



Gilligan's Wake

Tom Carson

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A kaleidoscopic novel about our last American century

A skipper plies the waters of the South Pacific, running ammunition and passing the time with navy buddies McHale and Jack Kennedy, remembering the sweet caress of Screw-Me Susie. A New York millionaire reunites with his prep school classmate Alger Hiss, and journeys to an unusual downtown cafe to meet a bearded friend. A young woman and her confidante Daisy Buchanan sink into the languor of the Hamptons and Provincetown. A buxom redhead from Alabam-don't-give-a-damn travels to Hollywood, in search of fame and fortune. A charismatic professor assists Robert Oppenheimer with his desert calculations and is henceforth the author of every American political conspiracy. And Mary-Ann Kilroy leaves Russell, Kansas, for Paris and love, only to discover that you can never go home (nor leave the island).

But beneath these stories is the story of their author, an institutionalized shadow man who has twisted the histories of six characters into a pastiche of American history.

Gilligan's Wake Details

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From Reader Review Gilligan's Wake for online ebook

MJ Nicholls says

First-rate wordplay and outstanding mindbendery in evidence, but narratively nothing particularly interesting past the p68 point. Strained pastiche, overly long surreal dream sequences, a Pynchonian tedium for neolonames-as-characters that disappear when the sentence ends, and an absence of any tangible through-plot bogs down one's pleasure. Too much reliance on unfunny dialogue and bland satire also kissed this reader goodbye. Cover is one of the ugliest around too. But Carson can work words: no dispute. The curious might consult this soapbox gush.

James Murphy says

Like its namesake, Finnegans Wake, this is a language novel. It's funny and it's brilliant. Besides the obvious title allusion to Joyce, it may also be dream. The frantic energy of it reminds one of Pynchon. Portions of it also remind me of Gilbert Sorrentino, especially those parts suggesting humble background aspiring to be learned and intellectual, a human trait he was a master of. In an afterword Carson pays a debt to Calder Willingham. He's a favorite of mine, but I didn't detect him here. Do you remember the television sitcom that ran several seasons during the 60s about a band of castaways on an island? We loved those characters. We enjoyed their antics week after week. But they had lives before they were stranded by the wreck of the S. S. Minnow. And it's those earlier lives Carson writes about. Gilligan is in transition from the character Maynard G. Krebs on The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis (remember that one?) to Gilligan's Island. He winds up in the mental ward of the Mayo Clinic with Holden Caulfield, Ira Hayes (the famous flag raising on Iwo Jima is a recurring theme) and Nixon. The Skipper's previous experience was in the South Pacific during the war serving in a PT boat squadron with John F Kennedy and McHale. Thurston Howell was a scion of a wealthy New York family. Lovey, his wife, was a bisexual lover of Daisy Buchanan and a heroin addict. Ginger travels from Alabama to Hollywood trying to make it in the movies. The Professor worked on the Manhattan Project. Later he surreptitiously suggested the CIA to Truman and, along with Roy Cohn, controlled the government through a web of shadow authority. Mary-Ann grew up in Russell, Kansas where she knew the Baums, Dorothy, and Bob Dole, later traveled to Paris and an affair with Jean-Luc Godard. So you see Carson gives us characters quite different and more morally complex than the zany, lovable castaways we watched during their heyday on television. Carson gives us postmodernism and satire. To populate a novel with characters like these is to progress naturally into satirical use of them. In fact, this is one of those novels in which the characters become aware they inhabit a construct controlled by an author and are being used to make larger statements. Toward the end I began to feel that one of the things Carson's novel is about is America. It'd been building for 250 pages toward the moment when you realize Mary-Ann is not only a stand-in for the Virgin Mary waiting for the moment of the birth which she knows is her duty but is also the personification of America and is the focal point the other narrations, perhaps especially the Professor's and the Skipper's, have been pointing. All the mythologies Gilligan's Wake and Gilligan's Island present are equal in the end. This was a reread. I'd first read it in 2003. In a year in which I'm trying to be constantly rereading something, this will probably turn out to be a highlight. For one thing, it's astonishingly fun to read. The novel's wordplay at its best, professional wordplay. And that energy, just like the dust lanes in our galaxy spawns stars, creates the verbal moments from which come the constellations of puns and cultural references filling the book. This is tour de force, this is high wire without a net. This is a 337-page prose poem. Few novelists can write like this. Robert Coover. Gilbert Sorrentino. Thomas Pynchon. Tom Carson.

