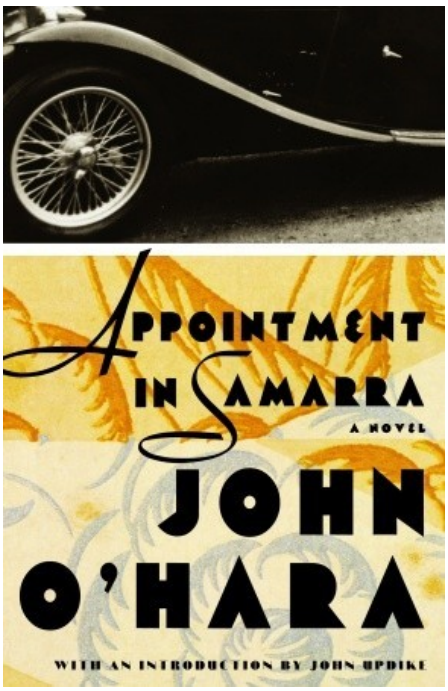

Appointment in Samarra

John O'Hara

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Appointment in Samarra John O'Hara
O’Hara did for fictional Gibbsville, Pennsylvania what Faulkner did for Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi: surveyed its social life and drew its psychic outlines, but he did it in utterly worldly terms, without Faulkner’s taste for mythic inference or the basso profundo of his prose. Julian English is a man who squanders what fate gave him. He lives on the right side of the tracks, with a country club membership and a wife who loves him. His decline and fall, over the course of just 72 hours around Christmas, is a matter of too much spending, too much liquor, and a couple of reckless gestures. That his calamity is petty and preventable only makes it more powerful. In Faulkner, the tragedies all seem to be taking place on Olympus, even when they’re happening among the low-lifes. In O’Hara, they could be happening to you.

Appointment in Samarra Details

Date	:	Published July 8th 2003 by Vintage (first published 1934)
ISBN	:	9780375719202
Author	:	John O'Hara
Format	:	Paperback 251 pages
Genre	:	Fiction, Classics, Novels, Literature

From Reader Review Appointment in Samarra for online ebook

David Lentz says

O'Hara's distinctive literary voice is both unique and disarming. For the first hundred pages I was unsure that O'Hara was even a competent writer, nevermind author of one of the century's great novels. His narrative technique and dialogue both are steeped in the jargon of his heyday, Prohibition Era, small town America. But O'Hara deals with big themes and the idiom of his day becomes secondary. He seems to want to take on big questions: why is the moth so driven to the flame? Why do we so willingly capitulate to baser instincts? Why can't we be satisfied, even happy with what we have? Why are we so often driven for more? More of what? At what price? Why are human beings insatiable? Julian English is an affluent man in his early thirties with a going business, a beautiful wife, Caroline, and social status in Gibbsville, a small town north and west of Philadelphia in Pennsylvania Dutch Country. His alcoholic habits drive him to dismantle every important social relationship in his life until he becomes essentially a social misfit, incapable of decent behavior among his family, friends, peers and colleagues. He seems determined to keep an appointment with death and has a death wish entombed in his heart. O'Hara's brief experimental flights with stream of consciousness propel us into the inner depths of his characters where we can feel their agony. His treatment of big themes with such a natural voice sets O'Hara apart. Be sure to experience this one of a kind American literary voice.

Matt says

pretty darn good minor classic about fitzgerald's famous "lost generation"...I really enjoyed this when I read it a million years ago. I just completely plugged into it and read it till the early hours of the morning. Great platter of minor characters and a well-paced plot leading inevitably to the satiric denouement where the flapping and philosophizing ends in tragedy because the participants lack the necessary self-reflection to understand how existentially unmoored they are in the consumerist society driving them to make the WASP scene with all its concomitant superficiality and repressed mimicry of English gentry: gentility, propriety, conspicuous consumption, etc. Can't fight the fate you lay down, O'Hara seems to be saying, with the transactions and petty (self-) hatreds you build up over a lifetime of glittering, gilded, self obsession....sound relevant, at all, in the slightest bit?

