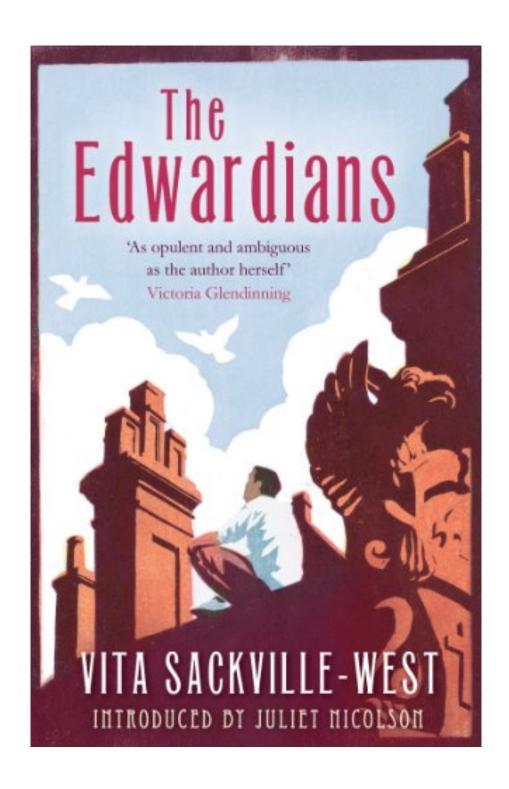


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### Review

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[A] solid book . . . Hattersley writes entertainingly . . . He is a clear and vigorous writer? Anne Chisholm, SUNDAY TELEGRAPH

Well written and wide ranging book . . . his account of the period is consistently enjoyable? Piers Brendon, DAILY TELEGRAPH

Hattersley makes a riveting case . . . a bold, sweeping synthesis . . . full of gleaming nuggets and offbeat points redolent of hours hunched over neglected papers. It is no surprise to readers of his journalism that it is superbly written, gleefully but wryly highlighting the absurdities and pomposities of the age . . . Hattersley's prose flows smooth as the port at a Sandringham shooting party. What makes this book is not just the quality of its social and political analysis, but the breadth of detail and the quality of its gossipy anecdotes? Colin Donald, HERALD

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Sebastian and Viola are children of the English aristocracy. Handsome and moody, nineteen—year—old Sebastian is heir to Chevron, a vast country estate. Tying him to his inheritance is a deep sense of tradition and love of the English countryside, but he loathes the cold, extravagant society of which he is a part. At sixteen, his sister Viola is more independent: an unfashionable beauty who scorns every part of her inheritance—most particularly that of womanhood. It is July 1905, and Chevron is once again the site of a lavish house party. The guests include the great beauty Lady Rochampton and the explorer Leonard Anquetil. It is Lady Rochampton who will initiate Sebastian in the art of love, but it is Anquetil who opens for both brother and sister the gateway to another world. Vita Sackville—West was a distinguished novelist, poet, and critic. She lived with her husband, Harold Nicolson, at Sissinghurst in Kent. The couple was the subject of the acclaimed BBC series Portrait of a Marriage.

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Vita Sackville-West (1892-1962), distinguished novelist, poet and critic, was brought up at Knole, and lived with her husband, Harold Nicolson, at Sissinghurst in Kent. She was the inspiration for Virginia Woolf's

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At nineteen, Sebastian is a duke and heir to a vast country estate. A deep sense of tradition binds him to his inheritance, though he loathes the social circus he is a part of. Deception, infidelity and greed hide beneath the glittering surface of good manners. Among the guests at a lavish party are two people who will change Sebastian's life: Lady Roehampton, who will initiate him in the art of love; and Leonard Anquetil, a polar explorer who will lead Sebastian and his free-spirited sister Viola to question their destiny.

A portrait of fashionable society at the height of the era, THE EDWARDIANS revealed all that was glamorous about the period - and all that was to lead to its downfall. First published in 1930, it was Vita Sackville-West's most successful book.

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• 349 pages

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Most helpful customer reviews

10 of 10 people found the following review helpful. Flawed, Maybe; Brilliant on Many Levels, Definitely

By David Valentino

"Oh that bloody book! I blush to think you read it," wrote Vita to Virginia Woolf, whose press, Hogarth, had published THE EDWARDIANS to surprising success. Comparing your work to Woolf's is an ideal way to torture yourself. In Vita's case, double the anguish, because they were lovers and Vita admired Woolf.

