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It is 1948 and a young American couple arrive in France for a holiday, full of anticipation and enthusiasm. But the countryside and people are war-battered, and their reception at the Chateau Beaumesnil is not all the open-hearted Americans could wish for.

The Chateau Details

Date	:	Published December 28th 2000 by Vintage Classics (first published January 1st 1961)
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Author	:	William Maxwell
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From Reader Review The Chateau for online ebook

Veronica says

What a refreshing change from the hectic melodrama of Haweswater! Maxwell's style is clipped and urbane, of its time (1961) with a hint of modernism (talking furniture ...). Somehow what should be a mundane travel journal with no plot to speak of is endlessly captivating, as the naive young American couple Harold and Barbara fall in love with France but consistently struggle to grasp what's going on around them and understand all the subtle nuances of social interaction with the family they stay with and the people they meet. Maxwell beautifully conveys that constant sense of just missing something that you get in unfamiliar places, the inadvertent social faux pas, the anxiety. And the characters are brilliant, from moody Eugene to the totally baffling Mme Straus, who is probably making everything up in order to conceal her inconsequentiality. The explanatory dialogue in part 2 didn't quite work for me, but I'm happy to have discovered Maxwell, whom I'd never previously heard of.

Russell George says

A strange novel really. I discovered William Maxwell by picking up a copy of his novella 'They Came Like Swallows', which I loved, but this never quite gets going. It's the story of an American couple visiting France just after the Second World War, and the various French friends that they make along the way. It's a study of the friendships that we make when travelling, and though there is a precision and clarity to the writing that I enjoyed, it felt like an idea for another novella bloated by a publisher's hubris. The final section where a Guardian Passnotes style second voice is introduced is interesting, but faintly bizarre given this only features in the final 50 pages. There are also a few gaps to the narrative - the trip to Austria is talked about in the future and then retrospectively, so was obviously cut - giving the novel a disjointed feel.

I think Maxwell is a really talented writer, and TCLS is wonderful, but this was disappointing.

Teresa says

This is a well-written (Maxwell doesn't write any other way) novel with a nostalgic feel (again, Maxwell doesn't seem to write any other way), with the longer first part (of two) reading almost like a travel diary at times; and just when you're wondering, near the end of that first part, what it might all mean, you arrive at the second part, which is almost meta-fiction, and requires the first part to achieve its ends.

Though the novel is not at all derivative, Maxwell's love for Virginia Woolf shines through, especially in the second part. Insentient beings think and a grandfather clock ticks with no one left to wind it. Actually, this novel is pure Maxwell, with his gentle humor and trademark empathy. I loved the last line, which explains so well why a sleepless person picks up the book, again, that had just been returned to the nightstand.

Tony says

Maxwell, William. THE CHATEAU. (1961). ****. I've said it before: Maxwell was one of America's finest writers. This novel – though not his best – demonstrates how he was able to enfold the reader into a story where nothing dramatic really happens. It tells the story of Harold and Barbara, a young couple married for three years, and their trip to France on vacation in 1948. They spend most of their time in the Loire Valley, at the chateau of Mme. Viennot as paying guests. Mme. Viennot is one of those impoverished aristocrats whose actions and conversations are not totally understood by the vacationers, in spite of their rather good French. They find that this is the situation for them no matter where they visit or stay. These Americans, who are certainly not the "ugly" Americans that we might expect, cannot relate to post-war France or its people. They try their hardest, but there is no point of common reference for them to fall back on. They are acting like they would act at home. It doesn't work in France. This is a marvelous novel whose impact, unfortunately, is diminished by the author's afterword, which he calls "Some Explanations," which is in the form of a dialog between the author and the reader. I wonder if the sublety of the story forced Maxwell's editor to induce the writer to add this. In any event, it is a fine novel. Recommended.

Brooke says

This was a very delicate, slow book, and - without spoiling anything - it remained realistically focused on alienation and interior motives. I kept waiting for the kicker, the twist, the dark side of human nature to pop up, but no, this book was faithful to the good-natured and well- intentioned misunderstandings, frustrations, and miscommunications of being a foreigner. Post-war France was obviously not all roses and daisies, which the idealistic couple slowly learns as they tour bullet-pocked towns, stay in chateaux and hotels commandeered and billeted by the Nazis, and form gradual relationships with characters still rebuilding their lives. Some have criticised this as being more of a travelogue than a book with a plot, but I rather enjoyed Harold and Barbara's well-meaning desire to understand and be accepted, and their open wonder at their surroundings. Frankly, I'd take a meandering travel diary this well-written over some of the overly-terse MFA fiction I've had to put down recently any day.

