



## Lancelot

*Walker Percy*

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## **Lancelot** Walker Percy

Lancelot Lamar is a disenchanted lawyer who finds himself confined in a mental asylum with memories that don't seem worth remembering. It all began the day he accidentally discovered he was not the father of his youngest daughter, a discovery which sent Lancelot on modern quest to reverse the degeneration of America. Percy's novel reveals a shining knight for the modern age--a knight not of romance, but of revenge.

## **Lancelot Details**

Date : Published September 4th 1999 by Picador USA (first published 1977)

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Author : Walker Percy

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## From Reader Review Lancelot for online ebook

### **Matt Simmons says**

Less of a novel, and more of a jeremiad, and a jeremiad more true now, 35 years after Percy penned it, than it was originally. While its main thrust is the problematics of a culture whose sine qua non is pleasure, it is also a fascinating investigation of how we create identities for others (and how we, in turn, willingly and cheerfully embrace those identities created for us as a part of our obsession with the various forms of pleasure), with how history functions in our lives, with how we misuse and misinterpret history, using it to insulate ourselves from reality, and how we should use history quite differently: to see the sickness of all times, and to diagnose the sickness of the present, and to learn how to cut out the cancerous perversions and sinfulness of the present.

Percy gives us something very unpleasant to think about, and he does it in a way that is devoid of his normal optimism, humor, and wonder at the beauty of life. What we have is a recitation of evil; properly and appropriately, then, the book is stomach-churning and gasp-inducing, uninterested in defending or showing as good and right any of our modern liberal platitudes or niceties. A book that most will either find a cri-de-couer, or abhorrent reactionary garbage, and not much in-between. No matter which camp the reader finds him or herself falling into, there is no way to not find the book compelling, challenging, and a place to begin to do substantial cultural criticism.

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### **Stephane says**

Catcher in the Rye for adults

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### **Nick says**

As reported by many, Lancelot is indeed the darkest of Percy's novels--which, after being quite distraught by The Thanatos Syndrome, I found myself wondering if all this darkness is worthwhile.

Lancelot is in a mental asylum, recounting the story of the circumstances of his imprisonment to a lapsed priest. He describes himself as in quest of the Unholy Grail--a real sin, which in his view, is the only interesting phenomenon and the signal of the existence of a spiritual order beyond desire and gratification. I found Percy's technique of a one-sided dialogue to be a beguiling way to set the stage for the final exchange between the two principal characters, giving the priest's monosyllabic responses to Lancelot's profoundly distressing narrative of unhinged revenge a weight and hopefulness that give me all the more reason to admire him as a writer.

I would not recommend this book for general readership, for the simple reason that Percy is all too deft in his portrayal of a mind poisoned by the dark relativism of a world bereft of all spiritual significance or openness to the transcendent. Then again, that world and its principal works are much closer to the everyday lives of ordinary people than they were in Percy's time--merely a click away. To such souls, the priest's final "yes" may offer the possibility of a search that starts them on a turn from the sickness unto death.

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## **Jeffrey Keeten says**

**"I cannot tolerate this age."**

Lancelot Andrewes Lamar is quite content to let his life unspool in quiet reflection in his refurbished pigeonnier with its exposed historic bricks and three inch thick cypress floors, all built by the hands of slaves.

**"I was moderately happy. At least at the moment I was happy. But not for the reasons given above. The reason I was happy was that I was reading for perhaps the fourth or fifth time a Raymond Chandler novel. It gave me pleasure, (no, I'll put it more strongly: it didn't just give me pleasure, it was the only way I could stand my life) to sit there in old goldgreen Louisiana under the levee and read, not about General Beauregard, but about Philip Marlowe taking a bottle out of his desk drawer in his crummy office in seedy Los Angeles in 1933 and drinking alone... The only way I could stand my life in Louisiana where I had everything, was to read about crummy lonesome Los Angeles in the 1930's. Maybe that should have told me something. If I were happy, it was an odd sort of happy."**

Lamar is not unhappy, but he certainly isn't happy. How happy can any of us expect to be? He has two daughters. He cherishes the loving memories he has of his deceased wife, Lucy. He still harbors a powerful lust for his want-to-be movie star wife, Margot. He lives in the palatial family home of Belle Isle. He doesn't have to work or even keep up the pretense of working. He is, for all intents and purposes, retired from life and sliding into the quiet, refined twilight years of his life, hopefully with a Raymond Chandler novel close to hand.

