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Originally published in 1939 and unavailable for over 2 years, a novel written just before the war, which prophetically describes how it would affect a town like Southampton.

What Happened to the Corbetts Details

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From Reader Review What Happened to the Corbetts for online ebook

Andrew says

This particular book of Shute's always slightly confuses me – am I supposed to be reading a story about how a bunch of uptight conservatives are forced to truly confront how much they love their family? Or am I supposed to be reading a story about how an already-loving family is torn apart by a war and forced to get really tough and cold? Shute seems to be writing both stories at once, in how Mr and Mrs Corbett give up their nanny and begin to actually look after their children themselves and love them, but then also at the end completely resign themselves to no longer being together as a family.

MrsCordial says

I'm a big fan of the WWII genre, but until I read this book (not strictly a WWII story as the events are fictional - perhaps apocryphal is a better word) I hadn't realised how cosily plucky little Blighty's fight has been portrayed. I've read books that detail the most appalling and life-shattering events but nothing ever before that has conveyed the sheer terrifying and exhausting grind of trying to survive while not being sure quite which is the right choice at any point.

At first I was so irritated by spoilt Joan who couldn't manage without multiple maids and a nanny that I thought I wouldn't enjoy the book, but I soon realised that I couldn't put the book down. I have young children too and found myself wondering how on earth I would hold it together for a single night if bombs were falling around us. I knew water supplies were interrupted and various foods became scarce, but I hadn't brought it down in my mind to the level of how long it would take to run out of water and then how you'd feel if you knew there was a chance that any water you did find could kill you all.

As the story wound on I was sobered by the fear and fatigue, the requirement to carry on finding something to feed your children, the squalor of the out-of-town camps that wore on, the mismatch between the official version of events and reality on the ground, the total inability to relax, ever, about anything - this must have been far closer to people's experiences than anything else I have read. It's my first Nevil Shute and has me wanting to read more.

Phil says

I wanted to like this more than I did, rereading it after something like 45 years, but I fear that what is normally one of Nevil Shute's strengths - his sharp and detailed observation of the manners, speech, attitudes and environment of unexceptional, unpretentious English people in the period of which he was writing (in this case the 1930s) - veers rather too close to caricature here. His characters, the Corbett family of the title - a comfortable middle class unit living in Southampton on the English south coast - are riven with the kind of snobberies and sense of entitlement that Shute normally mocks gently, such that they are unusually unsympathetic. They also do not appear to have given their nursing baby a name, which strikes me as unusual, to say the least, referring to the (non-gender-specified) infant only as 'Baby'.

The setting, an imagining of the outbreak of the Second World War, still some two years distant when the

book was being written, is reasonably well done, but suffers from a few gaps in narrative credibility, not least of which is the complete absence of newspapers to transmit information about the military and political situation to a confused and frightened populace - very important even in the pre-1939 period, and contributory, I believe, to the relative *lack* of civil disturbance that occurred even at the height of the Blitz a couple of years later. This kind of omission is perhaps the novel's greatest weakness: there's no reason why Shute's protagonists *should* be likeable (in fact, their unlikeability may be the point - everyone suffers in war), but the absence of material detail lets down both the book itself and its author's normal fastidious approach to his storytelling.

Peter Meek says

Grim forecast

Early Shute and thus a bit dated. Bombing civilians seems to stiffen resolve, but they still do it. It doesn't look like anyone learned any of the lessons that Shute hoped they would - neither the bombing nor the preparedness.

Gerald says

Nevil Shute is one of my favorite authors. This book was widely distributed during its 1939 publication under the title *What Happened to the Corbetts?*. About 1,000 copies were sold in the United States under the title *Ordeal*. I happened to find a copy in my local library under that latter title.

Peter Corbett is a solicitor who lives with his wife Joan and their three young children near Southampton, England in the later 1930's. The story begins just as their country has gone to war against an unnamed enemy. Their world is torn apart by nightly high-level through-the-clouds, indiscriminate bombing of their city. They are forced to cower in a trench Peter dug in their backyard. He parks their car over them for protection. Soon they have to contend with food and water shortages. A further critical shortage is milk for their infant. What little water they can get has to be boiled before using because of a cholera outbreak and later the area is hit with a typhoid epidemic. Just as they decide to move from their home to the small yacht they have some distance away, the diseases result in their area being quarantined. They are finally able to get to the yacht but soon the bombing begins in that area also. Finally, they decide that they must sail off to a safer location. They must overcome severe challenges to accomplishing this. Peter wants to join the military to fight for his country but first of all wants to see that his wife and children are safe by sending them somehow to live with his sister's family in Canada.

