

The
Achievement
of
E. M. Forster

by John Beer

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Contents

Chapter 1
Aspects of a Novelist

Chapter 2
The Earth and the Stars

Chapter 3
From a View to a Death

Chapter 4
Flame Boats on a Stream

Chapter 5
In Country Sleep

Chapter 6
The Undying Worm

Chapter 7
Serving the World

Chapter 8
In and out of Time

Bibliography and Abbreviations

Chapter 1

Aspects of a Novelist

THE account of E. M. Forster which has reached more readers than any other appears on the cover of a paper-back edition of his works:

He is one of those rare authors whose books are kept and re-read, not only for their stories, but for the wise sayings which crowd their pages and the gentle humanist philosophy which they reveal.

A general comment like this, addressed as it is to the reader who likes a good story, seasoned with occasional wisdom, might be allowed to stand. It is more disquieting to find the author of the *Concise Cambridge History of English Literature*, which ought to have a different audience in view, writing of the ‘shy, unworldly quality’ of work ‘almost diffidently presented’ by a man who is ‘at heart a scholar’.¹ As Lionel Trilling points out, the author of such a comment has taken an irony literally and has misinterpreted a manner.²

One reason for the diverging views of critics in dealing with Forster’s work is a basic uncertainty as to how the novels ought to be read. There is a deceptive directness about them—a concentration on events, which encourages the reader to read them ‘for the story’.

Forster himself has never forgotten the truth which he reiterated painstakingly in his Clark Lectures: ‘Yes—oh dear yes—the novel tells a story.’³ Yet it would be foolish to see in this statement more than a basis on which to build. For example, there is a good deal of attention to plot in the novels: but it is evidently not aimed at creating

(In the case of Forster’s novels, the page reference is to the pocket edition but the text is normally taken from the first edition. A list of abbreviations appears in the Bibliography.)

1 G. Sampson, *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature* 1941, p.969

2 L. Trilling, *E. M. Forster*, London, 1944, p. 9.

3 AN, 40-1; 62.