



A Very Private Gentleman

Martin Booth

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SOON TO BE A MAJOR MOTION PICTURE, *THE AMERICAN*, STARRING GEORGE CLOONEY AND DIRECTED BY ANTON CORBIJN

The locals in the Italian village where he lives call him Signor Farfalla--Mr. Butterfly--for he appears to be a discreet gentleman who paints rare butterflies. But as inconspicuous as Farfalla tries to make himself, his real profession is deadly, unbeknownst to the sometime brothel worker, Clara, with whom he sleeps.

Of a certain age, and as his feelings for Clara intensify, Farfalla has resolved to make his next job his last--all the while sensing a treacherous circle closing in on him.

A Very Private Gentleman Details

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From Reader Review A Very Private Gentleman for online ebook

Tfitoby says

Mister Butterfly is the eponymous Very Private Gentleman, and this, despite being a confession of sorts, is his very private memoirs full of names that have been changed, places invented for our benefit and a certain amount of history invented to protect the not so innocent. He's a man approaching the end of not just his working life but life, and he's very much aware of it. In confessing his sins as a member of an elite group of professionals that dabble in not exactly legal behaviour Martin Booth in what must be the closest I've come to finding somebody to compare to Graham Greene deconstructs the nature of humanity, mankinds relationship with religion, love, death, and each other. This is a very unique modern novel in what is my admittedly not VERY widely read opinion, it is a spy thriller of sorts, an entertainment if you will but at its heart is an existential journey of the literary persuasion that would leave most readers of its genre counterparts cold and frustrated. Booth devotes page upon page to descriptions of guns and bullets but there is ten times more space given to Italian history and musings on the different behaviours and evolution of Western man, the beauty of nature and the heartbreak of being unable to acknowledge your true feelings for your past, your future and the one person you've ever allowed yourself to get close to.

Bought several years ago now after finding it in a bargain bin at the height of the George Clooney movie's promotional campaign and never in any danger of finding its way to the top of my to be read pile, I was ready to give this book away without reading it. It took an unpacking of my literature from boxes and finding space on my new bookcases to decide to give it a quick look before discarding it. I'm very glad I did and I curse that movie even further, for I surely cannot be the only person who avoided this fantastic book afterward. There is hardly any of the book in the movie, none of the movie in the book. They are two separate entities that need not ever be considered in the same breath again once the bland film passes from public awareness.

Jim says

Everything you may have heard about this book is true: the pace is slow, there's not much action, and it occasionally reads more like a travelogue than a novel. That being said, I thoroughly enjoyed it, and there were two major reasons why.

Reason one is that the tone of the narration felt more like verbal storytelling than written exposition. Like a storyteller, the narrator doesn't just plow ahead with the facts, he pauses to set the whole scene, to flesh out the sights and sounds and the people who are there, to share his thoughts at key moments, or sometimes to wander off on an old memory that pops into his head. For me, it really evoked a sense of sitting on the back porch on a summer afternoon, sipping lemonade and spending a few lazy hours just listening to your grandfather reminisce about his younger days and occasionally wax philosophical about life.

Reason two is Booth's use of setting. The Italian village and surrounding countryside where the narrator stays is just as much of a living, breathing character as the people who inhabit it. With some books the location is virtually interchangeable; you could set your plot in New York or Tokyo or Cairo and have the same basic book with just a few details changed. Not this one - take it out of Italy, and it would be a completely different novel.

This is definitely not a book for people who a) like a fast pace or a lot of action, b) who get impatient with details, or c) people who have no interest in Italy. Some reviewers have added d) people who have no interest in guns, however I have no interest in guns, and I still didn't mind that part of it.

I'm glad that I read this (seeing "The American" put me on to it), and I think I'd be interested in trying another Booth book somewhere down the road.

Sue says

I loved this book. It's not loaded with action, so don't pick it up if that's what you're after. I loved it for the language and the phrasing and the character development is superb. You really grow to love "Edmund", despite his profession. The setting is delicious, and the conclusion, fitting. There are some books that are clearly written for men or women, but not both. This book, at first glance, would appear to be a book for men, but it has serious appeal for the ladies in the crowd.

Now I have to decide if I can face the movie after liking this so much. . .they're always such a disappointment, aren't they?!

