



## The Norman Conquests: A Trilogy of Plays

*Alan Ayckbourn*

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## **The Norman Conquests: A Trilogy of Plays** Alan Ayckbourn

This brilliant comic trilogy details the amorous exploits of Norman, assistant librarian, whose one aim is to make the women of his life happy—these women being, as it happens, three sisters, one of them his wife, who can't wear contact lenses because “life with Norman is full of unexpected eye movements.” Each play stands uproariously on its own yet interlocks with the others to form an ingenious Chinese puzzle of successive relations.

## **The Norman Conquests: A Trilogy of Plays Details**

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## From Reader Review The Norman Conquests: A Trilogy of Plays for online ebook

### Lyle A says

My drama teacher in high school threw this book at me one day and said "read this over the weekend." I'd been depressed and moping around, and this was exactly what I needed that weekend. I laughed until I couldn't breathe. I've read it three times in three years. I'll probably direct these plays some day. Hey, a girl can dream.

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### Tim says

The early 1970s means something to me. Perhaps because I was then first becoming aware of an intellectual zeitgeist, in things like plays and books and concerts. While still very young, I watched suburban professors and scientists adopt a watered-down version of the ideals of the 1960s, grow their hair long, and put on tight, flared pants. The intellectual life was a bigger thing in those days; corporate dominance had not yet reached its full fruition. It was an interesting time, a bit of decay and disillusion and self-centeredness had begun to set in, following on the heels of the all out 1960s. Reading these plays reminded me of those times, even though these take place very much in England, not America.

This book consists of three connected plays: Table Manners, Living Together, and Round and Round the Garden. It is a brilliant concept, very difficult to pull off, and to keep being funny, and keep making sense, and keep it together generally. Ayckbourn does it. The concept is to take a handful of characters, put them in a situation, and then tell the story of the same weekend three different ways. Each play focuses on a different part of the house where this neurotic, entertaining family has gathered. There are some fascinating dramatic writing techniques put into play here. Two characters are having a heart to heart in the kitchen, three more are having an argument in the living room, and two others are goofing around in the garden. Each of the three plays contains one of the scenes. It is not a perfect puzzle, but that is unimportant.

### SPOILER ALERT

Norman is the main character, a wacky, emotional, garrulous clown, who nonetheless has a way with the ladies – but the ladies he is after are his wife Ruth's sisters, Sarah and Annie. Sarah is married to Reg, a cynical fellow who is more interested in the board game he is designing than he is in his wife. Annie is a sweet spinster, stuck at home taking care of poor bed-ridden old mother (who never makes an appearance). She spends a lot of time with Tom, a clueless veterinarian who hangs around constantly, and despite the efforts of all the other characters, seems unable to make a move for Annie. Norman has shown up at the house to try to spirit Annie away for an amorous weekend, but Reg and Sarah arrive too, followed by Ruth, a strong, sensible woman who is a great foil for her dingaling of a husband.

During the course of the weekend various things happen: Norman loses interest in Annie and begins pursuing Sarah, Norman gets absurdly drunk, squabbling breaks out among the sisters, Norman gives Tom a lecture about how to pursue Annie, and Tom then promptly goes after Sarah, Ruth comes along and seems quite bored with her husband's antics, which he no doubt indulges in with great regularity. Norman is the catalyst for everything, yet no one takes him seriously, and it is hard to believe that he even takes himself seriously, even though he seems to.

It is brilliant comedy, and like the best British comedy, it has a bite to it (I thought of Kingsley Amis, who is more venomous but equally entertaining), and points to painful truths in our lives. In this case, Ayckbourn tangentially works with some serious themes: the difficulties and longeurs of marriage and family relationships, and the mixture of irritation and love that characterizes close relationships in real life, but rarely in fiction. Wit and wisdom indeed. Bravo!

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### **Ann Canann says**

Side sidesplitting funny! This is Ayckbourn's Pulitzer Prize winning trilogy, "The Norman Conquests" which follows six characters through an increasingly destabilizing week end.

