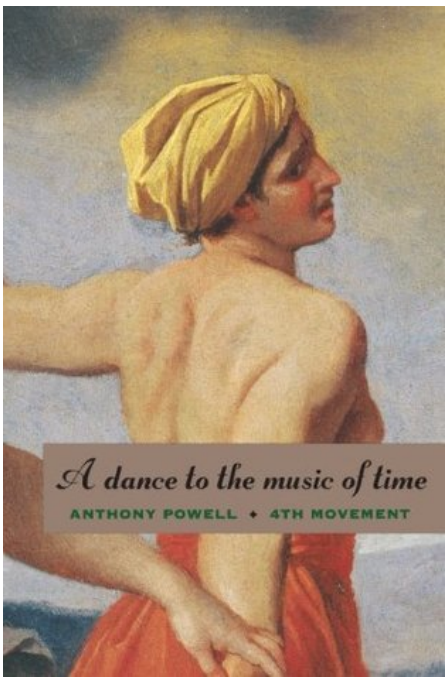

A Dance to the Music of Time: 4th Movement

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Anthony Powell's universally acclaimed epic encompasses a four-volume panorama of twentieth century London. Hailed by Time as "brilliant literary comedy as well as a brilliant sketch of the times," A Dance to the Music of Time opens just after World War I. Amid the fever of the 1920s and the first chill of the 1930s, Nick Jenkins and his friends confront sex, society, business, and art. In the second volume they move to London in a whirl of marriage and adulteries, fashions and frivolities, personal triumphs and failures. These books "provide an unsurpassed picture, at once gay and melancholy, of social and artistic life in Britain between the wars" (Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.). The third volume follows Nick into army life and evokes London during the blitz. In the climactic final volume, England has won the war and must now count the losses.

In this climactic volume of *A Dance to the Music of Time*, Nick Jenkins describes a world of ambition, intrigue, and dissolution. England has won the war, but now the losses, physical and moral, must be counted. Pamela Widmerpool sets a snare for the young writer Trapnel, while her husband suffers private agony and public humiliation. Set against a background of politics, business, high society, and the counterculture in England and Europe, this magnificent work of art sounds an unforgettable requiem for an age.

Includes these novels:
Books Do Furnish a Room
Temporary Kings
Hearing Secret Harmonies

A Dance to the Music of Time: 4th Movement Details

Date	:	Published May 31st 1995 by University of Chicago Press (first published 1975)
ISBN	:	9780226677187
Author	:	Anthony Powell
Format	:	Paperback 793 pages
Genre	:	Fiction, Classics, Historical, Historical Fiction, European Literature, British Literature

From Reader Review A Dance to the Music of Time: 4th Movement for online ebook

David says

It took me a year to read this entire saga. Four volumes each comprising three books make up Anthony Powell's *A Dance to the Music of Time*, originally published as 12 books over the course of 24 years. We've gone from Nick Jenkins' boyhood, in which he has memories of the outbreak of World War I, to his senior citizen years as he watches with wry bemusement the arrival of the 1960s.

The Fourth Movement is a bit grimmer from start to finish. It's not my favorite of the four Seasons. Powell has been introducing and reintroducing characters since the beginning of the series, and now they begin dropping like flies, constant reminders to Nick that he too is mortal.

The first book, *Books Do Furnish a Room*, picks up a few years after the end of the last. World War II is in the recent past, but while Nick frequently reflects on his wartime experiences, it's the Fifties now, pops! X. Trapnel, a beatnik sort of deadbeat writer whose legend will grow larger after he passes away (off-screen, in typical Powell fashion) in the next book, is the central new personality Powell introduces. Nick is resuming his literary career, but we hear little about his own endeavors; he's much more interested in narrating the rise and fall of X. Trapnel, with his affections ranging from his name to his death's-head cane, who falls into the succubus-like embrace of Pamela Widmerpool.

The Widmerpools — Kenneth and Pamela — loom large in these final installments. Their match-made-in-hell reaches truly abysmal depths before both of them are escorted offstage.

