



# The Sea, the Sea

*Iris Murdoch*

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**The Sea, the Sea** Iris Murdoch

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY JOHN BURNSIDE

When Charles Arrowby retires from his glittering career in the London theatre, he buys a remote house on the rocks by the sea. He hopes to escape from his tumultuous love affairs but unexpectedly bumps into his childhood sweetheart and sets his heart on destroying her marriage. His equilibrium is further disturbed when his friends all decide to come and keep him company and Charles finds his seaside idyll severely threatened by his obsessions.

## The Sea, the Sea Details

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## From Reader Review The Sea, the Sea for online ebook

## Salma says

# Luna Punch By Alexander Jansson

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Iris

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## Paul says

I struggled with this for a while, mainly because I was so irritated by Charles Arrowby, the main character and unreliable narrator. Arrowby is a retired actor, director and playwright who has moved to a remote cottage by the sea and is tentatively writing his memoirs. Whole successions of characters, many of them former lovers, arrive and depart and Charles encounters his first love Hartley who has also retired to the area with her husband.

Like many of Murdoch's characters Arrowby is not very likeable and seems completely oblivious to the mayhem he creates among his nearest and dearest. I also found myself increasingly irritated by what he did with food (nothing kinky here!); if Murdoch meant him to be annoying, she wrote him very well. There is moral complexity and ambiguity as Arrowby tries to recapture his first love (literally). The cast of secondary characters are strong and are not there for mere ornament. Cousin James is an interesting counterpoint to Arrowby.

The Sea is an ever present and the title comes from Xenophon's Anabasis, an account of the travels of 10,000 Greek mercenary soldiers who end up getting stranded in the middle of the Persian Empire. They have to fight their way through hostile areas to the Black Sea coastline near Greece. The cry of The Sea, The Sea is one of joy and relief; it is symbolic of home; the home Arrowby wants in his twilight years. However there is a French poem which has the line "The Sea, The Sea, forever restarting" and that also has resonance as Arrowby tells his story.

It will be no surprise to know Murdoch's favourite Shakespeare play is The Tempest and there are parallels; Arrowby is an odd Prospero. The sea serpent is a strange addition and the Freudians have had a field day with that one. However, the principal idea here, the key to all Murdoch's fiction is contingency. Murdoch usually has purpose in her literature; she argued that religion and philosophy had lost their oomph (a technical term) and potency in explaining the human condition and can be described as dry (see her essay called Against Dryness). It is up to literature to provide what religion and philosophy now cannot; an interesting argument. Murdoch stresses the importance of the accidental, unpredictable and life's sheer messiness; this is what she means by contingency. Contingency invades Charles Arrowby's life with monotonous regularity and the ending is unresolved, messy and indeed contingent.

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## Duane says

This is a five-hundred page diary of a madman. Vain, heartless, jealous, rude; all of these, and more, apply to Charles Arrowby, the central character of the novel. Charles is a retired actor who has left London and bought a house (Shruff End) hard by the sea, where he intends to write a memoir of his career, his life and loves. Low and behold he runs into his childhood sweetheart, Hartley, who lives nearby, and his little self-centered world runs completely off the tracks. He sets about trying to convince her to leave her husband and run away to him, and this is the scenario that plays out over most of the novel. Murdoch may be one of the few writers who could create such an unlikeable cast of characters, and still keep the reader interested in the story. She is a good writer, make no mistake about that. It was overly long but I liked it well enough to give it four stars.

1978 Booker Prize winner.

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## **Michael says**

This is a wonderful novel about a playwright composing his memoirs, trying to escape to some remote outpost by the sea, only to have his former life find him again and again in hilarious, spectral, and sometimes tragic ways. An unreliable narrator so full of his own vanity, and yet so obviously frail and needy, that I was willing to follow him even when I felt sure he must be hallucinating. A remarkable narrative feat.

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## **Steven Godin says**

Ah the sea, that wonderful spectacle bringing joy to countless many, whether swimming, diving, surfing, fishing, boating, splashing about in waist high water or just simply strolling along the shoreline whist the tide tickles your feet. But for some they won't go anywhere near it, all thanks to a certain Steven Spielberg film. For Iris Murdoch's fictional character Charles Arrowby, getting munched on by a shark is not likely and the last thing on his mind, after all, this is the British coast we are dealing with here. The former theatre playwright and actor just wanted to escape and retire by the sea, away from London, away from everyone, to be left alone. Could he have foreseen the life ahead of him? seeing a sea serpent, believing a ghost is wondering around his home, running into women from his past good and bad, nearly drowning through an apparent attempted murder, or ending up with a houseful of unwanted guests, apart from the one he does want, Hartley, his childhood love.

This 1978 Booker prize-winning novel was a feast of reading, rich, textured, deep characters and a story that keep me intrigued throughout. It was a study of vanity and self-delusion more than anything else, with Charles Arrowby the egomaniac narrator a most unlikable person, moving to Shruff End, a house with a tower by the cliffs "How huge it is, how empty, this great space for which I have been longing all my life," Arrowby writes. He would clamber down the rocks and take to the sea come rain or shine for a swim, letting the calm of the water engulf him. Arrowby is writing his memoirs, and his attempt to chronicle his successful career in the histrionic arts, he wants to be a hermit and indulge in fine wine, gourmet food, whist pondering over his history.

But with nothing but his writings, it is inevitable that Arrowby will create some sort of drama in his boring life, even in this isolated spot, and this he does, by attempting to draw his former lover Lizzie into his new life while trying to destroy the marriage of his childhood sweetheart, Hartley (the one he really loves). Other visitors would appear on the scene to congregate at his new abode, shedding light on Arrowby's past and present: including his Buddhist armed forces cousin, James, and various theatrical ex-lovers and ex-friends.

Their relationships start to reveal the shallow ways of Arrowby's self-knowledge, as well as his ability to be a manipulating bully, and a complete belligerent asshole.