Lori says

From what I recall, this was quite a head trip. Carson takes the characters from Gilligan's Island and plugs them in as general representations of the American post-war psyche. Gilligan exploring the sub-culture...the booze and morphine addled Howells losing their grip and seeing their world become less relevant...star struck Ginger looking for her 15 minutes of fame...Mary Ann attempting to lose her innocence...the Skipper recalling his glory days and the Professor-as-Smoking-Man on the X-Files.

Who knew this could work as a story? But the combination of the hopelessly banal and shallow Gilligan characters awash in sleaze, sex, power plays and amoral actions is good twisted fun.

Jean says

Sit right back and you'll hear a tale...of a campy send-up of James Joyce's "Finnigan's Wake". More than a three-hour tour, this is a tour-de-force through American history (sort of) and an entangled story of what the Gilligan's Island characters might have been up to before they started from this tropic port aboard this tiny ship.

Jim says

This ambitious and very funny novel is not remotely a linear narrative. Rather, as its title suggests, it moves with the spirit of James Joyce and presents a series of seemingly jumbled narratives riffing lightly on characters from the TV series **GILLIGAN'S ISLAND**. In a style that has been compared with that of Thomas Pynchon, Tom Carson's book is not a particularly easy read, but neither is it especially difficult. It does require, and it plays like a jazz band on, an awareness of popular culture and of politics in the post-war era. Carson's sense of humor and of wordplay is spectacular and while the novel really only uses **GILLIGAN'S ISLAND** as a springboard and touchstone, you will never look at that TV series in quite the same way after reading this. Darkly funny, intricate, and at times puzzling, **GILLIGAN'S WAKE** is a terrific novel--but, like the show that inspired it, it's not for everyone.

James says

this book is a mash-up history of the 20th century, loaded with pop-culture references as well as those political and not-so-pop, all wrapped up in the neurosis of a young man.

each chapter re-tells the story of one of the castaways from gilligan's island, each time within the context of an era and filled with forrest-gumpian entanglements. the skipper runs a pt boat alongside mchale and jack kennedy. lovey has a drug-fueled flapper friendship (and more) with daisy buchanan, thurston recommends alger hiss for his very first government job, and ginger is best friends with and co-model to bettie page as well as lives in the same building as (and lends a pink angora sweater to) ed wood.

while none of the book reaches the feverish, delirious pace and delightfully loaded language of the first chapter (gilligan as maynard g. krebs in the mayo institute's psych ward with holden caulfield), it does a good job of encapsulating the feel of a country growing up (for better or for worse) alongside its confused youth and doesn't end up being half as goofy as the premise might make it sound.

Patrick DiJusto says

Not so much a novel, as a collection of short character studies of six people, as told by the seventh.

The first character is a middle aged sailor. A veteran of WWII, where he commanded a PT boat in the South Pacific with a rich kid from Boston named Jack and a schemer named McHale, he eventually starts his own business running three hour carter cruises in Hawaii.

The second character is an upper class American twit, incredibly rich, and a good friend of Tom Buchanan and Alger Hiss.

The third character is a spoiled rich girl; friend, opiate enabler, and occasional lover to Daisy Buchanan. She eventually marries the second character.

The fourth character is a pneumatic redhead from Alabama who goes to Hollywood to break into the movies. The only advice her mother gives her is "Don't sleep with no coons". She winds up meeting (and getting passed around) the Rat Pack, where she does indeed hook up with Sammy Davis Jr. Hijinks ensue.

