



Heaven's My Destination

Thornton Wilder, J.D. McClatchy (Foreword), Tappan Wilder (Afterword)

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Drawing on such unique sources as the author's unpublished letters, business records, and obscure family recollections, Tappan Wilder's Afterword adds a special dimension to the reissue of this hilarious tale about goodness in a fallen world.

Meet George Marvin Brush—Don Quixote come to Main Street in the Great Depression, and one of Thornton Wilder's most memorable characters. George Brush, a traveling textbook salesman, is a fervent religious convert who is determined to lead a good life. With sad and sometimes hilarious consequences, his travels take him through smoking cars, bawdy houses, banks, and campgrounds from Texas to Illinois—and into the soul of America itself.

Heaven's My Destination Details

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From Reader Review Heaven's My Destination for online ebook

David says

4 1/2 stars. More so than any author I know, Wilder has the ability to find the universal in the specific, the humor in the sadness, and the sadness in the humor. This book about the birth, death, and resurrection of one man's religious convictions contains some of the greatest laughs I've ever encountered in literature and some truly painful pathos (Although, no pathos is the world of Wilder could ever top Esteban's experiences in "Bridge of San Luis Rey.") What's so amazing is how fair Wilder is to his characters and his diligent patience in letting each of the cartoons become three-dimensional human beings. If I miss the poetry of his grander, foreign novels a little, if I miss the epigrams that defined his earlier works, I'm still glad to have known George Brush and to have shared such a remarkably joyful, painful, and human experience with him.

Mike says

Although one of the lesser known Wilder novels, *Heaven's My Destination* addresses some common themes in Wilder's work, including struggles with faith and the difficulty of connecting or communicating with others. George Brush is a highly religious traveling book salesman who is just out of college. His strict adherence to religious dogma gets him into trouble as he chides smokers and drinkers, refuses to accept interest on his investments (and ultimately rejects banks altogether), and tries to convert those who study evolution. He evens struggles with his own vice--women--often to his own detriment. He often feigns ignorance or pretends to be naive in order to avoid self-reflective questions examining his own character and desires that might shake his own faith. ("This is a cathouse? Why, I had no idea! I just thought these were some nice young ladies..." etc.) Ultimately, his obsession with following these religious rules is impossible for him (or anyone) to maintain, yet, ironically, these are the only rules that can sustain his existence. Without them, he might quite literally die.

The novel's tone is light, funny, and episodic. Wilder leaves it to the reader to interpret whether or not George is a critique of religious dogma, American values, or just those lone eccentrics who live their lives by impossibly-strict rules. As with most of his other work I've read, Wilder's novel is mildly interesting, but lacking the spark and fire of his contemporaries. He claims Joyce as a model and inspiration in the essays at the end of the Library of America edition, but this writing lacks any of the insight, style, or penetrating inner examinations of Joyce. (But even when Wilder is at his most "original," he is actually at his most derivative.) In short, I'm still searching for the Wilder work that "wows" me.

Tyler says

Candide in Kansas City.

Tony says

Wilder, Thornton. HEAVEN'S MY DESTINATION. (1935). ****. This is a different kind of novel for

Wilder. Set in Depression America, it chronicles the travels of it's traveling salesman hero. On meeting anyone, our hero always provides the necessary information about himself. For example, when he visits a summer camp for young students, one of the women there approaches him:

"What's your name?" she asked.

"George arvin Brush. I was born in Michigan. I'm a traveling salesman in school books. I came to this camp to see a man on business. This evening I asked if I could help in the kitchen, because I like to be where students are and where people are working. I've had to do that kind of work all my life."

George is a delusional idealist. He tries to live his life according to his interpretation of what is taught in the Bible, with some additional rules passed down by Ghandi. This would be all well and good, but he has a problem: He expounds on his views to everyone he meets. George doesn't smoke or drink or chase women. Anyone who does is a fallen person in his eyes. He doesn't believe in the acquisition of money for its own sake, and gives away any that he might have over and above his needs. He doesn't believe in banks; he believes that they foster fear in the people who use them to store up their money "for a rainy day." He is a Pacifist, though he isn't afraid to defend himself. He has this strange belief that women should be pure and aspire only to becoming good wives and raising families. Spouting off all of his ideas continually gets George in trouble. He is arrested for withdrawing his money from the local bank, but refusing to take the interest. When this word gets around, it starts a run on the bank that ultimately puts it out of business. He is a stranger in a strange land. We follow these picaresque adventures with a slight grin, but stop to think more closely about the basic tenets of society as George questions them. Is there any hope for George? Maybe. Maybe not. Recommended.