Murdoch's subtly and blackly humorous digs, periodically build into waves of hilarity, and Arrowby (although on the whole unlikable) is without doubt a brilliant creation: a deeply textured, intriguing narrator that you just can't get enough of, leading to one of the finest character studies of the 20th century. But Murdoch also uses a cast of supporting characters to great effect, Hartley, a gray, worn and distraught woman living through the pain of a marriage that doesn't seem just, the jealous, raging ex-lover Rosina, Peregrine, an old friend who may have alternative motives for his visit, Titus, a young man that turns out to be Hartley's son, and cousin James, who may or may not have some sort of Tibetan superhuman ability, they all work into the story tremendously well.

In intricately charting the multifaceted deceptions of Charles Arrowby, Murdoch adeptly elaborates on a motif that followed her in her lifelong concern with Good, with Love, and with Freedom: to be good one must transform the personal into the impersonal, one must escape one's private self and concern oneself with others. Inspired by Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, *The Sea*, *The Sea* brilliantly depicts the risks and self-deceptions of life, the precarious and important distinction between imagination and fantasy, and the vital importance of negotiating these dangers.

My only gripe, there were too many moments when I wanted to push Arrowby into the sea myself, for his constant whining, other than that it's writing of a virtuoso, tour-de-force nature.

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## **Teresa Proença says**

**Iris Murdoch** nasceu em Dublin em 1919. Filósofa, poeta, dramaturga e romancista, morreu aos 79 anos com a mente destruída pelo monstro Alzheimer.

**O Mar, O Mar** - vencedor do Man Booker Prize em 1978 - conta a história de Charles Arrowby, ator e encenador, que aos sessenta anos decide abandonar o teatro, mudar-se para uma aldeia inglesa e comprar uma casa (com uma torre Martello) junto ao mar. Aqui pensa desfrutar de tranquilidade para escrever as suas memórias, comer bem e tomar banhos de mar. No entanto, acontecimentos inesperados vêm perturbar os planos de Charles.

*"O tempo pode divorciar-nos da realidade das pessoas e convertê-las em fantasmas. Ou antes, somos nós a convertê-las em fantasmas ou demónios. Certo tipo de obsessões estereis pelo passado podem dar origem a tais simulacros, que podem exercer poderes, como aqueles heróis de Tróia que lutavam por uma Helena fantasma."*

(Ticiano - *Perseus and Andromeda*, 1556)

Ler **O Mar, O Mar** é, como disse a escritora Ana Teresa Pereira, "*entrar num mundo desconhecido, que não se parece com nada, e ao mesmo tempo é aquele em que vivemos.*"

O Casamento, o Ciúme, a Velhice, a Solidão, a Morte, e tudo o que é trivial na vida, Iris Murdoch transforma em excepcional.

García Marquez publicou *O Amor nos Tempos de Cólera* sete anos depois de *O Mar, O Mar* e eu diria que ele o leu, tanto a história de amor de Charles e Hartley me recordou a de Florentino e Fermina, com homens fiéis, durante dezenas de anos, ao primeiro amor. Mas Iris troca-nos as voltas, confunde-nos, perturba-nos, questiona-nos: "*Quem é o nosso primeiro amor? Quem, na verdade?*"

**O Mar, O Mar...** foi um deslumbramento desde a primeira linha. Li a última página há vários dias e não consegui dá-lo por terminado. Reli algumas passagens; pesquisei sobre a vida de Iris; li *A Tempestade*; li resenhas e inventei interpretações e ligações que explicassem o que ficou em aberto. Este livro é daqueles que estimulam o leitor a ler mais além do que está escrito; a completar certas características das personagens e a encontrar sentido para alguns comportamentos que o narrador (Charles) desconhece, interpreta erradamente ou conta sobre o seu ponto de vista.

**O Mar, O Mar...** para guardar, com muito carinho, na memória e na minha estante dos Livros Especiais.

*"O tempo, tal como o mar, desata todos os nós."*

(Gustave Courbet - *The Wave*, 1869)

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## Alex says

Here's the first thing I love about *The Sea, The Sea*: its title. Isn't it wonderful? Imagine how boring it would have looked on a shelf if it had just been called "*The Sea*." But with that profoundly simple decision to repeat itself, it suddenly drips horror and madness and obsession. It's just brilliant. Almost makes me wish Emily Bronte had called her book "*The Moor, The Moor*."

And then Murdoch plays this terrific game with the opening sentence:

The sea which lies before me as I write glows rather than sparkles in the bland May sunshine.

Which is the boring first sentence of a book that should be called "*The Sea*." It even *says* "bland"! Blahhhh, lame, until you get to the next paragraph:

I had written the above, destined to be the opening paragraph of my memoirs, when something happened which was so extraordinary and so horrible that I cannot bring myself to describe it even now after an interval of time and although a possible, though not totally reassuring, explanation has occurred to me.

And there's the first sentence of a book called "*The Sea, The Sea*." Whee! Off we go, madness and horror.

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## Gemma says

A fabulous investigation into ego and vanity and sexual stalking. Charles Arrowby, a theatre director, retires to a tower by the sea in order to be close to his childhood sweetheart. The novel is narrated by Arrowby himself, who has decided to write his memoirs. Murdoch has created a brilliant unreliable narrator in

Arrowby and we, as readers, are forever straining to read between his lines. When he sets out to destroy the marriage of his childhood sweetheart the novel takes on the allure of a thriller. Arrowby is like an inverted 20th century Prospero, blinded by narcissism and a bullying predisposition to control everyone within his sphere of influence. My favourite Iris Murdoch novel.

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## **Bionic Jean says**

**The Sea the Sea** by Iris Murdoch, is her 20th novel, which won the Booker prize in 1978. The author famously was an academic; a professor of Philosophy at Oxford University, who also wrote novels with a philosophical focus.

The novel is in the form of a journal. The viewpoint character throughout is a famous actor and director, Charles Arrowby. The impression we gain immediately is that he is a solitary, rather arrogant and egotistical individual. In the novel he has decided to retire to "Shruff End" a dilapidated and creaky old house on a rocky promontory next to the sea. He tells us that he has decided to get away from London life once and for all, and to follow his dream of living in seclusion, much to the bewilderment and scepticism of all his theatre friends.

