

NevilShuteOnTheBeach1957TextTVS

By Tim Van Schmidt

On the Beach

by Nevil Shute

It doesn't take long for Nevil Shute to nail the problem to the wall that continues to eat away at the characters in his 1957 novel "On the Beach." That is, that all the death and all the waste that occurs because of a nuclear conflict just isn't fair.

Shute gets it said pretty much right away in the beginning of the book. To begin with, an Australian navy officer assigned as a liaison to an American submarine invites the captain to his home for some beach time and a party. The Australian and his wife call upon a friend to keep the American busy during his stay, but her insatiable taste for alcohol makes her quite a handful.

The friend has become a lush in the face of impending doom- the radiation clouds that are rapidly approaching their location after a nuclear war in the north- and she doesn't mind sharing why, lamenting how "bloody unfair" it was that everyone had to die because countries thousands of miles away had a devastating war they didn't participate in there in Australia. The waiting- and knowing what's coming- had turned her into an alcoholic.

The same thing makes others act differently and that nagging feeling of being victims draws a tragic pall over the final months of their lives. Some would rather keep busy with their work, some take up the pursuits they have always dreamed of- like racing a car in the Grand Prix- while others try to deny the facts. "On the Beach" is a tearjerker to say the least. There isn't a page in the book that doesn't refer to death.

One interesting idea that stuck out was a section that discussed a rumor that some government agency was using its dwindling time etching a history of the war- and presumably the extinct human race- into glass and sealing them into bricks. These histories were then to be placed in a vault in a mountain top judged a likely destination for future visitors. This reveals a desire to preserve some of the basic knowledge of the human endeavor in a form that could outlast paper, electronics and apparently the race itself.

"On the Beach" is imaginative and mostly descriptive, following the actions of the characters and what they say, but not trying to guess what they are thinking. Instead, you end up starting to wonder what you yourself would use those last few months for.

What I disagree with most is the decision of the submarine captain to remain true to his wife back in devastated Connecticut, denying the affection of his lady friend in Australia. His Australian friend becomes a different person because of him, but he holds fast to his ideals despite the facts he himself witnessed. It makes me feel that, especially in the last hours of humanity, love should not be denied no matter what promises were made when the world was different.

More 1957 Books:

Isaac Asimov - The Naked Sun

L. Sprague de Camp - Solomon's Stone

Ian Fleming - From Russia with Love

Jack Kerouac - On the Road

Boris Pasternak - Doctor Zhivago

Ayn Rand - Atlas Shrugged

Dr. Seuss - The Cat in the Hat, How the Grinch Stole Christmas

Art Linkletter — Kids Say the Darndest Things

Jean-Paul Sartre — Existentialism and Human Emotions