

Descent Into Hell

Charles Williams



A Novel

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The key to Williams' mystically oriented theological thought, *Descent into Hell* (arguably Williams' greatest novel) is a multidimensional story about human beings who shut themselves up in their own narcissistic projections, so that they are no longer able to love, to 'co-inhere.' The result is a veritable hell.

Descent into Hell Details

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Author : Charles Williams

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From Reader Review Descent into Hell for online ebook

Szplug says

Here be some trippy penteChristal shite. Threnodic theatre, scaffold ghosts dazed and confused, a funhouse of sin where the mirrors reveal the distortions to body, mind *and* soul by a self-centeredness and worldly rapture threatening to metastasize, and the most baroque ego-suppurating beat-down since the mascaraed spiritual insolvency of the volcanic vultures from *Riders in the Chariot*. Williams' style squeezes the air from your lungs, making the process of penetrating the mysteries of his tale a distinctly uncomfortable and asphyxiating experience—it's like reading with a pair of eyeglasses that tauten one's vision and limn each word with bruising vigor. Sternly surreal, morally fraught, and temporally claustrophobic, and yet these perhaps unappealing parts definitely combine to make a compelling whole.

Tim Pendry says

This is not an easy book. In fact, it is a very difficult book on two grounds - the style and the content. But it is a minor masterpiece that deserves much wider readership.

The style owes something to its period. The emotionally cold world of 1930s Britain. It is cerebral. The artistry - like the play at the centre of the first half - is classical and functional. Conversations can seem rhetorical and clipped. The approach to the supernatural is 'Roman' rather than romantic.

Williams is not merely a highly educated Christian but he has read his Dante and his classics. His readership is uncompromisingly assumed to know the 'canon' - a barrier in itself to post-modern man.

I found it very difficult and only mastered the style, to the extent that I did, by imagining it first as part-poetic and second to be read out aloud, perhaps on occasions declaimed. As one reads, one senses quotation after quotation for the cognoscenti. This calls for a critical edition.

I came to this book as a result of the enthusiasm of the literary historian Glen Cavaliero, whose 'The Supernatural in English Fiction' (reviewed elsewhere on GoodReads) praised Williams for his startling portrayal of the supernatural.

Williams' books are not easy to find in modern London so I had to resort, not to the edition noted here, but to an old post-war standard edition from Faber & Faber, which is unusually defensive about its limited appeal on the dust jacket, obtained by rummaging through the shelves of our local antiquarian bookshop.

Williams writes as a High Anglican, an Elizabethan Settlement Christian, whose theological commitment is deep, so deep that I will confess that I could not always understand it.

There are obscurities, arrogances almost. The cold word play might alienate many but it is worth persevering – to the point, in my case, where I might well choose to pick up this book again in ten years and know that I will see the great deal that was missed on first reading.

Where his genius lies is in the literary elision of a recognisable material reality into the spiritual realm.

I have seen no writing like this – perhaps the equally difficult and intense but very un-Christian John Cowper Powys might come close and perhaps there is something of the chilled intellect and emotional desert of the world of *Brief Encounter* in it, but it is rare to find something that can convey so effectively not what we might feel like if we met a ghost but what it is to be a ghost, as a rational possibility.

And that is the point – Williams makes supernaturalism vividly possible, based on persons who are real rather than merely allegorical (though there is a dash of minor key allegory in each).

Centred in a place embedded in history – the appropriately named Battle Hill – the book mixes up space, time and other worlds with more panache than the usual English business of going through a cupboard door, climbing into a police box or getting on a magical train.

The continuity of an existence in which the natural and the supernatural flow ‘naturally’ into one another, all providentially one in space-time with Zion and Gehenna embedded within the Republic (our material world of work and more or less orderly administration), is masterfully handled.

Spirits co-exist who are barely aware or are unaware of each other. A building may be built and not built at the same time. A spirit who dies in one place in time is met much later in time as if scarcely any time had passed.

The occasion for the story is a play at a country house in a village. Far away is the Big City. Journeys between village and City have meaning. The world of work has ultimate meaning.