The journal he writes, and which we are reading, is an attempt to form some structure to his life, and to be a memoir of sorts. But even though he professes to be writing details of the house and village, he seems to find it impossible to concentrate on the job he has set himself, which he says is the reason for being there in the first place. He becomes distracted inordinately easily; even the food he prepares is an excuse. He rambles on about his culinary activities - both past and present,

*"guzzling large quantities of expensive, pretentious, often mediocre food in public places was not only immoral, unhealthy and unaesthetic, but also unpleasurable. Later my guests were offered simple chez moi. What is more delicious than fresh hot buttered toast, with or without the addition of bloater paste? Or plain boiled onions with a little corned beef if desired?"*

This gives us the measure of the man; faddish and particular to the point of eccentricity. And given subsequent events in the novel, it is probably important for the author to get the reader on Charles's side, to enjoy his little foibles and forgive him what appears to be fanciful and conceited notions about himself.

Increasingly Charles has little grumbles about the privations of his self-imposed exile, reporting spooky goings on. He half imagines there is a poltergeist, as things keep mysteriously getting smashed. (view spoiler)He reassures both himself and the reader that this could be due to a solitary experiment with mind-altering drugs in his youth, thus rationalising the weird "supernatural" experiences that he has. There is an ambiguous attitude to the supernatural here. Sometimes it seems as though there can be no logical explanation for the events; yet at other times a delayed reaction to LSD seems more than likely. Several of the horrific and malevolent impressions Charles reports, are bound up with his feelings about the sea. (view spoiler)But is this after all merely what used to be called a "bad trip"?

The best parts in the first half of the book have to be the wonderful descriptions of the sea, which increasingly seems to have an organic, perhaps omniscient presence,

*"The sea was covered by a clear grey light together with a thick rain curtain. The rain was exhibited in the light as if it were an illuminated grille, and as if each raindrop were separately visible like the beads upon*



*my bead curtain. There it hung, faintly vibrating in the brilliant grey air, while the house hummed like a machine with the steady sound of pattering."*

Occasionally he tries to refocus his thoughts, and we get a potted history of his early rather dull life with his mother and father, and his more glamorous and outgoing Aunt Estelle, Uncle Abel and cousin James, whom he says he detests, but clearly envies. He tells us about his theatrical life with charm, and describes his many relationships with women, professing to not understand his undeniable attraction and appeal for any female he meets, yet obviously making sure he leaves us in no doubt about it.

We are very aware that Charles may be an unreliable narrator. His conquests of women seems very fanciful. Is every woman he has ever met really in love with him? At this point he also waxes lyrical about an old childhood romance with a girl called Hartley, his only "true love", and the readers gets the impression that Charles is impossibly unrealistic, viewing the world almost entirely through his imagination.

The journal is a useful device, telling us much of the history we need to know, and developing our ideas about Charles's character, as well as giving us an indication of his attitudes towards some of the other people who will enter the novel. It is also presented in a totally believable and authentic way. An amateur, unpractised writer, starting with a vague idea in retirement, may well start off with one idea, and go off at various tangents, being diverted by other ideas. However this early part of the novel does seem to be a little tedious and self-indulgent. It is rather too full of lengthy speeches and conversation; there are great long swathes of emoting from the characters, and it's all very angst-ridden. Nothing much seems to be happening, and a modern reader cannot help wishing this first part of the novel had been edited.

In this way the novel is very much of its time, the 1970s, when self-expression was all, with the Arts swamped with long unformed passages of "progressive" music, experimental literature, painting and sculpture. But then, to rescue the reader's attention, there are the magnificent and evocative descriptions of the sea in all its moods. There is an impending sense of doom. There are so many descriptions of the sea, and the whirling cauldron of foam. It is very symbolic, sometimes for the emotions and moods of the characters, sometimes perhaps for their stormy relationships, sometimes it seems to be Charles's "id". He often goes in search of the sea when he is in mental turmoil - once even desperately "checking" on it through his binoculars, as if he could somehow get a portent of how things would be from a glimpse of its state. Sometimes the sea seems like a live creature itself,

*"It was as if the sun were shining through a mist, but a mist made out of the dark blue globules of the sky itself. I remember the lurid impression of that evening, the vivid dark light, the brilliant vibrating colours of the rocks ... There was no breath of wind, not the softest breeze. The sea was menacingly quiet, utterly smooth, glassy, glossy, oily, a uniform azure."*

Inevitably, about half way through, something is bound to happen. Charles is not left in his isolation. Starting with a letter, his acting friends, all unbearable "luvvies" begin to descend on him in ones and twos. Parts of this are very funny, and one part where they are all wondering where on earth they can camp out in Charles's ramshackle house, is almost farcical. The interrelation between characters is pure Iris Murdoch. Each seems absorbed in their own little middle-class world; each professing attitudes and ideas the reader suspects are dissembling. Who is manipulating whom? It is not clear.

These events serve two purposes, because they also show another side to Charles. At one point, an ex-girlfriend remarks acidly, *"you know you can't keep your hands off women"*, yet throughout so far Charles has claimed he has a scrupulously fair and respectful attitude to females, even using the word *"unsexed"* to describe his fastidious, ascetic attitude. (view spoiler)

the way this is achieved is a whopping, fairly unbelievable coincidence. It does strain credulity. Yet this is a novel, and such deus ex machina abound, from Greek tragedies right through to the works of Charles Dickens, so perhaps we should allow Iris Murdoch this one. (view spoiler) the subsequent events in this novel follow the pattern of a slightly bizarre thriller, with aspects of cruelty, mental instability, jealousy, manipulation, entrapment, imprisonment, abduction, domination, tyranny, corruption, perversion of love, obsession, and brain-washing.

