coursing faster through his veins.

”Your resemblance to your grandmother is quite prodigious.”

“That’s what I wish you’d tell me about--your recollection of her and your wonderful feeling about her. Mother has told me things, but that I should have something straight from you is exactly what she also wants. My grandmother must have been awfully nice”, the girl rambled on, “and I somehow don’t see myself as the same sort of person.”

“Oh, I don’t say you’re in the least the same sort; all I allude to,” Mr. Longdon returned, “is the miracle of the physical heredity. Nothing could be less like her than your manner and your talk.”

Nanda looked at him with all honesty, “They’re not so good, you must think.”

He hung fire an instant, but was as honest as she. “You’re separated from her by a gulf--and not only of time. Personally, you see, you breathe a different air.”

Mr. Longdon makes it clear that he will settle a vast fortune on Nanda if Mr. Vanderbank will consent to marry her. This sets off a flurry of activity among the social set that leaves Vanderbank cold to the idea.

Harold?

Nanda has a brother named Harold, a ne’er do well that actually provides a bit of comedy in the novel. He has a knack for putting the touch on his mother’s friends for five pounds here and five pounds there. Any money left about is vacuumed into his pocket. He is a product of his mother and knows how to manipulate the grand manipulator. Mr. Cashmore, you’d have to be wealthy with a name like that, does give Harold some money, but then threatens to tell his mother. Harold explains the circumstances.

"She knows all about wants--no one has more than mamma."

Mr. Cashmore stared, but there was amusement in it too. "So she'll say it's all right?"

"Oh no; she'll let me have it hot. But she'll recognize that at such a pass more must be done for a fellow, and that may lead to something--indirectly, don't you see? for she won't tell my father, she'll only, in her own way, work on him--that will put me on a better footing, and for which therefore at bottom I shall have to thank you."

This entire novel is almost entirely set in one drawing room or another. I had difficulty guessing the motivations of the characters because almost all the information is given to us through the course of conversations. At times it is hard to follow, but the deeper I delved into the novel I was able to make the adjustments to keep up with the acerbic sabre slashes and the double meanings that hung heavy on every conversation.

Henry James feeling out of sorts after the public reception to his plays.

Henry James was recovering from the shock of failing as a playwright when he wrote *The Awkward Age*. He had taken up plays after the disappointing sales of his novel *The Tragic Muse*. He swore he'd never write another novel. After being booed and hissed at the conclusion of the showing of one of his plays, he then announced he was done with plays. As we know turning his back on writing novels or plays did not last very long.

If you are looking to read a Henry James I would not start with this one. I would recommend *The Portrait of a Lady* or *The Turn of the Screw* and *The Aspern Papers* for your first dance with Henry James. On the flap of the Everyman's edition, that I read, they refer to this book as "one of his greatest and gentlest masterpieces". James has a well deserved reputation of leaving his characters and readers distraught and unhappy at the conclusion of his novels. In the case of *The Awkward Age* things did not work out the way one would hope. The characters may not be happy, but James, feeling gentle I presume after his own humbling experience at the hands of the public, does leave them with room to achieve some fashion of happiness.

Make me smile, I dare you.

Mark Stephenson says

Perhaps a clue to what perplexes some readers of *The Awkward Age* may be found in James' short story *John Delavoy*. This is a story about censorship in which James makes a case in FAVOR of censorship on the part of periodical editors who are acquainted with their readership. *The Awkward Age* first appeared in 1898 as a serialization in the prominent periodical *Harper's Weekly*. Two young English women, Aggie and Nanda, are portrayed as representatives of two opposed philosophies of preparing a girl for marriage. Aggie's aunt Jane (the Duchess) is aggressively interventionist, making all sorts of (very showy) efforts to ensure that her niece, whom she has reared, has a mind as pure as driven snow. Nanda's parents, the Brookenhams, who live in London on expensive Buckingham Crescent (uncomfortably close to or even beyond the limits of their means) are much more laissez faire and quite proud of the fact. Tragedy and comedy ensue! I confess a suspicion that a certain percentage of the comedy and tragedy may have been lost on me but I still liked this book very much.

Captain Sir Roddy, R.N. (Ret.) says

I think Henry James must have had some issues with parents as he was growing up. Now I'm not saying that his parents were bad parents or bad people, but he sure has created some truly monstrous parental units in a good bit of his fiction, and the parents and adult guardians in *The Awkward Age* are certainly no exception and are right up there with 'Dr, Sloper' ("Washington Square"), 'Gilbert Osmond' ("The Portrait of a Lady"), or little Maisie's parents ("What Maisie Knew").