James says

"George Brush is my name;
America's my nation;
Ludington's my dweling place
And Heaven's my destination."
(Epigraph for the novel)

An informed and realistic look at the struggles of the depression era, Heaven's My Destination is a comic picaresque tale that defies categorization. It was Wilder's fourth novel and second after the wildly popular The Bridge of San Luis Rey. The hero of the story, George Brush, is an other-worldly figure whose single-minded pursuit of a philosophy that seems like pure hokum, but through his earnest devotion to its strange principles somehow seems to make sense--in an odd way. He needs a certain strength of character to persevere in this earnest pursuit because almost all the people he meets are married to a common sense that either rejects his entreaties or runs away from him in fear and misunderstanding.

The events in this very episodic novel are the epitome of what has come to be called quixotic, named after the pursuits of Cervantes' Don Quixote and his humble partner Sancho Panza. They said that Quixote suffered from a sort of madness and that might be an apt explanation for the strange behavior of George Brush. It is likely that Wilder drew on his short stint teaching at the University of Chicago where he taught Cervantes among others. His lectures were popular and they apparently provided him with ideas for future writing. The picaresque hero he created was a wandering man in search of home and family. More than once he says that he believes he should put down roots and have "founded an American home". He says to an

acquaintance, "You know what I think is the greatest thing in the world? It's when a man, I mean an American, sits down to Sunday dinner with his wife and six children around him" (pp 22-23) He aspires to "settle down and found an American home." When he tries to persuade a young woman to marry him and share "a fine American home", he enlists the help of his prospective sister-in-law to convince Roberta, the reluctant bride. "Will you go and ask her to come here?" George pleads. "And, Lottie, listen: we'll have a nice home somewhere and you can come in all the time for Sunday dinner, and the whole family can come in from the farm, too. We'll have some fine times, you'll see."(p 170)

He values his home above his job, just one of his notions and one of those that is more understandable than most of them are. More often he is pursuing windmills with ideas like the notion in the opening episode of the novel that banks are built on fear and everyone should take their money out of banks. While in a small town selling books door-to-door he suddenly has an epiphany: he must remove his money from the local bank and he immediately goes to the bank to do this. But he also lectures the Bank manager on the evils of banking and the fears upon which it is based. By the end of the chapter he is being escorted out of town while people are lining up for a good old-fashioned run on the local bank. It is the first of several incidents that mix his strange philosophy with the realities of depression-era America. Often the humor is tinged with a sadness that makes you wonder how poor George can maintain his earnest and naive sincerity in the face of a real world that just does not get it.

The book is an anomaly in my reading experience and certainly an anomaly among American novels written during the Depression. Wilder's realism portrays the struggles of the era, but it is a portrayal that is colored by shadings of farce and high comedy that provide a depth of humor missing too often when considering this era. While George Brush is rigid and puritanical in his thinking he is also sincere and earnest. His straightforward approach upsets the powers that be including evangelists, priests, and local leaders; he finds himself seduced, persecuted, misunderstood, arrested, married, and converted. It is clear, however, that whatever else he may be, George Brush is a sincere man who believes that what he is doing is right, no matter what the cost. For him, he believes, things will work out in the end. The result is a delightful journey, both picaresque and picturesque, of an American dreamer searching for a home in his and our great country.

Sam Torode says

Thornton Wilder's funniest work, and one of my favorite books ever. I've read it 3 or 4 times now, and get more out of it each time. It carries a lot of personal meaning for me, and was a major influence on my own novel.

Paul says

An amusing and not too well known tale of one of literature's innocents; George Marvin Brush. It is set in the depression era of the 1930s. The novel might be said to be picaresque and there is a touch of the tilting at windmills about it (Brush is only a very little like Don Quixote and there is no Sancho Panza). Brush is a travelling textbook salesman, who has his own particular brand of Christianity, which he tries to share. The novel has been described as a satire on fundamentalist/evangelical Christianity; but I am less sure about that. Brush uses Ghandi's philosophy; not a fundamentalist trait, and the voluntary poverty theory is not typical either. Brush has developed his own particular philosophy by borrowing lots of different elements

of belief.

