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Nevil Shute

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Aboard a fishing boat named “Genevieve,” a small group of British officers and French fishermen—armed only with a flame thrower and small arms—plan a secret commando mission against the might of the German army after the fall of France in World War II. Each man has experienced a terrible loss of one kind or another, and each is fully prepared to face the risks of their desperate gesture of defiance. *Most Secret* is classic Shute: a thrilling tale of sacrifice and courage and the heroism of ordinary men that will keep readers on the edge of their seats.

Most Secret Details

Date : Published July 1st 2002 by House of Stratus (first published 1945)

ISBN : 9781842322697

Author : Nevil Shute

Format : Paperback 364 pages

Genre : Fiction, War, World War II, Historical, Historical Fiction, European Literature, British Literature

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From Reader Review Most Secret for online ebook

Peter says

In truth this is a bit of "Boys' Own..." fiction. It was written mid-way through WW2, although I believe that actual publication was delayed almost until war's end. I'm an admirer of Shute's work, but acknowledge that it can be variable. I enjoyed the book, but I feel it's important to bear in mind the context of 1942 - just after the worst of Hitler's Blitz on Britain - before rushing to judgement on some of the sentiment and morality. Certainly do not start on Shute with this novel!

David Foster says

Great war story. Offers a better understanding of what French villages went through under German occupation. Nobody is a saint during war!

Beverly Gray says

I have long been a fan of Nevil Shute. I was delighted to discover that a number of titles I have not read are now available for the Kindle and the Nook.

MOST SECRET was his usual job of craftsmanship. The characters were memorable and, as with many of his works, there was a subtle moral issue at the core of the book.

The following description comes from the book's product overview: Aboard a fishing boat named "Genevieve," a small group of British officers and French fishermen—armed only with a flame thrower and small arms—plan a secret commando mission against the might of the German army after the fall of France in World War II. Each man has experienced a terrible loss of one kind or another, and each is fully prepared to face the risks of their desperate gesture of defiance. MOST SECRET is classic Shute: a thrilling tale of sacrifice and courage and the heroism of ordinary men that will keep readers on the edge of their seats.

The moral dilemma for the characters is quite simple: Is it justifiable to use terrible weapon (a flame-thrower in this case) against the Nazis who have used the same and worse themselves? Typical of Shute, this is not a bang-over the head discussion in the narrative nor does he ever declare himself one way or the other. Instead, he leaves it to the reader to work it out via the characters and their views about it.

It is not a happy book (but then many of his are not). This is England and France in the early, desperate years of World War II with France already a defeated nation and England hanging on by an eyelash. Yet, through the despair of the times, there are moments of courage and hope (also typical of Shute).

I recommend this book highly.

Zora says

More convoluted narrative devices that slowed the book down. (I want to visit his grave and yell, "Just tell me the g.d. story!" But I guess that'd be weird. And ineffective.)

But, that said, a thrilling war tale with great characters. You really root for the rabbit guy and his Wren. The attack on the Germans is a horrendous thing, really, but he takes time to make you believe they'd all been logically brought to this morally ambiguous place.

It also struck me that there is no bloody way a book like this would be published today, with all that necessary character background. Today Shute would be instructed to blow something up on page one, and keep blowing something up every few pages, and it'd be a far worse book for that.

Ian Laird says

Nevil Shute led a full, varied and active life in peace and war, which informed his work as a novelist.

Shute was an aeronautical engineer with a successful business career in aviation, specifically airships. He flew his own plane to Australia after World War Two (to research **On the Beach**), and ultimately settled near Melbourne. Serving in the Royal Navy during the war, Shute worked on 'secret projects' which I'm willing to bet are not a million miles away from the events of this tale **Most Secret**.

This is the story of a daring initiative to equip a French fishing boat, *Genevieve*, with a flamethrower, to wreak havoc on the Germans close to the coast of occupied France.

Two features immediately struck me about this book: its authenticity and the masterly storytelling.

The story feels real. It's told from a back room perspective, where we learn the genesis of the operation; we see the bureaucratic interaction between the various services, specific organisations like Coastal Command and the individuals recruited to do the deeds. The marine craft are well described, their characteristics, operation and especially the weaponry deployed on them. The technical descriptions of the flamethrower are compelling, how it worked, how it would be fitted to the fishing vessel, how the oil and flame mix worked and the constituents of the devastating Worcester sauce oil.

