

Cakes and Ale

by

W.S. Maugham

ANNA

The "Cakes and Ale" of the title is a quotation from Shakespeare's 'Twelfth Night', and refers to the simple pleasures of life. The sub-title "The Skeleton in the Cupboard" refers to one of the main characters, Rosie Driffield. Somerset Maugham says in his introduction that he had the character of Rosie in mind for many years before finding the right setting for her. The book is a satire on the literary life which was published in 1930, but is set in the Victorian/Edwardian period, starting in a small Kentish seaside town. The narrator of the story, William Ashenden, is introduced to us as a very young man, growing up amidst the narrow-minded attitudes of his relatives and their friends. When he meets a local writer, Ted Driffield, and his pretty wife Rosie, he is introduced to different ways of behaving, speaking and thinking. Rosie, in particular, has worked in many of the local pubs, and has a reputation for "going with" the customers. She seems to have a close relationship with a local character 'Lord' George Kemp. Ted writes about the local life of ordinary poor people: the workers on the quayside and in the fields, which is very different from the literary style of the time. As William grows up, he spends more time with the Driffields, enjoying the simple pleasures of cycling, boating, meeting friends and the occasional drink in a local pub. One day when he comes home from boarding school, he is horrified to learn that the Driffields have done a bunk, leaving behind numerous debts. William doesn't see anything of his former friends for several years, as he is in London training to be a doctor, and also writing in his spare time.

He finds that he and the Driffields live close to each other, and he develops the habit of visiting, along with a group of writers, musicians, actors and artists. Rosie often goes out with some of the men while Ted is writing: William realises that she is going to bed with them, and eventually Rosie and he become lovers. Rosie finally leaves Ted for 'Lord' George Kemp, and it is thought they go to the United States: at any rate, no more is heard of her. Ted divorces her, and eventually marries again. His reputation blossoms, and he becomes a grand old man of letters before dying at ninety years old.

Many years later William, by now a successful playwright, is approached by another writer for any recollections he may have of the Driffields from his youth. The second Mrs. Driffield has commissioned a biography. The trouble is that they are determined to depict a sanitised version of Ted, omitting some of his less polite habits, such as nipping down to the pub for a beer or two. Another problem for this tidied-up view of Ted is Rosie - 'the skeleton in the cupboard'. There is an amusing scene where Mrs. Driffield mark two and the biographer try to blackguard Rosie, and William defends her, explaining her simple and generous nature. The other two think Rosie is dead, but William knows that she is alive and well - he has had a meeting with her in her home in Yonkers, New York. She was enjoying life, as she always did.

(I think he only learns later that she is still alive)

William decides that he will pass on some of his memories, but he will protect Rosie's reputation because she was a simple and affectionate woman, who did not deserve to be held up to ridicule.

I hope that at least some of the group will enjoy the satirical humour - actually, after it was published there was quite a brouhaha because various authors thought they were being made fun of in the book. denied by Maugham, of course!

ALIX

I found Cakes and Ale a bit slow at the beginning but enjoyed the parts in the book to do with Rosie and her different affairs and escapades! I found the "class" system and terrible snobbery difficult to take but I know it was very much like this in those days. My Mother used to be a bit snobby coming from money and coming from a generation with "staff". By the time I arrived the family money had gone in the Depression!!

ELAINE

I did not particularly enjoy this book. I found it quite slow and the main character came across as very pretentious and selfish. I appreciate it is of its time but the snobbishness and insistence on people 'knowing their place' was challenging.

I also disliked his hypocrisy at having an affair with his friend's wife and being shocked when she has affairs as well. I felt sorry for Driffield who was manipulated shamelessly by people for their own aims rather than letting him write and enjoy his life. I also felt sorry for Rosie who was looked down on but came across as friendly, open and honest. The passages about the loss of her daughter were very moving and explained a lot about his relationship with Rosie.

SABINE

At the meeting it was clear that none of us were wildly enthusiastic about the book, but some enjoyed it while others went as far as saying that it was boring and certainly not their choice of reading matter.

Many who had read other books by W S Maugham were disappointed and certainly not gripped by the story line. It was hard to get into, old fashion in style and use of language. Some even positively disliked William, the main character – whilst all enjoyed Rosie. William was criticised for being selfish, and snobbish. Was it due to his upbringing? This led to talking about S Maugham himself, his upbringing, his travels, his homosexuality and decided he was a rather conflicted man.

The book has to be viewed in context with its time. We all appreciated the commentary on social set ups and hierarchies of the early 20th century. We discussed the social snobbery of in the 20s and 30s, and compared such issues with the world of today. The topics of class, social etiquette, code of behaviour, attitude to sex including homosexuality made for stimulating conversation. None of us found the book humorous.

Despite these remarks, we concluded that it was an interesting choice and all were glad for the opportunity to read Cakes and Ale. We should perhaps, try to include a classic author in our future readings.

My own copy of Cakes and Ale starts with a rather lengthy introduction written by Nicholas Shakespeare, written in 2009. I was totally baffled by it and put off as I simply couldn't understand not so much the convoluted language but all the references in the text... I skipped it and moved on to the author's preface which essentially informs of how the character Rosie had been in S Maugham's mind for a long time and how the book was received. It also includes some comments on what it is to be an author:

- With reference to Rosie: *"But when once that character is set down on paper it belongs to the writer no more"*
- The attacks and accusations he received
- And deploring the advertisements at the launch of a book...

Like some others it took me a while to enjoy the book. I found the syntax and vocabulary so dated and difficult. The syntax was for me so weird, so confusing. Some sentences very lengthy. The following quote is a good example of what I mean:

"Than Roy no one could show a more genuine cordiality to a fellow novelist whose name was on everybody's lips, but no one could more genially turn a cold shoulder on him when idleness, failure, or someone else's success had cast a shade of notoriety"

At first such writing style distracted me from my reading and enjoyment of the book. As the story developed, and the characters became more familiar, I began enjoying the book. I appreciated the book for its comments on the society of the time, with all its prejudices, codes of behaviour, and marked class differences. I also greatly enjoyed many statements on literature, what it is like to be a writer, on poetry, and how the taste and fashion influence our appreciation of the arts in general.

The humour did not tickle me that much. But there are so many good lines in the book!

I suppose what I enjoyed most was the (what seem random) philosophical reflections not only by the main character William Ashenden – who in many ways was S Maugham himself but also by Rosie. The book was also an invitation to reflect on virtue, the doubleness or "hypocrisy" of human beings, in summary on what could be called or seen as the "human contradiction".

I very much enjoyed the fact that a male author of that time was able to depict with real affection a woman who was behaving freely especially sexually and without sense of guilt. I was also somewhat surprised at times by some of the remarks like the one about women's constipation, with a reference to their back passage!

It is always very interesting to read about how societies behaved in the past and this book gives us a very good sense of British society in the early 20th century.