Really, these last two books are full of as much grotesquerie as humor. They still have Powell's rich, nuanced prose and detailed characterization, but the touch is not as delicate as in the previous volumes, maybe because Powell has spent nine previous books arranging the Dance and now he's winding it down, whirling dancers off-stage one by one.

Temporary Kings takes place ten years after *Books Do Furnish a Room*. Most of it takes place at a literary conference in Venice, where Powell introduces a few new characters, including some rather caricatured Americans.

> She had, so she related, stayed on after the rest of the party had gone home. Glober, it seemed, had been more attractive to her, far more attractive, than outwardly revealed by her demeanor at dinner. In admitting that, she went so far as to declare that she had greatly approved of him at sight, as soon as she entered the room where we were to dine. Glober must have felt the same. The natural ease of his manner concealed such feelings, like Mopsy's exterior reserve. Later that night mutual approval took physical expression.
>
> 'Glober did me on the table.'
>
> 'Among the coffee cups?'
>
> 'We broke a couple of liqueur glasses.'
>
> 'You obviously found him attractive.'

Temporary Kings chronicles the beginning of the downfall of the Widmerpools. Pamela, after her disastrously sordid affair with the late X. Trapnel in the last book, is back with her husband, now *Lord* Widmerpool, and still humiliating him like a modern Megeara. Pamela's never-explained rage reaches a crescendo, intersecting with the American writer Russell Gwinnett and the American film producer Louis Glober, both sexual deviants in their own way but no match for Pamela's chthonian fury.

And finally, there is *Hearing Secret Harmonies,* in which Widmerpool himself, at the end of a long life of ever-increasing power, becomes every bit as absurd and full of himself as always as a self-styled "counter-cultural" figure, rebelling against the Establishment in which he is a Peer of the Realm. Nick sees the arrival of the Hippies, and Powell's view of them can hardly be considered benign. Scorp Murtlock, the "reincarnation" (possibly literally) of Dr Trelawney, initially appears as a long-haired mystic in the company of one of Jenkins' nieces, but over the course of the book, he becomes an ever more powerful and sinister figure, finally contending with Widmerpool himself in what is, in one sense, the ultimate battle of two Men of Will, and in another sense, an anticlimactic coda to 12 volumes of careful, intricate lifelines involving scores of characters.

> The thudding sound from the quarry had declined now to no more than a gentle reverberation, infinitely remote. It ceased altogether at the long drawn wail of a hooter - the distant pounding of centaurs' hoofs dying away, as the last note of their conch trumpeted out over hyborean seas. Even the formal measure of the Seasons seemed suspended in the wintry silence.

This is a series that requires a heavy investment of time and effort. It's not "plotty" and it's not fast-paced and while it's not lacking in drama, the drama is as often something that happens between chapters as on the page. So why should you read it? Because it's a masterpiece. A slow, convoluted dance spanning decades. It's not quite like anything else I've ever read, and I don't know that I'd want to read something else like it. It seriously took a year to wade through to the end, taking a break to read other books between volumes.

But it is a masterpiece. Powell probably was one of the greatest writers of all time.

Abigail says

A fabulous ending to this quartet. Perhaps would be useful to have a list of characters as they are so vast and many, by the end it takes a great deal of effort to recall some of the earlier more obscure characters.

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carl theaker says

'Books Do Finish a Room' great title- this book focuses on reconnecting
with characters from oh several books ago, Jenkins' nostalgia. Postwar
Jenkins settles into his literary career. Wicked Widmerpool continues his climb in Parliment
while being tortured by spouse Pamela, easily the bitch of year, shooting for the decade.

Jenkins does a college reunion of sorts and many characters are re-introduced.
We also see again many writers who are reconnected through Jenkins' publishing efforts.

'Temporary Kings' - The Widmerpool tornado reach a climax with wife Pamela, Widmerpool and a famous Communist writer caught in a menage a' trois, of sorts. Rumors and stories of this event cause great consternation.

