



The Chequer Board (Vintage International)

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John Turner, a young man with a checkered past, has been told he has just one year to live. He decides to use his remaining time in search of three very different men he met in the hospital during the war, each of them in trouble of some kind: a pilot whose wife had betrayed him, a young corporal charged with killing a civilian in a brawl, and a black G.I. wrongly accused of the attempted rape of a white English girl. As Turner discovers where these men have landed on the checkerboard of life, he learns about compassion, tolerance, and second chances, and overcomes his fear of death.

The Chequer Board (Vintage International) Details

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Phil says

Published four years previously, this novel in many aspects anticipates themes developed more fully in "Round the Bend": the necessity of change in traditional British class attitudes following the social upheavals of the Second World War, and the iniquities of and harm caused by racism and prejudices based on skin colour and nationality. It also explores the deepseated changes in people whose lives have been radically transformed by their personal experience of war.

The principal character, Jack Turner, is, as in the later book, a man of undistinguished origins and little education, who has found himself promoted through the fortunes of war to a responsible British Army officer's rank, only to find himself on the wrong side of the law when a dishonest moneymaking scheme - the latest of several, we are given to believe - is discovered and he is disgraced and sent home from his overseas posting for trial. The plane carrying him is shot down, and he suffers a serious shrapnel injury which necessitates hospitalisation. On a guarded ward he becomes acquainted with three other men in varying types of trouble - the pilot of his plane, who has a disastrous marriage; a Marine injured in a street fight in which he killed his adversary; and a black American GI who has attempted suicide after being accused of the attempted rape of a white woman. Three years later, after the end of the War and once more at liberty, he learns that his inoperable injury is causing progressive and fatal neurological damage, and conceives the notion of seeking out his hospital companions to find out what has happened to them before he dies.

The rest of the book deals, therefore, with the particular consequences of each man's personal circumstances both during and after the War. The pilot, Philip Morgan, betrayed by his cynical and selfish wife during his absence on service, has found himself in Burma where, shot down again, he befriends a group of local partisans fighting the Japanese invaders, while remaining deeply suspicious of their former British imperial rulers. He finds himself greatly in sympathy with their culture and religion, and falls in love with a young woman there. After the war and his repatriation he makes his way back and enters wholeheartedly into the life of this new home, overcoming in himself the ingrained colonial and ethnic prejudices of his background, and finding the stability and moral values of Burmese society far more congenial than that from which he has come. This is where Turner finds him, and it serves as an education to him as well. Although Turner himself is not portrayed as a man of much imagination or ambition, he has learnt a tolerance and openmindedness, perhaps as a result of his impending death, which enable him to sympathise with everyone with whom he comes into contact. A local Buddhist holy man proclaims him a genuinely good man, although the reader knows that Turner would have absolutely no idea why he should deserve that estimation.

The story of Dave Lesurier, the black GI, is without doubt the most distressing, and also the most difficult for a modern reader to take in. He is frequently referred to, even by those sympathetic to him, as 'the nigger', which, although it would have been a fairly common and thoughtless way for a white to describe a black person at the time, Shute almost certainly uses in a way which acknowledges its callous, objectifying, demeaning nature. The crime of which Lesurier is accused consists in nothing more than trying somewhat clumsily to kiss an inexperienced young woman with whom he has become infatuated, an incident deliberately and maliciously exaggerated and spun into something it was not by white Military Police officers determined to maintain segregation of black and white soldiers even in a civilian setting in the UK. The contrast between the racial attitudes prevalent among his fellow-countrymen, and the lack of these in a Cornish village which had probably never encountered black people before, forms the background to this story. The good-natured stubbornness of the local pub landlord, who refuses to agree to the 'colour bar'

demanding by the US military authorities, and bans white soldiers from his premises instead, on the grounds that they behave badly in the presence of their black colleagues, is a touch of comic lightness in a serious situation.

The third man sought by Turner, Duggie Brent, does not get as much attention from Shute as the others, but his case is one that is nevertheless presented as relevant to what must have been the experience of many servicemen both during and immediately after the war. As a commando, he has been trained to kill unreflectingly in unarmed combat, a technique which makes him an efficient soldier but, in a non-combat situation, greatly blurs the line between intention and recklessness which distinguishes murder from manslaughter.

This, then, is, as always with Shute, a thoughtful and humane novel of flawed people and hard experience. Concentrating as it does on individual, localised experience, it shows their specific, practical responses to their conditions - not always clear-sighted, sometimes mistaken, but always believable. Nevil Shute had a great gift for making optimism convincing.