The other structural element which works well for me is the gradual unfolding of the story, layer by layer as each major character is introduced. Shute uses his central figure to tell the tale. This is Commander Martin, co-ordinating the mission from the back rooms of the Admiralty, but not actually part of the action. Apparently this is a device Shute used regularly. We meet Charles Simon, the Englishman who is just as much Frenchman, expert in ferro-concrete and a recreational sailor; Oliver Boden, son of a Bradford wool spinner, married to Marjorie, the daughter of his father's business partner and the soul mate of his childhood, and expecting their first child. Oliver serves on anti-mine trawlers before joining the *Genevieve*; Michael Rhodes, a young scientist who comes up with the technical requirements for the flamethrower. He strikes up a tentative romance with a WREN driver, both shy people on unfamiliar ground. Finally, an older American merchant mariner, John Colvin, much married and divorced. Each has a back-story, which adds poignancy when events come to their conclusion.

Shute adopts a retrospective approach to the action sequences, the actual operation itself: 'this is what happened...'. A little hard to get used to at first. Why not locate the characters in the events as the action unfolds? Ultimately it does not matter, because the approach adds a realistic, documentary feel to the story, because you get observation and opinion as well as the facts. It is just as intriguing, to learn what *has* happened as opposed to what *is* happening.

The operation is quite small scale, audacious and geographically vivid. The characters are convincing, some slightly more than others; the American is not quite as well drawn as Boden or Rhodes, with whom Shute perhaps was in more familiar territory, even though Shute would have known Americans serving in Britain. Their motivation is always convincing. The action scenes are tense and the tension remains throughout the lengthy periods during which several characters remain in occupied territory.

At several points in the narrative the morality of using such a fearsome weapon, burning people to death, seems morally indefensible. The question is never fully decided, and ultimately the implied justification is that the enemy deserved no better. The raids do, however, have a galvanising effect on the local French population, which in fact was one motivations for the mission.

(view spoiler)

Later, Commander Martin talks with Michael Rhodes in his hospital bed after the *Genevieve* has been sunk:

"I see," I said. "What happened to Boden?"

Rhodes said: "Oh he was killed."

"Did you see him killed?"

"No sir."

"Was he the officer who was on the keel of the boat, firing with a tommy gun?"

"Yes, sir. They were all talking about it in Douarnenez. He put out the searchlight. Jules was the man with him, sir."

"How do you know he was killed if you didn't see it?"

There was a pause. "He wanted to be killed," Rhodes said. (p367)

(hide spoiler)]

Andrew McClarnon says

If war time special operations can be a 'cosy read', then this was it. First you get to know a group of characters, lonely in their different ways, bring them to South Devon to build up a plan, explore some of the Brittany coastline, and add some gentle romance, daring do, and an element of religious anger.

Vikas Datta says

Truly vintage Shute! If you had to read one book about war, especially the demands it makes, the heroism it evokes and the cost it levies on the participants, especially those on the front lines, then you cannot do worse than to pick this one up. Not only does Mr Shute depict with immaculate detail the planning and the very 'nuts and bolts' of operations, the stories of the characters and the very structure of the narrative are engrossingly engaging.

Ian says

When I started reading this novel I assumed it had been written in the post war years, but there was an odd reference early on to the Royal Navy defeating an attempted German invasion of Britain in September 1940, something we know didn't really happen, which led me to check the date of authorship. It appears the book was actually written in 1942, and was published in 1945. There are both pros and cons to reading a period piece like this. On the one hand the social mores of the day are perfectly captured in the way the characters speak to each other and otherwise interact, and the book conveys wartime attitudes that are difficult to reproduce today. On the other hand, you get the full on emotions of a Briton writing in 1942, and the characters express a hatred of Germans that at times makes for uncomfortable reading, though of course that is a modern day reaction and not one that would have been felt at the time.

In any case this is an excellent read. The story is told retrospectively by a Commander Martin of the RN, and concerns an operation to use a Breton fishing boat, brought to England at the time of the French armistice, as a means of launching covert raids into occupied France. The story is built around the fates of four officers, 3 Navy and 1 Army, involved in carrying out the raids, with the operation overseen by Cmmdr. Martin. Three of the officers are outsiders in some way. One is half-French, one has spent the last 20 years in the States, and one is a socially awkward introvert. All four are embittered against the Germans because of events during the war, and their bitterness is important to the plot. The novel spends some time introducing each character in turn and giving us their backstory, but this feature adds rather than detracts from the novel, allowing the reader time to identify with each. Once the team is assembled the novel moves on to the raids themselves, and again the story is well told although a little "propagandist" in tone. There is also a subplot involving a love interest between one of the officers and a young woman serving in the Wrens. Separately, throughout the book there is a weird mystical theme about the cleansing power of fire, which is one of the uncomfortable aspects for the modern reader. I thought the ending was very effective, although to avoid spoilers I won't say any more about that. This maybe isn't for everyone, but overall I was impressed.