In the first play, "Table Manners," Norman sets off to seduce his sister-in-law.

In the second play, "Living Together," he gets drunk on home-made wine and everyone goes down to defeat except Norman.

In the third play, "Round and Round the Garden." in mother's overgrown English garden, the satirical masterpiece comes to a hilarious conclusion.

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### **Frank Lawler says**

Funny but dated. Stuck in the swinging 70s. Felicity Kendal, Penelope Keith ad Michael Gambon were part of the original cast. Nice Ayckbourn gimmick of having three locations that interconnect in the trilogy, while each location can stand alone as its own play.

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### **Jillian says**

What an undertaking Ayckbourn pulls off with this trilogy. All three plays depict the same weekend of domestic misadventures from different areas of the house. Each play enriches the others without feeling repetitive, and any of the three could also stand entirely on its own for viewers only in town for one night. Despite featuring few to no likeable characters, the plays themselves are charming and hilarious. This is my second Ayckbourn collection and I can't wait to discover more, and hopefully see some on stage one day.

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### **John Jr. says**

To judge from seeing a few examples, Alan Ayckbourn's comedies are solidly entertaining in the theater. But, in the case of this trilogy at least, they can be somewhat thin on the printed page. These three interlocking works from 1973 constitute, in effect, one play, taking place in the course of a weekend among the same six characters in three settings at one house. In one play we see what happens among them in the dining room; in another, events in the sitting room; finally, in the garden. All of the characters—three

siblings, two spouses, and a solitaire—are comically unhappy, stuck with one another because of blood, marriage, or mere routine, willing under pressure to consider something different or somebody different. The last is especially true where Norman is concerned; he's something of a joker and a faun, tempted, if the wind is right, even by his own wife. Nowadays one would expect Norman to play both sides, as Joe Orton would've had him do even at the time, but the spirit of anarchy is much less strong in Ayckbourn. Some readers and theatergoers may find this trilogy, as a review quote from Frank Rich declares on the front cover, "wise about sex, marriage, love, and loneliness," but it's also relatively tame.

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### **Jonathan says**

Witty and enjoyable. The Norman Conquests consists of a trilogy of plays, each of which takes place in a different room in a country house over a single weekend. "Table Manners" takes place in the dining room, "Living Together" takes place in the living room, and "Round and Round in the Garden" takes place in the garden. As a reader (of the book) or audience member (of the play), you, by the end, see everything that happened over the weekend--although, of course, the characters do not.

The BBC production (1977) is available online, and I'd highly recommend that, too.

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### **Therese Ptak says**

Something that struck me about these series of plays is how incredibly funny they were! It's a first for me because prior to reading these plays I had felt that plays were rather boring while musicals were funny. But this turned that concept promptly on its ear. It's a bit hard to get the jist of what's going on and I feel that seeing it performed on the stage would eliminate some of the confusion but the characters are fun and the situations can be side-splitting. If you hear of a dramatic production of these plays definitely GO!

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### **Mai says**

Interesting set of plays. I'll need to mull this over some more. I'll be playing Sarah in July, so my thoughts are mainly about her right now. It will definitely be a challenge to learn all three plays.

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### **Justin says**

There isn't too much to say about The Norman Conquests because it is something that absolutely must be experienced. I dove head-first into reading the trilogy after seeing all three parts on Broadway and found it to be just as joyously hilarious to read as it was to see, and I even caught myself audibly laughing at moments I hadn't during the actual play, and I was practically doubled-over in laughter for the duration of the live performance. This gem of a trilogy seems to be tragically unknown, but is the first thing I would recommend to anybody who wants to read a solid, unpredictable comedy. In short, The Norman Conquests is a masterpiece.

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### **Steve says**

Such an original piece of theatre. Each play may claim to stand on its own, but seeing all three really raises this work to new heights. Each character has their moment to shine across the set, while still finding their place within each respective story. I can't imagine how difficult it was to write this trilogy, but I'm glad I've seen it on stage.