But the play is the thing – a rather conventional poetic affair that sets off the more fantastic narrative that centres on, amongst others, the ghost of a beaten man, a woman troubled by a doppelganger, a succubus created by a man whose destiny is hell and an earthy and sinister Lilith figure.

The play is to its writer, what the world is to God - a formal affair with poetry and beauty added. Between the formalities, the word play and the disquisitions are moments of exceptional expressive writing.

We see a determined leaden journey to suicide, the ghost that slowly comes to terms with his new world without ever truly realising what he is, the descent into madness or evil (as distance from God) of one character, the haunting but dessicated temptation to lust (in its pure, not sexual sense) of another.

At the bottom of all this is an attempt to express an inexpressible – the ‘mysterium tremendum’ of Christianity. This book does not exist without the author’s faith, intellectualised perhaps but only because the matters of which he writes are so deep that any explanation requires the dignity of intellect, rather than the expression of sentiment. It is a standing rebuke to shallow sentiment.

Rather than do the impossible and try to explain what I might think Williams means, I will hone in on one central idea – and the title of a central chapter - ‘The Doctrine of Substituted Love’. What this is, in essence, is redemption through charity where the pain and suffering of another can be taken through will and in trust that another will take yours.

Pauline who wills her own redemption (God is referred to only elliptically throughout) is aided by two ‘saintly’ figures – the poet-playwright Stanhope who introduces her to the Doctrine and her aunt, Mrs Anstruther, an aged person close to the end of existence who is ready for the next stage. The hope for and faith in an eternal redemption is to be expressed through charity.

The character of Wentworth, the darkest of the figures drawn, and the Lilith figure of Mrs Sammile are willfully disregarding of others' true needs and are expressions of hate and lust respectively. Wentworth's lust is the negation of love in his construction of a succubus out of the image of his desire. His descent into hell of the title is progressive.

But no more on the content. Although not a thriller with a plot in quite that way, too much information could spoil the story. There is no surprise in persons getting their just deserts but how they get there, the temptations on the way and the opportunities for redemption ignored, that is for you to read.

A highly recommended book – especially if you are not, as I am not, a believer in the religions of the book.

The Christian tradition has degenerated in our eyes into stories of institutional tyranny and abuse and insane irrational politics or we have tried to construct some Gnostic version for our own times but Williams reminds us that, though we may not think it true, the Christian tradition can be noble in the Roman sense.

This book did not get a large readership in its own time and probably will not appeal to most people today. The sensibility is Early Modern and aristocratic. It is also absurdly unscientific. But it will give some people some inkling of a religion that provided solace to many in darker ages.

Above all, it does so by not being 'traditionalist' – which is the current fashion of conservative pessimists operating without a myth that is actively present in the world.

Williams is not a Larkin or a Lovecraft. Things change in the material world and this is just how things are (as Pauline and Stanhope understand). Death just 'is' and it is not a matter for torment if a life is led well (as Mrs Anstruther demonstrates). Such Christianity is of the Stoic kind.

New housing estates are built and jobs are taken in the City but all such phenomena are still built on the past and on a living tradition rather than some constructed '-ism': religion here is not ideology, at least in the eyes of the author. The torments and sufferings of ancestors are owed their own duty of substituted love.

This is a book of conservative England at its best – and I write as a left-libertarian who wars with this tendency in his own world. Yes, very difficult - but rewarding.

Douglas Wilson says

I read this book once way back in the day, in my teens or twenties sometime. It was vivid, and I remembered details of the book, and other details from Williams' other novel. That said, I thought that Williams was a gifted weirdo. I decided to read this book again, and really enjoyed it. I am reminded of Mark Twain's comment that when he was 17, his father was an idiot, and when he was 21, he was amazed to see how the old man had grown in four years.

Alex Stroschine says

This is a brilliant and bewildering book. As is typical of Charles Williams, he has a grand, absorbing vision

but he writes so obliquely it can be very difficult to understand what he's trying to say. The chapter "Dress Rehearsal" is magnificent as Williams exquisitely describes a character whose mad desire and narcissism transforms him, turning him in on himself (one detects "The Great Divorce") and enslaved to false fantasy. I love how Williams writes so imaginatively of the natural and supernatural worlds. This book requires a second reading.