'Hearing Secret Harmonies' -- AHHH, book 12 complete, 7 months for me, 25 years or so for Powell, the novels covering from 1920s to 1970s.

Wonder if Powell planned for this to be his last? He brings in a variety of folks from the earlier books for cameo appearances.

The 'Harmonies' in the title refer to the hippie cult, it's leader Scorpio, the mandatory weird character introduced into each story, well it is the '60s. The cult causes Jenkins to reminisce about the 'hippies' he knew in the '30s.

It's been a long, fun, strange trip.

A friend mentioned 'Dance' to me way back in '85ish and gee sorry I didn't take them up sooner. I liked this read and certainly got into the characters, well, after this many pages, they become part of the family.

There is a 'Dance' British TV series production available on DVD. It's worth a watch. Fun to put faces to the names.

Kim says

For some reason I thought that the final three novels of this twelve novel cycle wouldn't be as satisfying as the earlier works. I assumed, I guess, that Powell would run out of steam as his narrator, Nick Jenkins, aged. But I was wrong: I love the Fourth Movement as much as I love the first three and, having come to the end of the saga, I miss being in the world of the Dance.

The three novels that make up the Fourth Movement, Books Do Furnish a Room, Temporary Kings and Hearing Secret Harmonies cover the period from 1945/1946 to approximately 1970. This is in sharp contrast to the novels of the Third Movement, which deal with World War II. As a result, time passes quickly in this Movement: a year or more can go by in the space of two chapters, with post-WWII austerity giving way to 1960s counter culture.

What struck me most about the Fourth Movement is the extent to which it deals with the creative process and particularly with the nature of fiction*. Although Nick Jenkins personally experiences many of the events upon which the narrative centres, even more of these events happen off-stage, with Jenkins being told about them by other characters. To this process of story-telling is added a metafictional element, with novel-writing emerging as a theme in and of itself.

I listened to the audiobook edition of the novels, superbly narrated by Simon Vance. Powell's wonderful prose, biting humour and vast cast of characters with their complicated inter-relationships will live with me for a long time. If I remember correctly, I've given four stars to each of the Movements, most likely because

I'm stingy with five star ratings. But this is a pretty amazing cycle of novels and I'm going back to up the rating to five stars.

*This is true of the entire novel cycle, but the emphasis on writing and writers struck me as strongest in the Fourth Movement.

Christopher says

After a hundreds of pages dealing just with World War II, Anthony Powell brings us through the postwar decades with the last three novels of "A Dance to the Music of Time", which tracks Nicholas Jenkins and his social circle across an enormous breadth of 20th-century Britain.

BOOKS DO FURNISH A ROOM, the tenth novel, opens in the winter of 1945/46 as Britain settles back into peacetime, though not without annoying rationing and shortages. Jenkins has come to his old university for research towards a biography on Robert Burton, but soon first himself involved in the launch of a new literary magazine with distinct leftist tones. Indeed, we return to a world of shady politics left behind in the early 1930s in THE ACCEPTANCE WORLD, the third novel of the sequence, and many of the characters from those days return. Widmerpool, his political career now taking off, also comes into the picture, and his continual defence of the Soviet Union makes him a more repulsive antagonist than ever.

But beyond revisiting old friends, BOOKS DO FURNISH A ROOM introduces two new characters with very distinctive personalities. One is the novelist X. Trapnel, whose bohemianism mystifies his fellow characters and ultimately leads to his grisly ruin. The other character is Pamela Widmerpool. Though she appeared first in the previous novel, she was mostly a force of nature destroying the lives of numerous male characters offscreen. Here Jenkins talks with her on several occasions, revealing something of her as a person. As this volume was written at the end of the 1960s in a more frank era, Powell felt that his language could be a bit more coarse, and it is Pamela who utters all the profanity. The relationship between Widmerpool and his wife sometimes descends into mere soap opera, and the literary allusions, especially to Burton, get rather tiresome. Still, this is a pretty OK entry in the series.

