



The Ball and the Cross

G.K. Chesterton

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I cannot understand the people who take literature seriously; but I can love them, and I do. Out of my love I warn them to keep clear of this book. It is a collection of crude and shapeless papers upon current or rather flying subjects; and they must be published pretty much as they stand. They were written, as a rule, at the last moment; they were handed in the moment before it was too late, and I do not think that our commonwealth would have been shaken to its foundations if they had been handed in the moment after. They must go out now, with all their imperfections on their head, or rather on mine; for their vices are too vital to be improved with a blue pencil, or with anything I can think of, except dynamite. Their chief vice is that so many of them are very serious; because I had no time to make them flippant. It is so easy to be solemn; it is so hard to be frivolous. Let any honest reader shut his eyes for a few moments, and approaching the secret tribunal of his soul, ask himself whether he would really rather be asked in the next two hours to write the front page of the Times, which is full of long leading articles, or the front page of Tit-Bits, which is full of short jokes. If the reader is the fine conscientious fellow I take him for, he will at once reply that he would rather on the spur of the moment write ten Times articles than one Tit-Bits joke.

The Ball and the Cross Details

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From Reader Review The Ball and the Cross for online ebook

Marcos Junior says

The Ball and the Cross é a transposição para a ficção dos temas abordados em Heresies e, especialmente, em Ortodoxia. A esfera é o símbolo do racionalismo, uma forma perfeita, mas que possui limites que não consegue superar; a cruz, por outro lado, aponta em todas as direções e simboliza a abertura para o mistério. O livro se divide em duas partes. Na primeira, o racionalista ateu Turnbull e o católico MacIan tentam, sem sucesso, duelar até a morte pela existência de Deus. Na segunda, ambos enfrentam uma espécie de pesadelo, ao se verem em um estranho asilo liderado por uma personagem demoníaca, o professor Lúcifer. Chesterton, fiel ao seu tomismo, coloca os argumentos materialistas na boca de Turnbull com profundo respeito, dando ao personagem uma roupagem simpática e criando empatia pelo leitor. O ódio entre Turnbull e MacIan se mostra aparente e Chesterton parece querer mostrar que ambos impulsos, da matéria e do espírito, existe na alma de cada um de nós, e que querer eliminar um deles é um mal que o homem faz a si mesmo. O homem é feito de carne e espírito e essa é a grande mensagem da aventura fantástica de Chesterton.

Dave/Maggie Bean says

I purchased the Dover edition, which contains a fantastic foreword by Martin Gardner. Said foreword is worth the price of the book – a pittance at \$7.95. The text itself is worth twenty times more. TBATC was purportedly inspired by Chesterton's debates with (deservedly) forgotten R.P.G. Blatchford. (I doubt even Gardner -- who refers to ciphers and numerology in his foreword-- caught the "woo-woo" significance of Blatchford's initials: Blatchford, like the Soviets, whose B-40/RPG-7 became a weapon of choice among humorless malcontents the world over, was both a determinist and a socialist.) Chesterton, a "distributist" disliked capitalism and socialism, "conservatism" and "progressivism" equally. Like Charles Dickens, his convictions apparently stemmed from misplaced -- but justifiable -- anti-elitism and genuine humanitarianism. Whereas I'm not completely sold on his "distributist" ideas (how does one ensure that productive property finds its way into as many hands as possible -- without resorting to state-sanctioned theft?) or any other "third way" philosophy, the system Chesterton envisioned was far less brutal than the nasty mix of socialism and fascism infecting most of the world nowadays.

Beyond his odd economic theories, Chesterton was an unapologetic and devout Roman Catholic. Needless to say, his faith colored every word-picture he composed, whether blatantly or subtly. The Ball and the Cross was certainly no exception to his general rule. In an interesting variation on the pre-1745 Highland/Lowland, Catholic/Protestant historical theme, Chesterton – an Englishman—creates two worthy adversaries in Evan MacIan and John Turnbull. The former is a tall, dark-haired, blue-eyed Highlander: the latter a short, stocky, red-haired, grey-eyed Lowlander. (And yes, I suspect Chesterton had read Scott's poem, "Marmion."...)

MacIan is a devout, simple, mystic Catholic/Jacobite, longing for the return of the "auld Stuarts." Lowlander Turnbull, however, is *not* a stern, surly, pragmatic Covenanter; but rather a stern, surly, pragmatic atheist, longing to leap forward into a (putatively) rational utopia.