Richard says

This is a remarkable novel. Normally, I love a book with a well-wrought plot and this story concerns nothing more than a community performing a play written by the local celebrity poet, Stanhope. But into this apparently innocuous framework Williams introduces a suicide and a doppelgänger. Further, the various characters involved in the play soon reveal various jealousies, motives and rivalries.

As usual, Williams is adroit in creating believable and sympathetic women. Margaret and Pauline Anstruher are examples. Margaret is Pauline's dying grandmother and is a beautifully drawn character. She gives me an idea of what Sybil of "The Greater Tramps" might have become. Pauline is a deeply tormented person and through her relationship with Stanhope we learn of the law of "substituted love", an aspect of Williams' theological concept of Co-inherence.

Finally, there is the strange, ambiguous figure of the historian, Wentworth. Much of the novel focuses on his choices and he is the character that gives the novel its name.

"Descent Into Hell" weaves a brilliant tapestry of symbolism, mysticism, philosophy, spirituality, life, death and intensely powerful psychological characterisation. It is a novel that goes to the roots of being and combines the visions of the eagle and the worm. It is frightening and consoling. It is unforgettable.

David Huff says

Charles Williams was one of the Oxford "inklings", a literary group which also included C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien, and he was far and away the most deeply mystical one of the trio. Any reader who takes the dark and often surreal journey through this novel of his, "Descent Into Hell", will understand clearly how Williams gained his reputation.

Here you will find what, on the surface, seems a simple enough plot: a group of amateur actors putting on a play in a small town. But, as Williams masterfully pulls back the curtain of their lives, you'll discover the deep existential struggles that plague many of the group's members. As he tells the story, Williams confronts you with ghosts (literally) of the past, who still move and mourn among the current residents. And, from beginning to end, there are deep theological and philosophical musings that require some close reading to comprehend.

Though I don't know that I grasped all of the layers and realms that are present in Williams' rich, sometimes stream of consciousness, occasionally opaque prose, the story was still a stark example of how unwise moral choices, seeming simple at first, can drag a soul into bondage, addiction, and ultimately to an irreversible descent. This was a unique and fascinating read, both terrifying and edifying. Not a beach read by any means, but very much worthwhile.

booklady says

Wow! I am so glad I returned to this story! It took me less time to read it this second time but I got so much more out of it. Rereading Williams's tale in relation to C. S. Lewis's book *The Great Divorce* made all the difference. Having read *Many Dimensions*, another Williams thriller, during the intervening years also helped. And Thomas Howard's book, *The Novels of Charles Williams*, also made a tremendous difference in allowing me to penetrate the miasma of descriptive prose for which Williams is famous. (Thanks again Julie!)

All I can say is do *not* be fooled by the title. Please. The *descent* part is only half of the story. There is redemption and salvific joy here too. Charles Williams wrote to show that our choices are all-critical and *always* matter. In *Descent into Hell* action centers around the production of a play which takes place on Battle Hill—named for the many historic military battles which have occurred on the locale. As this is a story about the all-important battle for souls, this name also serves as a spiritual double entendre. Near the end, there was a glorious climax where a dying woman's request, a young girl's fear, and a new friend's tested promise all come together in a moment of divine propinquity which, when I read it, had tears running down my cheeks. It was so beautiful.

There is also no denying the great darkness in *descent*. I believe Williams meant this to be a warning. It is certainly a thriller. What struck me were the characters that chose hell, turned away from others, were rejecting and/or quitters. So long as one persisted in something, with someone, somewhere, there was hope. The message I take from this is, don't ever give up. Continue to reach out to others.

Another beautiful passage in the book is where Williams describes one character offering Joy in exchange for carrying the other person's fear. What a powerful image of love-in-action.

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(ORIGINAL REVIEW) December 16, 2008: One part horror, one part salvation and the rest the possibility for either, *Descent Into Hell* isn't all as ominous as the title sounds. Yes, there is at least one character who allows delusion to sweep away reason and reality. The reader watches in fearful fascination as the deadly descent begins and progresses.

This was my first ever book by Charles Williams, a friend of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis and a member of the famous Inklings, the literary pub group they belonged to. How I would have loved to have been a fly on the wall at those meetings! I can just imagine Williams reading this book to his compatriots. No blood and gore thriller produced today, no matter how fiendish, can surpass the reality of an individual succumbing to evil without a fight; it is chilling.