PS: doesn't the guy on the cover of this edition look like maybe late 70's era David Bowie?

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aPriL does feral sometimes says

The stifling atmosphere of small town life is so vividly displayed here that alone made the book difficult for me. I'm not old enough to know what middle class mores were in fact like in the 1930's but many so-called canon Great Books depict the same types of people, occupations and distresses.

The Wasp set of values in vogue in the past, under which the characters in the book must live, struck me as the American version of Victorian values in the earlier era. Julian English's name is a clue to the origin of the social set of rules he is forced to live to earn a living and be respected. He is a car dealer who sells cars from a lot.

Cars are mobile and take you places but everyone in town is in lockdown following scripts of behavior no one dares go rogue from. Julian is a name that echoes Thomas Hardy's Julian who is a character attempting to break the bonds of class holding him down into a preset box of social rules of English society in an earlier century. Cars, a symbol of freedom and escape, is obviously the author's vivid choice of irony for his Julian and this symbol of getting away is literally in English's face every day sitting in his car lot.

He loves his wife but he hates his life. Without the life they have in Gibbsville he loses the wife, economic security, and social position. English's father is the town's doctor who cures everyone's sickness and he wanted Julian to become a doctor. Julian does not want or cannot, more accurately, be that guy. His tragedy is wanting to fit in and be "normal" but being unable because of something inside his mind struggling against Gibbsville. He is no rebel but unfortunately some unconscious part wants desperately to get away.

By the end of the novel Julian has without consciously meaning to begun burning bridges to the life he believes he wants in Gibbsville. Despite his own values and hard work he is unable to force that unconscious part to submit. The tragedy moves to an end to which an unexamined life can lead.

The book is somewhat autobiographical except unlike the author's protagonist John O'Hara very much examines the workings of the human heart. At this book's center is the war between what we want and who we are.

Patrick McCoy says

I have heard a lot of good things about John O’Hara’s first and most popular novel, Appointment in Samarra. So I finally decided to read it. It was quite a revelation-a Fitzgerald-esque depiction of the 30s jazz age lifestyle complete with snappy dialogue, big parties, heavy drinking and other sorts of dissipation. There are bootleggers and gangsters among the upwardly mobile who see this way of life as an entitlement. It is essentially the chronicle of a marriage in decline between the self-destructive Julian English and his somewhat selfish and cold-hearted wife Caroline English. This couple was the center of party on the verge of imploding due to the oncoming depression lingering just around the corner. It seems to me that the Coen brothers must have used this novel as one of their sources for their complex and entertaining film set in the 30s, Miller’s Crossing. I see that expressions like “giving me the high hat” found their way into the dialogue of the Coen brothers' film. Furthermore, there are Irish gangsters, references to Julian losing his hat (a major theme in the film), a gangster boss with an obsession with a less than true mistress, a potentially gay gang lieutenant, and a club manager, Foxie Lebrix, who has an approximation in the film). I really enjoyed the short and powerful novel, and even though it seems that O’Hara never matched this novel, I would read more of his work just to see where he goes from this audacious start.

Mike Moore says

A remarkably succinct novel about social standing, gender relations, economic disadvantage, sex and death.

John O'Hara is often thought a middling writer, but for at least the 200-odd pages of this work he is an absolute master. Covering an astounding panorama of themes and insights into the bourgeoisie population of a small town at the beginning of the depression, his frankness on married life, resentment, criminality, and a dozen other topics that are alternately ignored or aggrandized by other authors is so startling it's almost

poetic. Several times I thought to myself "Yes, that's exactly the way it is, but nobody would write it that way"

Someone asked me if the story was depressing. I would say no, it's neither depressing nor fatalistic. Rather (like the vignette that gives the book its title) it's inexorable yet entirely of the character's own making. A celebration of bad decisions. I would recommend this to anyone who likes "Breaking Bad" as the two works share the same central theme: that actions have consequences.

