Under the Volcano: A Novel (Perennial Classics) by Malcolm Lowry

Geoffrey Firmin, a former British consul, has come to Quauhnahuac, Mexico. Here the consuls debilitating malaise is drinking, and activity that has overshadowed his life. Under the Volcano is set during the most fateful day of the consuls life--the Day of the Dead, 1938. His wife, Yvonne, arrives in Quauhnahuac to rescue him and their failing marriage, inspired by a vision of life together away from Mexico and the circumstances that have driven their relationship to the brink of collapse. Yvonne's mission is to save the consul is further complicated by the presence of Hugh, the consuls half-brother, and Jacques, a childhood friend. The events of this one day unfold against a backdrop unforgettable for its evocation of a Mexico at once magical and diabolical.

Under the Volcano remains one of the most powerful and lyrical statements on the human condition and one mans constant struggle against the elemental forces that threaten to destroy him.

My Personal Review:
In his forward to Under the Volcano, Stephen Spender, writing twenty years after the initial publication, directs the reader away from Lowrys alcoholic Consul as a self-contained story, and draws our attention to the parallels between the man of 1938 and the impending collapse of the world into war and madness. The Consul, then, is a modern hero - or anti-hero - reflecting an extreme external situation within his own extremity. (pg ix) Maybe, but as Mr. Spender delves further into that argument, probing the symbols and measuring the references to the world situation, Im reminded of someone who examines the Mona Lisa with a microscope to provide proof of why we ought to enjoy it.
Conversely, William T. Vollman, in a 2007 afterward, has to provide the historical context that must have been common knowledge when Lowry’s novel was published (and even up until Mr. Spender’s forward), but since may have slipped from popular memory. Whether the history lesson is necessary to you the reader is neither here nor there - the very fact that the publishers thought that it would be helpful lends weight to the argument that the power behind Lowry’s novel did not depend so much on the relationship between the man and exterior events (which seem very far away 70 years after), but on the description of man in isolation (a gift from the twentieth century to its children).

There is no doubt that the main characters from Under the Volcano are affected by the political winds sweeping through Europe at the time of the novel. That same breeze comes ashore as an ill wind in Mexico, and certainly they are buffeted by it and pushed in directions they may not have chosen had the story taken place in a vacuum. In that respect, I might agree with Mr. Spender, as not only these characters felt the brewing storm, but so too must have great crowds of people, up to and including whole nations. The Consul, his wife, and his half brother, as intelligent, well-crafted characters, surely would imbue the same qualities and beliefs that were acting on the rest of the world. But I cannot explain the impact of this novel on me by limiting my (layman’s) analysis to the political realities of life circa 1938 represented by the microcosm of three people.

What is apparent is that Mr. Spender fears readers will be turned off by the Consul’s alcoholism - or dipsomania, as he so delicately, tentatively, and euphemistically puts it. A book in which for three quarters of the time the hero is drunk may seem too special, too much a case history (pg viii). The argument being that Lowry’s (perhaps) autobiographical examination of isolation and loneliness don’t offer enough universal elements with which to identify. Again, from my layman’s point of view, I thought this examination was the very crux of the book, the very reason it was written. Call it Lowry’s examination or exorcism, but the demons he visits here are the same for many others, and the alcoholism only one possible solution to dealing with them.

Taking place during the Mexican Day of the Dead celebration, Under the Volcano traces the arc of Geoffrey Firmin, an alcoholic ex-Consul from England, as his ex-wife Yvonne and his half brother Hugh try to pull him out of his self-destructive spiral. Yvonne has only that morning returned after a year’s absence following an act of infidelity, hopeful of reconciling with her husband. Hugh is also staying with the Consul, trying to sober him up, and at the same time dreaming about and planning on joining the Loyalist effort in the Spanish Civil War. The Consul, nearly ruined by his anguish over the past year at losing Yvonne and his constant use of Mescal, is almost incapable at this point of distinguishing between fact and fantasy, but suggests as a celebration of Yvonne’s return that the three of them take a day trip to a neighboring town hosting a sort of Mexican rodeo, as perhaps a token effort to recapture a hint of normalcy about their lives.
Lowry trails the three of them, writing stream-of-consciousness prose that will reward the close reader with many of the symbols and subtle references that Mr. Spender was so eager to dwell on, but the inattentive reader, such as myself, who may miss many of the clues, will still be inundated with the recognizable thoughts of separation and loneliness and foreboding. In other words, I dont believe its necessary to grasp every nuance in order to follow along - thats part of the pleasure that comes with subsequent readings.

The Consul continues to disintegrate throughout the day, and at last he rejects the hand up offered by the only people that have chosen to remain in his life. He rushes away from them to seek immersion in self-pity, self-loathing, and loneliness in another bar. That the story of the Consuls (and perhaps Lowrys as well) alcoholism is the true story is revealed in the last pages, when the Consul faces his greatest danger. In the middle of a confrontation with Mexican police, the Consul hears A sudden noise from the corner (that) startled everyone: Yvonne and Hugh perhaps, at last. It is not, but that his first thoughts are of his ex-wife and half-brother coming to his rescue (and his short-lived relief at that thought) dovetail completely with alcoholic thinking - If he can only get the people he cares about most to feel sorry enough for him (regardless of how ill-deserved that thinking may be), and keep chasing him down, then hell finally know if they really care about him. Except its never enough, and the alcoholic trudges off to find even more extreme tests to put his loved ones through. Even after the Consuls horrific insults toward Yvonne and Hugh, he expected them to follow after and try to rescue him again. It becomes a sick and twisted game between the alcoholic and his enablers, one they are forced to reenact over and over again, until the self-destruction reaches its forgone and inevitable conclusion.

If the story is about the alcoholic, then is it true that the Consuls dipsomania is too unique for the book to have universal appeal? The reader will have to decide that question for themselves. Those who will be most repelled by the Consuls story are probably those who have the hardest time understanding *why* someone would free-fall plunge into self-destructiveness. I think their disgust is certainly valid. The book does make it clear though, that for whatever reason, the Consul was alcoholic long before Yvonnes infidelity - and the same causes and conditions must still be present today, as there are plenty of manias and addictions yet to go around. Some people - intelligent people - faced with the isolation and loneliness of the modern world, still view the Consuls lifestyle as a solution to the problem. That it is ultimately pointless is, unfortunately, often hidden by their complete self-regard.

I was afraid in the end that Lowry might glorify his Consul, perhaps turning him into some kind of bright shining star that burns out from its own heat, and leave the reader feeling sorry for the things that might have been. Had he done so, I would have rated the book much more severely -
eliciting pity for self-destruction smacks of the worst sort of manipulation. But the last sentence of the book makes it clear that Lowry thought the Consul undeserving of such emotion. The Consul’s fate is set in motion far earlier than this one day, and Lowry gives us the conclusion of a life poorly used - not as a warning, but as a matter of fact outcome. For that kind of unsparing honesty, without the manipulation, it deserves its status as a classic.

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