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The Wheels Of Chance

H.G. Wells

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If you (presuming you are of the sex that does such things)-if you had gone into the Drapery Emporium-which is really only magnificent for shop-of Messrs. Antrobus & Co.-a perfectly fictitious "Co. " by the bye-of Putney on the 14th of August 1895 had turned to the right-hand side where the blocks of white linen and piles of blankets rise up to the rail from which the pink and blue prints depend you might have been served by the central figure of this story that is now beginning. (Excerpt)

The Wheels Of Chance Details

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From Reader Review The Wheels Of Chance for online ebook

Mel says

This is a light hearted little book with some interesting ideas. It is written in a funny, though sometimes a little superior way. The main character is a shop assistant who goes on a bicycling holiday, falls in love with a young girl he meets and ends up deciding to improve his life. The young girl has run away from her step mothers home with a man because she wants to be a writer and a journalist. The (married) man wanted an affair and the girl is most distraught to discover his true intentions. Him wanting to "awaken her sexual desires" where she's just interested in having her own life and writing. The irony comes from her step mother who wrote a book about a young girl (though 21 not 18) who goes to Paris to live by herself to paint. But the step mother is horrified that her step daughter would take this to heart and actually think of doing something similar. It's an enjoyable, if light, story. There's a lot about learning to ride bicycles, and biking holidays. But even if (like me) you've not ridden a bicycle since you were 13, it's still fun.

Cindy says

Started off as funny satire on cycling and holidays, sort of reminding me a bit of Three Men and a Boat, but then got tangled up in a romance and became more about class struggle and the plight of enlightened women and got boring.

G. says

Favorite passage:

So many people do this -- and you never suspect it. You see a tattered lad selling matches in the street, and you think there is nothing between him and the bleakness of immensity, between him and utter abasement, but a few tattered rags and a feeble musculature. And all unseen by you a host of heaven-sent fatuities swathes him about, even, maybe, as they swathe you about. Many men have never seen their own profiles or the backs of their heads, and for the back of your mind no mirror has been invented. They swathe him about so thickly that the pricks of fate scarce penetrate to him, or become but a pleasant titillation. And so, indeed, it is with all of us who go on living. Self-deception is the anesthetic of life, while God is carving out our beings.

And I also like the term "insufficient mustache".

If I read this again I'd likely give it four stars. Not quite there yet, however.

Paul says

A lot of charming writing here, but a very slow read. Interestingly, the female protagonist wants "a room of my own, what books I need to read, to be free to go out by myself alone."

Hal Brodsky says

A delightfully funny 1895 novel by H.G. Wells dealing with a young man of the working class taking off on a bicycle for a week's holiday. This was a novel idea at the time with bicycles being newly available for the lower classes and providing opportunities previously only available to people who owned horses or could afford rail passage.

Our cyclist, Mr Hoopdriver (get it?), meets an upper class damsel in distress who is riding a bike in an attempt to escape from the strict confines of society's expectations of women at the time, and off they go in an adventure through the 19th Century English countryside, with various comically inept parties in hot pursuit.

What I enjoyed most about this novel, aside from some very witty passages, is the effect the appearance of the bicycle had on rigid British norms. For example, when a cyclist arrived at a Hotel, the Hostler would routinely come out and take the bike 'round to the stables and wash it down as if it was a horse.

Additionally, the bicycle was not a child's plaything. Consequently, you had adults taking riding lessons (again, think of horses) for weeks at a time and crashing right and left as they learned to ride.

Denis says

Cycling is important to me. When I tell someone: I like to ride my bike, I always have to clarify that I mean bicycling not motor cycling. I have to do the same thing when I tell someone that I live in London... London, Ontario, Canada, not England. And further, I have to explain that I don't mountain bike on challenging trails in the wilderness or am hunched over a slick titanium or graphite frame twelve speed, feet clipped into the pedals while dreaming of doing the tour de France. No, my cycle is the heavy curved Schwinn frame with fenders, the rack at the back and a comfortable seat, not quite Peewee Herman's ride but in that class. I often dream of riding an antiquated large wheeled cycle but fear that I might look a little ridiculous perched on such an apparatus, failing miserably getting on and off the thing... But one can dream.

This gem of a novel was written in 1895, a time when cycling had just become mainstream. It had become a relatively cheap accessible way of travel, no matter of one's class or status.