Doug says

Starting with the novel's opening scene, the frank sexually-oriented passages in Appointment in Samarra were obviously shocking for the times. And the times, the ‘30s (and within the context of lives of well-to-do American country clubbers), are vividly created by John O’Hara, who sources tell us had an agenda in presenting that world in his cynical, yet humorous point of view.

Fran Lebowitz described O’Hara as “the real F. Scott Fitzgerald." I’m not exactly sure what that means (whether dear Fran had her own ax to grind with FSF, or whatever), but AIS is built around the self-destruction of Julian English, Cadillac salesman, who ultimately just gives up on life, drinking himself to oblivion, his journey punctuated by violence and the alienation of all in his sphere.

Like the failure found in The Great Gatsby, the story O’Hara (who felt shut out of the elite world of his day) tells makes JE a victim of that world, and perhaps a martyr to the American ideal of success; also the cause of tragedy (if self-destruction in the form of burning in the crucible of unrequited love of a “rich girl” is a form of self-destruction -- and I think it is) in Gatsby.

Prohibition, the depression, and the fuel that the better-off used to keep their social engine running -- black market booze -- are all featured in O’Hara’s gimlet-eyed portrait. Also, O'Hara's portrait of the American way of courtship and love peel the gilt veneer off the elite, proving that under all the fancy dress and attitude they are somewhat like you and me. But they are rich, so in the final analysis, they must be different.

Margit says

Appointment in Samarra is an American Classic by John O'Hara. He describes the life of a young man in small town America before the Depression who has it all. When he makes a big mistake on Christmas his downward spiral is aided by people and events and shows that it is rather difficult to evade one's fate. This is also implied by the Arabian parable in the beginning of the book.
The book is very well written and , although it is depressing, I enjoyed it very much.

Chrissie says

The book is about three days in the life of Julian English, the 24th, the 25th and the 26th of December 1930. So it is Christmas and during the Prohibition and the Depression. Julian is thirty, lives on the right side of the tracks in the fictional town of Gibbsville, a surrogate for Pottsville in the anthracite coal region of eastern Pennsylvania. He has a wife that loves him, his father is a doctor and he is himself a wealthy car dealer of

Cadillacs. He is a member of the town's most posh country club, and yet he drinks, spends more money than he has and is a rake. He is promiscuous. He is immoral, profligate and rash.

So that is what the story is about, but what made me like it so much? The writing, the characters and that it is so very American.

What we are presented with is real people and real dialogs. OK, the setting is 1930, so the issues are different than those of today. Our IT gadgets and gizmos do not yet exist, but I recognize in what is said the words and language that shaped my parents, my childhood and myself. The expressions and language and habits are genuine not to my life but to the generation that shaped my parents. The cocktail before dinner, the partying and that intimate but not-so-honest talk between mother and wedded daughter. The advice given by mother to daughter, what is avoided and what is not said made me smile--different form our times but true to earlier times. I liked all of this .I think it is something you will appreciate if you are or have American background.

I came to care for Julian English. I came to understand him and his wife and to feel empathy for him!

The audiobook is very well narrated by Christian Camargo, although a bit fast in the beginning when many names and characters are thrown at you. I had difficulty keeping track of who was who, but that straightens out by the end. I have given the narration four stars.

I will speak now of the title, Appointment in Samarra and the epigraph with which O'Hara's story begins. (My source is Wiki.) The title and the epigraph are in reference to W. Somerset Maugham's retelling of an ancient Mesopotamian tale in his play *Sheppey*. The epigraph that begins the novel is this:

"A merchant in Baghdad sends his servant to the marketplace for provisions. Soon afterwards, the servant comes home white and trembling and tells him that in the marketplace he was jostled by a woman, whom he recognized as Death and she made a threatening gesture. Borrowing the merchant's horse, he flees at great speed to Samarra, a distance of about 75 miles (125 km), where he believes Death will not find him. The merchant then goes to the marketplace and finds Death and asks why she made the threatening gesture. She replies, 'That was not a threatening gesture, it was only a start of surprise. I was astonished to see him in Baghdad, for I had an appointment with him tonight in Samarra.'"