And then he discovers that his wife has been deceiving him.

It's a gut punch that he suffers without flinching.

The problem is something unravels in his mind. Chains rattle and bang, sheared off bolts zing by, embedding themselves into the walls of his brain, and a creature long contained is suddenly let loose.

The story may begin here, but the novel starts in a different point in this tale of unhinged madness. We have to go to the present before we can start analyzing what really went wrong in the past.

**"I've been feeling rather depressed and I don't remember things very well. I think I am here because of that or because I committed a crime. Perhaps both. Is this a prison or a hospital or a prison hospital? A Center for Aberrant Behavior? So that's it. I have behaved aberrantly. In short, I'm in the nuthouse."**

Lamar is in a cell with a limited view of the world, telling his story to a priest named Percival. There is a Merlin, as well, but I'll touch on him in a bit. There is no Guinevere, but then it is quite obvious that Guinevere has to be the unfaithful Margot. Maybe Percy thinks it is too much of a stretch to believe that a Texas Belle would be saddled with that name. Lamar is plotting a new world order with a warped idea of the Age of Chivalry. **"It's a whole new beginning that's wanted, a new order, nothing less than a Third Revolution for America, the First having been the one in 1776, which succeeded, and the Second having been the one in 1861, which failed 'because we got stuck with the Negro thing and it was our fault.'"**

I was actually liking my Raymond Chandler reading Lancelot Andrewes Lamar, but the rants he gets into are frankly bat shit crazy. Okay, this part isn't too bad. **"The New Woman will have perfect freedom. She will be free to be a lady or a whore."** Adults being allowed to choose how they conduct themselves is usually a good thing, but then there's this Mel Gibson-esque rant:

*"What the poor dears discovered is the monstrous truth lying at the very center of life: that their happiness and the meaning of life itself is to be assaulted by a man.*

*Ah sweet mystery of life indeed, indeed yes, exactly, yes indeed that is what it is: to be rammed, jammed, stuck, stabbed, pinned, impaled, run through, in a word:*

*Raped.*"

Percy, here let me take that decanter of bourbon from your desk drawer and pour it out the window. Did I say Percy? I meant to say Lamar. So is Walker Percy exposing the dark hidden thoughts that lie behind the facades of regular society? How potentially crazy are seemingly normal buttermilk minds? Is there a sober reality and another tormented by sazerac laced chimeras? Lamar is, after all, talking to us from a prison cell because of his aberrant behavior.

### **What does Walker Percy believe?**

When Lamar discovers that his youngest daughter's blood type indicates that it is scientifically impossible for him to be her father, he doesn't have to speculate as to who her real sperm donating rogue of a father is.

### **MERLIN.**

That rat bastard, wife seducing, movie producing, pinko...well you get the idea. Margot is financing his movie, which is the only reason she has secured a starring role. She doesn't seem that interested these days in penises or what penises want (at least when she is talking to Lamar), but she does seem to understand the power that comes with making them happy.

The movie crew is somewhat baffled and intimidated by Lamar, as if he *"were an ancestor who had wandered out of his portrait."* I had to laugh at the following description one of the cast members had for him. **"You look more like an ugly Sterling Hayden, a mean Southern black-haired Sterling Hayden in seersuckers."** As they will all learn, Lamar is not a man to be trifled with.

This is a book full of unsettling ideas that certainly had me squirming in my seersucker underwear. I'm still pondering how I really feel about Lamar. I can't let go of the early brooding vision I had of him before the discovery of infidelity unmoored him.