The novel takes place over a year (age 23 to 24 for Brush). Brush has adventures in banks, trains, brothels, courts, guest houses, cafes and shops. He seems to bring out the worst in people. When he withdraws his money from the bank, he refuses to take the interest due, explaining to the bank manager that it is immoral to give interest. He is, at the same time exasperating, delightful and baffling.

The point of the book becomes more obvious when you realise the comparator for the book is Bunyan's Pilgrim Progress and Christian's journey. I suspect that this would have been more obvious at the time, but Pilgrim's Progress is less well known these days. However, Bunyan is one of the authors I was brought up with (Remember that racy little tome "Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners") and there are clear parallels with Brush's journey. The conclusions to be drawn are different, but the meaning is in the journey and the theme of growth. It might appear that Brush has learnt little, but towards the end of the book Brush pays to put a girl through college. When he meets her, she is reading a book by Darwin; Brush at the beginning of the book would have been appalled by her reading matter and stayed away from her. Like Christian, George has suffered temptation and despair and has grown. It is commentary on the America of the 1930s, but it is also great fun, with an almost deathbed scene, a marriage, a few fights, a small amount of drunkenness and lots of travel.

Wayne says

It was a surprise
AND a pleasure
just to see how the majority of Americans in this book
ABSOLUTELY loathed, hated and reviled
its Bible-bashing, fundamentalist hero.

But of course Thornton Wilder
didn't,
and he wouldn't let us, either.
George Brush (just a little too close to "George Bush" for me,)
is a likeable hero
and by the end of the book he has...
well, read it.

Having ONLY read Wilder's MARVELLOUS "The Bridge Of San Luis Rey"
6 TIMES !!!!

I really thought it about time to extend my repertoire
and so picked up TWO at the second hand bookshop.
This one and "The Cabala".

...a Wise Fool is always,
as is Don Quixote,
an admirable creature to behold
and to ride with.
One suffers with George,
admires,
even learns from.

A competent and enjoyable novel.
THAT sounds damning but...
you'll just have to read it for yourself!!

Jim says

Four and a half because this is a peculiar little book. The intro and afterword are excellent. Thornton Wilder is a complicated man! At first i thought this was going to be a Charles Portis type of satire of the disingenuous, the bumptious baptist full of good news and met with bad faith, and it plays that way at first, with George Brush the butt of the joke. I wonder also if Winston Groom had read this book... However, things start to get complicated with the introduction and influence of gandhi and ahimsa, and as much as don quixote was meant to be the source of this picaresque novel, the crisis of faith begins to darken the account, and quickly. For my taste it feels like GB's return to his path was too easy and that the book ended too abruptly on that count, but it's very interesting and I am eager to find out more of Thornton's hopes for this passage, and I think it's more than mollifying the marxists as is suggested in the (truly informative) introduction. I do want to read it again, and that's usually a five star, but I think it's a curtailed work which brings up too many interesting questions that it doesn't really resolve. Of course I see that that's partially intentional, but if you read it let me know if you think it ends too abruptly.

Katie says

Loved it. Don Quijote meets the Bible Belt.

Bob Newman says

Idealistic Idiot Inevitably Invites Irritation

Wilder's lighthearted spoof of religion and do-gooders is an easy read and will keep you amused throughout. George Brush, the main character, is a mix of Protestant morals and Gandhian behavior with a huge amount of plain old naivete thrown in. He is entirely innocent of how the world works. He doesn't know that ideals are not often translated into action so he constantly irks everyone he comes into contact with. His insistence on the truth alienates almost all. He manages to do good sometimes, but at other times his efforts go off the rails because he just can't understand why people don't live up to religious standards of love and charity. Most people feel that he's crazy, even though he earns a fair living as a traveling textbook salesman. He doesn't smoke, drink or date pretty girls. He once had sex with a girl and decided that they were already married and would be together for the rest of their lives. The only problem was that he couldn't remember her name or where she lived. He has a fine singing voice and makes friends through it, only to lose them by his unfailing tendency to be the "fine, upstanding, godfearing, American boy". It's a satire after all. He tells bankers that their system is immoral, he gives money to bank robbers, and winds up in jail more than once. He reads the Encyclopedia Britannica at every chance he gets. No doubt he is a one of that group of vivid, "religious" characters in American literature along with Arthur Dimmesdale, Elmer Gantry, Owen Muir, or Clyde Griffiths. Wilder made fun of the hypocrisies of American society, but provides an entertaining read

as well. Maybe there is a strand here of wishing that human nature might be better than it is.