To make a long story short, Turnbull denigrates the Virgin Mary. MacIan responds with physical force and a challenge to a duel of honor, which Turnbull willingly accepts. The ensuing (and hilarious) quest to elude the authorities and consummate their engagement makes for one hell of an entertaining novel, and Turnbull's and MacIan's arguments – while endlessly amusing -- also provide much food for thought.

Anthony says

November 1, 2016

A Review by Anthony T. Riggio of the Book "The Ball and the Cross" by G.K. Chesterton

I purchased this (free) book in Kindle format from Amazon. I have heard a lot about Chesterton and his religious/philosophical views and was curious about his writing style. This book, The Ball and the Cross is an allegorical story showing the conflicts between good and evil and uses the relationship that develop a philosophical distain for one another's beliefs or lack thereof. The believer challenges the disbeliever to a dual using swords. The story is comedic and reminiscent of Cervantes Don Quixote. It sets out a series of humorist adventures which follow in a consequential sequence. I believe it sets out a struggle for the author and as a consequence demonstrates his belief system. I liked the book but it was a challenge to read to keep up with the whimsy of the author and somewhat circuitous in his overall conclusion. I gave the book three stars, primarily because it was interesting but lacking in a flow that appealed to me.

Matthew says

Bizarre but certainly entertaining and provocative. I'm a big fan of Chesterton with his rollicking plots and writing style and the question is why he is not more widely read today, albeit having a niche group of fans that apparently includes Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett. I had a glimmer of the answer in reading his collected Essays -- including one in which he defends the jury as opposed to the single judge system, in the spirit of democracy; his argument, to me, felt dated, although I empathise with his faith in the common sense of the everyday man and his concern for the abuse of power. The Ball and the Cross also feels a little dated. Chesterton (as well as CS Lewis) appears to have this caricatured conception of modern science as a Nietzschean will to power, and his villain in this case is an abstract polemic made flesh rather than a fully fleshed out character. Then again most of his fictional writing is really metaphysical argument couched as story. Having said that I very much like the balanced and respectful way in which he portrays Turnbull, the humanist atheist, and his slight satire of the humorless MacIan -- this of course despite his personal bias in beliefs toward the latter.

Daniel Carr says

Having read and enjoyed "The Man Who Was Thursday," and having discovered this book thanks to my devotion to (now) Venerable John Paul I, who comments on it in his *Illustrissimi* (which I highly recommend), I thought I would give it a read.

I didn't know what to expect, except that Chesterton is a master of words and his allegory is often confusing. I greatly enjoyed the roller coaster that was this book, just as I enjoyed "The Man Who Was Thursday." The journey is long and often puzzling, seeming to aimlessly wander. He seems to like making the reader fix on a single moment of destination and dance around it for the entirety of the book, often never quite reaching that moment. And yet I don't feel unsatisfied by it.

I greatly appreciated the contrast between the two main characters. They are so apparently different, often

violently so, and yet there is something which unites them both immensely - a character which is rarely found in today's world. I think Chesterton here hits on a valuable point - often those who disagree on an issue or have opinions which are polar opposites ought to be closest friends because of their similar attitudes and virtues. Just as love and hatred are considered opposites, in reality it is said that love and apathy are much further apart, and love is one step away from hatred.

I didn't understand or appreciate all of the allegory and symbolism in the book, although I suspect a more careful reading would unlock some of that for me. But I thoroughly enjoyed Chesterton's random musings and his philosophy hidden in narrative. In particular, he has a way of showing something upside-down as being right-side-up and then slowly revealing the truth of the situation. And he does this while still maintaining a high level of action and suspense.

I loved it, just as I've loved all of his works which I have read so far. Enjoy!

Joel says

This book is not about the everyday world. It has little in common with the modern novels I am used to. It is not interested in exploring the nuances of introspection and social interaction. It seemed to me to be more like a farce with characters running around implausibly, saying witty, profound things. It also felt at times like a morality play with characters declaring their views on the state of the universe and of each other.

In the end, it is its own sort of book, a book obsessed not with "real life" but with reality. That is, it is a book interested in those parts of life that seem the most real, the parts when you are falling in love or escaping death or taking a stand for what is right. An absurd number of scenes take place at sunset or sunrise, with the almost automatic beauty and poignancy those times can carry.

