



Greene on Capri

Shirley Hazzard

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When friends die, one's own credentials change: one becomes a survivor. Graham Greene has already had biographers, one of whom has served him mightily. Yet I hope that there is room for the remembrance of a friend who knew him-not wisely, perhaps, but fairly well-on an island that was "not his kind of place," but where he came season after season, year after year; and where he, too, will be subsumed into the capacious story.

For millennia the cliffs of Capri have sheltered pleasure-seekers and refugees alike, among them the emperors Augustus and Tiberius, Henry James, Rilke, and Lenin, and hosts of artists, eccentrics, and outcasts. Here in the 1960s Graham Greene became friends with Shirley Hazzard and her husband, the writer Francis Steegmuller; their friendship lasted until Greene's death in 1991. In *Greene on Capri*, Hazzard uses their ever volatile intimacy as a prism through which to illuminate Greene's mercurial character, his work and talk, and the extraordinary literary culture that long thrived on this ravishing, enchanted island.

Greene on Capri Details

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From Reader Review Greene on Capri for online ebook

Greg says

Shirley Hazzard's writing is sublime. Smooth as silk. She writes with such charm and grace, and encapsulates broad events into a succinct, condensed few lines so smoothly and eloquently. Perfect for reflecting in a memoir on fellow writer and long-time friend, Graham Greene. Shirley Hazzard draws a portrait that because of its subtleness in showing many and various aspects of Greene's character, I feel I wouldn't want to know too much more about the man. I don't think I want to read a biography on him, not at least until I've read a good number of his novels.

Near the end of the memoir Shirley Hazzard says of Greene, "No two encounters with Graham were ever the same, he saw to that."

There is a lot to interest in this memoir. There's a good description of Capri and its history. It has long been a magnet for writers and artists.

Shirley Hazzard relays the friendship between Greene and the "Dottoressa Moor", Dr. Elisabeth Moor. The "Impossible Woman" who was the acknowledged source for the character in *Travels With My Aunt*. Hazzard gives a glimpse of how Greene was energised by difficult people, he was one himself, all material for his writing.

James says

I read this during the late summer of 2008 as it was selected by our Thursday evening book group for our return from hiatus in September of that year. We read this alongside Hazzard's short novel, *The Bay of Noon*. Her portrait of Greene is focused, and in comparison with the earnest but elephantine biography by Norman Sherry, is brief and economical. Yet she is able to convey far more in it of the inner man, and the sense it provides of the outer man is more vivid as well. It is a model not merely of memoir but of the writer's craft. We enjoyed the literary portraits and the descriptions of Capri as well. This was an unexpected delight.

Zuberino says

One winter morning in the late 1960s, the Australian novelist Shirley Hazzard met - *par hasard*, in a cafe - the aging Graham Greene on the fabled island of Capri, just off the Neapolitan coast. What ensued was a friendship *à quatre* that endured over three decades - the quatre consisting of the two novelists and their respective partners (the Frenchwoman Yvonne Cloetta and the American writer Francis Steegmuller).

This may be a slim volume, but it is a work of exceptional beauty. In crystalline prose, Hazzard, who is a writer of some note herself, captures the natural wonder that is Capri and the prickly personality of the gnomish novelist perched in his eyrie. Graham Greene doesn't really come off all that well, cantankerous old misogynistic bastard that he was - and Hazzard makes a telling late comparison against that other Italian exile Harold Acton (best known today for his aphorism re power and corruption). Nonetheless, there is genuine affection and admiration in Hazzard's portrait, exasperated though she often was by Greene's

unpredictable moods and uncharitable behaviour.

The other star of the show is the island of Capri itself, whose jewel-like setting in the Gulf of Naples has drawn a fascinated crowd from the Emperor Tiberius downwards. A host of figures from literature and history flit across the pages - Axel Munthe and Norman Douglas, Lenin and Gorky, Rilke and Bunin, Turgenev, DH Lawrence, Compton Mackenzie, Robert Penn Warren and the Italian fascist writer Curzio Malaparte. Hazzard touches also on local oddities like the Dottoressa Moor and Count Fersen, and in the latter half sketches a superb historical survey of the island across the centuries. But above all else looms the shadow of the recluse-emperor from two millennia ago who ruled his vast dominions, guarded and suspicious, from a mountain fastness that still overlooks the wine-dark sea.

Books don't come much more bijou than this, but when the topic is so engrossing, the writing so eloquent and intimidatingly erudite, the gratified reader can only call out: "More please."

Bobsie67 says

We learn that Graham Greene was sometimes surly and imperious as well as witty and insightful. We learn of the friendship that Ms. Hazzard and her husband strike up with Greene and their many meals at Gemma (good food, even if not transcendent). We learn about other interesting characters on Capri and even learn a little bit about Capri life and politics. I found Ms. Hazzard's writing style to be more fluid here than in her book on Naples. All interesting, but seems to lack a true urge to move the reader through the book.