"The Wheels of Chance" is not a futuristic "Scientific Romance" by H.G. Wells, but rather a book set in the current time of its writing, featuring a new technology that would soon greatly affect the current society. In this case the bicycle merges all social classes on the road (sauf those few elites who were already wowed by the even newer technological gadget: the motor car (which was still not yet the norm as Henry Ford was just setting up shop at that time.) Also featured here are women's affairs. "Most editing is actually performed by women these days..." is a quote/paraphrased example of a point made.

This novel is a great document illustrating the anticipation of comings of the 20th century. Had the world subscribed to the development of the bicycle rather than the petrol powered motor car, imagine what a bike might look like today after a century of refinement applied to it that the car had; and what physical condition the average human being might be in, and how clean our air would be, and how much oil we would still have in reserve, ready to use in a most efficient, responsible and clean fashion. 60 million years to produce that reserved of stored energy and we use it all up in a couple centuries, in the most destructive and wasteful way...

Sorry. Got carried away.

(Say no to the Keystone XL)

Richard says

The story of a shop assistant and an independent young girl, who meet by chance while cycling to the south shore of England in the 1890s.

Thom Swennes says

H. G. Wells is best known for his science fiction writings and their popularity has overshadowed his other works. *Wheels of Chance* is a romantic adventure that deserves more notoriety than it has. The hero of this tale is hardly the juggernaut of his dreams but when the beautiful lady in gray crosses his path, his life changes. Jesse Milton, an eighteen year old girl, flees from her home and stepmother to pursue her dream of becoming a writer. She soon falls prey to a married man that had designs on compromising her but the hero; Mr. Hoopdriver comes like a knight in shining armor, to her rescue. This is a surprisingly refreshing story that should please the masses; I certainly enjoyed it. I can recommend this to all who are looking for a light, humorous love story.

Stephen says

What an odd little story! Begin with one J. Hoopdriver, a draper's assistant who lives for nothing but spare opportunities to ride his bicycle -- or rather, to crash repeatedly on his bicycle, banging up his legs but still delighting in sheer momentum. Mr. Hoopdriver, at the novel's beginning, is finally embarking on his yearly vacation: a cycling tour in England. Immediately he spies a beautiful woman, crashes dramatically, and earns her pity and his own chagrin. He chances to see her again, later on, and this time in the company of another fellow who claims to be her brother. His love-sickness notwithstanding, Hoopdriver can tell that something's amiss, especially after the "brother" accuses Hoopdriver of being a detective. Delighted at having a game to play, Hoopdriver pursues the odd couple, eventually changing roles to that of a clumsy knight-errant once he and the woman (Jessie) realize the other chap is a genuine cad. (A rogue, a fiend, even!) Eventually the gig is up for everyone, but Hoopdrive ends the tale most invigorated, having gone on a quest and discovered a friend who could put a little steel in his soul and allow him to dream of doing greater things with his life.

Although the story is nearly inconsequential, there's much charm. Wells' writing is often fun (one passage remarks that while Hoopdriver was in the throes of indecision, gravitation was hard at work and thus the man found himself on the ground with a bleeding shin, still wondering what to do), and sometimes beautiful, as when he's describing the landscape or the dreams of these two. Still, there were two reasons I picked this book up: bicycles and H.G. Wells -- and that, in the end, was the reason I finished it.

Malcolm says

The title, along with my previous knowledge that Wells was a keen cyclist during the first cycling boom, lead me to expect a book about cycle touring, a sort of rival to Jerome K Jerome's Three Men on the Bummell. The main characters do cycle over a large area of South West England and we learn a lot about how contemporary society had adapted to the cycling craze. I found the fashions, particularly of the women and how the tourist industry adapted to the opportunities, interesting.

Wells once again uses a draper's assistant as his main character although Hoopdriver isn't quite of the same stuff as Mr Polly or Kipps. I know draper's assistants feature in the short stories as well, but is Wells just mining his experiences or obsessively returning to a period in his life which he so strongly hated?

However while I read a lot of HG Wells, I am aware of his habit of sniping at other writers and of his womanising which left several young women pregnant with his child (most notably the writer Rebecca West). Both these subjects are to be found in this novel. The main story becomes - not a picaresque cycle tour - but the rescue of a seventeen year old girl from the clutches of a would-be seducer, interspersed with digs at Arthur Conan Doyle, G.B Shaw and a whole lot of other authors I have not met before. It is probable that Jessie's step mother is also a thinly disguised portrait of a contemporary writer.