The Ball and The Cross is about a devout Catholic and dogmatic atheist whose passionate stand against each other set them apart from the world and thus throws them together. At least, that is what the first half of the book is about. The second half (or maybe final third) is something else altogether—a Kafkaesque nightmare leading to a redemptive apocalypse, maybe. It's a little hard to describe.

Although *The Ball and The Cross* can feel didactic at times (it has no postmodern ambiguity about where it lands on the theism/atheism debate, for example), it is like little else you can read. If you can accept that G. K. Chesterton is doing his own thing here, the hyper-symbolic weirdness of its ending is really amazing.

NOTE: If you liked this book even a little, I would highly recommend *Napoleon of Notting Hill*. It has a similar narrative arc and is my very favorite of Chesterton's novels.

Simon Stegall says

The Ball And the Cross is about two Scotchmen, an atheist and a Catholic, who, due to certain irreconcilable differences, decide to fight a duel to the death. Unfortunately dueling is against the law, so the two champions are forced to make a run for it across the English countryside, avoiding the authorities and various philosophical types that try to stop them, in search of a place where they can kill each other peacefully.

It's a fun book, like most of Chesterton's fiction, and it's also profound, albeit a little heavy-handed on the symbolism (but we wouldn't read Chesterton if we didn't need a little of that). And after all the fun and various profundities, the feeling I am left with is the same from book to book when it comes to this author; I wish I understood Christianity the way that mirth-and-girth Gilbert did. To illustrate, I leave you with a quote:

'MacIan turned upon the Tolstoyan with a white face and bitter lip. "Sir," he said, "talk about the principle of love as much as you like. You seem to me colder than a lump of stone; but I am willing to believe that you may at some time have loved a cat, or a dog, or a child. When you were a baby, I suppose you loved your mother. Talk about love, then, till the world is sick of the word. But don't you talk about Christianity. Don't you dare to say one word, white or black, about it. Christianity is, as far as you are concerned, a horrible mystery. Keep clear of it, keep silent upon it, as you would upon an abomination. It is a thing that has made men slay and torture each other; and you will never know why. It is a thing that has made men do evil that good might come; and you will never understand the evil, let alone the good. Christianity is a thing that could only make you vomit, till you are other than you are. I would not justify it to you even if I could. Hate it, in God's name, as Turnbull does, who is a man. It is a monstrous thing, for which men die. And if you will stand here and talk about love for another ten minutes it is very probable that you will see a man die for it."

Make of it what you will.

Morris Nelms says

This is the first work of fiction by Chesterton I've read. It's a fine book. Elegant and witty writing prevails throughout. Chesterton, a devout Catholic, makes the atheist the most lovable character.

It's funny. It's funny like Twain and Wodehouse are funny. It's also deep at times, often at the same time that it's being funny.

This book may not be for everyone. Some will find it too philosophical. Some will say that Chesterton is engaging in straw man arguments, that he does a poor job presenting the atheist's side of things, but by the end of it I felt Turnbull's ideas were well represented. And I'm sure some will say it is silly.

I say this is an important book and should be widely read. I loved it, and I loved it more than I have loved a new book in quite some time.

Virgiliana says

I just finished rereading *The Ball and The Cross*. It's not a very good novel--Chesterton himself did not like how it turned out--but I enjoyed it--it was at least a good idea for a story, and expresses, if poorly, some very fun and interesting ideas. I also reread Martin Gardner's introduction to the book and thought it was not very good. Contrary to what he says, the novel isn't really about the conflict between the Catholic and the atheist--it's about what brings them together--that specifically being a world that hates them both. But then, as it turns out, it's not really the world that hates them but the devil. The world is just a bit misguided.

Although Chesterton would surely blanche at the suggestion that he was a universalist, he seemed to think so

well of everyone he met, I doubt that he could really imagine any person being worthy of eternal damnation. And that's played out in the ending of the book, which makes it rather a curious statement for someone so concerned with "orthodoxy."

Sandra says

Another Sci-Fi story from Chesterton, however much easier to follow than *The Man Who Was Thursday*. A real duel with arms needs to take place between a Catholic and an atheist, they struggle to find the right place and so they become fugitives and comrades. Their adventures are both funny and witty and both of them start leaning towards his enemy.