### **Or did it just wake up the real Lancelot Andrewes Lamar?**

Like in all the Walker Percy novels that I've read, there are these lovely sprinklings of beautifully conceived sentences that command the mind and must be read and read again. This book is southern charm wrapped in the barbwire of barbarous thoughts.

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I also have a Facebook blogger page at: <https://www.facebook.com/JeffreyKeeten>

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### **Amanda L says**

Understated yet altogether profound. Lancelot's story is retold entirely within his disturbed mind from a single room in an institution with but one window through which he can glimpse a fragment of his past life. The writing is absolutely beautiful and not the least pretentious. The retelling of his past will make you feel uneasy but oddly will make you laugh along the way. Confronts racial issues marked by the era with uncanny deliberateness and marital/ familial strife as the main character directly experienced it. He's crazy and, while you'll get a sense of this, Percy undoubtedly maintains an elusive and enigmatic quality.

It is a story of the past told from the beginning chronologically, leaving you in anticipation and yearning for more information. But when the story is finally told you have a satisfying and complete picture. He conveys Lancelot's character in an implicit manner--- and elucidates truths to his identity that perhaps the complex man isn't even able or willing to admit. Beautifully, it is through his tragedy that his numbness to the world is finally alleviated, but with the caveat that another altogether separate conflict is born within himself.

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### **Corey says**

“I cannot tolerate this age. And I will not.”

A slow-burning and darkly funny jeremiad, told with the kind of brutal eloquence Southern storytellers pull off better than anyone else. Think ‘Fight Club’ by way of Flannery O’Connor.

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### **John says**

A man realizes he's been sleeping his way through life when he learns of his wife's infidelity. He wakes up and is disgusted with the ways that we all live. Life has no meaning. He ends up in a prison/insane asylum. This is his rant as he searches for meaning.

I loved this book. Percy writes so well.

June 2015-re read. Lancelot tells his priest friend that life is meaningless. The closest thing to meaning for him is sexual desire, which he sees as merely violent. The priest is silent throughout until the very end. Can the priest show Lancelot meaning? If so, is it just for Lancelot or for each one of us. This novel is at times quite funny. It also is very serious as it addresses how so many of us go through the motions because we see no real purpose to our time in this world. Glad I read it again.

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### **Lance Kinzer says**

First a note of caution - this book is very explicit in its language and subject matter and may understandably be too much for some in that regard. Coming on the heels of Love in The Ruins this book approaches similar issues from a completely different angle. The plot unfolds quietly and ominously, all the while exploring how the protagonists inability to find meaning in the ordinary occurrences of life leads to a quest to find meaning in negation. Lancelot is disgusted by the tawdriness of tepid sin that, while low and vile, hardly

deserves the name. For him it is by passing through, participating in and embracing real and pure evil that some sort of meaning might be found. It is only in the final pages of the book when Percival the psychologist/priest and Lancelot's old friend decides to embrace his priestly calling that the possibility of a different source of meaning is presented. Percival who has listened silently to the story of Lancelot's quest for meaning in evil is, in the last lines of the book, asked if he has anything to say. He responds - Yes - and with this the book ends. Percival's Yes, which I take to be the gospel, is left as at least a possible alternative to Lancelot's search to find life in negation and death. This leads naturally to Percy's next novel, *The Second Coming*, which I plan to re-read immediately.

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## **Darwin8u says**

*"In times like these when everyone is wonderful, what is needed is a quest for evil.*

*You should be interested! Such a quest serves God's cause! How? Because the Good proves nothing. When everyone is wonderful, nobody bothers with God. If you had ten thousand Albert Schweitzers giving their lives for their fellow men, do you think anyone would have a second thought about God?*

? Walker Percy, Lancelot

I find myself running to Walker Percy to explain to my why the modern world feels so f-ed up. He never provides a perfect salve, but it is nice that he recognizes some things in a similar way. I'm not sure why I am so drawn to "bad Catholic" writers, but they are kinda my thing.

Lancelot is not his best, but almost. There are parts of this book I need to bounce off someone, so I've thrown it over on my wife's side of the bed for her to read. It is absurd, dark, funny, a moral hazard.

