



# Caught

*Henry Green*

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When the war breaks out, Rose, a well-to-do widower with a young son, Christopher, volunteers for the Auxiliary Fire Service in London, and is trained under a professional fire officer, Pye. The two men discover that a quite different link already exists between them: it was Pye's strange, disturbed sister who once upon a time abducted Christopher and kept him in her room until Pye rescued the terrified child. In the apocalyptic atmosphere of the Blitz the relationship between the two men develops as each of them grapples with his own troubled emotional attachments, the one to his dead wife, the other to his unhappy sister. Inevitably matters come to a head when history shows signs of repeating itself. The subtle handling of relationships, the brilliance of the dialogue and description - including one of the best accounts ever written of London under the Blitz - established *Caught* as one of Henry Green's most powerful novels.

## Caught Details

Date : Published April 5th 2001 by Panther (first published 1943)

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Author : Henry Green

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## From Reader Review Caught for online ebook

### Mark says

Survivors of war invariably edit their experiences and tailor their responses for their audience, and rarely like to revisit the more traumatic moments that they experienced in combat. It might seem that a contemporary historian can get a true horror of the Second World War from the abundant black & white newsreel footage, and the diaries and memoirs, and eye-witness accounts of survivors, but, however graphic and agonising these reminiscences might be, they are invariably written with publication in mind omitting the more scandalous and uncomfortable personal truths. Families hide their secrets.

But thanks to two wartime novels - Henry Green's 'Caught' and Elizabeth Bowen's 'Heat of the Night' - I have deepened my understanding of the climatic and confused emotional hiatus experienced by so many and the unexpected opportunities suddenly presented, and so these narratives have illuminated what my parents omitted, especially about wartime love and romance. With these two absorbing novels I feel that I can get as close, as I ever will do, to experiencing the London Blitz, and how my parents' generation felt the thrill and fear of wartime London, and time spent underground taking shelter, or in cafes, restaurants, clubs and bars, life in the black-out, and the heady excitement of being alive at such a thrilling time, despite the constant danger and threat of death. Both novels address these feelings with a wonderful directness, but Henry Green's writing carries a stronger erotic charge.

In 1938 as the prospect of European war grew ever closer so author Henry Green served with the Auxiliary Fire Service in London, believing that this experience would prove fertile ground for his writing 'to learn about the lives of ordinary people'. And certainly it did just that, on the evidence of this beguiling novel which defies categorisation but gave him first hand account of the random nature of death and appalling destruction in the capital.

At times parochial and insular, as the firemen, both regulars and the auxiliaries making up the London Fire Service, tease one another during their long periods of inactivity, enduring the 'Phoney War', but also the bigger picture, when the Luftwaffe squadrons finally arrive bringing death from the air. Now this motley cohort of firefighters, lay aside their petty jealousies, if not their promiscuous behaviour, as they are catapulted onto centre stage, at the front of the nation's fire-fighting during the Blitz itself.

In the first two thirds of the novel the author takes great pains in developing portraits of all the diverse characters in the Fire Station depot, both the 'Regulars' and the 'Auxiliaries'. The normal rules of behaviour are suspended and our narrator, Richard Roe, shows us his fellow fireman, separated from wives and girlfriends, and their families now evacuated from the city, and so they are seizing every opportunity for amorous adventure, and conducting affairs, both clandestine and openly. Beautiful young girls engorged with love, and drowsy with lack of sleep, are shown 'love-walking' and taking it on themselves, as their patriotic duty, to give their servicemen out on the town on their last night, something special to remember before they go overseas. Far from satiated by these emotional farewells the same girls go hunting for more farewells, 'Darling, darling, darling it will be you always.'

There are many moments in this tense novel that feel like reading a script for a play, where conversations are recorded accurately carrying the narrative and creating real melodrama. Long and interminable days of inactivity at the depot are punctuated by boozy visits to the local pub, where conversations lurch uninhibitedly to the personal, and thence quickly to lurid sexual gossip as colleagues, feeling the erotic charge of danger, indulge in openly flirtatious behaviour.