If the book were only about darkness, however, I don't think I could have finished it. Instead, there is a parallel story about another character that is also haunted, disappointed and apparently even more justified in following a path of descent, which does not. *Descent* contains many beautiful passages, hidden or double meanings, places where you want to pause and reflect on the author's full intention. It is a book worth reading slowly. Williams believed that everything which happens has an underlying spiritual meaning. It was the spiritual side of things he was interested in--the physical world was -- is -- clothing so-to-speak to dress what is really happening. That belief is not too far from Lewis' own Shadowlands concept. Again, just

imagine the great conversations they had!

Read *Descent Into Hell* but plan to take your time with it. It can be confusing in places. I admit that I did not understand all of it. I'd love to find a William's expert somewhere who could go over the book with me because there are confusing bits here and there, but even so, it was an incredible book. I'm sure I'd raise my rating to 5 stars if I could only understand it all. I definitely plan to read it again and – God willing – I want to read the rest of his books.

Vincent Darlage says

I'm not sure how to rate this one. It deserves a five-star rating for depth and magnitude, and incredible concepts, but it deserves a one-star rating for writing style, clarity, and technique.

Charles Williams, one of the Inklings, apparently cannot write. The scenes with the succubus, and the descent of the man into Hell are chilling, and the rise of Pauline from her own hell into heaven was interesting.

However, the man can't write. He strings together too many sentences with semi-colons until the original thought is completely lost and opaque. He is vague with pronouns, so often one does not know who or what is doing the thinking or acting. The writing goes in circles and circles and circles.

Here is a typical sentence: “The edge of the other world was running up along the sky, the world where everyone carried themselves but everyone carried someone else’s grief – Alice in Wonderland, sweet Alice, Alice sit by the fire, the fire burned: who sat by the fire that burned a man in another’s blood on the grass of a poet’s houses where things were given backward, and rules were against rights and rights against rules, and a ghost in the fire was a ghost in the street, and the thing that had been was the thing that was to be and it was coming, was coming; what was coming; what but herself? she was coming, she was coming, up the street and the wind; herself – a terrible good, terror and error, but the terror was error, and the error was the terror, and now all were in him, for he had taken them into himself, and he was coming, down all the roads of Battle Hill, closing them in him, making them straight: make straight the highways before our God, and they were not for God took them, in the world that was running through this, its wheel turning within this world’s air, rolling out of the air.”

OMG. That was just ONE sentence.

Stuart Kenny says

Probably the greatest Christian novel ever. Williams transforms occult symbols into vehicles for Christian truth. His ability to see into spiritual reality is unparalleled. He is said to have been a man for whom the Nicene Creed was as real and operative as the law of gravity. People in this novel interact with the Triune God mostly without knowing it, deciding their eternal destiny based on their response. A welcome change from most modern novels where characters live in an empty, absurd universe.

D.M. Dutcher says

In a town preparing to put on a play by the celebrated Mr Stanhope, several people wrestle with inner and possibly outer demons. A poor loser of a man hangs himself, but his ghost still wanders the streets. A young girl fears what will happen when she meets her doppelganger, the one who comes closer and closer each time she sees her. A man jilted in love meets a succubus. And a grandmother hovers between life and death.

While this all sounds good, and it can be good while reading it, you have to wade through such constant theological monologuing and gas that you shake your head and sigh. The power in the book is not the dribble and ramble of what people are thinking, but when he actually forgets it and just describes things and people's direct motivations. I started to hate reading Pauline segments because she never can just DO a thing, there has to be 3 or more pages of arcane narrative monologue quoting latin and Bible verses as she does. But the idea of her afraid of her doppelganger, and many other scenes are vivid and striking.

The idea really isn't as deep as people seem to think. It's the contrast between narcissism and selflessness/acceptance of others in bearing one another's burdens. Add a little Sodom and Gomorrah vibe, and you are set. C.S. Lewis in *The Great Divorce* (notice how often Williams's themes pop up in Lewis novels?) handles similar themes with much less obfuscation.