John says

I had never read any Maxwell before, nor based upon the descriptions of his other work, am I likely to do so - those themes just don't interest me. But, I decided to spend an Audible credit on this one, after listening to the sample. A good choice as it turned out.

Without rehashing the plot (too much), a young American couple tour Europe in 1948, during the rebuilding of the former war zone. For the first part of the book, they're based at a country estate of a family that takes in lodgers to make ends meet, becoming gradually enmeshed in their doings. The second half sees them based in Paris, where several members of the family, whom they've come to know, are also based; they end of staying at the family apartment there, while exploring the city. They return five years later, to find that life has moved on, although they're still fond of the family. Finally, there's an epilogue, wherein the omniscient narrator and a (hypothetical) reader have a dialogue concerning the many loose ends.

I've seen criticism that the book was more like an overgrown novella, and I disagree. Had they stayed in the country, perhaps it would've seemed so, but moving to Paris exposes them to new characters and experiences. If I were to quibble with anything, it's that they had so much time off, and seemingly quite a bit of money for folks who didn't come from upper class backgrounds themselves. Otherwise, the personalities

were well differentiated, not stock "French people" at all. Harold and Barbara struck me as quite the culture mavens, but otherwise quite likeable folks one could identify with. There was one "loose end" that either I missed, or was implied - the subplot concerning Mme. Strauss, a fellow lodger in the country, who also lives in Paris.

The audio narration was terrific, although readers who don't understand French might be a bit thrown at the few points of untranslated text.

Definitely recommended.

Michael says

Despite my fascination with The New Yorker, I only found out about this writer through the TLS (and had to buy it at the time from Amazon.co.uk) and it sounded like the perfect book to buy for an upcoming trip to France. Maxwell's gentle prose and nostalgic story grabbed me at a time when I was no longer reading many novels and I fell completely in love with it.

Jane says

Having read most of the book before our Book Group meeting I felt that I should perhaps finish it. Now I wish I hadn't wasted my time. Such a tedious trek through Barbara and Harold's holiday and not saved by the final chapter "Some Explanations" which were also uninteresting. I will be glad to remove this book from my bookshelf.

Ted says

A strange book. When I try and say what it's about, all I can think to say is that it's about a couple on vacation. But there's so much more. Maxwell captures perfectly the feelings of alienation in the traveler. There's the social disappointments, the inadvertent offense given, the anxiety about being taken advantage of. The book has its own weird sort of suspense. It's by no means a potboiler, but you read to find out what's behind the mysterious behavior of other characters and to see if the Americans will find the happiness they're looking for, if it's out there. No one captures the sweep of life as gracefully as Maxwell. He is both devoted to the goodness in people and versed in the intricacies of their neuroses and cowardice and frailty. He forgives all. I love how, with his elegant prose, he gets away with the most outlandish techniques, like imagining that the furniture talks and that crazy ending where he addresses the reader directly and explains what happened. He is a master.

Kklingon says

A rich and romantic story of a young American couple visiting France shortly after WW2; not Maxwell's best but still enjoyable. As Howard and Barbara Rhodes fall in love with France and its culture, they want to BE French and relate on an easy and intimate level with everyone they meet. Of course this isn't possible,

and there is much self examination and recrimination, as well as self-congratulation when they get it right. The motives of their hosts and new acquaintances are often mysterious and impenetrable. But Howard and Barbara are lively, beautiful, intelligent, they mean well, and William Maxwell makes you feel nothing but empathy for them. In fact, you feel like a fellow traveler, and some of the description will make you want to run out and buy a plane ticket. It strikes me that Maxwell and Richard Yates, while both immensely gifted writers, were opposites in their attitude toward people. I'll take Maxwell any day.