The last two volumes are unfortunately very weak. TEMPORARY KINGS brings us over a gap of more than a decade to Venice 1958, where Jenkins is attending a literary conference. We're introduced to some American characters, but only so that Pamela Widmerpool can destroy them. This novel is tedious, the coincidences too hard to swallow, and there's a real lack of the comedy that sustained the series. HEARING SECRET HARMONIES takes place another decade on, in the late '60s, and here Powell had gotten bored with the usual trend of the "Dance" to be centred around dinner parties and inspired by real life events, so he creates an outlandish plot with a cult leader, magical powers and ritual sex.

In these last volumes, Powell tries to pare the basic plot down to Jenkins versus Widmerpool, and indeed Widmerpool's demise is what brings these multi-volume reminisces to a close. But in TEMPORARY KINGS and HEARING SECRET HARMONIES, Widmerpool is a completely different character, doing things not at all in keeping with the fellow we've long followed. Also, in the last two novels the sex really gets out of hand. In early volumes in the "Dance", the presence of a few homosexual characters added realism to the work, but Powell now reveals nearly every male character (and not a few female characters) to be homosexual and bases the plot on this, which rather reminds me of mid-century British humour's excessive reliance on cross-dressing.

I am happy that I read the Dance and I'd probably even recommend it. The bulk of the series is very

entertaining, and pushing through to the end didn't require so much extra effort. Still, it's a pity that Powell couldn't keep it together in the end.

Manny says

The First Movement is about Class, the Second is about Love, the Third is about Duty. Now we're at the end, so what is the Fourth Movement going to be about except Death?

I have read the series several times, and I'm still not completely sure about the Fourth Movement. It isn't as much fun as the others, at least not at a surface level. As Buck pointed out in a comment to my review of the Second Movement, it has a tendency to meander around, and the *aperçus* are sometimes not as sharp as they were in the earlier books. In particular, the demonic Scorp Murtlock, who eventually turns out to be Widmerpool's nemesis, is, by Powell's standards, crudely drawn. One straightforward analysis of the book is that Powell himself was getting old, and couldn't quite cut it any more.

So perhaps Powell had lost some of his talent by now - these books were written when he was in his early 70s - but I also think it's possible to read their fragmented construction as intentional. Powell is not afraid of presenting unpleasant truths, though he generally has an indirect way of doing it. Getting old and dying is, most people agree, unpleasant, though there is a tendency not to dwell on the details. Powell could have made several points here in a straightforward way. He might have told us that, as we become older, we lose our physical strength and, even worse, our mental alertness. He might have said that we find it increasingly difficult to understand the world and feel connected to it. He might have said that younger people will, more and more often, fail to take us seriously. They will treat us with indifference and contempt, or just not see us at all.

This kind of thing has been said directly to great effect; for example, in Doris Lessing's *The Summer Before The Dark*, there is a stunningly graphic scene showing how women, as they lose their sexual attractiveness, literally become invisible to men. But Powell, as already noted, doesn't tend to use the direct approach, and in particular loves to use absences rather than presences; as with Nick's feelings for Jean in the Second Movement, it's more what he omits than what he says. Here, we have the character of X. Trapnel. I think it's clear that Trapnel is, objectively, intended to be a great writer, probably the most distinguished one that Nick meets in the course of a long life spent hobnobbing with authors and artists.

But Nick never really understands X. Emotionally, he can't feel that Trapnel is important or interesting, except as an agent of the fate that's now starting to breathe down Widmerpool's neck. It's only through other people's reactions that you can see Trapnel is a major talent. Alas, I don't think that Powell's ability to bring a character to life deserted him here. I'm going to be 52 soon - about the age Nick is at the start of *Books Do Furnish A Room* - and I can already see the process he's describing in his oblique fashion. There are younger stars in my field whom I'm aware of, and whom I know intellectually are very good, but they don't excite me they way they once would have. I don't pounce on their papers and read them fervently. Instead, I spend my time continuing to investigate ideas that my generation developed, which the new guys will politely dismiss as irrelevant. It's painful to project the curve forward, but this is what Powell is doing in his quiet, unflinching way.