Also, there's the some of usual Charles Williams quirks. The gnostic male hero who doesn't do much of anything. The Macguffin that doesn't really do anything except cause harm. (The play. poor Adela and Myrtle. Why should SHE be unable to sleep?) The weird semi-pagan belief systems. (Notice how there's a lot of theological talk, but no real talking to each other about repentance or salvation who aren't already saved?) The dropping of plots wholesale, and the creation of new ones mid-book.

It's frustrating because there are scenes that have a lot of dark power, and things that could have them if not neglected. Wentworth especially made the book, his slide downward was chilling. But you have to wade through so much to get to those moments of power that I don't blame you if you throw up your hands and quit the book midway.

Tim says

The writing style of this book is pretty dense. Bring a pick axe.

The story centers around a group of people rehearsing for an up and coming theatrical performance. I am still not sure if they actually are a group of people putting on a play or if the play itself is a kind of surreal stand-in for life itself. One of the characters, Pauline Anstruther, is haunted by her doppelganger. Slowly, day by day, it draws closer to her. She dreads the day when it finally bridges the distance between them and she sees it face to face. The author of the play, Peter Stanhope, offers to take the burden of her fear upon himself. She simply relinquishes it and is at peace. I am tempted to see Stanhope, as the author of the play, as a stand-in for Christ and the doppelganger as a representation of the self. After all, what is a doppelganger but the face you see in the mirror every morning? None of this is spelled out but it is a legitimate enough interpretation, Charles Williams being a christian and this being a christian work of fiction.

Another theme is a meditation on the difference between fantasy and reality. Is it better to be happy in an isolated fantasy world of your own making or to endure a reality you wouldn't have chosen? Early in the book, one of the characters, Lawrence Wentworth, is seduced by a succubus who takes the form of an unrequited crush. We later learn the creature is conjured up from the depths of his own imagination and consequently has none of the annoying quirks and foibles his real life crush has (it is always easier to love your idea of who a person is than to love the actual person). In due course, the fantasy world takes over his life and he leaves the comfort of his house and the kingdom he has built there for himself less and less. Eventually, when the very real person the fantasy is modelled on comes to him in need of help, he turns away from her in order to embrace his self-made reality. I was reminded of Robert Nozick's experience machine. A more contemporary analogy is Ciphher who didn't care if the Matrix was real, it only needed to seem real.

One can see in Mr. Wentworth and Mr. Stanhope two diametrically opposed definitions of love. Mr. Wentworth representing what one can get out of any potential relationship (how well do you conform to my needs), Mr. Stanhope representing what one can give in any potential relationship (how well can I meet your needs). One is the love that takes, the other the love that gives. Of course, laughing, loving, hating, breathing, plotting human beings defy being slotted into such simple black and white categories of being either this or that. The best one can say is that it is always possible to be less of one and more of the other.

If they ever made this book into a movie, I suspect it would be one of those artsy movies where occasionally you find yourself scratching your head and wondering precisely what is going on. For example, early in the book one of the characters commits suicide and then proceeds to spend the majority of the book wandering around before eventually being called before God. I am still not sure what that particular subplot was all about.

There are a number of other characters and plots in the book that I was unable to make heads or tails of but the main takeaway from this novel seems to be that the individual contains the seeds of Heaven and Hell within them and so far as this life is concerned, it is a matter of determining a sort of inner spiritual equivalent of physical attributes like trajectory and velocity. (I am tempted to read this into the comedy and tragedy masks on the cover of the book.) The 'descent' in the title of this book is not simply talking about moving from one set of geographical coordinates to another; rather, it describes a state of being. Sort of the reverse of this:

Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you.

I had a hard time assigning an appropriate rating to this book. At times I found myself thinking it ought to get five stars, at others it would be lucky to get two. The main problem was the disparity between concept and execution. It is always nice when a book provides you with a *selah* moment, and this book did that abundantly, but at the same time reading a fiction book shouldn't feel like work.

Bbrown says

I was fooled very, very briefly into thinking that Williams's writing was similar to Chesterton's. Outside of the occasional similarity in the style of structuring sentences, however, Williams's writing is in fact the opposite of Chesterton's- it has no joy, no life, no wit behind it, rather it oscillates between bare competence (when addressing the actions of the characters, which Williams obviously cares very little about) and barely coherent rambling (when Williams is piling on his mystical nonsense). The story of Descent into Hell is a

disjointed mess, and is interspersed with long passages of drivel, and in sum total this book is garbage.