The fifth character is a priapic omnisexual polymath genius, invited by a catamited Roy Cohn to become the scientific advisor to the Trilateral/Bilderberg/Illuminati cabal who really run the world. As part of a grand psychosocial experiment, he has himself marooned on a deserted island with a cross section of "average" Americans.

The sixth character is a farm girl from a small town in Kansas, which, Brigadoon-like, only appears once every hundred years. Oh, and every time she loses her virginity it grows back overnight.

There are strong hints that the narrator of these stories is a seventh person, possibly insane, who knows all six people very well.

[Name Redacted] says

WHY DID NO-ONE TELL ME THAT THIS NOVEL EXISTED?!? It's a parody of Joyce's novel AND a send-up of American television!

Stefanie says

This book was amazing. I gave it 5 stars, and would have given it 6 if I could. To properly enjoy it, you must enjoy postmodernism and be amused by wordplay. If you meet those requirements, you're in for the trip of a lifetime. The story takes the main characters of Gilligan's Island - in the order from the theme song - and

provides them with back stories of their own, rife with cameos from prominent 20th century figures, real and imaginary alike. Tough it out through the first, short chapter. The rest of the book is worth the confusion of the first few pages.

Jenni Wieland says

This book had my head spinning. I didn't know what to expect, and the premise seems sort of cheesy, but I consider it a good find. The narration takes us into the heads, hearts and incredibly sordid pasts of the 7 castaways of Gilligan's Island, and with it, into the head, heart and sordid history of 20th Century America. No, it doesn't tell us how they all ended up on the island-- it tells us how they ended up at some of the most significant, often top secret, events in our recent history... and it is not what you'd expect.

Tina says

This was a really interesting book. To be honest, it's not something I would have picked up or stayed with if it hadn't been recommended to me by Scott, b/c I really hated the first chapter: it's very self-consciously clever, and it bombards you with puns and pop culture references and literary allusions and crazy-person talk, which made me really exasperated. It was like everything I hate about James Joyce and writers who want to be him.

But it's a short first chapter, and the second chapter hooked me pretty quickly. There are a few more annoying "look at me!" Pun Moments, but for the most part, it was pretty fascinating. Also, there are lots of times when Carson uses his language skills for good, not evil: at so many points in the book, he tossed off these really fresh, apt descriptions -- y'know, the kind that are perfect and you wish you'd thought of yourself.

I've never even seen Gilligan's Island (I know! Really!) so there are probably references I missed, but the book isn't really about that. I liked it for the characters, who were interesting and distinct -- each chapter is narrated by one of the castaways, and Carson does a good job creating their voices. He also writes really great satire, and this is a funny-but-harsh look at America in the twentieth century. He also does pomo pretty well, too: the chapters, although separate, are all connected in interesting ways, and the characters interact both with historical figures and other well-known fictional characters. I'm not always great at making the leap from Realistic to Suspending Disbelief, but the way Carson makes his characters metaphors AND psychologically complicated individuals worked for me, and, once I got past the first chapter, everything kind of flowed and I found myself really enjoying all the little connections between chapters without wondering too much about What It All Means.

To sum up: smart, funny, poignant, deft, and a little bit masturbatory -- but those parts are worth getting through for the book as a whole.

Cat. says

Hello James Joyce-influence! There is something to be said for being the same age as the author of

something like this book, because, even if you don't get the plot completely nailed down, you at least understand the allusions and puns. For example, from the first section:

Rats were patrolling Room 222, gunsmoke made the sea be yesterday, oh Dr. Kildare F. Troop I'm on to you: I know what the Mayo Clinic is.... When dawn wells up in the sky, she knots me together. Then we'd sit around in the Cleaver Ward in our robes and gowns.... The one across from us was called the Burt Ward, and every schizo in it wore a mask and hopped around like batty robins.

OK? Count the pop-culture references: I find at least 9, with a couple others buzzing around the perimeter that I can't place. But do you see what I mean about the plot? To be fair, this is the least intelligible chapter, kind of like someone who has done nothing but watch TV his entire life would sound like if you took him out of his living room.