Then in the final twenty pages Richard, when convalescing in the West Country far from London's Blitz, tells his step-sister, in retrospect, just what happened, when after months of inactivity, the first Luftwaffe raids started. Here is a visceral evocation of the horrors of indiscriminate bombing and the dense poetic prose provides a graphic narrative that reads like Dylan Thomas,

“Nearby all had been pink, the small coughing men had black and rosey faces. The puddles were hot, and rainbow coloured with oil. A barge, overloaded with planks, drifted in flames across the black, green, then mushroom skin river water under an upthrusting mountain of fox-dyed smoke that pushed up towards the green pulsing fringe of heaven....

“But what a night. Think of the way we had waited a whole year behind those windows, then suddenly to be pitchforked into chaos. We used to think we get some directions. Instead we had about 8 acres of flames and 60 pumps with the crews in a line pouring water on, when the bombing did not drive them off. And, because of the size of the whole thing, doing practically no good at all. And no know orders whatever.”

But before the cataclysmic firestorm engulfs London the period of calm allows Green to develop his characters, revealing themselves through extensive dialogue, rendered in carefully wrought colloquial prose. But if, as many would have us believe, Henry Green's greatness as a writer came from his conviction that we can never really know what anyone is thinking or feeling, then I would say he gets closer than any novelist I know to revealing characters from the inside out.

Take the scene between Richard and Hilly in the jazz club. We are transported into that night club, sitting at the table beside them, in their heads and aware of their thinking, seeing what they will say next, and feeling their growing excitement, we wonder how they will complete their mutual seduction. We feel the stifling heat in the subterranean cellar and note the changes in the light, and hear the frenzied beat of the music, and the excited timbre of their voices, hearts racing with desire. It is a slow sensuous seduction and the reader is drawn into the exciting erotic confusion of the would-be lovers enjoying the danger of their rapid descent into carnality.

“It was warm in the half dark of the club...lights were low from table lamps with violet shades...the deep light from a gentian bulb infuses the room with a seductive glow and ... now with excitement so that his throat was constricted because of her nearness, fat, soft and soft-eyed with sea flower fingered..’

‘She had been wafted off’.. ‘enchanted not entirely by all she had had to drink and which was released inside her in a glow of earth chilled above a river at the noisy night harvest of vines, not altogether by this music, which literally was her honey, her feeling’s tongue but as much by sweet comfort, and the compulsion she felt here to gentleness that was put on here by these couples, by the blues, by the wine, and now by this murmuring night haunted softness shared.’

Their first breathless kiss reminds Richard of “..moist wet lips and open figs wet at the dead of night in hothouse....of a thousand moist evenings in August on her soft skin and, on the inner side of her lips, where the rouge had worn off, opened figs wet on a wall...They are caught up in a forced communication a grape dark fellowship of longing.”

Sebastian Faulks sums it up perfectly when he says of novelist Henry Green, “He seemed to have redrawn the familiar triangle between reader, writer and character, so that you somehow had the impression that you knew his characters better than he himself did.”

Interesting that Henry Green is not so widely read today given that two esteemed poets wrote glowingly of

his attributes in the 1950s, W. H. Auden calling him “the best English novelist alive,” and T. S. Eliot cited Green’s novels as proof that the “creative advance in our age is in prose fiction.”

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### **Jim Coughenour says**

A deeply surprising book – not for its plot of which there is barely any – but for its writing. In the introduction,\* James Woods describes Green’s “almost Shakespearean talent for inventive spoken poetry.” This is exactly right. The novel oscillates between the garrulous comedy of working class speech (“His eyes started out of his head like a little dog’s testicles”) and modernist elisions worthy of Woolf. The poetry pops up out of nowhere, often in a phrase or two swept along by the flow.

he came out into a gin-clear air pasted with blue moonlight

Most of the novel unfolds in the early months of 1940 in London where Richard Roe, the narrator, apolitical and upper class like Green himself, is serving on the London Auxiliary Fire Service; the big events (Hitler’s invasion of Norway, the fall of France, Dunkirk) feel far away. When the Blitz finally hits we hear of it only elliptically, when Roe, recovering from injuries back at his country house, describes it to his bored-but-patient wife. Even then the story reverses itself.

“The first night,” he said, “we were ordered to the docks. As we came over Westminster Bridge it was fantastic, the whole of the left side of London seemed to be alight.”

(It had not been like that at all...)

This isn’t a page turner, not even close, but there are elemental echoes of England that reminded me of passages from DH Lawrence or John Cowper Powys, as well as the distinctive voices of men and women that burn and buzz and disappear into the static of the past.