Charlotte says

Martin Booth's 1990 thriller, originally titled "A Very Private Gentleman", is an interesting and unusual novel. It's funny to me that an edition of the book titled "The American" (so titled because it has just been adapted into a movie starring George Clooney who probably cannot do an English accent) has now been released, because the first-person voice of the narrator is so very English. Yes, in the novel, the narrator and protagonist is an Englishman. He handcrafts high-quality guns with sometimes unusual specifications to be used (and remain untraceable) in assassinations, commissioned by various individuals (who usually retain aliases). His is a job that requires secrecy, constant vigilance, and an on-the-move lifestyle (he usually picks a city or town to complete a job, and then moves on, and has lived all around the world).

In the novel, the narrator has picked a small town in rural southern Italy for his latest job. He is known by the locals as "Signor Farfalla," or Mr. Butterfly, since they believe he is a reclusive man who is commissioned to paint flowers and butterflies for a living. As Signor Farfalla proceeds with his work and spends time in his lovely apartment, about the town, and in the countryside, he begins to fantasize about finally leaving the business after completion of this job, settling in the small town he is slowly falling in love with, and spending his twilight years with Clara, a young local prostitute whom he has been visiting regularly (of course they fall for one another). Of course just as Signor Farfalla begins to envision a peaceful, romantic future for himself for the first time in his life, a shadow-dweller (this term is used consistently throughout the novel) appears in town and begins to watch and follow him. Signor Farfalla knows he is not safe and must find out who this person is and what he wants.

This novel left quite an impression on me because of its very distinctive and unusual style, moody atmosphere, and wistful, evocative tone. The voice of the narrator is at once refined but intense, romantic but cynical, thoughtful but arrogant. As I said above, it is written in a very English narrative voice and style. No short, concise Hemingwayesque sentences here. The language is quite ostentatious (at times even flowery), but yet no-nonsense, with a very masculine perspective. Signor Farfalla is in late middle-age and spends a lot

of time recounting stories from old jobs and reflecting on the past. In fact the novel is as much a meditation on life, love, and death from someone entering his twilight years as it is a thriller, and the two combine for a surprisingly compelling read. I have to admit that I was initially turned off (the first 60 pages or so) by the seemingly pedagogical, patronizing voice of the narrator, but then became somewhat enchanted by it. Rural southern Italy is, of course, an important character, and lends to the nostalgic yet dark feel of the novel. I would definitely recommend it, especially to any lovers of the English language. It is certainly not for someone who is expecting a fast-paced, action-packed thriller. In fact it is quite slow-paced, and only really has a burst of action at the end.

Casey says

I'm thankful to have received this book when I did, right after finishing Franzen's Freedom and before starting Tom McCarthy's C. I felt I would need something inbetween those two super serious book mountains. I was looking for some LeCarre-style spy goodness, which I got, but also with healthy doses of:

- Stephen Hunter gun porn (attaching lasers and sights to modified barrels...zzz)
- Eat, Pray, Love for Men (Cheese! Picnics!)
- Power and the Glory Catholicism
- and a hooker with a heart of gold

I did enjoy the slow burn (most of the action is at the end) and flashbacks to previous jobs, but the gun catalog rundowns and Rick Steves-style travelogue descriptions of piazzas seemed to just take up space rather than add color (or colour) to the story. I guess I can't really blame the book since I really just wanted it to take up space between two other books.

Thanks goodreads and picador for the free book. I'll pass it on to the first wanderlusting firearm enthusiast that I see.

Josiah Hawkins says

Life is a strange but wonderful thing in which not only are we all a part of but are all intertwined together through a series of connections. The word Sonder is defined as the realization that every single random passerby has a life as vivid, complex, and real as your own. It is populated with ambitions, friends, routines, worries, fears, and above all, life. The lives around us continue and continue and are shaped like an anthill under the ground, infinitely complex and dazzlingly intricate. For a moment we can be a part of their life just as they are ours, as an extra sipping coffee in the background, or the man who reminds them that they dropped something.

I bring this term to the forefront when I write this review because The American is built on the principles of Sonder. A man who is a loner, quiet, no connections, but you know he has a life and you play a part in it as that extra when you see him walking through the market or leaning at a bar nursing a cappuccino. This is a book about men like that, the bystanders, the background fillers, and what we would know if we could just envisage what happens when they go home.