This is an exciting story with lots of difficulties which must be overcome. I did enjoy it fairly well, although it is not nearly as good as many of Shute's other novels. It was good enough to give it a reasonably good recommendation.

[Book 60 of revised 2012 target 70 (Jan-10; Feb-11; Mar-9; Apr-8; May-7; Jun-8; Jul-7)]

Suzanne Auckerman says

In the US, this book is titled Ordeal. It is set in Brighton, England and describes what happens to a town once the relentless bombing begins. However, it was written before the war actually started and so fictional. However, by the time the book was published, the bombing had started. The book was held back and he included a disclaimer that it was fictional and not based on what was actually happening in England.

Cally73 says

I can not believe that no one thought to collect rainwater!

Larry Piper says

Another gem by Nevil Shute. The Corbetts are a normal English family—father, mother, two small children and a baby, living in a small house with a lovely garden—who find themselves scuttling to their garage for safety against a surprise bomb raid on their city. After the bomb raids continue, but only on cloudy nights, they decide to escape for safety to their small yacht, with hopes of eventually making it to safety in Canada.

The suddenness of the bomb raids pretty much destroys normal modes of communication—newspapers and radios—so no one much knows what's going on. Essential goods, gasoline, milk, bread, become scarce. Some kind of medical epidemic appears, perhaps; no one knows how virulent or wide spread. Thus everyone is left to speculate as to how best to protect themselves and their loved ones. They don't really know who the "enemy" is (never called out in the book) or why he suddenly began a random bombing campaign. People are pretty much forced to live day by day, making out as best they can. This story tells how the Corbetts themselves did that. Quite a nice story.

It was written shortly before World War II broke out, so is a bit prophetic it would seem. Certainly terrorist bombing of civilians became common in WWII, both in the German's regular air raids over London, and in our own flying over Dresden, Tokyo, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Now, we're more sophisticated, we have drones do our terrorism for us. No real people involved.

Vikas Datta says

The bomber will always get through - unusually prescient while the narrative is most realistic but fast-paced too..

Gerald says

Nevil Shute's novel ORDEAL was published in 1939. I don't know exactly when during that year that it came out in comparison to the fact the England declared war against Germany on September 3, 1939, but it seems a safe assumption that he had written most if not all of the book prior to that declaration-of-war date. In light of that, the novel was incredibly prophetic with regard to how what came to be known as World War II affected England.

Peter Corbett was a solicitor in southern England near the town of Southampton. He and his wife Jean led a fairly quiet life in their modest home with their three small children. They had a small sailing yacht which they kept at Hamble and which they very much enjoyed periodic day sailing to the Isle of Wight and other ports in the south of England.

In the middle of one very cloudy and rainy night they began to hear far off loud noises which steadily grew louder. They soon came to realize that their part of England was being bombed severely. They huddled together, very scared, in what they thought to be the safest part of their house. When bombing had finally ceased and it became light enough to investigate outside, they were shocked beyond belief at the damage which had been inflicted by the bombing. All the windows in almost all the houses in their area were shattered and the rain had poured in, causing a great deal of secondary damage. The power was off in a major part of the whole area, but that soon came to be a comparatively easily resolved problem. The much more critical issue soon came to be to water situation. More specifically, the damage to the sewers caused by the bombing was not easily repairable at all, especially with the continued bombing that took place. Lack of a proper sewage system very quickly led to outbreaks of cholera and typhoid.

Peter soon came to learn that the bombers from an unnamed enemy, but obviously Germany, would only come to do their dirty work on cloudy, rainy nights during which they would fly and drop their bombs within the clouds without aiming other than having a general idea of location just before they dropped into the clouds. They were not trying to bomb specific targets, just harass the civilian population.