*"Sheer hatred can be a commanding form of madness."*

*"Jealousy is born with love, but does not always die with love."*

The comic interventions of the minor characters, Charles's friends, begin to take on a grotesque quality. Neither they, nor, it has to be said the reader, can quite believe the tenacity with which Charles clings to his idealistic notions. We quickly revise our opinion that he seemed to be a mildly eccentric but likeable ageing actor, who liked to have his ego massaged every now and then. His friend Perry tries to bring him back down to earth advising,

(view spoiler)

Increasingly the reader becomes less aware that the novel is a journal, as it becomes a chronicle of the unfolding events. At each point the sea becomes more symbolic, both a portent and metaphor for both the action and the relationships. Take this powerful passage, which comes about three quarters of the way through the novel when arguably the most tragic event has taken place, and the viewpoint character is in despair,

*"The rain came down, straight and silvery, like a punishment of steel rods. It clattered onto the house and onto the rocks and pitted the sea. The thunder made some sounds like grand pianos falling downstairs, then settled to a softer continuous rumble which was almost drowned by the sound of the rain. The flashes of lightning joined into long illuminations which made the grass a lurid green, the rocks blazing ochre."*

So how does this novel, written 36 years ago now, hold up? Surprisingly well, actually. It is not as dated as one might expect, perhaps since the "luvvie" actor types of personality which the author renders so accurately are, unfortunately, timeless. Of course the flow of writing, that particular style, is of its time. During the 1960s and 70s there was much interest in self-development and a search for meaning. The prevailing attitude, especially amongst the young, was that there was a purpose in finding a new approach to leading a good life. There seemed to be all the time in the world for such introspection. The Western world was not as concerned with acquisitiveness, and appearances, as it is now. Increasingly more people were searching for a deeper meaning, a significance, which would lead to a knowledge of one's purpose in life.

To some extent, we have lost the positive side of that now with our busy, materialistic 21st century world of superficiality, our overly competitive society where cooperation has been sacrificed for boastful procrastinations and gloss. Yet the downside of that time, was that there was scope for a lot of self-indulgence and pretentiousness amongst the search for deeper meanings. Such philosophical and esoteric musings are at the core of this book. There are both supremely tragic and comedic events, yet we have a journey running through the novel. In many ways it is Charles's journey to becoming more self-aware, and

beginning to stop his self-delusions, and gain a moral compass. Very near the end, he muses,

*"How much, I see as I look back, I read into it all, reading my own dream text and not looking at the reality ... Yes of course I was in love with my own youth ... Who is one's first love?"*

Elements of fate, coincidences and brushes with the supernatural are present throughout. The coincidence of (view spoiler) Perhaps this is intended to demonstrate the unknowable force and power of love. Perhaps it is part of the thread of mysticism which runs through the book; the idea that we generally only perceive things in a limited, logical way, and cannot see the whole picture. That the mind is, unknowably for most of us, larger.

Near the end of the book, Charles's older cousin James tells him about "bardo", a kind of limbo or holding place for souls who are in between their journeys on the wheel of life.(view spoiler)

The elements of mysticism in the book all come together and are given expression by James. Through having a position of command in the Army, he has spent a great deal of his life travelling through Tibet. He is a Buddhist, deeply involved yet rather secretive about the various ancient religious traditions he has experienced there. Towards the end of the novel, (view spoiler)

This impressionistic, esoteric, thoughtful type of writing is rarely found in modern literary novels, which have lost this dimension. They may be full of in-depth analysis and lyrical writing, but are necessarily less elusive, contemplative and illusory.

The skill of the novel is that it is possible to read and understand the indication of an alternative mystical interpretation of events, all interconnecting and determining the wheels of others' lives. Or it can be read as completely explicable by earthly, known logical precepts. Iris Murdoch leaves it open to the reader to decide which. Yes, it resonated even more for the time it was written. But it is well worth reading now too.

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## Sara says

I'm fairly certain no one writes, or ever has written, exactly like Iris Murdoch. Reading her prose is like listening to Frank Sinatra sing--you might have heard the song before, but never like that. In the first 200 pages of this book, I could not decide where it was going. Charles seemed an egocentric misogynist, not worthy of the interest I was showing in him. The plot seemed desperately thin and a bit all over the place, but the writing was exquisite, the descriptions were musical, and there was something fascinating that meant I never thought of putting the book down.

Then, with a suddenness that was surprising, all the bits began to fall together, Charles became someone intricate and complicated and the plot started to develop into a gripping story of love, obsession, misdirection, mystery and human foibles. Minor characters took on hidden meaning and became central to the story and Charles became someone you could laugh at and cry for simultaneously. I succumbed to emotions that bubbled up like the surf of Murdoch's raging sea. I felt the tension of the situation, I struggled to think how it could be resolved and leave anyone intact, I worried for the sanity of everyone involved, and I mourned for the things that might have been if any of these characters had lived life with their eyes open. If there is one thing I could say is unique in Murdoch's writing, it is that you feel her story as much as read it.

*"It's not an eternal thing, nothing human is eternal. For us, eternity is an illusion. It's like in a fairy tale.*

*When the clock strikes twelve it will all crumble to pieces and vanish. And you'll find you are free of her, free of her forever, and you can let the poor ghost go. What will remain will be ordinary obligations and ordinary interests. And you'll feel relief, you'll feel free. At present you're just obsessed, hypnotized."*

How much of life is exactly that? Obsession and invention. How often in life do we substitute our realities, our possibilities, for dreams, which are unreachable? Is it worth anything to us if we recognize the truth of love when life is all but done? And how much like the ever-changing, unfeeling, often cruel sea, is life? Charles romanticizes both, and plays a dangerous game with both, and each of us must decide for himself if the price Charles pays is worth the knowledge he gleans.

Charles is a complete character. He grows and morphs, despite all his efforts not to. And, while he is growing, so do we. This is the only Murdoch I have ever read, but I have no hesitation in labeling her "genius".

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## **Jaidee says**

5 Jungian Stars.

### **2015 Gold Award - Tie (First Favorite Read)**

Over the weekend I was sitting with a friend, having a tea and we were reading. She said, "How is the Murdoch book?" I looked up and without pausing or thinking and said "Simply wondrous". She tilted her head in her adorable way and said "Whatsitabout?"