I love the way Percy writes, but also adore the things he is saying. His big issue, I believe, in this book is how modern institutions (technocrats and modern psychology) not only enable often the worst in society, in the name of the good, but that other institutions (the Church) in this modern age are powerless often to prevent this attack on morality. The Church is distracted, weak, and it is up to us as individuals to combat the moral decay. That sound boring and I don't really do Percy justice. The hero, Lance, is a discredited psychiatrist now living at a nuthouse. The structure of the novel allows Lance to describe (the story slowly unwinds) his past actions (the central of the novel plot) to his old friend (a screwed-up priest or half-assed physician) named Percival.

Percy's novels are basically one giant rant against the modern age and some of the problems that come with its decadence. While I don't always agree with Percy, his novels seem to resonate hard with me. Like some literary tuning fork, there is a part of me that seems to resonate (emotionally? intellectually? spiritually?) with some Percy's arguments. His novels are often a bit messy, but also seem alive in their mess. There is always something with Percy that I don't quite like, something that doesn't quite square. Still he tends to impale me with more hooks than most other novels. I walk away from his novels dragging many of his visions, his phantasms, his warnings with me.

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## **Mikem says**

De-centering and dyspeptic, this Percy bit gets at the heart of the nihilism that has seduced some quarters of contemporary thought. The chivalric instincts of a would-be Knight of Faith is tossed into the mix of seventies soft-porn manners....manners cultivated and then subverted by all that Southern stuff.

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## **Brett says**

I loved this book. Percy continues diagnosing the "modern malaise" here through the eyes of a man that snapped out of his malaise through a single event. The man, now institutionalized, recounts the events of that lead to where he is, as he also rants and raves about the status of his life before and what the future holds.

There are points where Percy's own views come through the speaker in the story, but there are also points where the speaker just raves lunacy (the break between Percy's own views and the speaker's is clear because Percy is Catholic and the speaker is somewhat hostile to religion and faith). The story is often tense, and the narrative structure is unique.

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## **Perry says**

***What a waste it is to lose one's mind, or not to have a mind. How true that is.***

U.S. V. Pres. Dan Quayle, in May 1989 speech to United Negro College Fund whose motto is, "a mind is a terrible thing to waste."

A first person narrative told through monologues and recollections of a despondent attorney who has been committed to a mental institution for murdering his infidel wife shortly after learning that another man sired his youngest daughter. This Lancelot says he's on an Arthurian quest to unveil, not the Holy Grail, but the truth of the moral vacuity and decadence of American society in the 1970s. Here's a sample of his views on the better half of the human race:

"Of the 3 million species on Earth, the human female is the only one capable of living in a state of constant estrus... the only creature on Earth in perpetual heat... good for only one thing: eye to eye, face to face, belly to belly, breast to breast, day in and day out, in heat the year 'round. There is the omega point of evolution."

I was intrigued at times, but often got lost in his diatribes.

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## **Lori says**

Read this one for Sawyers Book Club on myspace, and because it is on the Lost Lit List....

I like the format... narrator speaks to reader as though they are part of the story (one sided conversation).

I did not like all the lost trains of thought. The narrator would lead you towards an answer, or explanation and then veer off for pages and pages, almost seeming to have lost his original point.

I did not like the ending at all. Perhaps my copy is missing the last few pages?? (sadly, I know this is not the case....)

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## **Kevin says**

We spend the entire book in the increasingly disturbing (but not unsympathetic) mind of Lancelot Lamar, a disenchanted liberal Southern lawyer who, in the light of discovering his wife's infidelity, proceeds on a personal quest to discover the "unholy grail," a real sin in a world where every evil is just a symptom of diseased minds.

The novel is his description of this quest to an old high school and college friend, turned Catholic priest, turned doctor, Percival, from the asylum in which Lancelot is a patient. The climax of the quest is Lancelot committing a mass murder, cutting the throat of his wife's current lover and burning down his mansion with his wife and half a dozen inebriated people still inside (his cheating wife, his wife's former lover, a swinger couple that has convinced his teenage daughter into joining in their orgies).