Chesterton again surprised me by being able (in such a short book) to portray two opposite characters in such a way that the reader feels sympathy for both of them. This story is not only a duel between theism and atheism, but an example of how any extreme would lead to a broken world. It also reminds the reader that common sense is what will save humanity. I loved that it makes fun out of some materialists who will take materialism over facts, even when the fact is standing in front of them. As Albert Einstein once said, "if the facts don't fit the theory, then change the facts"; in this book, Chesterton takes this mockery to the next level by implying that modern "science" (psychology in this case) would rather ignore all the facts and declare everyone crazy in order to convince others than something real doesn't exist (the duel between the main characters).

I recommend this book because it provides good entertainment while explaining big philosophical, theological and rationalistic issues from two very opposite standpoints. Once again I closed a G.K. Chesterton book with a big smile on my face.

Johan Haneveld says

Another great book by G.K. Chesterton. The more I read of him, the more I'm a fan. Yes, I do think Chesterton is in the 'hate it or love it' category, and I think one must have a taste for his pretty peculiar way of writing, but if one does, all of his works are like draughts from a spring of fresh, clear water. This one is no exception, filled to the brim with his trademark paradoxes and witticisms, coupling an allegorical story with lively descriptions and characters that feel fully alive, marrying theological and philosophical speculation with an overwhelming love of life, giving one the impression of having been taken on a journey, more than just having read a book. Yes, this is unashamedly Christian fiction, but it's also science fiction, and magical realism, with airships, and an apocalyptic conclusion. An atheist and a Catholic seem to be the only ones left in the world to whom the question if God is real really means something, and they think their difference in opinion worth fighting about. The world does not think so and they are hindered at every point. Eventually though, even though they are saner than the people around them, they find they were also wrong: they must reach a position not of fanaticism, but of love: love of the peculiar, the personal, love of the other (as exemplified by the pretty weird figure of the priest). That this novel ends with a miracle and a conversion could be seen as a cop out, but it doesn't feel like it is. It fits with the apocalyptic nature of the last chapters, of waking up instead of dreaming, and reminds me of the miracle I hope to experience at the end of my life or of history. When we will no longer dream, but enter the end of all things that is more real, more concrete, than the world which it ends.

Suzannah says

Chesterton's novels almost stand in a genre of their own. Heavily philosophical, wildly allegorical, unapologetically adventurous, and comically surreal, it can be difficult even to describe them. And of them all, perhaps *The Ball and the Cross* is the most peculiar; which might be to say the worst, if you could even use a superlative negative in a sentence about Chesterton's works. At least it does not operate on the same level of high genius as *The Man Who Was Thursday*. But what there is of it is unforgettable.

Read the rest at my blog, [In Which I Read Vintage Novels](#)

Victoria says

Sometimes Chesterton just gets a little too nuts for me. The premise of the novel - the conflict between the "ball" (the world/atheistic science) and the cross (Catholicism) - opened well, and being a very hotheaded Catholic myself, I sympathized deeply with Evan MacIan from the moment he was introduced. But when the lunatic asylum came around I began to be very, very lost. I kept waiting for the big reveal, the explanation to all the ruckus, but when it came it wasn't quite as explanatory as I had hoped, and in the end I still had a lot of questions. I do not like being unable to tell what is supposed to be real and what isn't in a novel. I was expecting to glean a lot of apologetics from the story, but couldn't because I could hardly grasp the arguments in order to follow them, much less repeat them myself to another. Perhaps I am very stupid, but I cannot help it. Three stars for the first two thirds of the book, and minus two for the last third.

Ken Bickley says

Many reviewers have called this entire novel a confusing allegory, and even Chesterton himself confessed in later years that he was a bit confused by it. Nevertheless, the story of an atheist and an orthodox Roman Catholic trying to fight a duel over faith, despite continual police intervention, is amusing and interesting. Duels were decidedly uncouth in Edwardian England, as indeed was any public discussion of religion. Religion was a private matter, after all. The climax is a bit more puzzling, but Chesterton's wit keeps you engaged throughout the book.

Don Incognito says

This is a book whose premise, and beginning, you need to be Roman Catholic in order to fully appreciate. Since I'm Protestant, I was befuddled.

In the beginning, the Catholic premise begins after a seemingly irrelevant chapter about an airship designed and flown by a mad scientist. Turnbull, a smug atheist newspaper publisher in London, has apparently published an article insulting the Virgin Mary. MacIan, a militant traditionalist Catholic man from Scotland, reads it and smashes the publisher's window in a rage. He challenges Turnbull to a duel; Turnbull accepts;

and after buying swords in an antique shop, they have at it, fully attempting to kill each other. I was unable to sympathize with wanting to murder someone for insulting one's religion.