I took a moment, sighed and exclaimed, "Everything"

This book is a psycho-spiritual masterpiece of the highest caliber. I decided to sit down and come up with a laundry list of what it is about:

- the stars and earth
- isolation, connection, misunderstandings, avoidance
- narcissistic men and histrionic women
- misunderstood boys and romantic girls
- wine, cheese, mushrooms and biscuits
- tea even when its not drunk
- Buddhist demons and Christian saints
- dreams, concussions, drownings, death
- petty cruelties, belittlement and acts of supreme generosity
- heterosexual passions and homosexual cravings
- theatre, woodworking, cooking and music
- merboys, seals, ghosts and sea dragons
- vengeance and apathy
- interpretations, neurosis and delusions

- minutiae and momentary insights
- sullen villagers and grandiose urbanites
- dogs, cats and many roses
- lost loves and childhood musings
- churches, taxis and pubs
- murderous rages and spiritual awakenings
- vulgarity and tender exchanges
- stagnation, repetition and momentary joy

Most of all it is about the depth and changeability of the Sea. The Sea that with one swoosh can take away all that we hold dear and understanding that we never held it in the first place.

Absolutely amazing. Thank you Ms. Murdoch.

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### **Jesse says**

I found this both repelling and compulsive, and the more repulsed I became the less capable I seemed of putting it down. I was hooked just several pages in, enamored with the elegant, elegiac tone of Charles Arrowby's attempts at composing a memoir/diary after exiling himself to a remote seaside home to live in monastic isolation. Via Arrowby, Murdoch's prose takes on a sea-like quality, the ebb-and-flow of memories and musings churning together present and past to the point where the edges of reality and unreality begin to blur imperceptibly. I settled in for what I fully expected to be more or less an intelligent and eerie psychological thriller.

But just as it was not meant for Arrowby to enjoy his solitude, so I was quickly jumbled out of any conceptions that I was in for a graceful memory piece. Suddenly figures from Arrowby's past begin showing up uninvited at his doorstep, culminating with the unexpected reappearance of a lost first love, setting off a string of increasingly erratic behavior that quickly threaten to become dangerous.

It took a while for me to adjust to such a drastic change of narrative trajectory, but as it went along I began to appreciate the grand guignol absurdity of it all. And it wasn't, I admit, until just about the very end that I realized how the incongruent-seeming opening does indeed set up nicely the rest of the novel: reported to be the premiere interpreter of Shakespeare of his day, isn't it natural, maybe even inevitable that Arrowby's life takes on an expansive Shakespearian theatricality?

*"All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players:  
They have their exits and their entrances;  
And one man in his time plays many parts,  
His acts being seven ages."*

-Shakespeare, As You Like It

And that kind of sums up my final response to *The Sea*, *The Sea*—creaky, isolated Shruff End is not the place of escape and seclusion Arrowby intends it to be, but is merely an empty stage upon which the figures of his past, present and possibly his future appear with a theatrical punctuality, reciting their lines, performing their small roles and disappearing again into the wings again until called upon again to reappear

on cue around Arrowby as he plays his "many parts," from a wizened Prospero to a tragic Lear to a pathetically misguided attempt at *Romeo and Juliet* that quickly deteriorates into a truly horrific parody of *Taming of the Shrew*.

Did I enjoy *The Sea, The Sea*? I can't honestly say that I did. I'm not even sure that I liked it per se. But it did compel me to descend into a unique type of claustrophobic madness, creating a literary experience of a type that I've never quite experienced before, which is saying something indeed. My true reaction is suspended somewhere between three and four stars, but considering that the only other Murdoch novel I've read has continued to grow in stature in my memory, I gladly give the novel the benefit of the doubt and round my rating up.

*The past and the present are so close, so almost one, as if time were an artificial teasing out of material which longs to join, to interpenetrate, and to become heavy and very small like some of those heavenly bodies scientists tell us of."*

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## **Adam Dalva says**

An extraordinary novel, at once page-turner and philosophic, comic and melodramatic, one of the best that I've read. Murdoch is remarkably skilled at inhabiting the minds of her protagonists, and Charles Arrowby, a late-middle-aged, bumbling, morally dubious, veteran of theater, is a wondrous creation. The first 100 pages of this novel shouldn't work, as Charles, in journal form, moves to Shruff's end and inhabits a lonely house by the sea, wanders around town, experiences visions that he blames on LSD (about which, more soon), goes on lengthy diatribes about food:

"For lunch, I may say, I ate and greatly enjoyed the following: anchovy paste on hot buttered toast, then baked beans and kidney beans with chopped celery, tomatoes, lemon juice, and olive oil. (really good olive oil is essential..." (this goes on for another 15 lines)

and thinks about his life. Though this early section is essentially pure exposition, it works, and I was oddly gripped. I was especially fascinated by what Murdoch left under the surface. *THE SEA THE SEA* has to be record-holder for characters mentioned who never appear - you can track the sub-narratives of at least a dozen acquaintances of Charles, such as a chauffeur who he feels he's wronged who shows up for exactly three paragraphs 400 pages in but is discussed incessantly beforehand.

And then, at the end of these 100 pages, the twist, one of the greatest twists in literature. All along, the journal hints at a lost love from childhood, one who comes up over and over again.

"All a child's blind fear was there, the fear that my mother so early inspired in me: the kiss withheld, the candle taken. Hartley, my Hartley. Yes, I see her quickly jumping over a rope, higher and higher it was raised, Hartley still flew over, the watchers sighing each time with sympathetic relief; and I hugging my heart in secret pride. She was the champion jumper of the school...Hartley always first, and I cheering with the rest and laughing with secret joy. Hartley, in a breathless stillness, crouched upon a parallel bar, her bare thighs gleaming. The games master spoke of the Olympics."

A sequence of jilted lovers visits and leaves, and the last's headlights reveals the woman herself: Hartley, now old, in the woman in town who Charles has kept walking by without noticing.