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\* Read last: it tells too much.

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### **Proustitute says**

Re-reading Henry Green into 2017 as NYRB reissues all nine of his novels.

First blog post on Henry Green as I re-read *Caught*, now up here.

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### **Ann says**

A book about the auxiliary fire service during World War II in London. It is mostly about waiting for anything to happen. It is about the pickering that goes on when there is nothing to do. It is about kissing up to superiors. It is about love at desperate times. About a father who does not connect with his son. It was hard to follow what was going on in the book because sometimes the story shifted to other

people/places/times without any hint of it happening. And you understand that things have changes in the middle of a paragraph.

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### **Laura says**

Not so good as expected.

3\* Loving  
2.5\* Caught  
TR Living  
TR Party Going  
TR Back

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### **Peter says**

I've read all but one of Green's books now (Blindness remains), and enjoyed them all. But there is a clear, short shelf of his books that are masterpieces, where the plot somehow fits perfectly into Green's idiosyncratic, descriptive technique and the act of reading becomes an all encompassing "experiencing." The majority of the novels actually don't quite "work" for me. The plot feels totally irrelevant and we keep reading because the language is so startling and lovely. For example, Back, also a wartime book, never quite coheres into a working story. But Loving, Party Going, and now, this one, really grip and emotionally move, on top of the enchantment we can rely on Green's language delivering. Caught is a perfect little novel about the London blitz. Caught beautifully brings to life the London of the blitz; on finishing there's a feeling of having lived through a little sliver of it.

(This edition, published in 2016, seems to be the first time Americans have had access to the book in an uncensored edition. The introduction, however, should be an afterword; it reveals far too much of the plot.)

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### **Mirte says**

I can be really short about this novel. I didn't like it.

Virtually all the male characters are misogynist without realising they are. The environment in which these men find themselves is dominated by men, there's a lot of fake manly men buffoonery going on, no single character seems to truly get a deeper personality because Green keeps coming back to their superficiality. While critics praise the novel as Green's best, and a must-read, I cannot see the appeal at all. Granted, Green manages to show the different experiences of men and women throughout the war and the subsequent misunderstandings and disconnections, the difficulty of expressing oneself and one's experiences intelligibly to someone who has different experiences and can, therefore, essentially never truly grasp what you mean.

Read this for a seminar on WWII writing, and I can see its value within that frame, but I still feel many, many better novels have been written in this era that express the world view of people in a clearer and less male-focused way. Persephone Books has published many novels that address the gap between the sexes so

much better than this novel does, that I'd strongly recommend that those interested in this era search their catalogue rather than pick this book up.

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### **Dave says**

Too sad and jagged to read this sad and jagged book right now. Starting something less so.

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### **John says**

My eighth Henry Green novel. I've loved everyone. Very British, between the wars, between classes. This one follows the goings on of the members of an auxiliary fire service in London before and during the Blitz. As a 2016 New Yorker profile nicely put it, "The Henry Green novel—typically portraying failures of love and understanding, and noisy with the vernacular of industrialists and Cockneys, landowners and servants—was terse, intimate, full of accident and unnerving comedy, exquisite though still exuberant, sensual and whimsical, reflexively figurative yet always surprising, preoccupied with social nuance, generational discord, and sensory phenomena while maintaining an air of abstraction." I don't think anyone writes a dance or restaurant scene better than Green. In fact, Green convinces me, at least within the confines of his novels, that life is a magnificent dance, of which you can simultaneously appreciate all its disparate parts.

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### **Jen says**

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Caught is a book that depicts the lives of auxiliary firefighters during the Blitz in London. The majority of the book occurs before the bombings. Protagonist Richard Roe is a wealthy widower who joins the auxiliary service and sends his son to the country to live with his sister in law. While Richard is the protagonist, the author provides us with multiple points of view, frequently shifting from one character to another. Many of the characters feel as if they are suspending in time waiting for the Blitz. There is a complicated relationship between Richard and fire chief, Pye, whose sister abducts Richard's son (the focus here is not on the actual abduction but rather the psychological consequences that this has on those involved).