The humour is nowhere near as funny as Mr Polly so I feel this novel is just a footnote in Wells' canon and a historical record of the first cycling boom. However, the masterpiece of that subject remains Three Men on the Bummell.

Luke says

I was pretty disappointed by this book. To be fair I had higher than usual expectations due to the author's previous work. This one seemed more of a, well, idyllic jaunt through the countryside. At one point it may have held some kind of social significance as a commentary piece; though if it did, that was lost over the course of 111 years.

Andrakuf says

Autor ten od zawsze stanowi? dla mnie kogo? wyj?tkowego. Klasyki literatury w jego wykonaniu jak Wojna ?wiatów czy Wehiku? Czasu czyta?o si? doskonale i s? obros?e legend?. Te ponadczasowe opowie?ci s? zawsze aktualne. Tutaj autor daje nam si? pozna? z ca?kiem innej strony, opowie??, któr? snuje w tej powiastce pokazuje ca?kiem inn? stron? jego talentu. M?g?bym si? nawet pokusi?, ?e ma by? to opowie?? romantyczna, z rowerami w tle. Fabu?a dosy? skondensowana, ale jednoscze?nie wartka, historia mo?e nie najwy?szych lotów, ale czyta si? bardzo przyjemnie.

Kate says

"To ride a bicycle properly is very like a love affair; chiefly it is a matter of faith. Believe you do it, and the thing is done; doubt, and, for the life of you, you cannot."

"Many men have never seen their own profiles or the backs of their heads, and for the back of your own mind no mirror has been invented."

"Self-deception is the anesthetic of life, while God is carving out our beings."

Alex says

Delightful and hilarious

Ryan Kountz says

This story was twice as long as it needed to be. The author would spend paragraphs to tell you what something wasn't, before telling you what it was in a few lines. He would talk in circles and at times tell the reader that he wasn't going to tell you things because they didn't belong in the story, as opposed to not talking about the unneeded information at all.

Shenara says

This is one of my favourite books. Wonderfully written, it inspired me to go out and explore the countryside and reminded me of how the simple pleasure of riding a bike can be so freeing and enjoyable and what the invention of bicycles actually meant for everyday people at the time. Wonderful book and still one of my all time favourite authors. Magical, really.

Seth Lynch says

I first read this 18 or 19 years ago and enjoyed it. I've just read it to my girls (6 & 8) who also enjoyed it. They didn't get a lot of the Victorian language but they understood, more-or-less, what was going on, and were rooting for Hoopdriver and The Young Lady in Grey.

Catherine says

I picked up this book with much the same thought as I'm sure most people have upon discovering it, "H.G. Wells, one of the great fathers of science fiction, wrote silly P.G. Wodehouse-like farce? I've gotta try this." Admittedly, it's fairly average for the most part. There are a few good laughs, and the depiction of Victorian bicycle culture was interesting from a modern perspective. The best part is at the end where Wells seems to realize he is about to write something meaningless, and in the last few chapters, turns the whole thing into a wonderful dialectic on self-determination.

Recommended for hardcore H.G. Wells fans looking to get a different picture of the author as a whole, or Victorian literature fans looking for something frothy.

Squeaky says

It took me a long time to read the e-book version on my phone. A fun story.

C.O. Bonham says

If for some reason your local Library has mislabeled this book as Science fiction then just be warned that it is not. Despite the authors fame in the Sci Fi genre this is a simple unassuming book about a simple unassuming man who goes on holiday along the English coast where nothing of much interest occurs.

Oh who am I kidding this H. G. Wells we're talking about, so of course the story was exciting but still was hardly the stuff of science fiction. Assistaint Drapier Hoopdriver is going on a bicycling tour for his holiday and of course misadventure follows him the whole time, especially after he runs into Jessie a young socitey lady who's on the run from her controling and not much older than herself step-mother.

The story was interesting enough but the lack of stars is because of the anticlimactic ending in which nothing changes and the status quo is restored. How sad the Wells of all people would end a story like that.

Fans of victorian England will find this an excellent portrait of the times and a marvelous account that singular contraption known to all as the bicycle. Also Fans of detective stories will thrill at the no less than six references to Sherlock Holmes as his deductive skills are emulated by the Narrator, the hero and even the heroine. One has to wonder what Dr. Conan Doyle thought of this little book.