I wont describe the plot to you because I think this is a story best read if you know less about it when you go in, the turns and subtleties that you read have more weight and more impact when you know less. The story

is framed as if you finally went up to that background filler and asked him who he was, our protagonist is speaking directly to us and its all as if your sitting across from him over dinner in a sleepy Italian café.

The American is a quiet novel, and what I mean by that is this: There are no explosions, no massive gunfights, no double crosses set to a meeting with a villain stroking a cat. This novel is not about the highlights of a criminal seeped in intrigue, this is a novel about the end of a criminals career and its seeped in realism. We hear about his exploits, yes, but its his musings on life, death, religion, happiness, peace, and meaning that make this book such a subtle and beautiful masterpiece.

At its very core The American is about life, it is about end of life, it is about love, it is about the history of the world and what we can do in order to play a part in it. Mr. Booth writes with the words of a poet as he describes anything from a woman to rain to the sweet perfume of oil coming from a freshly cleaned gun. This is not a novel for everyone, I know that, but its one that I could recommend to almost anyone. It serves as a deeply intense character study not just into the protagonist but life itself and the connections between humans, and its one of the most beautiful works that I've read on the subject.

It has beautiful language, excellent descriptions, realistic characters with real motivations, a romance that actually feels real, and a twisty end that I honestly could never have expected to happen. The book may be called The American but the events that take place in those Italian mountains wont leave my mind for as long as I can remember them.

Huw Rhys says

This is an exquisite book.

It is a finely crafted story about a craftsman who very finely crafts his wares.

There are so many different levels to the book that it's impossible to begin to capture them all - indeed, I suspect that just one reading is nowhere near enough to even begin realizing them all.

It won't appeal to everyone - certainly not on a fairly cursory examination of the dust jacket which suggests that it's the story of a hitman who hides behind a series of different disguises.

It does indeed deal with death - but it a very interesting way, where the main protagonist mulls on how death effects us all; how it comes to some of us slowly, and to others quickly; but very seldom is it surgically, to the exact place and time and modus operandi dictated by one other individual. This is a recurring theme throughout the book - and a compelling one at that.

It is also a love story though - how a "Very Private Gentleman" - the original title of this wonderful story - finds love for the first time in his life. It puts all of this into a religious context, thus invoking Grahame Greene at his best whilst never being an imitation of another author.

The book touches upon sex, pornography, eroticism and various other turns on the theme, again doing it sensitively, cleverly and intellectually.

You'd think that all these topic areas dealt with so interestingly would be enough - but on top of that, our author creates very believable, three dimensional characters - as well as placing them all in a very real Italian

country side which we can smell and touch as well as see thanks to the wonderful descriptive narrative.

It's not the perfect book - but it's very, very good. Certainly one that will be put on the "to be read again" shelf. Thoroughly enjoyable, and extremely stimulating.

Leo says

This is not at all what I expected. I saw the movie a couple of years ago and I grabbed the book at a bargain bin in London last summer. I was curious to know how different from the movie it was but I wasn't expecting much from the book. Turns out I was totally wrong, this book hooked me from the get go. The main character reveals things about him bit by bit, so that we can know how he is slowly. That way the story keeps being interesting even though technically "nothing" happens.

What I loved most about the book was Booth's writing style. I simply loved it. I wouldn't know how to describe it, you'd have to read it. But everything he wrote was interesting. For example, I don't know anything about guns but I read descriptions about how Signor Farfalla made them and told us the differences between them and I was totally interested.

Anyway, just try to get some time to read this book.

Also, I wouldn't describe this as crime or thriller. It was something else. Better.

Diana says

The movie, "The American" was based on this novel which led me to read the book.

Odd bits of trivia on a broad variety of subjects scattered throughout this book along with vivid descriptions of a medieval Italian village and its environs were as interesting as the plot itself. I really enjoyed this book.

Eric_W says

Anyone who has seen The American with George Clooney will not recognize this book. The opposite is also true. They are very different. The book is literate; the movie is entertaining (unless you like car crashes and piles of bodies dripping gore in which case you will be bored -- I was not.)??????