After the first night, Peter with advice from neighbors decided to dig a trench in his backyard and park his car above it. This was better in some respects than staying in the house because it provided more protection. However, it was not very pleasant for the family of five to be in the small trench when it was full of rainwater and very muddy. Peter and Jean decided they would be better off on their small yacht. After some hassle getting through the cholera quarantine restrictions, they made it to their yacht. Again this was better in some respects and a good bit worse in others. At first they seemed to be well away from the continued bombing, but the great difference in tides left them either unable to get to their vessel or get off of it through the tidal mud flats for substantial parts of the day. They decided to sail to the Isle of Wight but were prevented from landing because they could not obtain a clean bill of health, since they would be coming from a cholera area, without going through a several week restriction in a quarantine area. They seemed to be turned aside with every effort they made.

Peter was anxious to sign up for the war effort, hopefully getting a commission in either the army or the navy. However, his overriding first concern was to get his wife and three children to a place of safety. They began thinking that Jean and the kids would be safest to go to Toronto, Canada to live with Peter's sister but couldn't come up with a workable plan to get them there until a series of unusual circumstances open the door of possibility for that plan to come about.

As I said to begin with, this 1939 novel was amazingly prophetic in painting an author's idea of what might happen and having it mirror so amazingly well, at least as far as the bombing of England was concerned, the actual occurrences several years later.

Nevil Shute is an excellent author. I add this one as another of his that I highly recommend to readers.

Algernon says

I don't know if in passing through the world you leave a mark behind. A sort of impression. I'd like to think so, because I think we must have left a good one. We're not famous people and we've not done much. Nobody

knows anything about us. But we've been so happy. We've lived quietly and decently and done our job. we've had kids, too - and they're good ones. But I wish we could have had another boy.

Peter and Joan Corbett, together with their three young children, are gone from their modest house in a quiet neighborhood of Southampton. They were a decent, shy, modest young couple who didn't ask for much and who found happiness in the little pleasures of family life : going to work every day, keeping the house clean, listening to the radio in the evening, tending the lawn, going out from time to time sailing on an old second hand boat.

He was thirty-four years old, a pleasant, ordinary young man of rather a studious turn.

Peter Corbett is a typical Nevil Shute protagonist (come to think of it, Dick Francis uses the same type of anti-hero in his thrillers): a middle class professional with moderate ambitions and a pleasant disposition. He is good at his job, respected by his neighbors, loves his wife and children and is passionate about sailing. His life is a tranquil succession of routine days, until one fateful evening when the sky starts raining brimstone over Southampton.

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There have been numerous novels written about the Blitz, but the present one stands apart from the rest in one important aspect : it was written two years **BEFORE** the first German raid on English soil. It is, in other words, a science-fiction novel, a cautionary tale, something like the later and better known account of the aftermath of nuclear war that Nevil Shute will write a couple of decades later. I sure am glad the apocalyptic future imagined by the author in "On The Beach" didn't come to pass, but "The Ordeal" of the Corbetts (the alternative title of the present novel) is a lucid and often chillingly accurate analysis of the future impact heavy and indiscriminate bombing will have on infrastructure, governance, the health and the mental stability of the population.

Nevil Shute the engineer is looking at technical aspects of type of aircraft, flight paths, navigation instruments, likely damage to buildings and utilities, best actions to take to protect your home and your family. Read like this the novel serves a similar role as one of the modern Situation Analysis Reports that military Chiefs of Staff commission and use to prepare for emergencies. Indeed, after publication in 1939, a thousand copies of the novel were distributed freely to Air Wardens across the country.

Nevil Shute the novelist knows that the most important thing to preserve in a war is our humanity, our integrity, our dignity and our decency. This is why the Corbetts are stand-ins in the eyes of the author for the best the British culture has to offer: that stiff upper lip, that dogged determination to rise up and try again after you've been knocked down, that instinctive impulse to lend a hand and to help a neighbour in need - character traits that have little to do with one political party or another. Peter Corbett, on waking out in the garage after the first night of bombing over Southampton, checks first that his wife and children are OK, then he dresses up and goes back to work, as he did every day of his married life:

Twenty minutes later, spruce and neat in his business suit, bowler hat, and dark overcoat, and carrying a neatly furled umbrella on his arm, he came to her again.