Near the end, Lancelot gives his syllogism, what he has learned from his quest for the unholy grail:

1. We are living in Sodom.
2. I do not propose to live in Sodom or to raise my son and daughters in Sodom.
3. Either your God exists or he does not.
4. If he exists, he will not tolerate Sodom much longer. He will either destroy it or let the Russians or the Chinese destroy it, just as he turned the Assyrians loose on the Jews and Sparta on Athens. ...
5. If God does not exist, then it will be I and not God that will not tolerate it. ... But the difference between me and God is that I won't tolerate the Russians or the Chinese either. God uses instruments. I am my own instrument. ...
6. I'll wait and give your God time.

We never hear Percival speak (until the final page), but the novel is really about the effect that Lancelot's recounting of his quest has on him. At the start of the novel, we get the image of Percival as something of what modern Catholics would think of as a Vatican II priest. He dresses in contemporary style and does not wear clerical vestments. His stock response is that we need more love in the world. When asked by a young woman who knows him to say a prayer at a cemetery for her deceased mother, he demurs. He becomes a medical doctor after his ordination, but it is hinted that the reason for this is so that he doesn't have to be a parish priest, doesn't have to deal with the day-to-day realities and banalities of Catholic priesthood.

On the final page, Lancelot is about to be released from the asylum and we hear Percival speak for the first time. He affirms the premises of Lancelot's syllogism but denies the conclusion. The novel ends just before Percival explains his own conclusion, and the mystery of the novel is what exactly was the thing Percival wanted to tell Lancelot.

But we get it anyway, only from Lancelot's point of view:

"So, you plan to take a little church in Alabama, Father, preach the gospel, turn bread into flesh, forgive the sins of Buick dealers, and administer communion to housewives? ... So, what's the new beginning in that. Isn't that just more of the same?"

By this point in the novel, Percival has taken to wearing clerical vestments. When passing by the cemetery on his way to the hospital, he stops to say a prayer for the dead, whether asked to or not. He has resigned his post at the hospital and agreed to become a parish priest for a small church in Alabama.

Okay, what to make of all that?

I don't think anyone can understand this book that isn't sympathetic to Lancelot. If, by the penultimate page, you are not simultaneously agreeing with and horrified by Lancelot's rant against the modern world, I don't think you can follow the novel.

The novel presupposes that you are horrified by the world we live in.

Lancelot Lamar then says, the difference between you and himself, you, horrified by our world, is that he is clear-eyed and you are not. The world is bad. He will not tolerate it. If you were clear-eyed, you wouldn't tolerate it either.

If there were no Percival in the novel, it would be impossible to read the novel except as an argument for terrorism, and not a completely unconvincing one, because that is exactly what Lancelot proposes to do in his Third Revolution.

But there is a Percival, and you see Percival's answer, and even through the thick layer of Lancelot's snarky interpretation of it, it's a good answer, or I think it is, and Walker Percy thinks it is, and I hope it is because I don't have a better one: attend "a little church in Alabama". "Forgive the sins of Buick dealers." Commune with "suburban housewives." Say prayers at cemeteries.

<http://trentonzero.com/personal/2017/...>

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## Robert says

Walker Percy's best writing involved his characters and stories presenting themselves (i.e., The Movie Goer) without too much metaphysical claptrap. Lancelot offers some of both. Our protagonist, Lancelot Lamar, recounts how he ended up in a mental institution to a vaguely identified confessor (a psychiatrist, priest, old friend). The more he explores his existential quandary, the less we (I) care. The more he focuses on Margot, the woman who betrayed him, or his ancestral homestead along the Mississippi, Belle Isle, the more involved we (I) become.

Lancelot is the scion of a withered New Orleans family, a lawyer, a cuckold, and a reasonably heavy drinker. He has lots of thoughts and in the end he takes a grand sweeping action, leading to death and destruction but no jail time. The lesser characters are just that--lesser--and in the end it seems Margot is lesser, too, a woman who drove Lancelot mad once upon a time but has lost interest in him. Just plain doesn't want to be with him anymore.