Thus the epigraph suggests that fate is central to the story's theme. In the foreword to the book's 1953 reprint, O'Hara stated that the title and the epigraph speak of the "inevitability of Julian English's (view spoiler)." All of this I find interesting and so have included this information here. One can ask if it is fate that has determined Julian English's outcome or if it is his personality and temperament.

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I preferred O'Hara's BUtterfield 8 a bit more because it so wonderfully captures NYC. Both are definitely worth reading.

Teresa Proença says

Segundo a sinopse, **Encontro em Samarra** é um clássico da literatura norte-americana, com momentos de humor negro (pelos quais me "pelo", mas que aqui me escaparam).

Comprei-o porque consta da lista *Time Magazine's All-Time 100 Novels*.
Li-o porque um utilizador do Goodreads, cujo gosto literário é muito semelhante ao meu, o classificou com 5 estrelas.
Mas não gostei.
- Porque o desenvolvimento do enredo não me despertou qualquer interesse - as consequências para a vida de um homem que, por impulso, atirou um copo com *whisky* à cara de outro, cuja conversa o irritava -;
- porque tem muitas festas (e festas...nem na leitura as aguento);
- porque as personagens são tantas que, a certa altura, me perdi e a leitura tornou-se fastidiosa.

Às duas estrelas que definem o "não gostei", acrescento uma de bónus, porque fiquei a pensar que deveria corrigir este meu defeito de estar sempre a "atirar com copos de vinagre à cara" de quem me irrita, se não qualquer dia ainda vou ter um triste fim...

Armin Hennig says

Erster Versuch, inzwischen gibt es eine zweite Rezi von mir, die ich persönlich für gelungener halte.
https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...

Der Autor wird gern als *the real F. Scott Fitzgerald* gepriesen, dank meiner Schwäche für unterschätzte Genies hatte das Buch bei mir einen Riesenbonus, der sich am Ende eher als Mühlstein erweisen sollte, dabei fing alles so gut an.
Mit einem programmatischen Zitat von Somerset Maugham, das den Titel als Verabredung mit dem Tod erklärte. In der alten Legende flüchtet ein Mann nach Samarra, weil er den Tod auf dem Marktplatz getroffen hat. Der Tod wiederum wundert sich, dass der Mann, mit dem er am Abend eine Verabredung in Samarra hat, auf dem Markt von Bagdad über den Weg gelaufen ist. Bei Maugham ist ein Mann in das Verderben geflüchtet, dem er entkommen wollte.
Eine Flucht in den Tod beschreibt der Roman von John O' Hara nicht unbedingt, das Buch entfaltet zunächst das breite gesellschaftliche Tableau von Gibbsville, Pennsylvania an einem Weihnachtsfest in der Schlussphase der Prohibition in mehreren Handlungssträngen. Einer spielt im Country-Club wo Julien English, der gewissermaßen zum Patriziat von Gibbsville gehört, dem einflussreichen Emporkömmling Harry Reilly ein Glas Whiskey ins Gesicht kippt, als der mal wieder seine ollen Kamellen zum Besten gibt. Der aus Überdruss begangene Angriff auf einen ziemlich nachtragenden Mann, dem der nicht allzu geschäftstüchgtige Cadillac-Händler eine große Summe Geld schuldet, ist der Beginn einer vom Alkohol befeuerten Abwärtsspirale, in deren Verlauf es sich der allseits beliebte Julien English mit allen maßgeblichen Leuten verscherzt, einschließlich der eigenen Ehefrau, die ihn am zweiten Weihnachtsfeiertag sitzen lässt, nachdem ihr Julien mit der aktuellen Favoritin des obersten Schnapsbosses vor die Tür gegangen ist. Keine Stunde nachdem seine Frau die winterlichen Schmusegelüste ihres Gatten im Auto abgewehrt hat. Zwischen der kräftig dekolletierten Barfrau und dem Besoffenen läuft zwar nichts, aber der Schein spricht gegen die beiden.
Insofern zieht der im Dauersuff durch die Feiertage fahrende Cadillac-Händler doch eine nicht unerhebliche Vernichtungsspur hinter sich her, auch wenn er niemanden an- oder überfährt, obwohl man ihn nach heutigen Maßstäben nicht einmal vor der ersten Station ans Steuer lassen dürfte.