Debbie Robson says

It’s ridiculous but I have put off this review of William Maxwell’s The Chateau for over six months. Why? Well for the uninitiated Maxwell was a legendary mentor for many famous writer of his day and he edited The New Yorker from 1936 to 1975. So, how dare I critique his work. What could I have to say? But of course the other part of me was fascinated. What were his novels like? The Chateau intrigued me. Two young Americans visit in France in 1948.
Quite straight forward to start with. Harold and Barbara travel through war-battered France on their way to the Chateau Beaumesnil. They plan to stay a while, immerse themselves in the countryside and widen their knowledge of the French language. Of course they encounter all the troubles travellers often encounter. Problems with luggage, trains, lack of porters and a dingy hotel. Disappointment at Tours. Finally they arrive at the Chateau after a long dusty walk as a result of not being met at the station.
Mme Vienot is friendly but there is no hot water in their room, they can’t find the toilet and there is no wood for the fireplace. Gradually it becomes apparent when dealing with the other guests and sometimes even between themselves, that there are communication problems.
“Mme Vienot interrupted the flow of wit and anecdote to inquire if he understood what was being said.
“I understand part of it,” he said eagerly.
A bleak expression crossed her face. Instead of smiling or saying something reassuring to him, she looked down at her plate. He glanced across the table at Barbara and saw, with surprise, that she was her natural self.”
Through conversations and outings and meals the novel moves on with simple but effective prose - at times you wonder what are you missing? Am I, like the characters reading too much into the actions of the foreigners?
And suddenly we read Part II and Maxwell shows his hand. It is no longer a simple narrative. It is instead, a reflection on life itself - the missteps, the misunderstandings and the fact that sometimes, not everything can be known. Like other reviewers, I love the last line. A challenging but ultimately rewarding read.

Robert says

If it weren't so well-written, William Maxwell's novel, The Chateau, would bore you to death. And if the inventive coda weren't so cheeky and authoritative, the novel as a whole would be a very great flop.

The problem is this: Two newly married Americans go to France in the late '40s and they suffer all the indignities four months of tourism can offer: luggage difficulties, overcharges, opaque cultural rebuffs lightly sweetened with polite formalities, dreadful rooms, no hot water, bad food, endless discussions about whether to break the schedule and hurry ahead, inscrutable and undeserved affections showered upon them by needy acquaintances...

In the hands of Henry Green, this tale would be delightfully comic. He'd make the most of the confusions, the squabbles, the endless dinners, the endless rain, etc. Maxwell chooses, instead, to honor French rigidities and reserve, letting Harold and Barbara peer at life as though through smokey plate glass. Some have called Maxwell a romantic in writing this way. I'm not sure about that. He becomes very sharp and pointed at least once on every page.

The centerpiece of the novel is a two-week stay at a once grand chateau now run as a country hotel, of sorts. Madam Viénot operates it. She's wise and tight-fisted, determined to keep up appearances and not let anyone in on what happened to the family money. Her daughter scrapes by as a commercial artist in Paris. She visits the chateau from time to time. Likewise Madam Viénot's son, Eugène, and his wife, Alix. Harold and Barbara would like to befriend all of them, the other guests included. Harold and Barbara are Americans, after all. Not uncultured Americans but still...Americans like to get on with people...and Americans tend not to think that having smashed France in the process of crushing Hitler should be held against them.

But Harold and Barbara can't figure people out, and there is no Jamesian middleman to explain to them why Eugène runs hot and cold or why Alix does the same. At times the sun shines. There are good days along the river and good days visiting other chateaux and a party or two from which it is at least enjoyable to leave.

All along Maxwell describes everything he's willing to reveal quite expertly. He is (was) a fine, fine writer. But he's got a narrative trick in mind. He's going to hold back on the backstory of the indecipherable French cast and force the reader to puzzle along...just as a reader of a book like this no doubt has puzzled along in France himself...or Italy herself...or Germany himself/herself.

We have too much luggage. We don't know what's in that bowl just set before us. We thought it was going to be a salad but it appears to be calf's brains. We think the sheets are mildewed or moldy or both. We look at so many paintings that we can barely recall any of them. We want desperately to carve out time for the Île de la Cité, but there are travelers checks to be cashed and tickets to be confirmed and a shoe that has to be picked up from a shoemaker who really doesn't repair shoes, he makes them, but is willing to do us a very expensive favor.

Do we need to read the memoirs of our own difficult spells as rookie tourists? Well, even if Barbara and Harold are a bit less interesting than we are, the cast of French characters is more interesting, and Maxwell scores point after point in presenting them. He does the same with foodstuffs, the moods of the day, the condition of an old chateau's plumbing, and the hazards of ferry rides.

Well, here's the deal, make of it what you will: He unravels all of his mysteries (and miseries) in his final section and we are able to see deeply into everyone's motivations. He does this after the fact. The story is over, but he goes back and in a kind of self-interview tells us what's bugging Eugène and Alix and so forth.

In other words, Maxwell masterfully (I think) violates that hoary old edict all the writing schools issue: He succeeds, in the end, by telling, not showing. This wrap-up is superb.

Now, would The Chateau be a better book if it showed more in a telling way throughout? I suppose not. I suppose I like writers who break rules, and in the end, I suppose I like The Chateau.

