

THE
CONNELL SHORT GUIDE
TO E.M. FORSTER'S



A ROOM WITH A VIEW

“Clear, elegant and authoritative guides – worthy of
the great masterpieces they analyse.”

ROBERT HARRIS

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE
NOVEL IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by Michael Patrick Allen

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Introduction

Few novels are more sceptical of guidebooks than *A Room With a View*. Some of E.M. Forster's characters are so caught up in reading about how to appreciate Florentine art and history they can hardly appreciate the present beauty of Florence in front of their eyes. Fortunately for the guide you are now reading, *A Room With a View* is also mistrustful of excessive scepticism about guides. A guide can perform the valuable service of making its reader stop and notice what he would otherwise pass by. This one aims to provide, in Forster's words, a few "different ways we can look at a novel".

The protagonist of *A Room With a View* is a young person in what one critic calls "the experimental season of life". As several generations of rapt readers testify, Forster provides Lucy Honeychurch with a compelling romantic (or courtship) plot: will she marry the passionate individualist, George Emerson, or the sardonic aesthete, Cecil Vyse? Or will she refuse to marry at all in order to make her own way through life? *A Room With a View* splendidly connects these urgent romantic questions with Lucy's equally urgent questions about her own self-development and place in the world. Lucy, as George Emerson's father notes, is in a "muddle". She struggles to live up to the ideals of her station in life until her encounter with the Emersons prompts her to question those very ideals. Then, Lucy must weigh

the value of instruction against the value of experience, without yet having enough of either.

Obscurely dissatisfied with the narrow life that has been chosen for her, Lucy wishes for something to “happen to her”. It does. She witnesses a murder at close hand and is rescued from a fainting spell by George Emerson. Afterward she tries to avoid him. By chance, she stumbles across him in a field of violets and he kisses her. Instead of clarifying her doubts about what she wants from life, these incidents throw Lucy into greater turmoil. Do the murder and the kiss prove the danger of stepping outside her narrow circle and its standards of proper behaviour? Or are they evidence of “the call of the blood”, a life of freedom and risks worth taking?

The passionate interest the other characters (and the reader) take in Lucy’s choices is motivated by more than solicitude for her happiness. When Lucy finds the values of her set stifling, she implicitly condemns the code of propriety that props up the social position of her closest relations. When she chooses to marry for love outside her class, she implicitly rejects the narrow freedoms of respectable spinsterhood. Forster’s candid and ironic narrator inserts himself into these debates. Like the novelists Henry Fielding and George Eliot before him, Forster gives the narrator permission to comment on the passions and misprisions of his characters. This intrusiveness irritated one of the novel’s first reviewers. Forster, he wrote, “is full of

views; what is worse, he is full of subtlety, a subtlety that rises up and assails you in pregnant epigram or paraded restraint”.

The novel’s views, or ideas, are presented with considerable subtlety and irony because, as Forster told a correspondent: “I can’t write down ‘I care about love, beauty, liberty, affection, and truth’ though I should like to.” *A Room With a View* is a novel of ideas. These ideas are intimately connected with the intrigue and suspense of Lucy’s romantic plot. Yet the central drama of the novel is not to be found in murder or stolen kisses or proposals, but in Lucy’s internal struggle to divide living from dead values. The novel is optimistic, not utopian on this score. The critic Lionel Trilling credits Forster with “a curious tough insight”, and notes that “clear ideas are perhaps a sign of ignorance, muddle the sign of true knowledge”.

A summary of the plot

Part one of the novel begins with an overheard conversation. Charlotte Bartlett and her young cousin, Lucy Honeychurch, have just arrived in Florence. Over dinner, Charlotte complains that the proprietress of Pension Bertolini has given away their promised rooms “with a view”. For her part, Lucy is disappointed to learn that the Bertolini, with its “Cockney” landlady and portraits of Lord Tennyson and Queen Victoria, hardly

seems foreign. Charlotte, who delights in playing the martyr, insists that the next available room should go to Lucy. Their dispute is overheard by Mr Emerson, who is sitting nearby. He interjects himself without introduction into their conversation, saying: "I have a view, I have a view." Charlotte is as shocked by his offer as Emerson is baffled by her refusal to take it. Fortunately, Mr Beebe, an affable clergyman already known to Lucy and Charlotte, arrives in time to persuade Charlotte to overcome her misgivings.