Of course, Vita faulted herself too much. In its own right, THE EDWARDIANS is quite good. It highlights many of her writing skills, skills that put most modern authors to shame. The weaknesses come in the form of a couple of didactic passages, what some may consider excessive exposition, and a predictable and less an organic ending.

However, these criticisms pale when measured against the many strengths and rewards of the novel. These include an insider's observation of high society at the beginning of the 20th Century, the sexual mores of the British aristocratic class, the societal shift in the run up to World War I, and, for those fascinated by VSW, additional insights into her thinking and view of life.

The story is straightforward. Young aristocratic Sebastian is coming of age and is tormented. He feels trapped in the predictable life he sees laid out for him, lord of the manor and all the obligations and constrictions his duke title entails. He is a tightly wound ball of anger and rebellion, though his expressions of rebellion remain confined within his well-off world. He revolts by having liaisons with various women, the two most important of which are Lady Roehampton, Sylvia, best and girlhood friend of his mother (who quietly is "... quite content that Sebastian should become tanned in the ray's of Sylvia's Indian summer"), and, reaching downward, the middleclass wife of a doctor, Teresa. Sybil devastates him by breaking off the affair at the insistence of her husband, for the sake of propriety. Teresa rejects him when he offends her middleclass values of faithfulness and loyalty, which befuddle and antagonize him. Finally, he seems resigned to spending his life fulfilling the role he was born to. Until, that is, he again meets Anquetil, after participating in the coronation of George V, the ceremony rendered in vivid and enlightening detail by Vita.

Anquetil and Sebastian become acquainted early in the novel. Anquetil functions as a critical observer of upper class society, which he disparages with wit and wonder, and as a catalyst to Sebastian's rebellious spirit, as well as that of Viola, Sebastian's sister. It is in this early chapter where Vita dons her lecture robes, as Anquetil launches into a long, though intriguing, disquisition on the choice before Sebastian. Everybody,

not the least Sebastian and Viola, esteem the rough and ready explorer Anquetil, who is something on the order of a Shackleton. Vita, who possesses considerable powers of description, paints him as having "A startling face; pocked, moreover, by little blue freckles, where a charge of gunpower had exploded, as though an amateur tattooist had gone mad ..." His association with Anquetil further riles Sebastian. As for meek and mild Viola, by the conclusion of the novel she reveals herself, to Sebastian's astonishment, as the true rebel.

Strict distinctions divided the upper and lower classes in Victorian and Edwardian England. In the sex department, the upper class believed in exhibiting decorous behavior as an example to the lowers who otherwise might cavort in the manner of rutting animals. As for their own sexual conduct, as THE EDWARDIANS illustrates, especially Sebastian's mother planning weekend accommodations for guests at the great country house Chevron and dinner seating arrangements, the uppers regularly switched and shared partners, and (a variation on noblesse oblige, perhaps?) extended an appendage down into the lower ranks. (For a peek at the rich pornographic sub rosas activity of the periods, see, for example, the underground Victorian publication, THE PEARL.) When found out by a spouse, usually through an indiscretion that created a buzz too loud to ignore, accommodation usually proved the accepted strategy. Thus, Lady Roehampton gives up Sebastian and at the insistence of her husband George leaves with him for a station in the colonies.

Teresa, the morally cinctured doctor's wife, assiduously adheres to the strict code espoused and flaunted by the upper class. Believing he has wooed her and that she has happily succumbed, her rejection of his sexual advances, made at a Chevron weekend with her husband downstairs playing bridge with the biddies, stuns him.

Vita, you may know, rebelled against most every stricture of accepted sexual and spousal behavior. She conducted numerous lesbian and straight affairs, the most famous and most scandalous with Violet Trefusis. She abhorred being addressed as Mrs. Harold Nicolson and she would burn anyone who attempted calling her such to the ground with a look. A bit of knowledge about Vita will increase your delight in reading most of the social passages in THE EDWARDIANS.

In the short introduction, Juliet Nicolson, Vita's granddaughter, focuses on the novel as one of societal change. And, indeed, you'll see this theme thread throughout the novel. The privileged, for the most part, ignored it. The class most dependent upon them lamented it. But some, especially Viola, embraced it enthusiastically.

While on the subject of social and societal upheaval and Vita and Harold's unusual life style (delineated artfully in the superb PORTRAIT OF A MARRIAGE), Vita's main character names are very telling. Sebastian and Viola, as you probably know, are the brother and sister in Shakespeare's TWELFTH NIGHT. In the comedy, Viola assumes the role of lost Sebastian, dressing like him. And it is Viola in the novel ... well, that's for you to find out. Vita herself often during her affair with Violet dressed as a man, a soldier in fact, and sometimes a wounded one at that. In THE EDWARDIANS, you will find how the brother and sister deal with rebellious spirits and change fascinating.