Bill says

Nevil Shute continues to be one of my favourite authors. I've now read 4 or 5 of his books and each one has been so excellent. I can't sing the praises of books like *On the Beach*, *Pied Piper* and *The Far Country* enough. Today I finished *Most Secret*, published originally in 1945, during his war period. On the surface, it's a simple war story, 4 men of diverse backgrounds coming together to devise a plan for the English to harass and destroy German assets and at the same time to give new courage to French citizens on the French coast, who have been under the thumb of German rule throughout the war. But as always with such a well-crafted Shute story, it's much more than that. Shute takes the time to tell us about the characters, to develop feelings for them and what they've been through. His narrator is a Navy

Commander, drawn into the scheme to bring fire to the Germans, who becomes invested in them and who tells their story in such a matter-of-fact way, but also manages to provide us with the emotion and caring he has for Simon, Boden, Rhodes and Colvin.

Shute also adds in the Navy Wren who is assigned to transport the crew, the Commander and who falls in love with Rhodes. The story is one of great heroism and daring and also fairly technical in its own way. The plot basically is to convert a French fishing vessel into a raider, equipped with flame throwers to go across to France and fight the Germans. That is it in its very simplest forms. The four men each has his own motivations, which you find out throughout the story.

I thought as I read it, that yes, it's a pretty interesting story, but more and more I became invested in these characters, even with Rhodes' rabbit and by the end felt quite choked up with the ending and how everything turned out. Shute writes in a very understated manner but at the same time manages to get you completely involved in his story. His heroes are everyday people who strike a deep chord with you. Another of my favourites. (5 stars)

Bodwisebooks says

I enjoy reading Nevil Shute's books, some more than others. I'm not one who enjoys reading about war, but knows it goes on and in some circumstances has to go on. But having said that the story was seemed more about the characters than actually what they were having to do together. I liked the way the story panned out, but not one that I would re-read.

Lili says

This is a book I read years ago and I enjoyed it immensely. I've read all of Nevil Shute's books. The best by far is "A Town Like Alice."

Greg says

5 May 2016

The reliably endearing quality of Shute's novels is still there, but is severely compromised in this one, I found, because of the exteme contrast between the charming genteel manners and personal interests of the characters, and their cold blooded desire to kill all Germans in the most gruesome manner possible, incinerating people with a flamethrower. There is no differentiation made in the novel between Nazis and Germans. It was obviously written for a market sentiment in Britain straight after WWII, first published 1945, which makes it very dated now, and which I thought today was somewhat offensive.

I took this novel away on an Easter holiday camping break, for something light to read. I have liked all of the other Shute novels I've read. As it happens, while I was reading 'Most Secret' when I was camping, near us were a very nice German couple, and then a few days later, a nice young German couple on holiday in Australia camped right next to us. I am aware these sort of coincidences are telling me something.

7 May 2016

Talking of coincidence, a couple of days after the above post, I bought a copy of Graham Greene's Collected Essays..., on the back cover synopsis is a sentence. Greene wrote "Moral judgements are singularly out of

place in espionage". This would have been a good quote at the front of 'Most Secret', as that changes everything in looking at this WW II novel.

Susanne says

I did not finish the book. I would have been appalled if I would have met anyone with that craving of seeing a human burning the way it was described in the book, and I certainly would not want to read about, and I am disappointed that N Shute took it on himself to write about it. Good writer as he was, he captures one's attention, but this time, in my opinion, for his shame.

I do not see any difference between a gestapo man torturing his victim or the officer of her Majesty's Navy hitting an u boot with missiles and regretting not being able to see the suffering of the dying Germans, because they locked in their death trap. So he desperately WANT to see them burning.

I am not keen to hear - "they started it"- either, because that, again in my opinion is no answer for the bestial attitude.

Manda says

Shute wrote this during WW2; it has a distinctive feel that perhaps the events are not actually fiction. A great read, I will definately pick up more by this author. A true story teller.

Nancy says

Early in WWII, when France was occupied by the Germans, a small group of Allied fighters devised a novel means of striking back and lifting the spirits of an occupied village (Douranenez) in Brittany. One of the sardine fishing boats of this village somehow found its way into British hands. Some enterprising young men came up with the idea of using fire against the Germans—apparently the thought was triggered by something a Catholic priest said to a British spy in Breton. (Brittany). Germans were said to be afraid of fire and to use fire as a weapon themselves. The fishing boat was weaponized with a flamethrower and German (“rahmboats”) “ minder” boats that accompanied the sardine fleets were sprayed with oil & set on fire.