Lucy and Charlotte are then introduced to the circle of English visitors around the Bertolini, all of whom come in for mild ridicule. The priggish Reverend Cuthbert Eager leads the English Church in Florence; the middle-aged Miss Alans are his dutiful parishioners. Miss Eleanor Lavish is a novelist who shocks and delights the other English visitors with her mild unconventionality. She offers to escort Lucy to the Basilica of Santa Croce, exhorting Lucy to leave her guidebook behind so she can experience "the true Italy". However, she abandons Lucy on the steps of the church to chase after "local colour" for her novel. Inside, Lucy falls in with Mr Emerson and his son George. They overhear Rev Eager lauding the faith and fervour of mediaeval art to his parishioners. Mr Emerson cannot help interjecting in favor of humanity and realism, though he is pained to discover he has "ruined the enjoyment" of Rev Eager's party with his interruption.

Mr Emerson believes his son is suffering from an existential depression. Lucy, he thinks, can convince his son to see value in living. Like her cousin Charlotte, Lucy is shocked by Mr Emerson's extreme candour. Back at the Bertolini, Lucy plays Beethoven on the piano in triumphantly expressive style. Mr Beebe reflects on the difference between her outwardly unremarkable demeanour and the passionate intensity of her playing. "If Miss Honeychurch ever takes to live as she plays," he reflects, "it will be very exciting."

Stirred by the Beethoven, Lucy sets out alone into Florence. She wishes for something to "happen" to her. After buying some photographs, she wanders into the Piazza Signoria where she sees one Italian murder another over a trifling sum of money. She faints from shock. When she returns to consciousness, George Emerson is supporting her in his arms. The murder and the embrace send Lucy into a panic. She attempts to slip away, but George insists on walking her back to the Bertolini. On their route, George suddenly throws her photographs – which are stained with the victim's blood – into the River Arno. He tells her that something more than the murder has happened. George concludes "I shall want to live" and Lucy hears an "unexpected melody" in the sound of the river.

Frightened by this intimacy, she attempts to avoid George. However, they are thrown together when the two clergymen arrange an outing to the

countryside. The young Italian driving their coach is discovered canoodling with a young woman. Rev Eager and Mr Emerson quarrel over whether the driver should be punished. Lucy becomes separated from the rest of the party and goes in search of Mr Beebe. Forgetting the Italian word for clergyman, she asks the driver to direct her to “my good man”. He takes her to a field overflowing with violets, where George Emerson kisses her. Charlotte sees them and tells Lucy that George is an ill-bred sexual adventurer who “takes a brutal pleasure in insulting a woman”. The cousins depart the next morning for Rome.

The second part of the novel shifts to Windy Corner, the Honeychurch home in a Sussex village on its way to becoming a suburb. Lucy accepts the proposal of Cecil Vyse, whom she has previously twice rejected. Cecil, who is rich, clever, and well-connected, has conceived an aesthetic attraction to Lucy. She resembles, he thinks, the enigmatic women painted by Leonardo. Over the course of their engagement, Cecil grows increasingly irritated and, consequently, supercilious with Windy Corner and its inhabitants.

By chance, Cecil meets the Emersons in the National Gallery. Unaware of George’s attentions to Lucy in Florence, Cecil puckishly arranges for the unconventional father and son to rent a “semi-detached” villa near Windy Corner in order to ruffle the sensibilities of the neighbourhood. Lucy’s 19-year old brother, Freddy, takes George Emerson

and Mr Beebe bathing in the “Sacred Lake” near Windy Corner. Lucy, out walking with Cecil, encounters the half-naked George Emerson for the first time since Florence. Freddy then invites George Emerson to a tennis party at Windy Corner. Cecil refuses to play in “public” so Lucy completes the foursome. As they play, Cecil mockingly reads aloud from an absurd novel. The novel, it transpires, is by Miss Lavish, writing under a pseudonym. Cecil obliviously reads aloud a chapter that describes a barely altered account of George and Lucy’s kiss in the field of violets.

As they walk toward the house, George kisses Lucy again. Lucy falsifies her reaction to the event, denying her profound attraction to George. He confesses his love for her. Cecil stifles her spirit, he says, but “I want you to have your own thoughts even when I hold you in my arms”. She refuses him, but is deeply affected by his appeal and immediately breaks off her engagement with Cecil. Having denied her head and heart, she prepares to join Charlotte in the “vast armies of the benighted... who have sinned against passion and truth”.