Enough of me prattling on about VSW and THE EDWARDIANS: now it is time for you to read and enjoy it.

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful.

Stunning

By Ellis Bell

I have to admit that I was nervous going into the reading of this novel. I was expecting that Vita Sackville-West's writing style was going to be very modernist and hard to read. But I was pleasantly surprised, as I

usually am when I expect to dislike something.

The Edwardians is set in 1905 and 1906 (and then in 1910), and features Sebastian, a duke and owner of an estate called Chevron. His family is of the elite, and he rubs elbows with the cream of society, among whom are Lady Roehampton, a matron with whom he has an affair, and an adventurer named Leonard Anquetil, and Sebastian's mother Lucy and his sister Viola, who strains against the parameters that society has set for her life. Despite his wealth and the privileges that come with it, however, Sebastian feels trapped, and he finds himself faced with a heavy decision to make.

The plot isn't very original or groundbreaking, but what it lacks is more than made up for in the characters that populate this book. Vita Sackville-West's novel gives it's reader a little taste of upper-class, aristocratic society in the early 20th century--and she reveals the good and the bad of this kind of world. All of her characters, even the superficial and shallow ones, are well drawn, and probably very true to life considering that Vita Sackville-West knew this world very well. Sebastian and Viola seem to experiment with everything that is deviant from the world into which they were born; but it's all a part of the growing-up process for them.

Vita Sackville's message about the shallowness of the trappings of the upper-class lifestyle in Edwardian England also comes across strongly; sometimes too strongly. Also, the decision that Sebastian makes at the end seems a little too rushed (I understand why he makes that decision, but it seems too impetuous). As I've said, though, Sackville-West's writing moves very smoothly, and her characters are very real and believable. Sackville-West was very perceptive about the world of which she wrote, and it shows through in this novel.

59 of 59 people found the following review helpful.

The rich really are different

By JLind555

In a sly author's note at the beginning of "The Edwardians", Vita Sackville-West says "No character in this book is wholly fictitous." Oh, really? It's intriguing to wonder who among the British aristocracy was being sent up in this volume.

"The Edwardians" is a book of manners and morals during the last years of a decadent, decorative, and very inbred upper class. The characters live a life of total self-indulgence, waste and spiritual emptiness. The story focuses on the dukedom of Chevron and its 19 year old heir Sebastian, attracted to and repelled by the society he was born into and takes for granted; his selfish, predatory mother, Lucy, a legendary hostess who is as shallow and superficial as she is popular; and his sensitive, introspective sister Viola, considered an ugly duckling by her mother at seventeen. Into their lives comes a polar explorer named Leonard Anquetil, temporarily lionized by society, who sees "society" for the fraud it is and tries to open the young people's eyes.

But as drawn to Anquetil as Sebastian finds himself, he is also drawn in the opposite direction, heading into his first adult relationship with one of his mother's married friends, Lady Roehampton, of a certain age but still drop-dead gorgeous. Self-knowledge and discovery can wait; Sebastian is launched into society through a clandestine affair with Lady Roehampton, which, as Anquetil predicts, will be the first of many such empty, meaningless liaisons. Is this all there is to a life in which one's every wish is granted? Sebastian realizes how soul-deadening such a life can become eventually and after a few years he wants out; but just as he appears resigned to his gilt-edged fate, Anquetil resurfaces. Who knows where Sebastian's life will go from there? As Anquetil tells him, it's up to Sebastian to decide his own destiny. And decide -- for better or worse -- he does.

Sackville-West has a talent for characterization; we see all the youthful conflict in Sebastian, the heady excitement of Lady Roehampton as she flings herself into what may well be her last affair before age catches up with her; and the shallowness of Sebastian's mother, the duchess, who must surround herself with and endless procession of people and parties to cover the vast chasm of internal emptiness that is her own life. But Sackville-West is herself torn in two directions. On the one hand, she appears to share Anquetil's disgust at the false facade of high society; on the other, she shares that society's contempt of middle-class values and virtues. She can't have it both ways, and it's this very conflict that gives "The Edwardians" so much of its tension and interest. The daughter of a British earl herself, Sackville-West knows the aristocracy inside-out, and she writes with an authority that makes her book all the more compelling to read.

Judy Lind

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