The survivors from earlier books, more and more surrounded by a bustling cast of new characters that they barely notice, play out the ends of terrible dramas which are equally unnoticed by the younger people. Feelings which have been carefully hidden for decades suddenly emerge for a moment, but most of the spectators don't even realise anything has happened. I think it will be like this to be old: it all rings true. Powell's final volume is much better than its reputation.

Vit Babenco says

Autumn dies, winter arrives…
Turning the last page of the book I've got a feeling of deep nostalgia exactly like it is shown on the famous painting by **Ford Madox Brown**: *The Last of England*. It was so sad to say goodbye to all the characters – I lived among them so long.
"People think because a novel's invented, it isn't true. Exactly the reverse is the case. Because a novel's invented, it is true. Biography and memoirs can never be wholly true, since they can't include every conceivable circumstance of what happened. The novel can do that. The novelist himself lays it down. His decision is binding. The biographer, even at his highest and best, can be only tentative, empirical. The autobiographer, for his part, is imprisoned in his own egotism. He must always be suspect. In contrast with the other two, the novelist is a god, creating his man, making him breathe and walk. The man, created in his own image, provides information about the god."
A Dance to the Music of Time is a great drama and a delicious farce. It is lifesize…

Lisa says

Not as much fun as the other three volumes in the collection, and the last book Hearing Secret Harmonies was a bit too wacky for me. Still, a great series altogether, and I might see if I can find some other works by Powell.
When the TBR goes down a bit...

Gary Lee says

The final set of three, from Powell's overall twelve.

Books Do Furnish a Room -- 5/5
I don't know if it was simply because the 'war books' are over and done, or because it really was a strong read -- but this has been one of my favorite of the series. Yet, it took me more than twice my normal time to get through with it. I don't know why. I guess I had to ease back into Powell's rhythm.

Temporary Kings -- 5/5
The Dance is drawing to a close, and only the stragglers are left behind....well, and the drunks.

Much like the last novel, I enjoyed this one immensely even if I did tend to slog through it. There's a part of me that doesn't want to finish the cycle; I don't want it to end. Even though there have been about 300 characters coming in and going out of the narrative, they're all fairly memorable and unique. It's been a long time since I've had such a reading experience. But I digress...

Unlike the other novels thus far, Powell brings in a bit of the fantastic (or "surreal" if you will) to this one. Characters begin to resemble ancient paintings, mysticism rears its whithered head, and the ghost of Trapnel looms ominously.
Yes, Trapnel is dead.
Moreland is dead.

And it's hinted that Pamela Widmerpool swallows a handful of pills and ODs.

The end is near.
Hopefully the obvious showdown between Jenkins and Widmerpool will be worth the price of admission.

Hearing Secret Harmonies -- 4/5
Banquet dinners, Literary Awards, proto-punk political dissent, necrophilia, mysticism, Manson Family-like cults...the times, they have a-changed.
With the dance over, the elders return home while the youth take out to the night.

I was bit disappointed that Jenkins and Widmerpool didn't have the hoped-for final showdown; regardless, this final volume was one of the most fun to read. Like all them, it had it's incredibly slow, seemingly pointless moments, but they can easily be overlooked when regarding the novel as a whole.

Final thoughts:

Is 'A Dance to the Music of Time' perfect? No.

Is 'A Dance to the Music of Time' a masterpiece of English Literature? Without a doubt.

1.) Much like one's own life, this cycle is a trifle uneven -- but no one's life (especially when considering a fifty-year span of it) is entirely exciting or entirely dull; rather, one's life is a continual ebb and flow of experiences, emotions, and lackthereof.

2.) If more people were blessed with Powell's gift for characterization, I think people would be far more eager to read and to stay reading. There are well over 300 different characters encountered across the twelve novels, and somehow Powell makes the reader remember most (if not all) of them. Even if I never read these books again, I think I will always remember some of these characters as fondly as actual people I have known.