Bill says

The more books by Nevil Shute that I read, the more I come to recognize that he is one of the best story-tellers ever. I've enjoyed so many of his books so far; *The Far Country*, *On the Beach*, *Pied Piper*, etc and as I've been slowly exploring his works, I'm enjoying him more than ever.

The Chequer Board, published originally in 1947 was no exception. It is set after WWII and tells the story of Capt (Ret'd) Turner. Turner was injured during the war, while on a flight from Africa to England to be tried for black marketeering. On the flight were other personnel, including a Negro American soldier (on his way to be tried for attempted rape), a young English Commando (on his way for court martial for murder) and the English co-pilot. These four survive the attack by German fighters.

After the war, Turner is now being treated for the effects caused by his injuries (pieces of shrapnel still lodged in his brain). He is told that nothing can be done due to the location of the shrapnel and he has maybe a year to live. This starts Turner on a journey to find the other three men, all of whom kept him company while he recovered from his surgeries, and all of whom have moved on.

It's a simple story, but the journey to find out what happened to these men and the internal journey of Turner, his past, his relationship with his wife, etc, makes for a fascinating and at times very emotional story.

There are other issues that are touched on; the treatment of African - Americans in the US military, how the English impacted those countries that they ruled over, etc, but it is the stories of each man that is so interesting and the emotional stories as well. Shute has such a knack for addressing these emotional touches, that you probably don't realize how much you have found yourself becoming involved in the sub-stories, until the end. I do find that this story, like so many others Shute stories I've read, always strike my heart and soul, lovely to read and to think about. (5 stars)

Fredrick Danysh says

Learning that he only has a year to live, John Turner sets out on a quest to find three men that he met in a hospital during the war. Along the way he learns of compassion, tolerance, and second chances.

Patrick says

I have read quite a bit of Nevil Shute in the last few years, in part because the stories are very enjoyable, and in part because his characters have a romantic and very attractive quality about them. They are good people.

This story more than any other makes me wish I could have met the man and understood how he became such an unusual and frankly progressive voice.

Reading this book today, some might be put off by some language (liberal use of the N word by white characters) but it is an honest portrayal of mid-20th century language in small town UK. Others might find the story romantic to the point of sounding like a Pollyanna, until you recall that it was written in the late 1940's. His ideas about race and the ultimate unimportance of race when it comes to personal friendships were so far ahead of his time that I am curious to know how it was received then. According to one article, "In a letter written just before his death in 1960, Mr. Shute admits he thought that his handling of the racial issues would ruin book sales in America". Apparently it did not, which in itself would be an interesting story.

I highly recommend this book, and wish it were among the canon for Black History Month.

Indrani Sen says

A lovely little book on how life deals with 4 down-on-luck young men who were together in a hospital. Brings your faith back on humanity and second chances. This is my first book by Nevil Shute. He has a very pleasing way of writing and the story moves forward smoothly. The characters are well drawn and they pull you in.

Vikas Datta says

Absolutely brilliant tale of a man with little time left going to see if his companions in a sordid wartime episode need any help and getting surprised by what he finds... Mr Shute has spun a rivetting, heart-warming tale of attitudes, overcoming fears of morbidity, second chances and attempts at redemption for even a less than stellar character, which brings to fore some unforgettable glimpses of war and its effects - while his handling of race relations (considering the book was written in 1947) were most enlightened.... Very readable and memorable...

Rebecca says

A brilliant read. Loved every bit of it. I still treasure my memories of A Town Like Alice which I read back in my teens. That and the blurb prompted me to BR this. I read it in paperback with a beautiful red cover which added to the pleasure.

The storyline is simple. A man who is given only a few more months to live by his doctors goes in search of some comrades who had shared bad times with him. This is their story as well as his and each one had its charm. I thought that the Burmese woman had traces of the heroine in A Town Like Alice. My type of book.

Peter says

Warning....if you are uncomfortable with seeing the N-word in print, then you might struggle at times with this book. But it's only ever used to reveal prejudice and 1940s racial attitudes in America. Don't be put off or you will miss a little-known gem. I'd frankly never heard of this book until I started my current trawl through the Shute canon but I am delighted to have found it. This is a set of morality tales on a Chaucerian scale. Based on 4 disparate servicemen who end up in the same ward of a Cornish hospital, Chequer Board (2 of the characters play draughts, or chequers, in an allegorical reference to the book's inter-racial themes) tells their stories and that of several other minor characters during and after WW2. The action switches from isolated English villages through London suburbs to the Bay of Bengal and the jungles of Burma to point up a series of examples of why the least interesting thing about any of us is our skin colour or our tribal background. At times I felt this seemed a radical and untypical work for an author who came from a background of wealth and privilege.....or are my own prejudices showing?