The man's character and occupation are revealed in bits and pieces, slowly, almost like creating a mosaic or jigsaw, although, as he repeatedly states, much of it may be untrue in order to hide his location and identity. "I have hidden in the crowds all my life. Another face, as anonymous as a sparrow, as indistinguishable from the next man as a pebble on a beach. I may be standing next to you at the airport check-in, at the bus-stop, in the supermarket queue. I may be the old man sleeping rough under the railway bridge of any European city. I may be the old buffer propping up the bar in a rural English pub. I may be the pompous old bastard driving an open Roller — a white Corniche, say —."

The protagonist meditates on killing, that he is a part of history through his actions, that killing itself is essentially meaningless, since death is something that happens to all of us. *"Death is but a part of a process,*

inescapable and irrevocable. We live and we die. Once born, these are the only certainties, the only inevitabilities. The only true variable is the timing of the event of death. It is as pointless to fear death as it is to fear life. We are presented with the facts of both and have to accept them. There is no Faustian avoidance on offer. All we can do is attempt to delay or accelerate the approach of death. Men strive to postpone it.” How the killing is accomplished is important: surgically, quickly. “...for death can always be justified. It was the mutilation that was wrong. They should have been satisfied with the end of their enemy. It is not a matter of aesthetics or moralities, of political expediency or humanity. It is simply a waste of time. The dead feel nothing. For them, it is over. For the killers, there is nothing.” “History is nothing unless you can actively shape it. Few men are afforded such an opportunity. Oppenheimer was lucky. He invented the atom bomb. Christ was lucky. He invented a religion. Mohammed was just as fortunate. He invented another religion. Karl Marx was lucky. He invented an anti-religion”

Assassins are essential, he muses, “society would stagnate. There would be no change save through the gradations of politics and the ballot box. That is most unsatisfactory. The ballot box, the politician, the system can be corrupted. The bullet cannot. It is true to its belief, to its aim and it cannot be misinterpreted. The bullet speaks with firm authority, the ballot box merely whispers platitudes or compromise. . . . There is more gross profanity in one corner of the political world than in the whole of the red-light areas of Naples, Amsterdam and Hamburg all rolled into one.” “For what is hell if it is not the modern world, crumbling into dissolution, polluted by sins against the people and the earth mother, twisted by the whims of politicians and soured by the incantations of hypocrites. I drove away in a hurry.”

And yet, he is not the killer; he only supplies the means. “*As I care little for death, it follows I care not that I create it for others. I am not an assassin. I have never killed a man by pulling a trigger and taking a pay-off. I wonder if you thought I had. If this is so, then you are wrong. My job is the gift-wrapping of death. . . . “ Has he contrition or committed sins requiring forgiveness? “ I have told untruths. I have been economical with the truth in the very best traditions of those who govern us. These lies of mine have never done harm, have always protected me at no expense to others and are, therefore, not sins. If they are such, and there is a god, I shall be prepared to answer my case in person when we meet. I shall take a good book to read — say War and Peace or Gone With the Wind or Doctor Zhivago — for the queue for this category of sinner will be very long and, knowing the arrogance of the Christian church, will be headed by cardinals, bishops, papal nuncios and not a few Popes themselves.”*

Many lovely phrases. One I particularly liked: “*Bats do not so much fly as flicker-splash in neurasthenic parabolæ.*” Another: “*Here, rain is an Italian man who does not kiss hands and fawn like a Frenchman, or bow discreetly like an Englishman, keeping sex at bay, or get brazen like an American sailor on shore leave. Here, the rain is passionate. It does not fall in sheets like the tropic downpour or drizzle miserably like an English complaint, snivelling like a man with a blocked nose. It slants down in spears, iron rods of grey water which strike the earth and pockmark the dust, spread out like damp stars upon the dry cobblestones of the streets and the flagstones of the Piazza del Duomo. The earth, far from succumbing to the assault, rejoices in it. After a brief shower, one can hear the earth click and pop as it sucks its drink.*”

Part meditation on life, happiness, society, individual worth, personal satisfaction, I very much enjoyed this book, a thriller, but not in the traditional sense of providing a thrill, but rather providing intense sensations. As Farfella himself says, “*In a book, Salome can seduce me, I can fall in love with Marie Duplessis, have my own Lady of the Camellias, a private Monroe or exclusive Cleopatra. In a book I can rob a bank, spy on the enemy, kill a man. Kill any number of men. No, not that. One man at a time is enough for me. It always was. And I do not always seek experience second-hand.*” Exactly.