This is a novel that requires careful reading and attention to the details. This entire novel is a series of set pieces of dialog and 'thought-balloons' that all revolve around a salon of conniving schemers and plotters that are involved in trying to marry off their daughter or guardian to any number of wealthy older men; or, a man who is actively trying to marry one of the young women; or, the man having an affair with one young lady's mother; or, the man trying not to become married to either of the young women; and a kind of creepy much, much older man trying to replace a long-lost love with his quasi-fantasy-based fixation on one of the young women--Miss Fernanda 'Nanda' Brookeham, one of the young heroines of the novel.

It is my understanding that this novel was written shortly after the traumatic experience of his failed play, *Guy Domville* in the London theater in late-1895. The plotting, dialog, and scenes utilized in the novel I think are reflective of James's theatrical experiences, and I frankly don't know that it really helps the novel in the long run. Because of this reliance on dialog and inner thought, this is not a novel that one can read casually, or with the television on in the background, it really does demand one-hundred percent of the reader's concentration. If the reader commits to it in this fashion, he or she will be greatly rewarded as the 'veils are lifted' and one is given a rare glimpse into the day-to-day (and dare I say, at times, tedious) hum-drum of English society in the late-19th century.

I found *The Awkward Age* a fascinating book to read, and certainly one that I will pick up again and find a quiet corner of the world to sit down and re-enter the salon of 'Mrs Brook' and her gaggle of 'hangers on'.

Ángel says

Tenía más expectativas sobre este texto de un joven Henry James y su descubrimiento de Londres en el siglo XIX. Al final, cierto desencanto. Largos párrafos discursivos y de reflexión, hacen que la lectura se vuelva complicada.

Esdaile says

This is an extremely difficult and slow moving novel. It is a novel of transition, transition in several respects too, from the conventional novel to a novel of consciousness of the kind to be expected from say Virginia Woolf. It tells a story but one has the feeling that the story is often the pretext, the line, on which to hang out the linen, some of it less than wholly clean of personal motivation and drive. Apparently it was written in reaction by the writer to his rebuff when his first play was performed. The first of his plays (and the last? I am not sure) to be produced was received with derision by a section of the audience and, so I have read,

Henry James staggered home to begin to write a theatre piece in the disguise of a novel. Certainly, the dialogue dominates to the extent that there is almost no physical description of events and if this is a play, then I suppose it is left to the producer/imagination to conjure up the scenes. I hope I do not anger or irritate anyone by suggesting that it is something of a "ladies' book" being so much of a natter and gossip, so extremely dainty and fastidious in its suggestion of the illicit with so little space for reflection, no space at all. All the time it is as though one hears the giggling of adolescent girls behind a curtain with a forbidden text or pictures in their eager, nervous hands.

The power for me lies in the contrast between the facade of convention and the struggle for position and wealth and satisfaction including erotic satisfaction which is pursued relentlessly under the surface of a placid seeming social pond of polite discourse and appropriate behaviour. The pond is teeming with covetous life. This is a book of conversion too in that people are converted to new positions not of belief but of realisation, about others most especially. There is probably room here for a searing Marxist critique. I do not know if Raymond Williams wrote on this book, but I can well imagine how he might have done. As in Balzac, the striving for possession and security seems to drive the characters relentlessly. I am tempted to give this book only three stars, because I did not at a first read anyway, find the characters for the most part very well delineated but it may be that this would change upon a second read. Above all, the novel is intelligent, so intelligent in fact that it is a little awesome (in the old fashioned sense of that word). It also has little patience with readers with, er... little patience. It requires time and more time. However, I think that time invested will bring a substantial reward to the discerning reader. For each of us to decide how corrupted and corruptible the characters are and how much to blame for their own misdeeds, if the quest for money and possession are after all to be seen as misdeeds and not immortal biologically impelled behaviour.

Rachel says

So...this is not my favorite Henry James book, and I generally love Henry James.

