

The Master

By Colm Toibin

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The Master By Colm Toibin

Like Michael Cunningham in "The Hours, " Colm Toibin captures the extraordinary mind and heart of a great writer. Brilliant and profoundly moving, "The Master" tells the story of Henry James, a man born into one of America's first intellectual families two decades before the Civil War. James left his country to live in Paris, Rome, Venice, and London among privileged artists and writers. In stunningly resonant prose, Toibin captures the loneliness and longing, the hope and despair of a man who never married, never resolved his sexual identity, and whose forays into intimacy inevitably failed him and those he tried to love. The emotional intensity of Toibin's portrait of James is riveting. Time and again, James, a master of psychological subtlety in his fiction, proves blind to his own heart and incapable of reconciling his dreams of passion with his own fragility. Toibin is "a great and humanizing writer" who describes complex relationships in "supple, beautifully modulated prose" ("The Washington Post Book World"). In "The Master, " he has written his most ambitious and heartbreaking novel, an extraordinarily inventive encounter with a character at the cusp of the modern age, elusive to his own friends and even family, yet astonishingly vivid in these pages.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly
It's a bold writer indeed who dares to put himself inside the mind of novelist Henry James, but that is what Tóibín, highly talented Irish author of *The Heather Blazing* and *The Blackwater Lightship*, has ventured here, with a remarkable degree of success. The book is a fictionalized study, based on many biographical materials and family accounts, of the novelist's interior life from the moment in London in 1895 when James's hope to succeed in the theater rather than on the printed page was eclipsed by the towering success of his younger contemporary Oscar Wilde. Thereafter the book ranges seamlessly back and forth over James's life, from his memories of his prominent Brahmin family in the States-including the suicide of his father and the tragic early death of his troubled sister Alice-to his settling in England, in a cherished house of his own choosing in Rye. Along the way it offers hints, no more, of James's troubled sexual identity, including his fascination with a young English manservant, his (apparently platonic) night in bed with Oliver Wendell Holmes and his curious obsession with a dashing Scandinavian sculptor of little talent but huge charisma. Another recurrent motif is James's absorption in the lives of spirited, highly intelligent but unhappy young women who die prematurely, which helped to inform some of his strongest fiction. The subtlety and empathy with which Tóibín inhabits James's psyche and captures the fleeting emotional nuances of his world are beyond praise, and even the echoes of the master's style ring true. Far more than a stunt, this is a riveting, if inevitably somewhat evasive, portrait of the creative life.
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From Bookmarks Magazine
The Master may not elevate James to the status achieved by Virginia Woolf in Michael Cunningham’s *The Hours*, but it’s a remarkable accomplishment. Most readers, regardless of their familiarity with James’s work, will appreciate its timeless themes, including war, family, character, and ambition, and graceful, evocative prose. Tóibín (*Blackwater Lightship*) offers a humane portrait of the writer in middle age, ambitious and mentally energetic but emotionally aloof. Though focused on five years, he captures all stages of James’s life, from his Yankee childhood and European young adulthood to middle-aged angst. Sometimes Tóibín veers too much into fantasy, mixing up his and James’s voices; at other points, more imagination could have animated the text. Yet, there’s no doubt that *The Master* is the work of—well, another kind of master.

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From Booklist
Starred Review This distinguished Irish novelist boldly offers a fictional depiction of the last two decades of the life of the great god of American letters, Henry James. We come in on James at a low point in his career, the 1895 failure on the London stage of his play *Guy Domville*. This setback ignites "months of lethargy and pain and disappointment." What Toibin has so boldly done--and done so brilliantly and successfully--is forge a sympathetic but not mushy imagining of James' interior life at this crossroads, a picture that renders "the Master" astonishingly lifelike. Toibin gives him ordinary human qualities, such as fear and loneliness and longing, in a shaping and shading process that has not been an easy task, even in the most thoughtful, scrupulously researched biography. Obviously, by Toibin's illustration, fiction is the best way to achieve such a result, the best approach to infusing this somewhat cold, distant, and removed-from-real-life literary icon with an embracing degree of warmth and humanity. Even the reader who knows little about Henry James or his work can enjoy this marvelously intelligent and engaging novel, which presents not on a silver platter but in tender, opened hands a beautifully nuanced psychological portrait. *Brad Hooper*

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Clarice Johnson:

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Joshua Hsu:

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