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### **Andrew says**

A trilogy of plays, (Table Manners, Living Together, & Round and Round the Garden,) that will make you laugh many, many times. The brilliance of these plays is that they all take place on the same day during the same hours, just in three separate areas of the house, yet they all work on their own as well. If I had to pick the one I thought was best out of the three I would chose Round and Round the Garden. As for the trilogy itself, the jokes are great, the timing is wonderful, and the characters are very funny, yet are distinctive. Norman himself in almost any other play would be such an unlikable a-hole, but you can strangely connect to him and find him a very charming and likable character.

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### **Corey Murray says**

Each of these three plays can exist on its own, for they each tell the same story with the same characters; but reading all three gives you a much deeper appreciation for the complexity of the situation, the hilarity of the situation, for Norman the protagonist's skills as a charmer, and for Ayckbourn's talents as a playwrite.

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### **tomwrote says**

The set up is ingenious and there is real craft on display. In many ways it is an accurate tweaking of certain smug judgmental home counties values and attitudes but I really didn't enjoy it. The whole things has the air of a seventies sitcom, though not a particularly funny one. The humour is shallow and predictable and some of the gags would have been groan worthy in a christmas cracker, never mind that sitcom.

I know I have a horror of dinner party set evoked here and in an effort to push past my prejudice I tried to treat the play as perhaps a Wilde comedy, a period piece also but from a different era. It didn't help, just shone a light on the superficial shuffling round of the pieces under mediocre dialogue.

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### **Laura says**

A weekend of tangled relationships begins in the dining room of a country house. Stars Robin Herford and

Diane Bull.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b009snzt>

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### **Christina says**

If you are looking for a laugh and enjoy dry, British humor... this trilogy is for you. Each play takes place over the same period of time, but in different rooms. While each play stands alone, if you take the time to read all three, you see an interesting build on the plot and rich character development. Ayckbourn cleverly shows the reader how important off-stage action can be.

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### **Pithee says**

BBC Recording

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### **Paul LaFontaine says**

I am generally not a fan of plays where flawed characters repeatedly fall into traps laid by their own eccentricities, so this one was a long shot for me. That said, Ayckbourn's writing was so tight, his use of language so marvelous, that I enjoyed the trilogy of plays immensely.

The plays are funny. Full stop. The characters are silly and detestable but deserve each other. The scene is mundane, the dramas silly. And I was laughing aloud as I went along.

Ayckbourn ignited my interest in complex, comedic plays. Recommend.

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### **Colin Cox says**

*The Norman Conquests* is a whimsical trilogy of plays that, while a little anachronistic, glow with humor, ambition, and ingenuity.

Each play in this trilogy approaches the same confusing July weekend from a different location (dining room, garden, etc.) at a once stately but now dilapidated English country home. Tonally speaking, Ayckbourn's principle literary influence, Oscar Wilde, is impossible to miss. And like Wilde, Ayckbourn explores the potential futility of monogamous relationships, the petty banality of daily squabbles, and the measures some will embark upon to find joy and excitement.

The titular character, Norman, is an enigma brimming with contradictions. In *Round and Round the Garden* he confidently proclaims, "My God! I'm filled with the lust for conquest tonight" while later during the same play, after each of his three romantic interests rejects him, he bemoans, "I only wanted to make you happy" (191; 226). Norman's shiftiness and inconsistencies symbolize the tonal and thematic contradictions present in each of these three plays. Is Ayckbourn writing a bumbling satire or a scathing critique of a particular

moment in history? Like Norman, the answer is potentially a synthesis of the two.

More than anything, *The Norman Conquests* is an amusing set of plays that showcase Ayckbourn's ability to write pithy, scathing dialogue for complicated yet endearing comedic characters.

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### **Joanna says**

Funny and uncomfortable

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