Am Ende sorgt Julien mit viel Korn und Whiskey und dem laufenden Motor seines Cadillac noch vor Neujahr für seine Verabredung in Samarra.
Eine echte Leidenstour mit existenziellen Nöten bleibt ihm und den Lesern also erspart. Nach paar

sympathischen Gedenkminuten bricht der großartig begonnene Roman leider ab, das weitere Leben der anderen Charaktere ist kein Thema, das mehr als ein paar Zeilen wert ist.

Beim Lesen des Buchs wird nicht so recht nachvollziehbar, warum alle Julien so sympathisch finden sollen, in seinem Status als gebrochener Held und Vertreter der Lost Generation ist er natürlich ein Verwandter der Figuren F. Scott Fitzgeralds, allerdings geht O' Hara (zumindest in diesem Buch) die stilistische Eleganz der prominenteren Vergleichsgröße ab. Der Verabredung in Samarra fehlt es an Tiefe, Magie und echter Tragik. Es fällt einem schwer um Julien English zu trauern oder in seinem vorzeitig beendeten Leben eine vertane Chance zu sehen, der Mann ist ein Totalversager in jedem Bereich des Lebens, auch wenn es anscheinend keiner so richtig wahrhaben will, - außer dem Einarmigen Weltkriegs-Veteranen Froggy, der den Drückeberger nie so recht leiden konnte, aber gute Miene zum bösen Spiel gemacht hat, so lange Julien ein gewisses Ansehen genoss.
Die Verengung des erzählerischen Horizonts auf Julien, der mehr und mehr den Kontakt zu den gesellschaftlichen Realitäten verliert, ist ein gelungener erzählerischer Kunstgriff, der mir allerdings zu sehr auf Kosten der anderen lieb gewonnen Personen des breiten Panoramas geht.
Am Ende von *Träume auf der Terrasse* ist der Held, dessen Wege sich mehrfach mit denen Juliens kreuzen, doppelt so alt, das Buch ist mehr als vier mal so Dick (1200 große, eng bedruckte Seiten) als Treffpunkt Samarra. Im Verlauf seine späteren Versuchs dem tragischen Helden seines Erstlings besser gerecht zu werden und den sympathischen Julien zu zeigen, verfällt O'Hara in dieselben Fehler, das Panorama verengt sich mehr und mehr. Bei einem derartigen Großformat braucht O' Hara immerhin keine Vergleiche mit F. Scott Fitzgerald zu fürchten.

Jay says

My my. There's something about the pleasantville genre that never quite sat square with me- the difference between the public persona and the ineffable "self" that makes a mess of so much decorum. Well, no shit. Writing after 1968 affords us that judgement.

But here's John O'Hara, writing over the winter, publishing in '34. His apparently bibulous inclinations makes him one of the best writers about character and drink, at least on a technical level. But this portrait of a small town built on a dying industry, filled with faceless bourgeois that won't admit to the great depression, is enough to make you want to stay in a big city forever.

But who wouldn't unravel when the best anyone can do to distinguish you from anyone else holding highballs in the smoking room at the club, the 50 people in your universe, even your spouse, is that which "everyone else was not?" When all you are to them is a last name in conversation, with all its local history, passed in an unending string of other last names with local histories?

And somehow, the hollow comport maintains itself, even with the aberrant scandals that seem so much part and parcel to the lifestyle: infidelity, fraud, or even throwing a drink in someone's face.

If a car is the status symbol of consumer society, the salesman -who's just some salesman, after all- determines who's who and says what's what; the cars themselves will be all we have left to hold onto.

It's sad. It's not for newlyweds. It assures you that 1934 really was as fucked up (racist, misogynist, anti-Semitic) as you thought. Maybe its just O'Hara. Either way, after reading this, Gatsby isn't the only book of

its type.