Allie Riley says

A quick read (I mislaid my copy for a long while). Parts were funny and parts were exasperating. I'm not exactly sure what it is Wilder was trying to say about this particular brand of evangelicalism. The central character, George Brush, a travelling salesman with very particular religious views (an amalgam of a particular interpretation of the Bible and Gandhi) is odd yet sincere. His ethics seem to rile people no end and he is often arrested for the situations which arise from this conflict. On the whole he seems to be portrayed sympathetically and yet it is clear that most people think he is some sort of lunatic. I am left, really, not knowing quite what to think. Somewhat of a curate's egg, perhaps, or maybe it requires a re-read.

Brian says

"Heaven's My Destination" is a rather unexpected novel. I read it quickly, although I found the book to be "slow", and after it was done it stuck with me for quite some time. That seems to be the motif for my reading of Wilder's novels.

And I love them!

I am a little disappointed at how many reviewers want to call this book a satire, despite the fact that Mr. Wilder went to great lengths to point out that the novel is not a satire at all. The story follows a fundamentalist traveling salesman named George Brush whose philosophies and non malicious ignorance get him in one sad situation after another. George Brush is a good man, although I was often very irritated at his simplemindedness and frustrated at his sometimes idiotic views about certain religious topics. However that is exactly the response Wilder wanted to elicit in the reader. George Brush is only 23 in the book, and recently converted to Christianity, and he has all of the joy and stupidity of a recent convert. Wilder said about his novel's protagonist that he "is everybody when they are young", and the novel's ending is a perfect climax for the next stage of Brush's life and one that Wilder lets the reader decide for themselves.

At its heart "Heaven's My Destination" is about a man who sees the world as a very ugly place, and is bound and determined to try to make the parts of it that he comes into contact with better. He is idealistic, naïve, and maybe even deluded...but so what? He hurts no one and is striving to make the world better in some way.

George Brush is really the only fleshed out character in the novel, although each chapter is peopled with many cameo characters that appear and then are gone. It is to Wilder's great credit as a writer that they come across, for the most part, as very real.

I hesitate to offer a lot of commentary on a book that is so ambiguous and open to interpretation so I will end with what Thornton Wilder himself said about this novel's protagonist, "George Brush at his best is everybody." When you read a novel and you see some of yourself, it is worth the time to read it.

Patrick Murtha says

One of the great American novels, unaccountably little-known despite the fame of its author.

Gale says

MISUNDERSTOOD IN THE MIDWEST

Say there, young man: Are you feeling Unfit for Society? Battling with Depression? Socially persecuted because of your ideals? Well, take heart because you are not alone! George Brush has walked down that lonely path in life himself.

Both as playwright and novelist, Thornton Wilder captures the essence of human nature--revealing its hesitant yearnings and poignant humiliations in the daily struggle for recognition in an indifferent world. Despite the almost humorous cover illustration (Bard Pbx) and occasional outbursts of wit, this story is more pathetic than comic. George Brush is a young man sure of salvation in the next world, but woefully ill-equipped to cope in this one. Fiercely determined to live a righteous life of voluntary poverty during the Depression, he manages to antagonize or frustrate most of his non-business contacts. Haunted by an unfortunate romantic incident in his recent past, he feels obligated to make reparations, yet pursues various female acquaintances with overzealous devotion.

George is considered a success only by his employers, since he proves a competent traveling salesman for his textbooks company. So what is it about this unusual young man which turns normal folks off at first encounter? Is it his relentless religious discussions, his strict rules of self conduct, or his odd manner of viewing his own role in society? Somehow he just does not fit in with mainstream America of the 30's. His road travels are a series of bizarre circumstances and gross misunderstandings which result in brushes with the police and judges--even though he is honest to a fault. People can't figure out his motives, for it is difficult to put into practice the theories of Ghandhi in the "modern" mercenary world. The country was simply not ready to welcome this sincere but persistent young man as a regular member, even though he longed for his own hearth. Can a brutally honest fellow find happiness with the girl of his dreams in rugged, disillusioned America?

I found the style disjointed, with many loose threads instead of a clearly-woven plot, which made the book hard to wade through. But the courtroom scene was a delightful section, cleverly plotted with witty remarks--Wilder, the dramatist, in top comic form. How, where and when can poor George find justice in our plebian nation, as well as personal happiness at home?

(January 2011. I welcome dialogue with teachers.)