I'm going to cover the "story" first, which is a two-star affair if I were being generous. A good, but not first-rate, poet has written a play featuring a talking bear, which the poet acknowledges is flawed. The poet's countryside community, which is full of self-important people that mostly seem to have very little else going on in their lives, are putting on that play. The actress Pauline lives in fear of meeting her doppelgänger yet again. A costume consultant for the play gets saddled with a succubus, though he was apparently already descending into hell before the story began for some reason never mentioned. Another member of the troupe eventually runs into Lilith, the biblical demon. Also, there's the ghost of a suicide wandering around. These threads seldom cross, and do not feed into another how you would expect them to. The play is never given any depth, so it does not mirror or enhance the theme or action occurring elsewhere in the narrative. The suicide ghost plotline resolves itself early on. Others never resolve at all. I'm left not caring either way, because Williams puts no effort into fleshing out these characters or making me in any way care about their predicament. Oftentimes the narrative shifts wildly between tones- Pauline has finished one of the acts of the play, where she plays the head of a chorus of leaves/nature spirits/unnamed theatrical experimental entity in the aforementioned play with the talking bear. Then, out of nowhere, she starts telling the playwright about how one of her ancestors was burned alive near the spot the play is being performed. Williams had no damn clue what he was doing with the tone of this story.

This alone would make this a bad book, as having a bunch of things happen in this manner causes the narrative to be disjointed, with structural problems and a blunting of the intended emotional impact (though, please note, the only emotion I felt while reading this book was boredom, which was not blunted in the slightest). What drops this book from two stars to one star, however, is that the already choppy narrative is made more ponderous, tedious, and nonsensical by Williams's constant blathering on about his mystical christian/pagan self-help belief structure. The centerpiece of the chapter titled "The Doctrine of Substituted Love" is the titular doctrine, which boils down to the idea that you can give your fear to someone else, or can take away someone's burden of fear and place it onto yourself. Pauline's fear of running into her doppelgänger again, which has tormented her for her entire life, she gives to the playwright and that fear is suddenly taken off her shoulders. Then she goes back in time or something and takes the fear from her martyred ancestor as he's about to be burned alive. I've managed to make it sound far less stupid than it reads, but you have to realize that, on top of this mystical philosophy you've also got to deal with Williams's prose, which, when he starts talking about this type of garbage, never uses one word when twenty will do. An example:

"The angelic energy which had been united with Pauline's mortality radiated from her; nature, and more than nature, abhors a vacuum. Her mind and senses could not yet receive comprehensibly the motions of the spirit, but that adoring centre dominated her, and flashes of its great capacity passed through her, revealing, if but in flashes, the single world of existence. Otherwise, the senses of her redeemed body were hardly capable yet of fruition; they had to grow and strengthen till, in their perfection, they should give to her and the universe added delight. They now failed from their beatitude, and lived neither with intuitive angelic knowledge nor immediate angelic passage, but with the slower movement of the ancient, and now dissolving, earth."

This prose is one small step away from incomprehensible, in my opinion, and in any event it's fucking painful to read. Descent into Hell is a mess of a story barely stringing together disparate events into a tonally inconsistent whole with landmines like the above paragraph strewn liberally throughout. I wouldn't recommend it to anyone.

That's the end of my review of this work, now I just want to write down some thoughts. I knew that I was