And then a string of completely insane coincidences begins. It's a bit difficult to summarize - there's Charles's cousin James, who might have magical powers (I can't believe this book pulls off a mysticism subplot); Hartley's estranged adopted son; Hartley's husband, surely, surely the model for Albert in "The Bear Comes Over The Mountain," Lizzie the love obsessed actress, and her gay partner Gilbert Opian, the novel's saving grace, who has a 50 page lite-BDSM sequence where he intentionally debases himself as Charles's Butler; Rosina, who is also in love with Charles and wants to kill him, and HER husband who Charles stole her from, though their friendship is unaffected; Clement Makin, who is dead and quite possibly the actual love of Charles's life; and of course Hartley, who Charles stalks and eventually kidnaps.

It's as good a cast as I can remember in a book, and they function like Shakespearean ghosts. Shruff's End is clearly meant to be thought of as a stage, with exits on all sides and a clear set, and characters come crashing into it at all hours of the night. As with her punchier, slightly less ambitious SEVERED HEAD, we tolerate this madness because the characters are so fully realized, because it is so madcap, so fun to read. Things slow down in the third act, which bears some resemblances to Proust's THE CAPTIVE, as the book achieves a stasis that it doesn't want to have. An extraordinary night party sequence brings the energy back up, and the ending, totally bizarre, is virtually perfect.

I regret, greatly, not reading Murdoch sooner. This is a big, sloppy, flawed book, and I couldn't sleep for 3 straight nights until I finished reading it. Make the time for it.

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### **Lisa says**

Charles Arrowby, as he portrays himself in this "autobiography" is undoubtedly as tragic, as comic, as mercurial as any of the roles he played in his successful career as a Shakespearian actor. He has come to the English seaside to peacefully retire but instead faces a series of tumultuous derailments.

Charles is a spectacular character. He is self-centered, erratic, delusional, arrogant, disingenuous, impetuous, eloquent, exhausting, narcissistic, foolish, grandiose, tempestuous, obsessional, cunning, imperious, deceptive, self-destructive, magnetic. I hated him, I loved him, my feelings about him changed with every page. Ultimately, the novel is about one man facing his past and coming to grips with the truths in his life. It is an extraordinary novel. I absolutely loved it! (I highly recommend the audiobook which is masterfully narrated by Simon Vance.)

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### **Jeffrey Keeten says**

**"Even a middling novelist can tell quite a lot of truth. His humble medium is on the side of truth. Whereas the theatre, even at its most 'realistic', is connected with the level at which, and the methods by which, we tell our everyday lies. This is the sense in which 'ordinary' theatre resembles life, and dramatists are disgraceful liars unless they are very good. On the other hand, in a purely formal sense the theatre is the nearest to poetry of all the arts. I used to think that if I could have been a poet I would never have bothered with the theatre at all, but of course this is nonsense. What I needed with all my starved and silent soul was just that particular way of shouting back at the world. The theatre is an attack on mankind carried on by magic: to victimise an audience every night, to make them laugh**

**and cry and suffer and miss their trains. Of course actors regard audiences as enemies, to be deceived, drugged, incarcerated, stupefied. This is partly because the audience is also a court against which there is no appeal."**

### **Schruff End. Charles Arrowby's place by The Sea.**

Charles Arrowby has retired from the theatre to a damp, drafty, but dramatic home by the sea. His plan is to live on his own, read, and eat well while he writes his memoirs. He is famous, certainly well known enough to be recognized on the street from his days acting and directing on the stage. He wants to be anonymous, but as I can tell anyone from personal experience the last place one can be anonymous is in a small town.

*"I could have told you the country is the least peaceful and private place to live. The most peaceful and secluded place in the world is a flat in Kensington."*

I found myself liking him. I especially enjoyed reading about him figuring out this life of reading, eating, and writing. It sounds ideal. As the plot advances it will take many shattering blows for me to let go of the Arrowby I liked and replace him with a man that is on the verge of lunacy. Charles may miss the drama of the stage, but he doesn't miss it for long because his life becomes a stage play. It all starts to unwind when he goes to the village and sees his first love, Hartley appear as if by magic. As it turns out he is the only one that calls her Hartley everyone else calls her Mary. He knew her briefly before the war and during the war, as happened with many people, he lost track of her. Her life is a Mary life not a Hartley life. Charles can not accept the person he sees before him. She must metamorphosize and he is the man to make it happen

*"I saw: a stout elderly woman in a shapeless brown tent-like dress, holding a shopping bag and working her way, very slowly as if in a dream, along the street, past the Black Lion in the direction of the shop. This figure, which I had so vaguely, idly, noticed before was now utterly changing in my eyes. The whole world was its background. And between me and it there hovered, perhaps for the last time, the vision of a slim long-legged girl with gleaming thighs."*

### **Oh good lord!**

Now Clement, who he actually talks the least about of all his lovers seems to be the woman that made him into the successful man he is today.

*"Clement was the reality of my life, its bread and its wine. She made me, she invented me, she created me, she was my university, my partner, my teacher, my mother, later my child, my soul's mate, my absolute mistress."*

Clement made him feel so good that he did not attempt to find Hartley. She kept him from his one true love by...being...so...terrific. The Poor Bastard.

Lizzie visits him, another one of his ex-lovers. She has decided to move in with their mutual friend Gilbert.

*"Lizzie is half Scottish, half Sephardi Jew. Although she has the most adorable breasts of any woman I ever made love to, she is not really beautiful, and never was even when she was young, but she has charm."*

Unfortunately Lizzie is still in love with Charles and even though he really doesn't want her back he doesn't want her with Gilbert either.



**"Jealousy is born with love, but does not always die with love."**

Rosina shows up as well yet another ex-lover. They can't let him go any better than he can let them go. She is a famous actress almost as obsessed with Charles as Charles is becoming with Hartley. She breaks into house not once, but several times and soon knows all there is to know about this silly Hartley business. It seems that Charles broke up her marriage and then casually tossed her aside, but Rosina as it turns out is not the type to be so casually flung anywhere. She is more likely to pick Charles up and fling him into the sea or run over him with her car or brain him with a rock.

Charles seems to have a most powerful effect on women, but his charms are having no influence on Hartley. Despite being resoundingly rebuffed his fantasy continues to grow.