3.) I could spend the rest of my life rereading these novels, and still never understand everything that Powell has expertly pulled off within them. Historical references, mythological references, religious references, literary references, dramatic, artistic, scientific, military -- his novels are saturated with them.

4.) While it can be a bit dry at times, Powell's writing is never dull. Twelve novels (over 3000pgs total) seems like a daunting task for a reader, and they certainly would have been had they not been written in so readable a matter.
The *New York Times* might refer to this quality as "unputdownable" -- I know I would.

Trina says

After 4 months of listening to a remarkable audio version narrated by Simon Vance, I have finished with this. There was some of it I didn't love, but most of it I found humorous, sometimes heartbreaking and always compelling. Powell's musings on the passage of life are rich and eloquent, and I wish I had the book to recall these.

Marjorie Hakala says

The review that used to live here has been prettied up and moved to The Millions.

Teresa says

The Fourth Movement is suffused with the narrator's study of Robert Burton's The Anatomy of Melancholy and while I haven't read the Burton, it's familiar enough for me to have enjoyed the references to it, the last of which is perfect for the ending.

The narrator Nick, or Nicholas, as he's increasingly called as he ages, is the ultimate observer. Any time the contortions needed to tell the stories of other characters– backstories, conversations relayed by others—merely threaten to turn a bit ridiculous, Powell manages a sleight-of-hand and we stay under his spell. For example, Nick relates to the reader the various and separate conversations going on under a fictional Tiepolo ceiling, conversations that don't include him at all, and I thought, how acute Nick's hearing must be! But that passing thought did not mute the scene's power: it remains a favorite. Powell pokes fun at himself with a couple of references to Nick's running into the same people over and over again; and while the final sequence of encounters is rather unusual, it's also an entertaining, important summation. The sarcasm, wit and satire never overwhelm the seriousness of the themes.

I feel inadequate explaining what these books have been 'about'. But what about that 17th-century Burton quote near the end of the final novel? Despite our technologies, tools and toys changing over the years, it fits the ills of today. Perhaps you are someone who is discouraged that human nature never seems to change. I find it oddly reassuring.

Michael Battaglia says

Having depicted your characters attempting to live day by day during the most involved conflict that the world thus far had ever known, where do you go from there? Well, if you're Anthony Powell, apparently you veer headfirst into domestic drama against the setting of a post-war backdrop. People get married who shouldn't get married, people cheat on their spouses, explore their sexual identities, hang out in fancy places. And talk about books a lot, pretentiously if at all. It feels like I'm among friends.

To that end the last three novels in the, ah, twelvetet (?) are sometimes considered a bit of a letdown when compared to the first nine that comprise the beginning sequences. The characters have become older and a bit more set in their ways and to some extent it feels like Powell is struggling to find interesting things for them to do that are within the realm of possibility (it's not like Widmerpool can become prime minister, as amazing as that would be). The newer characters that are introduced are generally interesting but he doesn't seem to have as much of a handle on them as he did the original set and even that precise control slackens by the very end, where the plot dictates as much how people should act instead of letting their personalities guide us to the end.

Part of the problem is that coming off the peak of World War Two, pretty much almost anything can feel like an encore, or at least an epilogue (mirroring no doubt how some soldiers felt returning home, after being a

part of saving civilization as we know it, sitting at the table to the same pot roast every night for the rest of your life probably felt initially like an anticlimax of sorts . . . although not getting shot at constantly may be a fair trade-off) and coming back to your old life can feel a bit boring in comparison. Having taken us through the boom years before the war and the war itself, he's got us in the much more austere 1950s, where conformity still has a stranglehold on culture and all the attempts to let loose and be free come across as very odd to all the old guys. This is still rich fodder for a single novel, unfortunately trying to stretch that theme across three separate novels winds up pushing it and they suffer from a combination of spinning their wheels and a gradual sense of "who cares?"

