



BIOGRAPHY

Elizabeth von Arnim was born in Australia in 1866 and raised in England. One of her most famous novels, *Elizabeth and Her German Garden* (1898), was inspired by her move to Pomerania a few years earlier with her first husband, Count von Arnim. Cousin to Katherine Mansfield and friend to H.G. Wells, von Arnim herself published another twenty-one novels, including the critically praised *The Enchanted April* (1922). *The Enchanted April* was named a Book-of-the-Month Club selection in the United States, and sparked a craze of tourism to Portofino. It was later adapted into a major film and Broadway play. Elizabeth von Arnim died in 1941.

THE ENCHANTED APRIL

by Elizabeth von Arnim

Introduction by Cathleen Schine

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TO THOSE WHO APPRECIATE WISTARIA AND SUNSHINE. Small mediaeval Italian Castle on the shores of the Mediterranean to be Let Furnished for the month of April. Necessary servants remain. Z, Box 1000, *The Times*

And so begins *The Enchanted April*, a delightful romantic novel about four women who abandon their dreary lives for a month of life-transforming bliss on the Italian Riviera. It is a celebration of the splendors of the spring and an affirmation of the importance of time to oneself.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

On a grey, drizzly London afternoon, Mrs. Wilkins catches sight of a classified advertisement for a castle in Italy that is available to rent that spring. Moments later, she spies Mrs. Arbuthnot—a woman she recognizes but doesn't know—reading the very same notice. The two introduce themselves and—hardly believing their own daring—decide to deceive their husbands and rent the castle for the month of April. To offset the cost, they place an ad in the newspaper for two fellow borders. The sole applicants turn out to be the mesmerizing Lady Caroline Dester and the vinegary, imperious Mrs. Fisher.

All four women are deeply unhappy. Shy, modest Mrs. Wilkins is terrified of her ambitious husband; Mrs. Arbuthnot and her husband lead separate lives—she deplores the salacious historical novels he writes and he long ago grew bored by her piousness; Lady Caroline, beautiful, wealthy, and admired, is weary of people, especially men, who all want something from her; and intolerant, elderly Mrs. Fisher lives on a dark narrow street in a dark narrow flat, where her only companions are aging servants, some half-dead goldfish, and her memories of the eminent Victorians she knew as a child. Amid the warmth, beauty, and splendor of the Italian Riviera, spring begins to stir in these four souls and unlikely friendships are formed. But when their husbands and lovers begin to turn up, the almost magical power of the castle to transform its inhabitants is tested afresh.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. “The expression on her face...was as luminous and tremulous...as water in the sunlight when it is ruffled by a gust of wind” (p. 12). How does this physical description capture Mrs. Wilkins' personality? Why is Mrs. Wilkins the first of the four women to be altered by San Salvatore? What qualities does she have that allow for such a rapid transformation?
2. In what ways does the setting of San Salvatore effect the visitors? Is the process the same for each of them? Does the castle or its grounds exercise the more transformative power?

OTHER NYRB CLASSICS OF INTEREST

The Dud Avocado

Elaine Dundy
(introduction by Terry Teachout)

Alfred and Guinevere

James Schuyler
(introduction by John Ashbery)

The Fountain Overflows

Rebecca West
(introduction by Andrea Barrett)

Letty Fox: Her Luck

Christina Stead
(introduction by Tim Parks)

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Henry James,
The Portrait of a Lady

Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*

E. M. Forster,
A Room with a View

Katherine Mansfield,
The Garden Party and Other Stories

Jane Bowles,
My Sister's Hand in Mine

Evan S. Connell, *Mrs. Bridge*

Frances Mayes,
Under the Tuscan Sun

OTHER IDEAS FOR YOUR READING GROUP

Enchanted April, starring Miranda Richardson, Jim Broadbent and Alfred Molina, directed by Mike Newell (film, England, 1991)

3. Mrs. Arbuthnot feels that she has never been as happy as she is at San Salvatore, “this was the simple happiness of complete harmony with her surroundings, the happiness that asks for nothing, that just accepts, just breathes, just is” (p. 60). Mrs. Wilkins compares San Salvatore to “heaven,” where “you don’t try to be, or do, you simply are” (p. 79). Describe the kind of happiness the characters find at San Salvatore. What is its source and ideals? How does it compare with, or contradict, the fulfillment the characters seek in their daily lives?
4. The necessity of beauty in everyday life is a recurring theme in *The Enchanted April*, but is it an unambiguous one? How has Lady Caroline’s beauty shaped her character? In what ways has it been a burden? Do you agree with her assessment of herself as “a spoilt, a sour, a suspicious, and a selfish spinster”? (p. 242).
5. Mrs. Wilkins claims to have visions of the future, and frequently states that she can “see” things. Is this a merely a turn of phrase, or does she believe her own visions? Is she always right?
6. In what ways is *The Enchanted April* like a play? Discuss in terms of the novel’s plot, structure, and denouement.
7. Is *The Enchanted April* a sentimental book, or a skeptical one? Are there times when the novel subverts its own seeming sentimentality? Find passages that might be overly romantic, but that are brought into balance by either witty dialogue or an ironic narrative voice. Is the book a comedy?
8. “For a long while past she had been aware that her life was a noise, but it had seemed to be very much about something; a noise, indeed, about so much that she felt she must get out of earshot for a little or she would be completely, and perhaps permanently, deafened. But suppose it was only a noise about nothing?” (p. 89). What leads to Lady Caroline’s epiphany? Does it apply to all of the women in *The Enchanted April*?
9. Why does Mrs. Arbuthnot lose the desire to pray while at San Salvatore? Why were work and prayer her only sources of satisfaction before her trip? Is her reawakened yearning for her husband a function of Italy only, or does she truly love him?
10. “Holidays, of course, were good, and were recognized by everybody as good, but ought they so completely to blot out, to make such havoc of, the realities?” (p. 146). Do you think it’s believable that the month the characters spent in Italy would spark such profound changes in the ways they see themselves and in the ways they relate to others? How permanent do you think these changes will be?
11. Why does Mr. Wilkins again begin to believe that his wife is desirable? How much of his initial interest in her is pragmatic, based on the social and professional utility of her connection to Lady Caroline? How do his feelings for his wife evolve during his time at San Salvatore?
12. Who do you think responsible for the Arbuthnots’ estrangement? Do you think that Mr. Arbuthnot will stop seeking the company of the Lady Carolines of the world after he and his wife return to London?
13. What are the parallels between the ways that Mr. Wilkins and Mr. Arbuthnot’s interest in their wives is renewed? What is your prediction of the futures of both of these couples?