*"Her large brow, which looked white in the candlelight, was puckered and pitted with little shadows, but the way she had turned up the collar of her green cotton coat behind her hair gave her a girlish look. Perhaps that was what she used to do with her mackintosh collar in the days when we went bicycling. And even as I was listening intently to her words. I was all the time gazing with a kind of creative passion at her candlelit face, like some god reassembling her beauty for my own purposes."*

**Own purposes indeed.**

*"She did not have to join my grand intimidating alien world. To wed his beggar maid the king would, and how gladly, become a beggar too. The vision of that healing humility would henceforth be my guide. This was indeed the very condition of her freedom, why had I not seen this before? I would at last see her face changing. It was, I found, a part of my thought of the future that when she was with me Hartley would actually regain much of her old beauty: like a prisoner released from a labour camp who at first looks old, but then with freedom and rest and good food soon becomes young again."*

**Okay so he is losing all grip on reality, but isn't that what actors do? They make the role their own and transcend the script.**

This book won the Booker Prize in 1978. This is the first Iris Murdoch I've read and I've got to say how impressed I am by her writing style and ability. **I can't believe I've never read her before.** She wrote twenty-five works of fiction until 1995 when she began to experience the early stages of Alzheimer's Disease which she at first attributed to writer's block. There is something so sad about a woman who thinks her writing ability has simply shut down only to learn that her body is failing her. She had more stories to tell us, but unfortunately they became locked up in the corridors of her mind with doors without knobs and crooked, meandering hallways.

**Iris Murdoch**

When we first meet Charles he seems like a man that we would love to know, a favorite uncle or a friend to grab a beer with occasionally. As we get to know him better his selfishness, his egotism, his dramatic persona turns him into a person that I would avoid as if he were sporting bubonic plague. Murdoch brings us along, masterfully, through the dementia of Charles's growing obsession with possessing something that frankly no longer exists. By the end he has proved to be as chimeric as the youthful Hartley. *"Last night someone on a BBC quiz did not know who I was."*

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## Edward says

### *Introduction*

--The Sea, The Sea

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## Elie F says

### **Who is one's first love? Who indeed.**

At some point of one's life, one might want to exit the theatrical world of power, jealousy, and love, and withdraw into nature to learn to be innocent and good. Charles Arrowby is such a person, and this novel is an account of his failed attempt: "the sea, the sea", a natural surrounding that should have brought peace, is turned into a mirror of Charles' own psychic turmoil. Like *The Bell*, this novel is also about the desire to reclaim the past, but before reclamation, one needs to find the truth of what actually constitutes the past which most of us are unable to find; And like *The Bell* in which Murdoch uses characters like Dora, Catherine and Toby to bridge and then tear apart Michael and Nick, in this novel all other characters serve as the bridge between Charles and his cousin James (a Buddhist military officer) who instead of Hartley (the Helen of Troy of this novel) is the actual object of obsession for Charles. Charles wants to rival James' detachment with his attachment, rival James' mountain with his sea, but at the same time he needs James's companionship and rescue. In some sense, James for Charles represent a spirituality. As love degenerates into possessiveness and jealousy, spirituality degenerates into superstition and power. Love is the invisible hand that pushes us into the deep gulf of the sea, and spirituality is the mysterious power that we expect to come to our rescue. First love, the first obsession of our life, sort of constitutes both love and spirituality: it pushes us and then saves us, and from that moment onward we are no longer afraid of being pushed into that dark dangerous chasm.

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## Laysee says

**The Sea, the Sea** is the 1978 winner of the Booker Prize for good reasons. It is a brilliantly perspicacious exploration of human weakness in all its gory fullness. All the feelings that torment the soul are thrust into consciousness and displayed so well that the reading experience is so bad at times. Very few books that serve up a detestable self-serving cad as the main protagonist have succeeded in becoming for me a five-star read. This is an exception.

Charles Arrowby, an eminent theatre artiste in his sixties, has retired to Shruff End, a 'seaside paradise' he owned, to write a memoir and supposedly to 'repent of a life of egotism.' His intended subject is his love affair with Clement Makin, a deceased, older actress and mistress who has shaped his life both professionally and personally. Hailed in the popular press as a 'tyrant', a 'tartar', and a 'power-crazed monster', Charles is worshipped by the actors and actresses whose career he makes or breaks but who both curiously love and fear him. Right from the beginning, Charles' writing plans are haplessly and irrevocably derailed. He let on that 'something happened which was so extraordinary and so horrible that I cannot bring myself to describe it even now after an interval of time...' The memoir that Charles ends up writing is this book we are reading. It is an account of his life, in particular, his obsessive pursuit of a childhood love that encapsulates for him an ideal so pure that nothing must stand in the way of its resurrection.

After forty long years, Mary Hartley Smith remains in Charles' heart as his one true and only love, or so he claims. Other women, by comparison, are mere shadows. Or so he claims, too. Charles despises women, uses them for his pleasure and discards them at will. His relationships are characterized by irrational jealousy, vampirish possessiveness, and guiltless glee in smashing other people's marriages. His old flames – Lizzie and Rosina – show up at his seaside cottage to lay claims on his love despite having suffered humiliation and grand heartaches. The husbands of these actresses rock up as well. Their interactions are tense but marvelously hilarious. Charles has no qualms about exploiting each of his adoring colleagues until he bumps into Hartley in the village. This encounter with his lost love precipitated a devastating detour into unexpected experiences, which spin out of control. The crux of the story is Charles' descent into increasing horror and tragedy, so bent is he on snatching at happiness at the expense of others' misery.

Murdoch described the pain of yearning, confusion, jealousy, possessiveness, deception, manipulation and servitude with insightful candor. The internal chaos found a literal sounding board in the tempestuous sea, whose wildness and beauty were captured in myriad flashes of color and delight. It took Murdoch 500 odd pages to sift the main protagonist until he is finally able to separate the wheat from the chaff and allow the reader to perceive truth in all the falsehood that has thickened over time.