The bones of this book are the seven characters on Gilligan's Island, appearing in the same order as the song: Gilligan, the Skipper, the Millionaire, his wife, the movie star, the professor, Mary Ann. Kind of deflating:

- Gilligan's nuts, as is obvious from the quote above
- the Skipper is living in the past (World War II to be exact, where he meets JFK)
- the Millionaire is entirely clueless (recommended Alger Hiss for a government job even though he knew Hiss was a Communist...)
- his wife was a morphine addict in the 20s who married Thurston as a backstop when her father died
- the Movie Star is from "Alabam'-goddamn" and is actually a B- and X-rated movie star whose biggest claim to fame is sleeping with Sammy Davis, Jr., in Sinatra's house in Palm Springs while her sister did JFK in the pool
- the Professor...one of the characters I liked best on the show--is a narcissistic sex-addict who worked on the Manhattan Project and other creepily nefarious underground government programs
- Mary Ann is a perpetual virgin who left home for a year of college in France where she lost her virginity...the first time...and can't get back to her Kansas home because it's Brigadoon, so she just keeps wandering the globe losing her virginity time after time

Confused yet? This is definitely a book to read again, more closely, if I had time. I'd skip the Movie Star and Professor chapters because they were terminally depressing. Intricate book, good for book clubs, if you have a group that's pretty *avant*.

Hank Stuever says

One of my favorite novels from the 2000s. It's a complex and imaginatively hallucinatory retelling of modern history through the prism of the seven castaways on "Gilligan's Island." That's right: Joycean and Sherwood Schwartzian. Not at all hokey or gimmicky, but just so masterfully executed. I get it down every now and then and enjoy a chapter or two, admiringly.

Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

This is the book you've been looking for.

Read it today.

It's called "Gilligan."

It's called "Wake."

Do you really need more?

It'll be the best US\$0.01+shipping you will ever be able to spend.

Scott Hammack says

I knew I had to read this from the moment I heard what it was: a retelling of "Gilligan's Island" written from the point of view of each of the castaways, co-existing and interacting with many other fictional and historical characters of the time period. That kind of thing is right up my alley, so I had to check it out at least for the sheer weirdness factor. But as it turned out, there was a lot more to it than I expected.

When I call it a "retelling of 'Gilligan's Island,'" that's a little bit misleading, because very little of the book actually deals with the characters' time on the island. For the most part, it delves into each character's backstory prior to the three-hour tour -- one chapter per character, in order of the theme song, in first-person. As you might expect, the characterizations are a little bit different and deeper than you'd find on the show, often with bizarre twists, but still close enough to seem familiar. The castaways don't interact with each other much in their chapters (though each story somehow involves an anagram of "Gilligan"), which are more like seven separate stories than one continuous narrative, but they are all interconnected in one way or another.

For all of that, what I'm describing still basically sounds like Gilligan fanfic. Not that there's anything wrong with that, but I can see how some people might not be that interested in reading it. But as you get further into it, things start to get more complicated than that. The first few stories are fairly straightforward, but somewhere around the middle it starts to incorporate some odd and sometimes confusing storytelling devices, and it all gets a bit "postmodern." (That may annoy some people, but for me this is where it really started to get interesting.) The final chapter takes it to new heights of weirdness, but in the end it all sort of comes together and sheds some new light on the nature of the story (not to imply that there's some kind of "he was dead all along!" twist, but for a lot of the book I was wondering if it was really going anywhere and if it would all add up to anything, and it turns out that it does (though it's still pretty weird)). You do eventually find out what happens with the island, and after all that madness the conclusion is actually rather poignant.

All right, look, I know this book isn't for everybody, and a lot of people would probably just find the whole concept ridiculous, but it's more than just a gimmick. Maybe I'm biased because it hits so close to my own interests, but I really liked it and would place it up there with my favorite books.