What happens for about the next two-thirds of the book is almost a screwball comedy: MacIan and Turnbull, who become almost friends, keep going from place to place for their duel because people keep interrupting them and the police keep finding and chasing them.

The story eventually becomes more serious, and takes a bizarre and much more interesting turn. It becomes, in fact, possibly the strangest Chesterton book I've yet read. (The others being *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*; *Manalive*; *The Man Who Was Thursday*; *The Everlasting Man*; and *What I Saw In America*.) Even *The Man Who Was Thursday* doesn't seem so absurd, once you accept that it's surreal.

MacIan and Turnbull jump over a wall to evade the latest police pursuit, and eventually find that they have been tricked into entering an inescapable insane asylum that was apparently designed by mysterious and evil people who may or may not be trying to take over England. This section, very much like *The Man Who Was Thursday*, is so strange and surreal (if definitely less puzzling and difficult) that I have felt compelled to reread it.

Steve says

Probably the best of Chesterton's fiction that I have read. I think this book may be better than *The Man Who Was Thursday*. The society outlined in this book looks eerily like our own. The whole world has gone insane, yet it has placed the sane in the asylum. Chesterton does justice to the fact that there can be friendship between disagreeing parties, and this friendship can do more than all the battles to soften hearts and make them receptive to the grace of God.

Matt says

Delightful and thought provoking as ever. Highly recommended. However, I think it is best appreciated when there is a familiarity with some of Chesterton's other works in general and *ORTHODOXY* in particular. I saw many ideas and settings from *ORTHODOXY* which actually took place in this book. Insane asylums, the men who discover England, what things are worth fighting for, believing in oneself... all shared by both *ORTHODOXY* and *THE BALL AND THE CROSS*. They really need to be read together.

Someone else said it, and I'll badly paraphrase it, but it rings true through all of Chesterton's works: When you read Chesterton, the characters are never convincing, never "real," nobody in the real world is ever truly like a Chesterton character. But as you read, you begin to play peek-a-boo with an idea: That this is perhaps the way people ought to be.

Cooper Williams says

My second Chesterton work has awakened in me a most wonderful kind of rage. It is the rage that drives a

fervent Catholic to hurl a rock through the window of an editorial office. It is the rage with which an atheist prints blasphemy and logical syllogisms. The rage by which both men take up swords time and again to defend their views.

On the other hand, Chesterton's gentlemanly prose exudes forgiveness. Similarly to *The Man Who Was Thursday*, the author paints a picture of the cosmos's workings through the people who inhabit it. It is a picture of both hysterical structure and collected contradiction. The war between the ball and the cross is never biased, but always dynamic. I've never seen so strange a friendship in a book as the polemic bond between the two heroes. A mystic reader may be surprised by admiration of Turnbull's clever and earnest personality. The skeptic may find himself overtaken by MacIan's assurance and his support from the natural world.

The "unaffiliated" reader may be struck most profoundly, or not at all. The book is less a response to atheism than it is to fat-minded complacency. I mourn for those who have neutered their minds and actions, the lukewarm. The deluded and distracted are truly the most lost, and it might take a shock like this to awaken them. To awaken us, I should say. This book is a strikingly human document that progresses from madcap to metaphysical, and epitomizes the struggle between the material and the spiritual.

Manuel Alfonseca says

Written one year later, this novel is the counterpoint to "The man who was Thursday", which I read five times many years ago. On the other hand, I have just read once "The ball & the cross". Perhaps this is the reason why I gave five stars to the former, and only four to the latter.

I am not disclosing anything if I say that the main antagonist in this novel represents the Devil, for from the beginning he is called Dr. Lucifer. The main characters are one atheist and a Catholic who pass the whole book trying to duel on a matter of convictions and are never allowed to do it. Thus they become the worst enemies of Dr. Lucifer, who cannot tolerate people who are essentially true to their convictions, whatever they are.

I should correct the previous assertion: in fact Dr. Lucifer fears one person even more than those two, but I won't disclose who he is and leave the reader to discover it.

Ladygwen says

Utterly fantastic! I see now why all my Hillsdilians rave over Chesterton. I will certainly look for more of his works :) The Scandal in the Village chapter is perfect!

1. You cannot defeat the Cross, for it is defeat
2. The difference between Jesus and Satan is that Jesus wanted to descend, and so rose, while Satan wanted to rise and so fell.