This is pretty thin as far as a plot goes, so Percy makes up for it as he goes along with fine descriptions of the locale, the servants, and a fellow asylum inmate Lancelot takes an interest in.

Flannery O'Connor somehow always managed to make evil an active figure in her writing. Percy just went limp when he philosophized, often portraying folks as basically indifferent to how things turned out, not making them sizzle and squirm.

So, no, I wouldn't recommend this novel unless you have a long-time interest in Percy. If so, which is my case, Lancelot rounds out his erratic passage through prose fiction.

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### **carl theaker says**

The spiritual slumber, that seems to be the condition of the late 20th century, is caused by the transition from spirituality to technology.

We get our sustenance from technology as opposed to 'the land' where we would feel a closer spiritual connection. Previously that was the only choice, the land, God , there were not many alternatives or time to think of alternatives, as work & survival was a full time job.

Now we have a relatively new notion of free time and science has led us to believe that a God is not needed to provide for us. This causes confusion in spiritual choices.

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### **Silver says**

A quirky and very unique and original book which grabs the readers attention right away. It is written in a great style that is easy to read, and full of intrigue, while being told in a tone of ironical humor. It offers a reflective look, from an interesting perspective on what has become of our modern society, with a nostalgia for the values of the old where things made more sense.

A modern day rendition of the legend of Lancelot and the search for the Holy Grail, set somewhere between the 60s-70s the narrator of the story Lance (which happens to be short for Lancelot) becomes disillusioned with the world upon the discovery that his wife whom he had loved, was unfaithful to him. After receiving this crushing blow, Lance comes to believe that he no longer knows or understands what love is, and that in this new generation of free love and sexual liberation, in which women become as forward as men, and gender roles become confused, genuine love can no longer exist.

He rebels against the new generation and refuses to accept the world as it is and so he sets out to start his own crusade against the era itself, and begin a new revolution to restore order to the world, and bring back some chivalry once more in the hopes that love can be rediscovered again.

The entire story unravels itself from within a mental institution where Lance ended up after the discovery of his wife's infidelity.

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## Puna Baris says

Acikcasi daha once Walker Percy'nin adini duymamistim. Bu nasil olabildi onu da bilmiyorum ama onemli bir cagdas Amerikan yazarı oldugunu da bilmiyordum. Bu sucluluk duygusundan dolayi da okumak istedim :)

Kitabin adindan dolayi, su Yuvarlak Masa Sovalyeleri, Kral Arthur ve Guinevere cagrisimi haliyle epey yuksek. Zaten bir zina (!) hikayesi islendigi icin kahramana Lancelot adi bilerek verilmis. Fakat ben bunu biraz zevksiz, biraz zorlama. biraz da kendini-fazla-ciddiye almak olarak algiladim.

Roman kahramani, aldatildigini anladigi andan itibaren gozleri aciliyor ve dunyayı bu yeni gozleriyle gormeye basliyor. Bu yeni gozlerin gordukleri kelimelere donustugunde ise, karsimizda neredeyse kadin dusmani, irkci ve irrasyonel ofke dolu bir ideoloji buluyoruz. Dini reddedip, dinden daha beter bir yobazlik romatizmi vardi mesela. Romanla ilgili yorumlarda "modern s?k?nt?" uzerine oldugu, cagdas toplumun elestirisinin yapidigi gibi seyler okudum. Dogrusu ben kiskancılıktan kendini kaybeden birinin herkesi ve herseyi anlamsız ve berbat bulmasından baska bir sey goremedim. Yazarin hayat oykusunu okudugumda Lancelot'u kendinden yaratmis olabilecegini dusundum.