Powell's prose and eye for characters hasn't quite lost a step, it's just that the subject matter doesn't quite live up to what's gone before. In all honesty, the tone isn't that far off from the pre-war novels but there we had the shock of the new, getting to know these people, while here it's more a settling of accounts as people inevitably drop off for the great multi-part series in the sky, in a much more sedate setting. When things get wild here, it feels more artificial, like he's trying to insert drama where it doesn't quite belong.

As I said, the settings don't inspire much optimism. The main plot of "Books Do Furnish a Room" centers around the attempts at publishing a literary magazine called "Fission", which Jenkins gets involved in with some other characters. The hijinks as all the personalities collide isn't quite as exciting as all the dinner party escapades from earlier novels, and by the fortieth time Jenkins mentions Robert Burton you want to reach into the book and slap him. He manages to get one decent character out of oddball writer Trapnel, who should come across as a collection of tics masquerading as a human being but manages to turn into an actual conflicted artist. The main problem here is the focus on Pamela Widmerpool as someone we should care about. She gets way too much time in this book, not only hamstringing the latent awesomeness that is Widmerpool (who becomes a member of Parliament here, of course) but dragging the book into soap opera territory by becoming a character straight out of "Dynasty". Granted, she's supposed to be hot but she's so unrelentingly mean to every single person in striking distance not only does her marriage make little sense but you wonder why anyone even bothers with her. She's just angry for no reason all the time and while she's certainly distinctive, it becomes rather tedious after a while watching people attempting to be polite to her before she snarls in their direction. It does become hilarious how none of this fazes Jenkins, however.

The drama ramps up toward the end, with Widmerpool and Trapnel and Pamela all circling each other, leading to some interesting setpieces but everything prior to that is drenched in Powell's silky smooth prose, it goes down nice and easy but leaves very little aftertaste to remember.

By the time you get to "Temporary Kings" you can almost hear the steam coming out of Powell's ears as he endeavors to make any of this simmer above even a low boil. Moving the action to Proust's narrator's favorite place, Venice, isn't exactly the "what do ordinary blokes do in that time period" feel we're hoping for, as Jenkins attends a literary convention that somehow manages to encompass almost every single person he's ever met that's still alive by this point. More soap opera elements are introduced (spying! murder! infidelity! sometimes all at the same time!) but there are times when it feels like he's throwing things against the wall to see what sticks. Very little does. Again, some of the new characters find room to distinguish themselves from all the other genteel men we've encountered before but even when events start to pick up here comes Pamela Widmerpool again to do something cray-cray even as another male foolishly throws himself at her despite the fact that even if she were twice as nice as the book portrays her she'd still be an utterly miserable person. Her caustic presence basically neuters whatever benefit you might get from Widmerpool and whatever plot seems to be involving him doesn't seem to go much of anywhere at all. Once again, things pick up toward the end, especially with a surprise appearance by local weird witch psychic person Mrs Erdleigh, who I always imagine as one of those strange ladies from "A Wrinkle in Time", but it's kind of too little too late and most of the juicy stuff is recounted to Jenkins by other people after the fact. It does get bonus points for being set in a foreign city I've actually visited, however.

By the time we reach the supposed finale of the last volume, "Hearing Secret Harmonies", it's more of a

grand finally. While the subtraction of Pamela Widmerpool should only improve matters, Powell decides to go completely off the rails here and have a countercultural cult figure heavily into the plot. That would be weird enough but having Widmerpool join the cult is pretty much the last straw for hoping gentle satirical realism would win the day. The character becomes nearly unrecognizable in this book, and while you can suggest that part of that is because he's going out of his mind, it removes the one defining thing about him, that even though he's absolutely mediocre in every possible way, he succeeds through sheer singleminded willpower. Meanwhile there's a sense of wrapping the loose ends up, as the few characters who are old enough to die generally get around to doing so while the younger ones gradually drift away. As the plot begins to focus more and more on the cult (culminating in an interesting chain of events at a wedding) it starts to take on an air of ridiculousness and by the time we receive word of Widmerpool's final fate (fittingly, it basically closes out the novel), it almost seems like the character himself went "the heck with this nonsense"and did the logical thing. And thus it ends.