Alex says

It seems like *Appointment in Samarra* (SOM-a-rah) is going to be another one of those light comedies about silly rich people, the kind we've seen quite enough of already thank you - and then it gets close and slips the knife in.

Julian English is a useless person: an idle rich loser who drinks too much. One night he throws a drink into some other idle loser's face. Predictable social difficulties ensue.

But mistake is compounded on mistake. He *is* a useless person. He is of no use. It's one of your better fictional slaps in the face when he - and you - suddenly realize that this isn't funny.

(view spoiler)

I wasn't ready for how tricky this book turned out to be, and it might be one that benefits from a re-read. I'd like to see how carefully O'Hara really set it up. Maybe the lengthy backstory interludes (including Caroline's entire sexual history) would make more sense. O'Hara has been called "the real Fitzgerald," which is funny; both of them deal with uselessness, but O'Hara seems meaner. The result is somewhere between very good and great.

Gabriele says

Mi piace pensare che questo "*Appuntamento a Samarra*" sia il giusto punto d'unione fra due grandi libri della letteratura americana del secolo appena trascorso, ovvero "*Il grande Gatsby*" di Fitzgerald e "*Revolutionary Road*" di Yates, due libri con cui condivide molto, dall'ambientazione fino alle vicende raccontate. Potrebbe sembrare un'affermazione azzardata ai lettori italiani, visto che questo libro di John O'Hara è praticamente sconosciuto e introvabile nelle nostre librerie (pubblicato negli anni '80 dalla Mondadori, è stato riproposto nel 2005 dalla Minimum Fax, ma oggi è tristemente fuori catalogo), eppure questo libro qui oltreoceano di fortuna ne ha avuta, e direi anche a ragione. Personalmente posso dire che mi aspettavo un libro discreto, e invece ho trovato un gran bel libro.

Partiamo dai due romanzi citati sopra: cosa hanno in comune con "*Appuntamento a Samarra*"? Presto detto: O'Hara ambienta la sua vicenda in un piccolo paesino immaginario della Pennsylvania, Gibbsville, meno di 25mila anime, dove tutti più o meno si conoscono e dove anche un semplice party diventa notizia per il giornale locale. La nostra attenzione si concentra proprio sulla parte più in vista della società di questo paesino, su quei "borghesi di provincia" che in tempo di proibizionismo cercano di svagarsi nel migliore dei modi, fra party, club privati ed esclusivi, ostentazioni di ricchezza e macchine lussuose. Siamo nel Natale del 1930: le vite dei tanti personaggi di questa cittadina si intrecciano nei festeggiamenti, e in particolare è il giovane Julian English ad essere in primo piano. Trentenne, sposato con quella che è considerata una delle più splendide ragazze di Gibbsville, figlio di un facoltoso medico e a capo di una concessionaria che noleggia delle lussuose Cadillac, English sembra aver avuto tutto dalla vita. Eppure, nei tre giorni che separano Natale dal nuovo anno, attorno a lui qualcosa inizia a scricchiolare: serata dopo serata, vicenda dopo vicenda, O'Hara ci racconta la distruzione di quella che poteva essere una vita felice e spensierata.

Vengono così allo scoperto tutte le ipocrisie e le incoerenze dei personaggi che popolano questa cittadina, i sottili intrecci e i giochi di potere di questi borghesi arricchiti, i rancori e i pettegolezzi, fino ad un epilogo inaspettato e scioccante in cui si assiste all'autodistruzione del giovane English.