This was a slow and quiet book. The majority of the time they are waiting for the bombings to start, Most of the book centers on the waiting period and relationships between members of the auxiliary force and not much happens. Despite being bored for the first half of the book, I started to become more engaged the more I read. I liked the writing style and liked how the narrator would switch from one character to the next and gave us insight into truth of the situation vs. the character's description of the situation. For example, characters would state certain things and through use of parentheses the narrator would drag us outside the character's point of view to obtain a more objective reality. I found it interesting that while there were some key events in the book, the focus was never on those events but more on the consequences of those things on the relationships between characters.

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## BlackOxford says

### A Poetry Of Chaos

Henry Green is not for the faint-hearted or those with limited leisure. Here are two examples from his novel, *Caught*, about life in the Auxiliary London Fire Service which tended to bomb damage while the bombs were still falling during the war:

*His father had regrets. He wished it had all been less, as a man can search to find he knows not what behind a netted brilliant skin, the eyes of a veiled face, as he can also go with his young son parted from him by the years that are between, from her, by the web of love, or from the remembered country by the weather, in the sadness of not finding.*

This is a typically enigmatic sentence by Green. The structure is purposely awkward. What does the first comma signify in a place that calls for a full stop? What are the pronominal references for 'it', 'her'? What is this absence that eludes the finding and presumably creates the sadness? Are we to expect something explanatory latter in the text? Do the netted skin and veiled eyes refer to his wife, the son's mother? Are the net and veil analogues of time? And if so is the web of love meant to imply a displacement of memory from the person to the emotion? Meaning doesn't float, it hides in Green.

Here is another:

*At the station they used to pitch the escape and climb up that sharply narrowing, rattling ladder, red, but it would by now be too dark to see, up to the head painted white for work at night with, in this dusk, a voice from the sea bellowing advice below, all of them getting out of breath, fumbling, some telling themselves, and even each other, not to look down. After the first few times they were handy at it, but in the beginning, and most of all before they had been sent up, he would get wet in the seat of his trousers as he walked past the half seen tower at six o'clock, unlike by more than the time of day that other under which, on sun-laden evenings, the windows for seven hundred years had stained the flags, as it might be with coward's blood.*

Even more purposely complex grammar than in the first example, with its subordinate clauses and repeated interruption of the line of thought. There is the strange adjectival placement ('red'); and the ambiguity of the references is challenging (escape and climb? Now?) The reader is forced to re-read, not just to comprehend the structure but to identify and understand the relevance of what might be called external facts ('the sea', 'wet in the seat of the trousers', 'coward's blood') that are left loose as indicators without a definite object and no prior context. The paragraphs are arranged in a similar way. Each new paragraph is often an element in a sequence that shifts chaotically among physical locations, persons, and time.

This is writing that does not flow but jerks along as if over rapids and falls. There are eddies and somewhat peaceful backwaters where understanding is helped by straightforward subject-object links but these only emphasise the generally rough ride. This is very dense prose poetry. It takes patient attention to master. Not as difficult, one must admit, as *Finnegans Wake*, but it rates for sure.

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## Tony says

Perhaps, like Sherman, you think War is Hell.

But Prudence, in bed with Pye, is longing for John, a pilot now said to be marrying someone else. *War, she thought, was sex.*

I won't weigh the profundities, of Prudence versus Sherman, but I believe that War, like Sex, is defined often by a point of view. Prudence has her epiphany while Pye is lamenting small matters of command, she listening with *an utter lack of interest . . . for bed was all they had, and were not to have for much longer, in common.*

In the next paragraph our protagonist, Richard Roe is in bed with Hilly (not his wife). *She wriggled over on top, held his dark face and drank it with her eyes. She had never been to Venice. She murmured to herself, "This man is my gondola."*

In the next paragraph, *Brid at that instant was crying. She missed her Ted, so feckless in everything except when he loved her. . .*

So, maybe it's Sex is Hell.

Henry Green (his pen name) was an English aristocrat born to great wealth and privilege. He began writing novels while still at Oxford. In 1938, in anticipation of war, Green joined London's Auxiliary Fire Service. This novel is based on his wartime experiences. The character Richard Roe is a writer born with a silver spoon who likewise joins the fire service. I don't know how much of the plot is imagined.

The things that happen, at least until the end, happen while the men prepare for the war that is to come. They train and follow pedantic military rules. There are bars. There are women. For Roe, there is a wife at home, and a son. War gets complicated.