That said, after three thousand (or close to) pages, is it all worth it? To a good extent, yes, even if it doesn't show day to day life in the earlier part of the century as much as it seems to think it does (how often do you hang out in Venice?), the earlier novels especially are excellent at conveying the subtle shift of society into newer classes, as one way of life gives way to another. The war novels are by and large both exciting and funny, and there are enough scattered decent moments among the final three books to remind you that Powell hasn't lost his talent, just misdirected it. He gives us one of the strongest literary figures of all time in Widmerpool, a man sturdy enough to move both with and against the tide. But Powell's style is so consistent that it all hangs together nicely and never becomes a slog. With Proust (to compare one last time), it often felt like reading it was akin to engaging in an arm wrestling match with an opponent who didn't know how to tire. Here, Powell guides you along and treats you nice and while he never achieves the emotional highs or lows that Proust manages, it's never less than engaging and you never forget that you're in the hands of a master.

Still, there's an emotional distance to the proceedings that all the best prose and funniest scenes in the world can't overcome. For all the hullabaloo of people living and dying and cheating and loving, ultimately Powell's decision to have Jenkins keep himself as merely the window through which we observe the series keeps you from really feeling the century or the passage of time through it. By the time we reach the end we don't feel that we know him better than we did at the beginning and it never feels like he learned anything from all he's seen. Instead he's had a front row seat for the antics of Widmerpool, a far more dynamic character and while it probably wouldn't have worked, you almost wish the book had been narrated by him. In the end, it winds up being the view of a century and a vanished time as seen through glass that is perfectly clear and perfectly insulated: while there's nothing to obstruct the absolute clarity of the view, no matter how close you get to the barrier you never feel the heat being generated on the other side, or when the fire starts to go out and the chill starts to set in.

David M says

I confess I embarked on this behemoth out of a sense of filial insecurity. This past summer my idol Perry Anderson published a two part essay in the London Review of Books making the bizarrely hyperbolic claim that Anthony Powell is actually better than Proust. The magus of Marxism is mysterious; the ways of his mind are not like yours or mine; while omniscient, he is also prone to truly outlandish judgments from time to time. On the face of it, Powell's opus would seem to be the apotheosis of that middle brow Englishry which Perry made his name combatting.

Now having read all 3,000+ pages of it, I can say that by and large it was mildly pleasant, a bit like warm beer. I suppose there's no reason to think that life itself is better represented by intense revelations than dry,

sometimes vaguely amusing goings-on.

Dance to the Music is basically the story of one man running into another man he doesn't really like over and over again at parties for half a century. Nick Jenkins, the hero, is too nice, or else just too self-effacing, to ever make it clear that he doesn't actually like this other man, Kenneth Widmerpool, and so by default they're sort of like friends. Jenkins is a literary artist of considerable talent, but for some reason (perhaps his native English modesty?) he decides to devote his life's work to the chronicle of his non-friendship with this pompous bore rather than his own intimate life.

The sequence consists of twelve separate novels, each around 250 pages. Of the twelve, I found flashes of greatness in precisely two of them - Casanova's Chinese Restaurant and the Kindly Ones, books 5 and 6 respectively. There Powell's smooth, understated style seemed to adumbrate abysses that could not be represented directly. There was also a very memorable moment in the 9th novel when Jenkins breaks down crying at the end of the war. Otherwise, to be honest, I found the whole thing pretty underwhelming.

In the last three books, or fourth movement, Powell ditches his understated style to engage in caricature. Thus we get the horrible bitch and temptress Pamela and the late incarnation of Widmerpool as sixties cult leader. In both cases the portrait is a bit too crude to be very clever or effective. All in all, I'd say I've never encountered such a case of unexceptional content wedded to epic form as Dance to the Music. It's just possible that this is itself is paradoxical kind of greatness, but I'll have to meditate on that longer to render definitive judgment.

Sue says

What an excellent reading experience! My rating reflects my feelings for the entire series as a whole as well as the final trilogy.
full review to come