Chi ha letto Fitzgerald e Yates avrà già praticamente trovato molto dei loro romanzi in questo brevissimo riassunto, dai sogni di una vita lussuosa e senza impedimenti al triste declino davanti alla realtà della situazione. Ma anche l'alcool, visto come mezzo di contrasto al male di vivere, e i rapporti coniugali ed extra-coniugali, dal moralismo facile ai rapporti libertini. La differenza con i suoi colleghi O'Hara la presenta con il suo modo di raccontare. Per prima cosa, O'Hara non ha la "levigatezza" di un Fitzgerald, ma piuttosto la crudezza di un Hemingway e la semplicità di uno Yeates — testimoni ne sono i tantissimi dialoghi di poche battute, assolutamente realistici e spesso taglienti nel loro sarcasmo. Poi c'è il suo concentrarsi non unicamente sui due o tre protagonisti della sua storia, ma piuttosto su un microcosmo costituito praticamente da tutta la cittadina. La grandezza di "*Appuntamento a Samarra*" sta proprio in un modo di raccontare che procede saltando da un personaggio all'altro, introducendone spesso di nuovi e rendendoli protagonisti anche solo per poche pagine. Tanti sono poi i flashback che vanno a raccontarci il loro passato: si scava così nei trascorsi, spesso inaspettati, dei protagonisti, arricchendo ulteriormente di spessore questi "burattini" mossi all'interno di Gibbsville. È un modo di procedere nel racconto che, se da una parte presenta comunque una vicenda per il lettore alla ricerca di una storia avvincente, dall'altra riesce a rappresentare la vita di provincia fra le due Grandi Guerre, una vita che O'Hara conosceva bene. Abbiamo così uno spaccato assolutamente vivido dell'America degli anni '30, uno spaccato che volutamente non viene chiuso da O'Hara: se la vicenda di Julian English ha un epilogo, tutti i personaggi che ruotano attorno a lui rimangono in sospeso con le loro vicende, i loro sotterfugi, intrighi e quant'altro, lasciando al lettore campo libero sui possibili intrecci fra i vari protagonisti.

"*Appuntamento a Samarra*" è un grande libro, assolutamente consigliato agli appassionati di letteratura americana. Quattro stelle piene, sperando in una ristampa che lo riporti all'attenzione dei lettori come successo recentemente con Malamud e con lo stesso Yates.

Tony says

APPOINTMENT IN SAMARRA. (1934). John O’Hara. *****.
I like to go back and re-read books that I have read years and years ago that I only remember as being really good at the time. I first read this first novel by O’Hara in the late 1950s, when I was in high school. I was in school in Philadelphia, so was familiar with the setting of the story – the anthracite coal region. The town in the novel was called Gibbsville, a thinly veiled reference to O’Hara’s home town of Pottsville, PA. His characters were also relatively easily identified with the residents of the time. O’Hara was not very kind to or with his characterizations, and the novel created an uproar in the region. It was an expose of the small-town mentality and ethics in the early 1930s. Money and prestige were the two main goals of the residents of the town. Those with money were sure to keep themselves well apart from those without. One of the ways this was done was to frequent the local country club. Membership was closely controlled; no Jews were allowed. Being a member opened up the various activities it sponsored to all the right people. One of the right people we meet is Julien English. Julien was the owner of the town’s Cadillac franchise. He did his best to maintain appearances, but was skirting near the edge in this time of economic depression. Julien, like most of the other male members of the club, drank to excess. Affairs at the club usually ended with surrogate drivers taking members home – usually after an evening of trading subtle insults and flirting with the other mens’ wives. The key incident from which the story flows is the time that Julien tosses a drink into the face of Harry Reilly. Harry Reilly was not a bad sort, but he had the habit of telling the same jokes over and over. Julien,

after too many drinks, decided he had enough. This one act goes on to expose the hypocrisy of the members of the club, and to threaten the stability of the whole town’s social structure. If you start with Thoreau’s premise that “most men live lives of quiet desperation,” we soon learn that Julien has reached his breaking point. We also learn that people are not who they seem to be when faced with disruptions like this. This was a fantastic novel when I first read it, and it is still fantastic today. Highly recommended.

Rolls says

This is on The Modern Libraries Top 100 Novels? I can see no reason why. It's a good book - but top 100? Come on! This should be like # 552 on a list of the 1000 best novels.

Claire says

Like The Great Gatsby but much much better.