Romani zorla okumaya devam ettim ve dil ve anlatim acisindan da okumayı zevkli bulmadim. Fakat ; bazi Amerikan sehirleri ve Kuzey ve Guney ile ilgili yapılan muthis tespitler vardi. Ayrica Turkce'ye Ilgi Kurdu olarak cevriilen su kisim gercektan guzeldi ve Turkiye'de bu duyguyu cokca yasiyoruz ne yazik ki:

Yes, interest! The worm of interest. Are you surprised? No? Yes? One conclusion I have reached here after a year in my cell is that the only emotion people feel nowadays is interest or the lack of it. Curiosity and interest and boredom have replaced the so-called emotions we used to read about in novels or see registered on actors' faces. Even the horrors of the age translate into interest. Did you ever watch anybody pick up a newspaper and read the headline PLANE CRASH KILLS THREE HUNDRED? How horrible! says the reader. But look at him when he hands you the paper. Is he horrified? No, he is interested. When is the last time you saw anybody horrified?"

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## Stephen Gallup says

The structure of this novel reminds me of the movie *Amadeus*. There's no one here analogous to Mozart, but nevertheless a crime has been committed, and (like Salieri in the film) the man who felt driven to do it is now sorting out the meaning of it all while addressing a silent priest-like figure.

As such, this becomes a meditation on good and evil, on what matters and what does not, and it covers material that Percy handles in his other novels: Essentially, a character awakens to find himself in degenerate circumstances and considers the choices before him.

I'm trying to read all his books again, roughly 30 years after the first pass, in order to get them straight in my mind and understand their common ground. This one feels more explicit in that, amid much ranting ("You say we are redeemed. Look out there. Does it look like we are redeemed?"), the narrator lays out the existential problem in so many words:

*"The past, any past, is intolerable, not because it is violent or terrible or doomstruck or any such thing, but just because it is so goddamn banal and feckless and useless. ... As you get older you begin to realize the trick time is playing, and that unless you do something about it, the passage of time is nothing but the encroachment of the horrible banality of the past on the pure future. ... [This realization leads to:] the resolve to make a new life, an absolutely new beginning. But I know that one must start from scratch."*

In this case, Lancelot, the main character awakens from a long interval of almost semi-consciousness to find that everything he valued is no longer his. The event that wakes him up, in fact, is noticing that his daughter's blood type means that even she is not his -- biologically, at least. Intrigued more than outraged, he begins paying attention and discovers that his wife is in a love triangle in which he does not even figure.

The narrator's name is no accident. He sees himself as a modern-day Sir Lancelot, and he's telling this story to an old friend whom he associates with Percival. In the Arthurian legend, Lancelot and Percival were the only knights to see the Holy Grail, and in so doing awakened a blighted land to new life. In this book, Lancelot's discovery brought him face-to-face with an UN-holy grail, and yet as he ponders it now, there was nothing great or momentous about it at all. The far greater affliction is that, in a society with no values (Lancelot's home had been taken over by a Hollywood film crew who justified their utterly trashy production with double-talk, while neighbors imagined that the mere proximity of such beings added significance to their own lives), evil is no longer even acknowledged.

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### **Emily Colkitt says**

I learned of Walker Percy at a recent church picnic, when the senior pastor and I were chatting about literature and he recommended Percy as his favorite twentieth-century writer. He described Percy as a modern Southerner who laces witty, parabolic stories with deeper insight into the human condition. Having now read *Lancelot*, I couldn't agree more.

*Lancelot* opens with the passage quoted above, and that eerily intimate tone permeates the ensuing narration. Lancelot Andrewes Lamar is a man alienated from the world, trying to find a sense a purpose in the midst of "sinful suffering humanity." His story is told in a unique first-person voice directed at Father Smith, who is visiting Lancelot in his hospital/prison room. Thus, Father Smith becomes "you," the reader, and Lancelot is able to confront us in a tone almost off-putting in its directness.

*Lancelot* tell us the story of how, via his daughter's blood type, he comes to realize that his wife, an actress, has been cheating on him with her director, the famous Robert Merlin. This realization drives Lancelot crazed with emotions he cannot comprehend, since after all, as he puts it, "her fornication, anybody's fornication, amounts to no more than molecules encountering molecules and little bursts of electrons along tiny nerves—no different in kind from that housefly scrubbing his wings under my hair." The more he tries to analyze his dilemma, the less sense it all makes. By the culmination of the story when Lancelot finally confesses to us why he's been committed to this hospital/prison, we are confronted with the depth of his amorality. Overwhelmed by the meaninglessness of life, Lancelot has lost all sense of shared humanity.