Algernon says

*'Tis all a Chequer-board of Nights and Days
Where Destiny with Men for Pieces plays:
Hither and thither moves, and mates, and slays,
And one by one back in the Closet lays.*
Omar Khayyam - Rubayat

What would you do if you were told all of a sudden that you have only one year left to live? For many years I thought that Akira Kurosawa has given the best answer with his movie "Ikiru". Turns out he has a challenger, at least by my reckoning, in this slim novel published five years before the Japanese movie's premiere [1947].

Framed between two visits to a neurosurgeon, this is the story of James 'Jacky' Turner, and of how he spent the last year of his life. It is also a powerful condemnation of racism and prejudice, of separating people in black or white, good or bad, based on their skin colour, religion or social standing.

It all starts with World War Two, the cataclysmic event that did more than pitch armies against each other - a war that made people question and reject the old rigid social order that paved the way to the conflict, a war that made people search for answers in different places and different ideologies. In the particular case of Jacky Turner, the war put him in hospital with a grievous head wound when the plane that was bringing him from Africa to England is shot down over the Channel. He shares the ward with three other wounded men:

They were a bloody miserable lot - the miserablest lot of men I ever saw. But they were good to me. [...] They were sort of kind, do anything for me, they would. I reckon that I might have passed out that time, spite of all the doctors and the nurses, if it hadn't for them chaps sitting with me, talking. God knows they had

enough troubles of their own, but they got time for me in spite of everything.

One of them was a nigger from America. The last one to go out. He was the only one I ever see clearly - Dave Lesurier, his name was. Then there was Duggie Brent - he was a corporal in the paratroops. And then there was the pilot of the aeroplane, the second pilot I should say - Flying Officer Morgan. We was all in a mess one way or another excepting him, and yet in some ways he was in a worse mess than the lot of us.

Years after the war, Jackie's wound starts to give him trouble, and when the doctor gives him the bad news, Jackie's first thought is for his cantankerous wife, and his second for the men that treated him well in his hour of need. He's lost track of them and now he wonders if he could not somehow repay their kindness with help from his modest life savings. Later in the novel, a Buddhist priest will express the reason I cared so much about this simple man who is a bit of a crook, who loves beer and telling dirty anecdotes in the pub, plays a weekly game of football pool and tends to doze in the afternoon in his small back garden with a newspaper over his face:

He is a good man, and will climb up to the Six Blissful Seats. He has known sin and trouble and it has not made him bitter; he has known sorrow and it has not made him sad. In these last months that have been granted to him he is trying to do good, not to avoid damnation, for he has no such beliefs, but for sheer love of good.

The quote also serves to explain why Nevil Shute sits at the top of my favorite authors list, and will likely remain there for the indefinite future. His heroes might be fictional, but they are people I would be proud to emulate and to call my friends - compassionate, instinctively doing the right thing, reliable, modest. Shute also writes some of the saddest yet most convincing love stories I have ever read. He believes that we show our truest nature not in our moments of happiness, but in the hour of strife. Grace Trefusis, one of the four women that will redeem the sins of their men in the novel, underlines this basic tenet of the writer's credo:

I don't think trouble hurts people so much. I think it kind of brings out what's best in them, don't you?

Through the quest of Jackie Turner to atone for his past indifference, we will learn the stories of each of the other three men that shared his hospital room in the war, and of how they dealt with the troubles they had at the time.

Morgan, the surviving pilot of the plane and the only one of them not under arrest, was unhappily married to a beautiful actress of loose morals and expensive habits. Jackie tracks him down to what was still called Burma in 1947. According to his bitter mother, Morgan is a lost soul who lives in poverty with a 'darkie' (a local girl). The story arc, entertaining and informative on the subject of the Burma campaign towards the end of the war, serves even better as an expose of the prejudice the arrogant British upper class held towards their foreign subjects. It also touches on another theme dear to the author - inter-religious tolerance and respect for alternative beliefs. The interest in Oriental mysticism and reincarnation predates the Flower-Power fad by about two decades:

We have five elementary commandments; if you break them you will be reborn into a lower scale of life. You must not kill any living creature at all, you must not lie, you must not steal, you must not commit adultery, you must not touch any intoxicating drink. Those are the minimum commandments, the ones that everybody must observe if he wants to avoid being reborn as an animal. If you want to go forward you must do much more than that. explains Nay Htohn, the 'darkie' girl who is nothing like what Morgan's mother imagined.