Joseph says

Hard to think of this without wondering how and why it was changed for the movie. Like the movie, it is nothing like what one would suspect based on the subject matter, but rather a lyric exploration of a vivid and complex narrator, who just happens to manufacture assassins' weapons for a living. Mr. Butterfly makes it perfectly clear throughout the novel that he is a particularly unreliable narrator, but while obscuring facts and details, he gradually exposes something more important: the truth, both about who he really is and how he views the world. As a spectacularly black tumor in an idyllic setting, his insights are both surprising and thought-provoking.

On the flip side, if patience isn't your strong suit as a reader, or if you just don't enjoy slow, languorous books, you should probably skip this (and the movie too, for that matter).

John says

Nicely done story. Moderately paced. One doesn't know the arc of crisis until the final third of the book. Reads like a travelogue of small town Italy coupled with an insightful look into gunsmithing and the assassination trade. The climax is not rushed or panicked. On par with leCarre. Highly recommended.

Kathryn says

Telling the story of a man nearing the end of a successful but, let's say, morally-questionable career, this novel is a beautifully-written insight into his philosophy and thinking, and, indeed, his whole way of life. It is poetic as well as matter-of-fact in its telling, not simply one man looking back on his life but also the story of a man falling in love with this part of Italy, as much as the young woman he meets there.

I never thought I'd thank George Clooney for putting me on to a great book but he kind of did with this one - if only in a very roundabout way! When I heard that filming for The American (the title of the adaptation), in which Clooney plays the main character, was taking place in the earthquake hit region of Abruzzo, in central Italy, it piqued my interest and I sought out a copy of the book. And I am so glad I did - otherwise I might never have read it and I would hate to have missed out on such stunning writing. This is the first Martin Booth novel that I've read but it certainly won't be the last one.

thewestchesterian says

A captivating first person shooter. The 1990 publication date and some references to modern communication technology in the story are the only indicators that this is not a classic noir story from the 40's or 50's. Booth's taught pacing, highly refined language and meticulous attention to the smallest detail hark back to a time when fiction writing had far more craft and less splash than the Dan Brown-wannabee biblioscape of today. Booth builds suspense with Hitchcockian deliberateness and build sympathy for what is essentially the bad guy with "Double Indemnity" skill. The narrator and sole main character Mr. Butterfly explains charms and gently defends his amoral choice of profession with such precision that Booth could credibly claim he was simply relating a story told to him rather than constructing it from whole cloth. The airtight details

require no suspension of disbelief from the reader either in regard to the plot or the motivation of the characters. This rare and welcome treat flies in the face of common practice of current stories and movies that accept the plot hole as the cost of doing business. The downsides to the book all stem from this fidelity to its subject and character – there is a lack of dialog and character interaction to move the story along but that is replaced by the fun of trying to guess how reliable a witness our narrator represents.

In short, read the book.

Theodore says

This was a big surprise! After having seen the film I expected something different. To be honest, I didn't like the film very much, but the book is an altogether different story!

The movie was slow and a bit dull. The main character was rather flat and uninteresting.

This book however, even though it is not written to be a great adventure, it's not only very interesting, but also gripping and with a great pace. The prose is excellent and I just couldn't put it down. One has to wonder why they had to change the movie so much, and if they couldn't make a successful movie out of this book maybe, just maybe, they shouldn't make it.

Keith says

I have very little good to say about this book. Let me start by saying, if you are one of those people who try to make everything deep then this is probably right up your alley. This book was so boring. One of the things that annoyed me greatly was how the protagonist constantly has to explain to you how he has changed the name of a person or tell you that he is purposefully leaving out details so you can't discover his identity. I understand if you want to throw that in there once in the beginning, but he has to do it 10-15 times in a book that is only 277 pages. It was so freakin annoying. Also, almost nothing happens in the entire book. This is probably what those deep people love. I'll take a bloodbath over this every day of the week. Spoiler alert, on page 266 of 277, the first gun is pulled that isn't being used for testing. 266! I read it all because I'm stubborn but I wouldn't recommend it to anyone. To recap, if you are one of those posers who loves to go stare at a painting of a couple of squares for hours and discuss at length what the author was trying to express, go out now and read this waste of time. You will love it.