Percy's novel is one of the most peculiar, shocking, and profound works of art I have ever read. The author never gives anything to us straight; instead, he forces us to divine meaning by inverting all the basic assumptions at the heart of the text. In the same way that Lancelot struggles through life anxious and disconnected, so the reader, in a way, struggles with growing anxiety to perceive the moral conclusion of the matter.

For the conclusion which Lancelot ultimately embraces as explanation for the devastation of his life is, in fact, the exact opposite of the conclusion Percy wishes to propel his readers towards. The further we're drawn into the novel, the more outrageous Lancelot becomes, to the point where we are absolutely forced to disagree with everything that he stands for. Lancelot himself declares that he has embarked on "the quest for the unholy grail." With no moral standard to govern his soul, he is left no choice but to embrace evil as

commonplace, right and wrong as mere social constructs.

“In times when nobody is interested in God, what would happen if you could prove the existence of sin, pure and simple? Wouldn’t that be a windfall for you? A new proof of God’s existence! If there is such a thing as sin, evil, a living malignant force, there must be a God! I’m serious. When was the last time you saw a sin? Oh, you’ve seen quite a few? Well, I haven’t, not lately. I mean a pure unadulterated sin. You’re not going to tell me that some poor miserable slob of a man who beats up his own child has committed a sin?”

However, while it becomes clear that Lancelot’s quest leads inevitably to madness and despair, Percy’s real message lies in the inversion of Lancelot’s assertions. Salvation is not found via sexual violence. The meaning of life is not carnal love. Women’s true purpose is not to be raped, and men’s is not to rape women. There will be no “Third Revolution,” as Lancelot prophesies. The more feverishly Lancelot insists upon these absurdities, the more we are drawn to consider the opposite: a conviction of God’s sovereign purpose for humanity by first recognizing what it is not. As Percy alienates us from Lancelot, he propels us closer to Father Smith and the promise of hope beyond this mad, mad world. By the end of the book we can hear the fatigue dripping from Lancelot’s voice, thoroughly revulsed by the reality of life without God.

“I won’t have it … the great whorehouse and fagdom of America … I do not propose to live in Sodom or to raise my son and daughters in Sodom … Millions agree with me and know that this age is not tolerable, but no one will act except the crazies and they are part of the age. The mad Mansons are nothing more than the spasm-orgasm of a dying world. We are only here to give it the coup de gr?ce. We shall not wait for it to fester and rot any longer. We will kill it.”

Reviews of Lancelot remain incredibly mixed. Christian readers are offended by its language, its vulgarity, its amorality, and its wild, dark, profound, dizzying madness. Secular readers are intrigued by its unfettered wit but perplexed by its meaning. In reviewing Angela Hunt’s *Uncharted*, I commented that if Hunt had written with the same message but for a secular target audience, her book could have been truly haunting. Where Ms. Hunt failed, Walker Percy has excelled.

This book is edgy. It’s literary. It’s hilarious. It’s complex. It’s offensive. It’s delicious. And, if taken seriously, it’s dangerous. Dangerous, because it tears away all our delusions of grandeur and points an accusing finger right through the core of our hearts to our fallen, sinful nature. Without a God, Lancelot’s madness is not only justified, it’s necessary. It’s the only way to cope with life. I understand why this book causes such outcry; if taken literally, it paints a profoundly distressing picture of humanity sure to leave even the sturdiest of readers uncomfortable. And this view is one Walker Percy himself may have shared with Lancelot to some extent. However, where Percy/Father Smith/the Christian differs from Lancelot is that we are able to look beyond the madness to something greater. The world Lancelot inhabits, a world devoid of God, is beyond redemption. There’s no way out. It will drive us mad. But with God, there is the promise of escape—in salvation.

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