Characters loom larger than life and understandably so because they are actors by profession. They leave a deep impression as friends who matter, imperfect though they are. They become for Charles a source of light in the murky muddle he created for himself. Lizzie, Gilbert, Peregrine, Rosina and James are stars in their own right and far more likeable than Charles. Lizzie, whom I felt most tenderly toward, writes to Charles: "My love for you has always had a sad face. Oh the weakness of the power of love." And yet, she makes one of the most touching supplications to Charles for his kindness: "Tenderness and absolute trust and communication and truth: these things matter more and more as one grows older."

Read **The Sea, the Sea**. Like the fathomless sea, this novel has depth and profundity that promise to call forth a richer understanding of the natural impulses that underlie the best and worst in human behavior.

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## Perry says

*All our failures are ultimately failures in love.*

Iris Murdoch

Oh boy. This is deep, dudes. Far out and deeply deep, dudettes.

Rather than trying my unworthy hand at a thorough analysis of a psychologically complex 500 page novel, I shall lay track for a few grooves.

*Dig it.*

Near the beginning, I thought it might be a romance. No way, man. More like a real Mystery of Mental and Emotional Health and Well-being.

What is love? How is the idea or thought of it, especially young love, affected by the passage of time, what with our tendency to romanticize our youth?

The painful paradox of the ego (false pride), with its fang-ed sea serpent 'jealousy,' blinding us to reason, depriving us of patience and filling us with anger, all of which operates to ruin the very love that our innate

sexuality tells us to cherish above all else.

The ways we lie to ourselves to enable the fantasy, even to the edge of sanity, that another loves us despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

This is a thought provoker that goes down some murky places in the mind. Some readers may be turned off by what at times seems like a long-windedness of the first person narrator. Although it seemed to me, after finishing it, that 50 pages could have been trimmed, I haven't studied it enough to make conclude that those 50 were unneeded, and not the kick that pushed this novel into "classic" territory.

I could delve into all my thoughts triggered by the profundity of Iris Murdoch. It would be a ramble for it reminds me of how I languished in damaged love's lassitudes all the day I finished it. So, in that respect, I couldn't have read a more timely book.

This is a surefire 4.5 stars on the water.

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### **Jim Fonseca says**

This book earned the author the Booker Prize in 1978. It's a powerful book. I had seen it forever at library sales and for years I thought I should read it. Finally, I did, and I wish I had read it earlier. I'm giving it a rating of 5 and adding it to my favorites.

The main character is a recently retired actor/playwright/theater director. He was a so-so actor, a better playwright, but a masterful director. In the last endeavor he achieved his fame and made his money. The main character is an egotist. The press has called him a tyrant and power-crazed monster. He's a misogynist who has used and abused women all his life. A good friend, a male, tells him "the trouble with you, Charles, is that basically you despise women."

Now he has left the London scene to live by himself at a beach house in a tiny town, the first house he ever owned. Whatever will he DO there? All his friends ask him: How is someone like him, so used to the chaotic social scene of London's theater world, seriously going to live in isolation in a small village?

He spends his time writing a memoir that is a kind of diary and autobiography mixed in with copies of letters he sent or received; basically that is this book. Of course, we can't trust his writing; even he tells us his letters are "partly disingenuous, partly sincere."

He discovers miraculously, that his first-time love lives in the tiny village. He feels that he has fallen in love with her again; or, that he never stopped loving her. Without giving away much plot, I can say that basically he "kidnaps" her away from her husband and tries to berate her into loving him again. She's married in what he comes to consider an abusive relationship. Well, maybe, maybe not. Married relationships become a major theme of the book:

In a bad marriage, can you really "...live on half dead and even have pleasures in your life."

On spousal abuse: "She felt herself guilty of his sins against her..."

"Of course a marriage can look terrible, but be perfectly all right."

To which we can all add, there are also, perfect, ideal marriages that everyone talks about, praises and seek to emulate. Until they break up.

A moral question: can we say that a child's death can 'strengthen' a troubled marriage, if the child, now an adult, was the cause of most of the trouble?

"They've got their own way of hating each other and hurting each other, they enjoy it."

There's a lot of melodrama. Of course these are theater folks. Many of the women he abused throughout his life, wooing them and then abandoning them, still seem to be willing to move back in with him, now that he is alone. I wonder if a male author could get away with this scenario as well as this female author has. They seem to still hate him, despite their willingness to come back to him. All his old loves (he never married) come back to haunt him with dramatic, unannounced entrances (he has no phone). They come dragging their chains like the ghosts of Christmas past. They appear at his door at the most inopportune times, creating a theater-like farce. ('Enter stage left.')

At times the women talk and act more like they are mentally ill than in love. One woman breaks into his house and smashes mirrors and vases. One smashes another woman's purse. One enters the dining room while he is dining with a friend and spits on the floor. Another ambushes a car full of people he is traveling with, smashing all the windows with rocks. He tells us "I had witnessed hysterical screaming before, but nothing like this."

We have some surprising plot twists. There's an accidental death, an attempted murder, and a death where it appears that the person 'willed it.'

Passages I liked:

"Guilt feelings so often arise from accusations rather than from crimes."

"We were poorish and lonely and awkward together." (Of his parents during his childhood when he was theater-mad as a boy.)

On bad press: "Even if readers claim they 'take it with a grain of salt', they do not really. They yearn to believe, and they believe, because believing is easier than disbelieving, and anything which is written down is likely to be 'true in a way'."

She "...pulled the blanket up over her head as if she were a corpse covering itself."

"The thunder made some sounds like grand pianos falling downstairs..."

"He was a brave man. I cannot pretend I ever really loved him, but I do admire him for trying to kill me..."

This is a really good book. And it is another 'beach house' book by an Irish author. Consider several of William Trevor's; Banville's *The Sea*; Colm Toibin's *The Heather Blazing* and *Blackwater Lightship*. Of course the classic beach house novel is Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, but she is not Irish.

Murdoch can be considered an Irish author even though she grew up in and went to school in England. She was born in Ireland and both her parents were Irish.

I intend to read more by Iris Murdoch.

Photos from top:  
[thewordtravels.com](http://thewordtravels.com)  
[e-architect.co.uk](http://e-architect.co.uk)  
[dailymail.co.uk](http://dailymail.co.uk)

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