Mark says

I was inspired to read this novel after recently seeing a trailer for the film "The American," starring Mr. George Clooney. I was immediately irked by the title change. Let me quote briefly from the book: "I do not claim to be either English or French, German, Swiss, American, Canadian, South African. Nothing in fact." So much for adhering to the source material.

That being said, the film can do nothing but improve upon the book. Maybe I am being a little more harsh, because I was expecting a thriller of sorts. This is more of an anti-thriller. It reads more like a travelogue by some aging ex-patriot, who is enjoying the quiet life in small Italian village. He savors the locals wines, and

prostitutes; and enjoys afternoon conversations with the wise old priest, who secretly smokes ham in his basement. Mr. Farfalla (*Farfalla* being Italian for butterfly), as far as anyone in the village knows, paints portraits of butterflies for a living. The priest senses that this is a cover, and that Farfalla actually has more money than that pastime would provide. The struggling artist persona is a cover for his actual occupation: Weapons manufacturer for international assassins.

Farfalla considers himself to be an artist of a different sort. He is a creator of the tool that enables taking of a life, but not just any life. To Farfalla, these assassinations — be they politically motivated, or the taking out of a drug kingpin — enable a shift in history. He takes pride in the fact that he has helped create the havoc, which — when the dust clears — reshape entire economies and societies.

There is also a love story thrown into the mix when, as Farfalla comes to the end of his last job, he begins to fall for one of the two whores that he has been regularly bedding. Any inklings of romance do not really begin to appear until the last fifty pages, and by that time the reader will most likely not care. The amoral main character does not elicit much sympathy from the reader. And, unless you are about to take a vacation to the countryside of Italy, there is not much point to the long-winded descriptions of the history and topography of the region. In the end I could think of many other tales of professional assassins (Trevanian and Robert Ludlum come to mind) that are more compelling than *A Very Private Gentleman*.

Ray Ramos says

A Suspense Novel That Reads Like a Travelogue

Decided to read the novel that the movie *The American* (a favorite of mine) was based on. Also, I'm a lover of all things Italian so a novel that takes place in Italy, well, how could I pass it up? Thoroughly enjoyed it. Booth spends a lot of time, especially in the first half of the story, setting the scene in long passages describing the Italian countryside and its history and dropping hints about who his protagonist is and why he is there and then pays you back for your patience with his very descriptive prose and deliberate pacing when the action starts. If you're looking for a world to get lost in for a few hours, I recommend *A Very Private Gentleman*.

Chris says

Having enjoyed the movie, "The American," which is based on this book, I just had to read it to see how faithfully the movie adhered to the original. This is a gem of a book. It's not mystery but literary. It's filled with metaphors and philosophical discussions on the nature of man. The protagonist played by Clooney in the movie is the narrator. He has an air of arrogance and condescending omniscience but manages to still come across as engaging with the potential to be redeemed. The pace is slow but quite interesting. The descriptions of the local scenery and lessons on life as an assassin or armorer are descriptive and profound. You keep hoping that "Edmund" will finally find peace and never have to look over his shoulder again. For a man who kills or abets killing he rationalizes his deeds and proclaims his integrity as a man of honor. But the local priest and the local girl are tugging at his heart and head. The movie adheres to the book until the ending. Oh, and he had a Volvo in the movie, but a Citroen in the book. The ending in the book is clear unlike the movie. Read it and find out what really happened. Reminded me of John le Carre.

Chris Dietzel says

A couple years ago, I watched "The American," starring George Clooney. It was a disappointing movie based on a book I'd never heard of, and I remember thinking the book must have had a lot of introspection that didn't transfer to film. Fast forward a decade. I found a copy of the book and figured I might as well see how it was turned into a movie. It turns out that I was right--much of the story is the protagonist's thoughts and concerns, and almost none of that was adequately portrayed in the movie, "The American." However, the real value with this book is in how well Booth depicts extreme paranoia. This could be a case study in creating a paranoid character. There were two specific parts of the story that felt completely out of sync with the main character's ideas but they were easy to ignore. Other than that, it was a worthwhile read.