It's not awful, but it's particularly difficult to follow (even for James, who is famously esoteric with his character's thoughts) and just...not terribly interesting.

jennifer says

Damn you, Henry James. I remain a faithful apologist but your social nuance has stopped aging well. The wine's turning to vinegar or something. To be fair, it seems this one's just for the hardest of the hardcore, which makes sense because I didn't understand half of the subtle intrigue going on, or when people in conversations were being wildly controversial or spoiling secrets or just speaking off the cuff. In true Jamesian fashion, the heroine is neither beautiful nor plain but aesthetically captivating for her grace and how she looks like her dead gran, and she's also seemingly vivacious and full of dangerous candor (O! of the times) now that she's been "let out" to sit downstairs and take her own teas and suddenly disappear out into the country with an old man. I think I missed a lot of fun little bits, like her mom is a cougar and totally hates her in a sort of supportive little way.

Anyway, damn you Henry James! You slowed me down.

Lucy says

Let's just say I'm extremely glad I didn't pay for this. I'd have wanted my money back. I've now read all but two of James's novels, and most of them I have awarded top marks - but this was just tosh. Absolute tosh. How the man who wrote 'Princess Casamassima' and 'Portrait of a Lady' could come up with this is beyond me. Did the man not have an editor?

Jackson Cyril says

How can a Henry James novel be dull? Too much conversation, idiotic characters, and a lack of languid description, that's how.

Kurt Reichenbaugh says

Every so often I feel this urge to read something classic to offset the tawdry "dime-store" novels I'm typically devouring. This time it's a novel by Henry James. This was his last novel before James's "final period" of three very difficult and demanding novels.

This book of manners at the end of the the 19th century in London isn't something I'd recommend to anyone who isn't already familiar with Henry James. It's an exercise in style over plot. In this case, exploring a corrupt social circle of friends almost entirely through dialog. Which means lots and lots of talking around the plot instead of getting to the meat of it. It's a book that demands a lot from the reader.

This is a book best appreciated by English literature professors or English majors. I can't imagine anyone else happily subjecting themselves to such a difficult and somewhat less than rewarding book. I'm not sure why I did it. But there you are, as James would say.

Camilla Tilly says

Donna Leon has "Commissario Brunetti's" wife "Paola" worship Henry James. So it was with great disappointment that I gave up on this book after 80 pages! My self confidence is completely shattered since I have started doubting my command of the English language!!! It feels like the characters are talking in a code that I am not privy to. The plot line no doubt wants to expose the double moral code of Victorian and Edwardian society, but does it in such a slow and boring way that at least I could not stay awake, feeling that I understood nothing.

In the foreward it says that it's about two girls. The protected Aggie that is kept a pure virgin with no knowledge of ANYTHING till the wedding night and then goes wild with extra-marital affairs and you name it. And then Nanda, that HEARS too much at home and from her friend, what happens in marriage, sothat she no longer is counted as pure enough. Tainted by association, she no longer is marriageable and is taken in by an older man for protection from her adulterous mother and the mother's wicked friends.

I'd rather go to the dentist than finish this book!

Sketchbook says

Henry James loosens the corset of convention in a comedy of ambiguous desires and ambitions. Plenty of matrimonial talk goes round in discreet, repetitive cycles; the tenor is always tender. A vivid worldling of 'a certain age' ponders her daughter's future while manipulating a boring husby, protecting her rotter of a son and managing a beau that the heroine-daughter fancies. Salonistas insist on keeping up appearances. Emotional resolution is offered by a passionate friend, known as 'the old man' -- a Jamesian standin -- who wants someone to love, just as James recognized this deperate need in himself. It's a circus, sighs the hostess, in which they must all perform: "That is how we earn our living." How modern can you get?

Melodee says

Ordinarily, I enjoy a good Henry James book. But this book left me so cold. Ostensibly, it is about a coming-of-age girl and the immoral influences she is surrounded by. The characters are a bit flat, but what irritated me most about the book was certain little catch-phrases the author used to death. Instead of saying, "he said," when a character expressed himself warmly, he always says "he ejaculated." After the third time on one page, it got very annoying. Another term he used, to describe the other person in a conversation besides the speaker was to call him/her the speaker's "interlocutor/interlocutress." This grew extremely old after the fiftieth usage. And finally, if a speaker hesitated, he always says "he hung fire." This was also outrageously overused. And since 92% of the book is dialogue, these phrases came into use way too frequently. I had forgotten how James can elongate a sentence with innumerable parenthetical expressions, and endless commas, until you have quite lost the sense of what he is trying to say. I would not recommend this book to anyone, even people who enjoy a good James novel.

Doreen Petersen says

I really hate giving any book a low rating but this one was really bad. I've tried other Henry James books and only found one I really liked. Not sure if it's the author or me.