Tony says

GREENE ON CAPRI. (2000). Shirley Hazzard. ***1/2.

Ms. Hazzard wrote of her meetings with Graham Greene numerous times while vacationing on Capri, where Greene had a house. She was an obvious devotee of his writing, although she was quick to point out that he had his quirks. I enjoyed reading this memoir and learning of both Greene and many of his friends who came to visit with him on the island. I was able to visit Capri only once, but was quick to note its beauties and learn of its history. At the time, I didn't know of Greene's house there, so didn't get to see it, but Hazzard managed to include a photo of it as one of the many in the book. Greene was well known and respected by the literary community because of his writing talent. I didn't get the impression, however, that he had any large number of personal friends. His visitor list was quite extensive, and was representative of the writing community during the wars. This work was not really a biography in the strict sense of the word, but Ms. Hazzard was able to round out the picture of Greene by noting and recording Greene's relationships with his peers. I am a big fan of Greene and his works, and am glad that I discovered this short book that provided a more personal look at the man and his writings. Ms. Hazzard's writing was, as usual, impeccable, and flowed smoothly while she was telling her story.

Cphe says

Read this as part of a genre challenge. Have to admit memoirs and biographies aren't quite my reading preference. I have however read several novels by Graham Greene and enjoyed them immensely.

Strangely enough the character I most identified with in this memoir was the husband of the author, Francis Steegmuller. Francis appeared a wonderful foil to the complicated and irascible at times, Graham Greene.

Enjoyed the "name dropping" of authors and personalities who frequented Capri and were allowed into the "inner circle." I also enjoyed reading snippets of his interactions with his contemporaries.

The novel was obviously a labour of love which does shine through. Do have to admit though that it was Capri itself which quite managed to overshadow all mentioned in the memoir.

Elaine says

I was torn on this one. It's an Elaine 4, and probably an anyone else 3. I have a passion for Southern Italian islands and tales of expat life in a golden age that whenever it was was before my time. More importantly, Shirley Hazzard and Graham Greene are two of a very small pantheon of literary gods that I absolutely worship. So, it's as if this odd little rambling and nostalgic book was a cocktail mixed just for me. As always, Hazzard's turns of phrase and trenchant observations enchant - so much so that I now have a reading list of now quasi-forgotten early-mid 20th century writers who washed up on Capri at one point or another, simply because Hazzard's allusions to them make them seem enticing. And she captures an intimate, loving if quite brutally honest, portrait of Greene. Capri itself (in a relatively unspoiled rustic state when there were still verdant farms and good simple trattorias) is so lovingly depicted that you can see, smell and taste it, and wish that you had not only a plane ticket but a time machine, so you could immediately go eat at pre-buffet-table Gemma's, and see a donkey stroll by... But the book is also a bit of a jumble - loosely connected anecdotes involving Italian and English intellectuals who Hazzard or Greene either knew on Capri, or knew of on Capri (clearly a wide scope).

Again, a peculiar and obscure book - but delightful for what it is, and the eccentric tastes to which it speaks.

Callie says

If you've never read Shirley Hazzard, then you haven't lived (as a reader). Her writing is exquisite. There are very few writers like her in this world. I sometimes wish I could live inside her skin and be gifted with a mind like hers. Her sentences are absolutely divine. I find myself reading much more slowly than I normally do and I find that I reread a fair amount of these sentences, either for the pure pleasure of it or because they are brim with meaning and I want to squeeze out every last drop.

I've been wanting to read this memoir of Graham Greene for a long time..Hazzard is charitable toward Greene, it seems to me. At least, I imagine from her writing that he was quite a difficult man, but that she feels fortunate to have known him. It's not as if she has a great deal of material about him, this book is light in substantive reminiscences but it is like poetry, in that so much is conveyed in the details she provides. She is a very careful writer.

She's not only remembering Greene, however, she's also depicting the island itself, some bits of history, some bits about other literary figures who have taken up residence there or come for extended stays.

If you want a comprehensive biography of Greene, obviously this is not the book for you. But if you're a fan

of Shirley Hazzard, or of luxuriously well-written prose, you will love this book.

Alberto Fav says

Shirley Hazzard is an amazing writer. Don't miss out this book.

Melanie Vidrine says

Read this a few years ago, love both Graham Greene and Shirley Hazzard.

Jessica says

Hazzard writes: "Graham Greene has already had biographers, one of whom has served him mightily. Yet I hope there is room for one who knew him--not wisely, perhaps, but fairly well--on an island that was "not his kind of place," but where he came seasons after season, year after year..." and this as well: "It seemed time, too, that a woman should write of Graham Greene."