How does that song go ? "Mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun". Peter wants to defy the bombs and get on with his routines, trusting the government and the army to patch things up and to defend the realm. But with subsequent attacks, with water, sewage, electricity, radio and newspapers gone, food staples in short supply and services coming to halt, soon followed by deadly epidemics and civil structure collapse, Peter is forced to admit defeat and to try to get his family out of the danger zone. He is troubled by his conscience which tells him that he is young and fit for enlistment, that he should take up arms and defend

his country. A conversation with a neighbour, a veteran from the first world war, will help Corbett set his priorities right:

'I'm not going - not till I can see my way a bit better. It wouldn't be fair on the missus leaving her alone, with raids like that we had likely to happen any night. We've been together all these years, and I'm not going to leave her at a time like this. It wouldn't be right. Of course,' he said, 'if I could get to see her settled and comfy in a little house somewhere where it's safe, then it'd be another matter'. Corbett laughed shortly. 'Somewhere safe and comfy,' he repeated. 'It seems to me that's going to take a bit of finding.'

The first part of the novel describes the effects of the raids, the second part the efforts of the Corbetts to get out of the south of England. Nevil Shute knows how to keep the reader glued to the page. He in top form here as he combines technical details with reportage, human interest stories with adventure at sea, the last part from a dangerous journey in a small boat through the English Channel.

Some of the predictions made by the author will blessedly prove inaccurate. He errs on the side of caution by considering a worse case scenario, and later events will prove that the local and central administration will be able to cope with the damage and that people will come together and help each other survive the worst of the bombing. Some of the exaggerations in the predicted social collapse may be intended as I mentioned earlier, for raising awareness and for preparing the population in case of emergency. In the afterword, the author both dedicates the novel to the people of Southapmton and apologizes in advance for the slur on the city officials:

Very likely by the time you read these words I shall be in trouble with your chief officials. [...] But I don't care. If I have held your attention for an evening, if I have given to the least of your officials one new idea to ponder and digest, then I shall feel that this book will have played a part in preparing us for the terrible things that you, and I, and all the cities in this country, may one day have to face together.

Part of the bleak overview though may stem from Nevil Shute's dissatisfaction with the bureaucracy and the inertia he had had to wade through in his professional career, issues that will eventually drive him into exile a few years later. Despite the evident love he has for his homeland, the author will join the growing ranks of refugees who search for "somewhere safe and comfy" among strangers. The Corbetts of 1938, the Shute's of the 1950's, are sadly still relevant today, since indiscriminate bombs still fall from the sky on civilian targets, and "collateral damage" victims still have to flee from loving homes into the unknown, to promised lands where they are received with suspicion and angry words.

So maybe not one of Nevil Shute's best novels, but still one that celebrates the common man and the dreams of family and peace he holds dear. Recommended.

Kathryn says

I have read many Nevil Shute books in the past (i.e. MANY years ago) and recognized him then as a talented writer. However, I think I may appreciate his stories a bit more now that I am older. I picked this book up at a recent used book sale in the vintage section for 50 cents and had to read it before passing it along to my aunt. I doubt I have read this before. It is one of his earlier books, written before he moved to Australia from the U.K. It was titled 'Ordeal' in the US, but originally 'What Happened to the Corbetts?'. I think Ordeal really covers the story, which was written pre-World War 2 (1938), but it gives some view of what life could have been like - and it was written as a preview for those who believed war was imminent. I had to look up the locations online after I was done to get a better vision, as my UK geography is not great. Obviously,

those who were lucky enough to live in North America - or outside Europe and the UK - were fortunate not to have to go through similar ordeals themselves. I thought it was appropriate that I finished it on Remembrance Day.

ML

Sharon Zink says

I was kind of surprised that there could be a lawyer in England who did n't know the country was at war until the bombs started falling. This is the story of that lawyer's family, the Corbetts, from the night the bombs started falling until he was able to spirit his family away to the safety of Canada and join in the war effort himself.

Robin Squier says

Nevil Shute is the author to go to when you just need a good story. He is like an old friend.

Alice says

I love Shute but I found this one difficult to get on with, largely because I found the Corbetts rather awful people. I know it's 1938, but they're horrible about their several servants when these souls, understandably, decide to put their own families' needs first, and Peter Corbett actively dislikes looking after his own children; it's presented as a noble sacrifice if he spends an hour with them so his wife can pop out. Meanwhile it's just fine for him to put off enlisting because he wants to look after his family.

All this aside, it's a fascinating piece of speculation about the effect of air raids on the south of England. Some of it Shute gets wrong, but some of it is horribly right.