Michael says

O'Hara is neglected today -- maybe he was so ferociously accurate about his own time that he wrote himself out of the public mind. Who wants to keep getting their fingers burned, picking up each new book? Besides, as he aged, he got cranky and "prolix," as someone once put it, probably Updike. *Appointment in Samarra* is a tiny bit childish at the very beginning, when it feels like high school; but very soon the characters march righteously off the page and into your mundane, what'sforlunch consciousness. Very alarming! You have to finish reading the book or they will take over everything! O'Hara was a genius with his people; he gets them all, male, female, rich, poor, in-between. Is this, his first novel, the greatest plot? No. Is it more character-driven? Good golly, miss Molly, yes. I was especially taken with protagonist Julian English's wife. Caroline English is a tremendous creation, I think. Oh, yes, the book is all about sex, starting on the first page. Very grown-up with that, too, which I'm not sure he always was.

I was reading it in tandem with another book written simultaneously -- Steinbeck's *To a God Unknown*, which was published in 1933, *Samarra* in 1934. That was the pit of the Depression, and both books are imbued with that time while scarcely mentioning it directly. That aspect is fascinating. Steinbeck's second book, whose dialogue is as lame and clunky as O'Hara's is accurate and zingy, is also all about sex in a different way. I'm wondering if there is a connection between those facts. Instead of sex as a racy accessory to prosperity's joys, it takes center stage in a fundamental, and more interesting and honest way, when other distractions grow remote.

O'Hara's estimation of the human race is not especially high. (One big reason it was Steinbeck, and not O'Hara, who was eventually awarded a Nobel Prize.) So there were times when the trashy aspects of this book threatened to scuttle the artistry. But his skills, at least in this one, were just too extraordinary to allow that to happen.

Kira Simion says

The narrator, I'm told, is Death. That reminds me of The Book Thief in that way.

Jake says

On the back of this novel, Hemingway offered the following blurb: "if you want to read a book by a man who knows exactly what he is writing about and has written it marvelously well, read Appointment in Samarra." Unfortunately, the subject John O'Hara knows so much about, and about which he does occasionally pen very beautiful pages, is the social life of the country club set in a little backwater city in central Pennsylvania. The novel takes place in 1930, but apart from a few passing references, you wouldn't know the Depression was going on. The characters are too busy drinking, dancing, shit-talking each other, and insulting Jews to take much notice of the wider social scene. That's not to say every character in this book is morally repulsive- just most of them- if Pottsville, Pennsylvania was even 10% as stuck-up, materialistic, and socially insular as the Gibbsville he wrote about in this book, I could understand why O'Hara got out as fast as he could and headed to New York.

As for the style, well, I agree with Hemingway- O'Hara can write, with a lyricism and raw honesty that approaches F. Scott Fitzgerald's, and with a level of human insight that approaches Sommerset Maughan's. I mention both writers because O'Hara does, in the course of the novel- he name-checks them gratuitously, along with Hemingway himself (which might explain the blurb.) In trying too hard, and in his inconsistency, O'Hara seems to have more than a little in common with Julian English, his main character- both show real promise, but squander it in boozy self-indulgence- and by the end, you're not unhappy to see both of them go.

Jim says

I had never read anything by O'Hara before, and he probably would have stayed off my radar forever if I hadn't read Running with the Bulls: My Years with the Hemingways, in which Valerie Hemingway states that O'Hara was an author recommended to her by Papa himself(but not this title). I figured that if a writer is good enough for Papa Hemingway, who am I to pass him by?

So I figured I would start at the beginning and I was certainly not disappointed. I found a book with a noirish (if that's a word) theme: the story of a guy who seems to have the world by the tail on a downhill drag: nice house, swell car, trophy wife...but endangers it all through drunkenness, discord, and dissolution. O'Hara is brilliant in putting you inside the head of the anti-hero and all the people he comes in contact with on his debauched slide to the bottom.

For something that was published back when my pappy was a baby, this title is ahead of its time in that it almost explores the topic of sex in frank terms. Profanity is limited to words that start with "b": its not *that* daring.

Highly recommended...Papa was right after all.