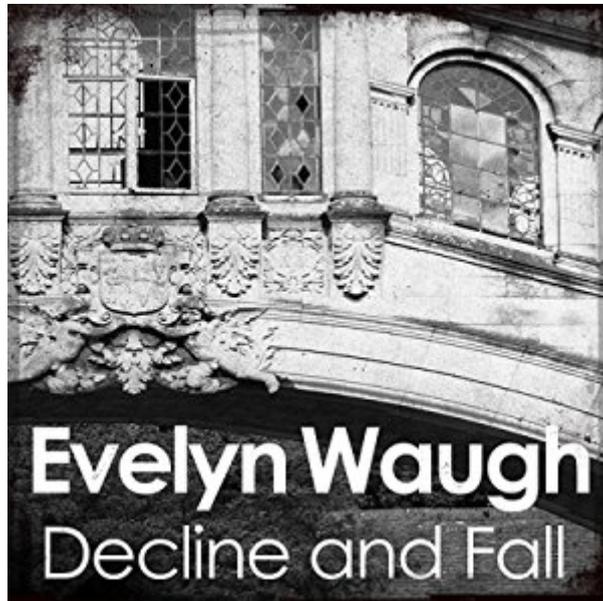


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Decline And Fall



Synopsis

Expelled from Oxford for indecent behaviour, Paul Pennyfeather is oddly unsurprised to find himself qualifying for the position of schoolmaster at Llanabba Castle. His colleagues are an assortment of misfits, including Prendy (plagued by doubts) and Captain Grimes, who is always in the soup (or just plain drunk). Then Sports Day arrives and with it the delectable Margot Beste-Chetwynde, floating on a scented breeze. As the farce unfolds and the young run riot, no one is safe, least of all Paul. Taking its title from Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Evelyn Waugh's first, funniest novel immediately caught the ear of the public with his account of an ingÃfÃnu abroad in the decadent confusion of 1920s high society.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

It's not uncommon that the books we're assigned in high school or even college sail by the larger portions of our young brains. Not only are, ahem, "other things" clamoring for our attention when we are that age but for a great number of us, it isn't the ideal time to be turned on to subtlety. We're too raw. For example, even though I enjoyed the poetry of Wordsworth in undergraduate school, I was told by my professors that I would only truly come to appreciate him once I'd gotten a little older. Which brings me to Evelyn Waugh, and the novel *Decline and Fall*. I can certainly remember ... well, not /hating/ the book when I read it for a class in the Comic Novel, but now that I return to it a few decades later, well, sheesh, the thing has me in stitches! Waugh is definitely a "deadpan" humorist. It may seem strange to claim that "deadpan" actually covers a wide range of styles, but it

does. There's the literal (!) deadpan of Buster Keaton. There's the deadpan camera of Jim Jarmusch. There's the kinda-stoned but hysterical deadpan of MST3K's Joel Hodgson. And then there's the deadpan of Evelyn Waugh: "My boy has been injured in the foot," said Lady Circumference coldly. "Dear me! Not badly, I hope? Did he twist his ankle in the jumping?" "No," said Lady Circumference, "he was shot at by one of the assistant masters. But it is kind of you to inquire." I can still recall my professor's joy when she read this passage to us. I doubt most of us "got it" past the point of a distracted snicker or two. Wow, though, do I get it now. It's subtle, but it's also like a cannon disguised as a lemonade stand.

Evelyn Waugh's first novel "Decline and Fall" pops like a cork from a bottle of champagne. While many authors take years and volumes to find just the right tone, the 25-year-old Waugh, who had just published a biography of Dante Rossetti, seems to have had his literary concept perfectly in mind from the start and hit the ground running with this raucously funny yet astonishingly mature debut. The hero (although Waugh would disagree with the term) is Paul Pennyfeather, a divinity student at Scone College, Oxford, who as the book begins is expelled for "indecent behavior" of which he is actually innocent, and is promptly disowned by his guardian over the shame educed by this incident. Now, in need of money, he searches for a job, and the only one he can get is a teaching position at a small boys' school located in a Welsh castle called Llanabba. Llanabba, while not quite rivaling Dotheboys Hall of "Nicholas Nickleby," is a woefully undignified educational facility, an institution of incompetence. The headmaster is a crafty curmudgeon named Dr. Fagan, the butler Philbrick is a criminal who prospers by constantly falsifying his identity, and the boys are an undisciplined and ungifted lot. The other instructors seem to have been deposited there for having failed elsewhere: Mr. Prendergast, a clergyman who has left the Church because of "Doubts," and Captain Grimes, a maimed ex-soldier ("Think I lost it in the war," he tells Pennyfeather about his missing leg) who is continually "in the soup" but always manages to extricate himself. Romance, or rather that badinage between the sexes that passes for romance in Waugh's world, turns out to be Pennyfeather's bane, initiating his misadventures in the second half of the novel. His engagement to marry the voluptuous Mrs.

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