An even deeper shade of discrimination is revealed in the story of Dave Lesurier, a black American soldier

who was in hospital after an attempt to cut his own throat. I will try to be as vague as possible about the reasons for his despair, but it has to do with a young and shy English girl and with a white supremacist commander in his Unit. Nevil Shute points out in no uncertain terms the differences in attitude between the local villagers and the American officers from the Deep South. He is also careful not to condemn the whole allied country because of the actions of those bad apples.

A less clear-cut case is reserved for the last man in the ward, Duggie Brent, a paratrooper accused of murder, a crime that he actually committed, just like Jackie Turner was guilty of the charges of stealing from the Army supplies. The defense of Duggie rests on a controversial (for me) thesis that the war is responsible for exacerbating and encouraging normal young men to become unquestioning and instinctive killers. Before his temper snapped in a barroom fight, Duggie had been through several specialized training courses as an elite commando. Thinking of the incredibly large number of soldiers who return from the present day wars with PTSD and of the number of suicides among them, Nevil Shute's line of defense doesn't seem as far fetched as initially considered.

So far, I have focused on leaving the scene of life with dignity and on the various prejudices that drive us apart. I would like to finish my review on a more uplifting note, giving the women of the story their due for keeping the home fires burning and for their quiet, enduring strength of character. With his usual delicate touch when it comes to the most intimate exchanges between the sexes, Nevil Shute draws parallels between four women from different parts of the world and different social backgrounds, linking them through a common passion for American movies and for taking care of things that grow, like gardens and children.

Since I mentioned in my introduction 'Ikiru', I say goodbye to Jackie Turner with a peaceful image, an echo of Mr. Watanabe swinging in an empty playground on a snowy night.

They sat there on the lawn in the warm summer night, in the quiet grace of the moon, and the stars faint in the bright light. It was windless, still, and silent. Around them, in the dormitory suburb, the world slept.

Nancy says

Loved this!

Michael says

I thoroughly enjoyed this story and Nevil Shute has used a pleasing technique to create this novel. It begins in a brain surgeons consulting rooms in England and he is visited by an ex-Army officer. It turns out that he was one of four men who were together for a short period of time in a hospital ward in England, following the crash-landing of an aircraft which occurred during WW2. Each of the men has a story and our ex-Army officer becomes the main character as he seeks to track down the other three and he has a very good reason to do so. One of the men now lives in Burma and our officer becomes rash enough to decide to fly there by flying-boat and see if he can locate him. Life in Burma is a completely new experience for him and it is well described. The man in Burma in his turn becomes the first person and we become involved with his life. Our

ex-officer returns to the UK and we then have two further characters and their first-person stories. We also encounter the US armed forces living in a village in England as they build a new airport during the war. This exposes racial tensions, particularly amongst the Americans themselves. All links together in a very well-rounded story. This was the best of the set of stories by Nevil Shute that I read.

Nancy says

It seems that every book I read by this author is better than the ones before. That's probably not true since I have thoroughly enjoyed all of them, including this gem. So far I have never been disappointed and plan to listen to all that are recorded as audiobooks. Perhaps, if I can ever find time to sit down and actually read a print book, I'll delve into even those that are not.

I am always sorry when I finish a Nevil Shute novel even though I compulsively listen as often and as long as I can which causes me to leave these wonderful characters sooner than I would like. And yet, each tale ends as it must and at the proper time. This one did as well.

What a treasured legacy this author has left, for me at least!

Meghan says

I LOVE NEVIL SHUTE

Alice says

A man dying from a head wound received in the war decides to spend his last months tracking down the three men who were in hospital with him after he received it. That's the starting point, but this is a novel about race, relationships, and the wider world outside England. A very important book for 1947, when it was first published; just as much so in the Sixties of the edition I read, and indeed today.

Bettie? says

Description: John Turner, a young man with a checkered past, has been told he has just one year to live. He decides to use his remaining time in search of three very different men he met in the hospital during the war, each of them in trouble of some kind: a pilot whose wife had betrayed him, a young corporal charged with killing a civilian in a brawl, and a black G.I. wrongly accused of the attempted rape of a white English girl. As Turner discovers where these men have landed on the checkerboard of life, he learns about compassion, tolerance, and second chances, and overcomes his fear of death.

TF An Old Captivity (1940)

TF Pied Piper (1942)
TF Pastoral (1944)
TF Most Secret (1945)
CR The Chequer Board (1947)
3* No Highway (1948)
4* A Town Like Alice (1950)
3* Round the Bend (1951)
3* The Far Country (1952)
TF In the Wet (1953)
3* Requiem for a Wren (1955)
4* Beyond The Black Stump (1956)
4* On the Beach(1957)
5* Trustee from the Toolroom (1960)
