

**Glenway Wescott** (1901–1987) grew up in Wisconsin, but moved to France with his companion Monroe Wheeler in 1925. Wescott’s early fiction, notably the stories in *Goodbye, Wisconsin* and the novel *The Grandmothers* (in which Alwyn Towers, the narrator of *The Pilgrim Hawk*, makes his first appearance), were set in his native Midwest. Later work included essays on political, literary, and spiritual subjects, as well as the novels *The Pilgrim Hawk* and *Apartment in Athens*. Wescott’s journals, recording his many literary and artistic friendships and offering an intimate view of his life as a gay man, were published posthumously under the title *Continual Lessons*.

**Michael Cunningham** is the author of six novels, including *The Hours*, which won the 1999 Pulitzer Prize in Fiction.

# THE PILGRIM HAWK: A LOVE STORY

By **Glenway Wescott**  
Introduction by **Michael Cunningham**

\$14.00 US / \$16.00 CAN / £7.99 UK

978-1-59017-457-9 paperback

“[In *The Pilgrim Hawk*] the reader is constantly being repositioned, constantly being forced to see something he didn’t quite see before. Mr. Wescott’s world is self-contained but precarious, and, like the real one, endlessly full of meaning.”

—Howard Moss, *The New Yorker*

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

Over the course of a single afternoon in a bucolic country home outside Paris, Glenway Wescott’s *The Pilgrim Hawk* captures the awkwardness of social niceties, the subtle ways a married couple can uplift and betray each other, the tenderness of friendship, and the complexity of love. The novel’s narrator, Alwyn Towers, an American expatriate, is visiting his friend Alexandra at her estate when two more of her friends come over: a well-to-do Irish couple, with a sulking trained hawk in tow.

As the afternoon goes on, Alwyn finds his conceptions about the couple challenged again and again; though the host and guests try to mind their manners, the truths that emerge about everyone involved are by turns hilarious and heartbreaking. With a sharp eye for detail and an unmistakable sympathy for each of his characters, Glenway Wescott has crafted a beautiful, compact story.

## FOR DISCUSSION

1. In the first few pages of the novel, what was your impression of the narrator? Did you get the sense that the novel begins in the midst of some longer recollection? Did this technique make you feel close to or removed from the narrator?
2. Alwyn begins attempting to characterize the relationship between the Cullens and Lucy, the hawk, right away. “Between remarks, in her glances at him, there was affection as bright as tears. And during the loving fuss she made over the great bird on her arm, she kept shifting her eyes in his direction, imploring him to try to like it too. It might have been a baby, and he a lover; or was it the other way around?” [p. 13]. As the afternoon goes on, does this initial judgment hold up?
3. *The Pilgrim Hawk* relies on many implicit and explicit parallels between hawk and human behavior—as when Mrs. Cullen says, on page 27, “I think it must frighten her to see things higher than she is. We’re like that sometimes ourselves, aren’t we?” How aware do you think the characters in the novel are of these connections? Why does the author choose a hawk as Mrs. Cullen’s companion?
4. Did you read the hawk as a sort of additional character, with her own motives and ambitions, or as a mirror reflecting whatever the human characters happened to project onto her? What words would you use to describe Lucy?

## OTHER NYRB CLASSICS OF INTEREST

**Apartment in Athens**, Glenway Wescott (introduction by David Leavitt)

**The Cost of Living: Early and Uncollected Stories**, Mavis Gallant (introduction by Jhumpa Lahiri)

**The Goshawk**, T.H. White (introduction by Marie Winn)

**The Go-Between**, L.P. Hartley (introduction by Colm Tóibín)

**Irretrievable**, Theodor Fontane (afterword by Phillip Lopate)

**The Peregrine**, J.A. Baker (introduction by Robert Macfarlane)

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Evelyn Waugh, *A Handful of Dust*

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*

Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*

Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*

William Somerset Maugham, *Up at the Villa*

5. Alex tells Alwyn midway through the book that although Mrs. Cullen is younger than her husband, financially stable, clever, and interesting, and even though Cullen has cheated on her, “She devoted herself entirely to him, every instant, year in and year out” [p. 38]. Why? How do you explain their marriage?
6. When Alwyn realizes that Cullen has been “a little tight all afternoon,” he feels badly about some of the earlier judgments he made: “No one had warned me that I was not seeing him at his best... So now I felt a slight embarrassment and grudging contrition,” he confesses [pp. 57-9]. Why does he feel this way? More broadly, how do his opinions of Mr. and Mrs. Cullen change as the novel goes on? By the end, does he like them? Do you?
7. In his introduction to this edition, Michael Cunningham suggests the existence of an upstairs/downstairs subplot. With reference to Alexandra’s servants, Cunningham writes: “One imagines they pass through this novel while living out an unwritten novel of their own, one in which they are the central characters, and the commotion created by those people in the parlor is important but secondary” [p. xvi]. How does Wescott hint at this intrigue among the servants? What, through them, might he be suggesting about class roles?
8. Why does Cullen cut Lucy free [p. 77]? Were you surprised by this action? Why doesn’t he kill her?
9. After the commotion in the Daimler, when the Cullens attempt to leave the first time, Mrs. Cullen says “I don’t even know which of us Larry thought of shooting, wife or chauffeur or haggard” [p. 98]. Which do you think is true, if any? Do Cullen’s actions throughout the day make more sense when you know about the gun?
10. What did you make of Alwyn’s relationship with Alex? They’re clearly close friends—did you get the impression that sexual or romantic tension existed between them, or not? Does knowing about the author’s own sexual identity inform your reading of the book in any way?
11. Why is the novel subtitled “A Love Story”?

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