Now eager to leave Windy Corner, Lucy arranges to travel to Greece with the Miss Alans. Mr Beebe approves of her determination not to marry, though her mother is pained by her increasing resemblance to Charlotte. Shortly before she is due to leave, Lucy encounters Mr Emerson in Mr Beebe’s study. After she confesses to him that she has broken off her engagement to Cecil, Mr Emerson instantly sees

that she loves George. She is in a “muddle”, he tells her, and on the point of consecrating herself to a life of disappointment. Lucy is angry, then confused, and finally persuaded. In order to gather the strength to face her disapproving family, she kisses Mr Emerson.

George and Lucy marry. In the final chapter, they sit together in her old room in the Bertolini. Charlotte, they realise, knew Lucy would encounter Mr Emerson in Mr Beebe’s study and allowed it to happen. Despite her surface antagonism to the match and repeated insistence that George is a cad, deep down she was on the side of love.

Narration in *A Room With a View*

About half way through *A Room With a View*, Forster provides a wonderfully exaggerated example of the novel’s key narrative technique:

Playing bumble-puppy with Minnie Beebe, niece to the rector, and aged thirteen – an ancient and most honourable game, which consists in striking tennis balls high into the air, so that they fall over the net and immoderately bounce; some hit Mrs. Honeychurch; others are lost. The sentence is confused, but the better illustrates Lucy’s state of mind, for she was trying to talk to Mr. Beebe at the same time.

The passage is coloured by Lucy’s state of mind, much as light appears coloured by the stained glass it passes through. The first sentence, as the narrator points out, is grammatically “confused”. Like Lucy, it is distracted from its proper object: it consists of one long dependent clause that never arrives at its syntactically necessary subject and predicate. As readers, we are in Lucy’s head, even if these are not exactly her words. Of course, *A Room With a View* employs the third person (“she”), not the first (“I”). Moreover, Lucy would have no reason to explain the rules of bumble-puppy nor to identify her playmate. Yet the manner of explanation and identification illustrate her way of thinking and feeling at the moment when she is playing bumble-puppy with Minnie.

This technique, often called “free indirect discourse”, is usually more subtle in the novel than it is here. Take the first sentence of James Joyce’s short story “The Dead”: “Lily, the caretaker’s daughter, was *literally* run off her feet”. The intensifier “literally” is the sort of word Lily not Joyce would use. Hugh Kenner points out that “it is Lily, not the austere author [Joyce], whose habit it is to say literally when figuratively is meant”. In *A Room With a View*, Charlotte Bartlett is usually referred to as “Miss Bartlett”. Naturally, Lucy thinks of her as “Charlotte” and that is how she appears in third person descriptions particularly inflected by Lucy’s consciousness, as in “Charlotte,

with the complacency of fate, led her from the river to the Piazza Signoria”.

Free indirect discourse is one important way that novelists manipulate point of view. Most of *A Room With a View* looks at the world from Lucy’s perspective; it is really her story. However, more peripheral characters like Charlotte, Mr Beebe, Cecil, and even the coach driver, “Phaethon”, sometimes assume centrality. The world looks different from their different standpoints. Crucially, the absence of Charlotte’s perspective near the end of the novel allows Lucy and George to speculate about her unconscious affirmation of their love.

In *Aspects of the Novel*, Forster takes a principled stand against fixed rules of narration. Novelists, he writes, have no duty of consistency in the matter of point of view or the related matter of omniscience. The narrator’s knowledge of his character’s histories, motives, and fates is extremely elastic. Narration will, at times, inhabit a character’s limited perspective on reality along with the particular emotional timbre of his point of view. For instance, the incongruous contents of the drawing room at Windy Corner – unstylish furniture and a bone from Freddy’s medical studies – are described with peevish superiority because that is precisely how Cecil regards them. Then, for a moment, the view widens to emphasise the pitiable limitations of his perspective: “For Cecil considered the bone and the Maples’ furniture separately; he did not realise that, taken together,



Maggie Smith, Rupert Graves and Helena Bonham Carter in James Ivory's 1986 film adaptation of *A Room with a View*

they kindled the room into the life he desired.” “The right to intermittent knowledge,” Forster writes in *Aspects of the Novel*, is one of the novelist’s perquisites.

Joyce’s alter ego, Stephen Dedalus, compares “the artist” to “the God of creation” who “remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails”. In contrast, the narrator of *A Room With a View* is very often in the foreground. To be sure, the novel’s narrator is not identical with its author; he is a fictional persona. Yet if he is a character in this limited sense, he is not known to the other characters nor implicated in the plot. The