Hazzard is a writer of elegance and reserve. Her book is slender, the times with Greene are neither numerous nor lengthy, but one sees Greene through her lens and learns of life on Capri as well and others who knew him there. She is never gossipy, not one to exploit. The book starts out compellingly, then seems to focus on Greene less intensely as other characters and situations, tangentially related to Greene, take more of center stage. Worth reading for a glimpse into his later life, when still he put in his 350 words a day, and because it will drive you back to his work. If you're like me, you'll want to hear him in his own words, his best and truest self being his novels, and the way to feel closest to the man and his work is to read them.

I liked these passages early on in her book, and had hoped to find more of them:

"That longing for peace which Graham invoked throughout his life, in published and in private writings, seemed, on the other hand, a fantasy of transfiguration. Anyone who knew him--and he knew himself best of all--was aware that peace was the last thing he desired. It was literally the last thing, synonymous--as often in his fiction--with death. ... Graham's recurring suicidal impulse--that flirting with fatality in adolescence and in his terrible prewar journeys, and in later expeditions to battle zones around the world--was countered or complemented by a defiant entanglement with life; and by a nearly nineteenth century energy of intention that enabled him to come through, and to write." (14).

and:

"Malcolm Muggeridge wrote of Graham: 'Whatever his circumstances, he has this facility for seeming always to be in lodgings, and living from hand to mouth. Spiritually, and even physically, he is one of nature's displaced persons.' He was not attached, through habit or memory, or aesthetically, to the rooms and houses and neighborhoods of his life, and could throw them over at will. Familiarity bred restlessness or rejection. Even in a chosen setting, such as the Rosaio, he retained the quality of wanderer." (22).

Andrew Schirmer says

I've long been an admirer of G.G.'s fiction, but Norman Sherry's 3vol. *brique* never attracted my interest. This seemed just the ticket--an elegant, brief view of G.G.'s life seen through the prism of friendship and the dwindling literary expat community on Capri (CAPree, let's say it together now...). The portrait is somewhat entirely in character. Greene came to Capri to get away from it all, and, despite purchasing a home on the island, never had any real 'interest' in the island and its culture or traditions. He was just sort of...*there* to escape and to write. Hazzard writes beautifully, but, as at least one other reviewer has mentioned, the effect is to draw you back to the works themselves. There are brief appearances of the final dregs of expat lit circles most memorably Norman Douglas in his final decline, but the overall vibe is ascetic. Coming off of Michael Mewshaw's irresistible Gore Vidal memoir *Sympathy for the Devil: Four Decades of Friendship with Gore Vidal*, one leaves G.G. wishing he'd jettisoned all the Catholic baggage somewhere over the Mediterranean...

Vel Veeter says

A small book on authors and friendship

Greene on Capri by Shirley Hazzard

In this book, we get the story of Graham Greene's various trips, stays, and excursions on the island of Capri. This is all told from the perspective of Shirley Hazzard, friend to Greene. Shirley Hazzard's connection to Greene come through her older husband Francis Steegmuller, some 25-30 years her elder, as the two of them would join Graham Greene and various other friends (most of whom were a generation or two older than Hazzard) on Capri.

For the most part, there's no story here. Almost at all. Instead, there's a series of reminiscences and anecdotes, and more than anything there's a light general reading on Greene's writing and career in conjunction with his biography.

I think you have to like Graham Greene to like this book. I like Graham Greene and I mostly like this book. It's fine, but it's not super insightful. What it will do for me is cause me to pick up more books by Shirley Hazzard (I have only read one before) and certainly some more Graham Greene (I have read five or so of his books).

All in all, I liked this, but it doesn't have a ton to say about Graham Greene. Part of the issue is that it doesn't seem like Shirley Hazzard and Graham Greene were particularly close when it all came down to it. But she was a presence in his life in the later stages. There's a kind of premise of a novel dwelling in her somewhere, but given that all the actors in this story are writers themselves, they did a better job telling it.

Teresa says

3 and 1/2 stars

Recommended for those already interested in Graham Greene, the island of Capri (its historical and natural aspects) or the writing of Shirley Hazzard, which is beautiful, as always.

Reading about such people (including other literary friends of Hazzard and her husband who visit the island), I am reminded of how much there is to know in this world and how little of it I do know.

Maria says

Recollections from the 1960s until Graham Greene's death - walks and talks with Greene and the author and her husband, Francis Steegmuller, of Greene's works, of writers, writing, ideas, during a 30-year period on the island of Capri. An actual appreciation of Greene's books is not necessary. It's Hazzard's writing that matters here -- and the history of the island, its literary culture, the unique perspective of the author, with descriptions and photographs -- make this memoir magical. There's even a picture of Leonide Massine's property, Isola Lunga, later bought by Rudolph Nureyev, if anyone cares. Hazzard is extraordinary.