Megan Chance says

I loved this book, but I think it's not for every reader. The writing is beautiful and in some places feels a bit experimental--which sometimes works, and sometimes doesn't. The story is about an American couple on a months-long vacation in Europe, though it focuses specifically on their time in France, and much of the book is set during their two weeks in a country chateau, where they are paying guests. Nothing happens in this book. It is very deliberately paced. The narrative tension comes through the clash of cultures, which is subtly and beautifully drawn, and through the various confusions the Americans suffer about who these new friends of theirs really are, and the insults, misunderstandings and gaucheness that comes simply from not really understanding a language or a culture. It ends with a few chapters answering questions and moving into the future, and for me, that was the flaw in the book. I would have preferred the unanswered mysteries. But Maxwell is an expert in the depiction of human emotion and the fine nuance of meaning, and I was riveted.

Jeanette "Astute Crabbist" says

Enough! Bastante! Abbastanza! I'm not gonna try to read this anymore. Can this be the same author who wrote the pointed and precise *So Long, See You Tomorrow*?

I spent days and days forcing myself to keep trying with this book. It was all I could do to get through a chapter a day, sometimes not even that. I made it to page 138. It felt more like drudgery than an enjoyable reading experience, so I quit.

The book has its good moments. I stayed with it as long as I did because it was interesting to see what travel in Europe was like in 1948, when the effects of World War II were still very evident. That factor wasn't compelling enough to keep me reading, because the plot is so dull and the characters so annoying. If you love France and are quite familiar with it, this story might grab you. Otherwise, it's a frustrating grind.

Julie Christine says

This is a rare gem of a book. It is so perfect in its depiction of traveling and falling in love with another country that, not only would I not change a word, I found section after section I wanted to absorb into my skin. Although written sixty years ago and set just after World War II, the interactions and reactions of a young American couple with the French and in France remain relevant, painful, hilarious, and true.

Its peaceful pace belies the profound transformation of its principal characters, Harold and Barbara, and of the painful recent history from which the French were so eager to shake loose in the fragile years of the late 1940’s. It is counter to French nature to turn away from history and move on with assertive hope; Barbara and Harold arrive at the border just as France accepts that breaking the habit of reflection and debate and marching in concert with their European neighbors- including Germany- is the only way out of the post-war depression.

Whether or not it was the writer's intention, Maxwell’s characters personify specific national characteristics or conditions that were present in France during this tender and uncertain time.

Mme Viénot is the face of dignity. She endeavors to preserve the gentility of the rapidly disappearing class of landed gentry. Hers is the eponymous *château*, which suffers the indignities of no hot water, no heat, and a larder limited by ration coupons. She is wily, a survivor, one foot trailing in the France’s past, the rest of

her thrust forward, ready to grasp what she can to keep her home and legacy intact.

Eugène Boisgaillard encapsulates a nation emasculated by war, and its co-conspirators helplessness, guilt, and frustration. He runs hot and cold- a character you don't trust and but somehow you come to understand. He is surely suffering some sort of post-traumatic stress disorder, a condition not spoken of in a nation that had lost so many of its young men to war. He resents the vitality and hope of the American *naïfs* as he comes to terms with the loss of his gracious pre-war lifestyle.

Mme Straus-Muguet is a reminder that all is not as good as it seems in the land of your dreams. Pulling back the curtain of Emerald City to see an insignificant blunderbuss at the controls is a keen disappointment. But once you accept the flaws and the ordinariness of it all, you also begin to feel more at home.

Her awkward social status is also a painful but unspoken reminder that, although united during the war by hunger, fear, resistance, or mere survival, the different social classes would sort themselves out in peacetime. Peace means never having to say "I'm sorry," to someone beneath your standing.

Sabine and Alix are the face of the new France: young, strong, independent women. Sabine is blazing her career path without the help of her connected family or a paramour; Alix is a busy mother in a passionate but difficult marriage with the mercurial Eugène. These women realize there is no time to stop and reflect on all that was lost in two generations of war; their lives are rich and full, the demands on their intelligence and heart too great to tarry.

It often feels that Harold and Barbara are more conduits than characters, particularly the winsome and vague Barbara. Harold works so hard to understand and to be understood, to fit in, get along, adapt; he wants desperately to be French, but understands that he is the quintessential American. The passages showing Harold falling helplessly in love with France, encountering the inexplicable and the maddening, and finally, saying goodbye to Paris are heart-wrenching to any one who has known and loved that beautiful, proud, contrary, gracious country.

The Château is a love letter to France, and an homage to the baffling, intoxicating experience of traveling abroad. It is also an astute portrayal of post World War II Europe, of a country that was on the losing side of the victorious.