They mark time. Norway is invaded. Then the low countries. Then Dunkirk. The men are looked on with favor. Then shunned as shirkers. Then revered as saviors.

Roe and Hilly go to a nightclub. The War has not come home yet. There is a torch singer there. Green does something spectacular, the song taking on a prophetic tone:

*As she stood there, gently telling them in music, reflecting aloud, wondering in her low, rich voice, the spot light spread a story over her body and dazzled her cheeks to bend and blend to a fabulous matching of the mood in which she told them, as she pretended to remember the south, the man who had gone, as she held all theirs with her magnificent eyes guardedly flashing, slowly turning from one couple to another, then again dropping her voice, almost sighing, motionless, while beads of sweat began to come like the base of a tiara on her forehead as she told the audience that he could see only as the less dark below her and whose clouded heads, each one, drew nearer to a companion's in this forced communion, this hyacinthine, grape dark fellowship of longing. The music floated her, the beat was even more of all she had to say, the colour became a part. alive and deep, making what they told each other, with her but in silence, simply repeatedly plain, the truth, over and over again.*

Still, they waited, *the peril drawing closer and heavier . . . Prudence, for the spring and summer months, would be as safe as houses.*

War, you know. Or something else.

I finished this late last night and went to sleep. I awoke a few hours later, rain pounding on the roof, as it has

for days. I felt this book, then. Not just that I was thinking about it, or thinking what I would say about it. I mean I really felt it, like it was clinging to me. Like I had just left perhaps safely from some smoke-filled room. And I could not lose the smell.

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### **Jonathan says**

"War, she thought, was sex." -- A book about the Auxiliary Fire Service during WWII, and people "driven to create memories to compare...hungrily seeking yet another with whom they could spend their last hours." It's a quiet book, but leaves an impression.

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### **Lisa says**

Have you ever been CAUGHT?

Think about it for a moment. There are so many ways to interpret that question. Actually, I might catch you off guard, and make you confess something you hadn't planned on telling me, just because your idea of being CAUGHT makes a certain situation in your memory stick out. CAUGHT you!

People can be CAUGHT doing illegal or inappropriate things. But most of the time, they are CAUGHT in the process of committing quite banal crimes, like secretly leaving work early, and have a colleague "cover" for them. Or they are CAUGHT sponging on a friend in a bar, or telling a lie, or being a coward.

How does it make one feel - being CAUGHT? What do people do to cover their tracks or smooth over their mistakes?

Henry Green, the master of dialogues, embarrassed silences and telling body language, lets a whole set of people - working at a wartime fire station in London - be CAUGHT in various situations, ranging from child abduction and secret love affairs to small mistakes without legal impact but of immense importance for the person's standing in the group.

If you are CAUGHT doing something you should not be doing, you share a secret, which can be passed on as gossip to others, in bits and pieces, and as a consequence, you can be CAUGHT spreading rumours as well. You can be CAUGHT in your painful past, or in an unhealthy relationship or in your worries and feelings. A conflict can catch fire, and several colleagues find themselves CAUGHT in an unpleasant situation. And most of all, you can share the experience of being CAUGHT in the nightmare of the London Blitz, and the horror of a city burning bright.

And the whole question can be turned around, and regarded from the other perspective as well. Have you ever CAUGHT anyone?

And if so, what did you feel, what did you do? Did you "cover" for him or her? Or did you pass your knowledge on as gossip among friends? Did you tell your parents or teachers or boss about it? Did you feel a moment of power? Or did you use it to your advantage? CAUGHT in a tricky situation, what would you choose to do?

I was CAUGHT by Henry Green, and he won't let me off the hook until I have fully explored his universe of catchy words and phrases, of his characters CAUGHT in spider webs of actions and feelings, of causes and effects expressed in small symbolic gestures and loosely connected dialogues.

In CAUGHT, there is more dramatic plot and action than in any other Green novel I have read so far, and the characters are CAUGHT in nightmares they can't escape by mere talking. They are on the run from situations they can't handle, playing "Catch me if you can" with each other, while the reader is CAUGHT by the heartbreakingly inevitable of their failures - it's humanity CAUGHT off guard, shown naked, and delivered in Greenish perfection!

Perfect reading pleasure, no catch!

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### **Doc says**

A tour-de-force of prose artistry, a deft ear at dialogue that delineates the gradations of social stratum, a master class in constructing a novel.

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