really disliking this book before I was even half-way through, but I kept reading. I acknowledge that there is wisdom in stopping a book when you realize you hate it, but in this instance I was rewarded, in a way, because I forced myself through it, because it led me to understand that there's a genre of books I should be avoiding: books that are essentially proxies for the author's spiritual beliefs. Other examples include *The Screwtape Letters* (boring and obvious rules for how to be a good Christian), *Voyage to Arcturus* (Gnostic allegory and nothing else), and *Pilgrim's Progress* (banal life lessons, also from a Christian viewpoint, aimed at the lowest possible common denominator). On the other hand, I love the works of Chesterton, so how do I reconcile that? Well, for one, Chesterton is about three tiers better of a writer than any of the other authors I've mentioned, but that's not all. I think it's that Chesterton isn't using his characters and story just for the sake of preaching to his readers, he obviously cares about writing a good story too (similarly, Narnia works because it's delivering an actual story). Even using a story solely to push political beliefs, a la Ayn Rand, is less off-putting to me than using a story solely to push spiritual beliefs, because by reading Any Rand I can at least see the flaws in her argument and come out the other side having gained something by reading the work. That's not true after having read some author's allegory for his inane mysticism. So in the future I'm going to avoid books described in ways reminiscent of how this one was described as "[t]he key to Williams' mystically oriented theological thought" unless it's from a proven author like Chesterton. If I want a theological treatise, I know where to find those, I don't need one gussied up in lackluster fiction.

Jack says

Wow. Every five years I stumble across a book of this caliber, and I now understand why this novel is considered to be Williams' best. From beginning to end, Williams crafts a story that reads more like a theological drama which, though obscure, is deeply personal and engaged with humanity's need for communion with God and one another. Williams believed that the source of sin and alienation from God and one another is our failure to live according to "co-inherence." There are passages in this book which give beautiful, refreshing, and yet slanted perspectives on the matters of spiritual direction, Christian doctrine, evangelical witness, and cosmology. Coinherence is not simply a motif for Williams' characters, it is also a literary form of sorts. This story expands one's theological imagination, even if Williams drifts a touch too far from orthodox understandings of the eternal realm and individual responsibility. But a drift is not a departure, and the work which evangelical Christians need most is the expansion of their imagination. This Williams does masterfully, and at the conclusion of the novel, you will understand why C.S. Lewis was drawn to Christ through this man's work.

Sørina says

Follow my Charles Williams blog, *The Oddest Inkling*, for more context on this book and (later) a summary and other thoughts. William Blake once wrote: "For every thing that lives is Holy"; and yet, Christ made division between subjects of the kingdom vs. slaves to the darkness when He said: "He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left" (Matthew 25:33). In *Descent into Hell*, Charles Williams sees beyond that fundamental opposition, which is a byproduct of temporal reality, into the deeper truth where those contradictory ends of a rope join and are one.

As he usually does, Williams creates several threads and traces them throughout this story. The first thread is that of "The Play." A great poet, Peter Stanhope, has just finished his latest play, and his home community is about to begin its first rehearsals.

The second thread is that of a doppelganger: a ghostly or spiritual double. This is the double of a young lady named Pauline. It is her secret terror, the unbearable sickening agony that drives her into houses, into company, out of solitude, for fear she will meet it and have to look it in the face. But, Mercifully, her fear is taken from her so that she can face it. By means of The Doctrine of Substitution or The Way of Exchange, Stanhope offers to take her fear and carry it for her.

The third thread is a pretentious little actress named Adela and an historian named Wentworth. Wentworth has a crush on Adela and fantasizes about her, and gradually trains his spirit to feed itself on its fantasies to the exclusion of reality. Wentworth creates a succubus out of his own imagination and establishes an erotic relationship with it. He retreats more and more into his own lurid, sordid realm of bodily and mental perversion, climbing down down down a rope towards a Hell of his own making.

Similarly, an unnamed workman, worn out with a life of ill treatment, commits suicide by hanging himself with a rope very like the one down which Wentworth is climbing in his mind. It just so happens that the man hangs himself from Wentworth's house -- before it is built. The dead man, in the past, and Wentworth, in his sullied mind, stand elbow to elbow unaware of each other.

There is another character from the past occupying the same Hill. He is Pauline's ancestor, and he was burnt to death at the stake by Bloody Mary some 400 years earlier. Pauline hears about his martyrdom, and Stanhope suggests that she can carry her ancestor's fear for him.

Descent into Hell really is CW's best book. The pacing of the book is admirable, with cycles of intensity alternating with passages of vague visionary stasis and tranquil revelations unfolding. Run out & read it, now!

Briana says

WARNING: If you feel like retaining any sanity, DO NOT READ THIS BOOK!

Perhaps the best description of this book is that it's "terribly good." Not for the faint of heart.
