

B O O K S

Nevil Shute

Everything Old is New Again

BY DUNCAN BROWN

BESTSELLERS COME AND go, but some books withstand the test of time and continue to captivate readers. Nevil Shute was a best-selling author from the 1940s to 1960. Many of his books continue in print today, for a simple reason. Shute is a very good storyteller, and has the gift of making you interested in what he is interested in.

Shute's life was a varied one. He started as an engineer, and later learned to fly. Flying is a constant element in many of his books. When he began writing full-time, he lived in England; later, he moved to Australia. This move is also reflected in several of his books.

Shute's breakthrough book was *An Old Captivity*, published in 1940. He chronicles the long and difficult flight of an archeological expedition on its way to Greenland. Under the stress and sleep deprivation of the journey, the main character experiences a dream/memory, of life as a slave on a ship of Leif Erickson as he sails to America long before Columbus, and discovers "Vinland the Good," what we now know as Cape Cod, Massachusetts.

Pied Piper is one of Shute's most charming. It follows an old Englishman as he journeys to France to retrieve some children of a friend back to England. But he hasn't counted on the fall of France to Germany, or the dive-bombers strafing the roads. The quiet courage and competence of Shute's hero John Howard as he gathers child after child (not just the ones he was sent for) while heading to safety makes a cracking good read.

The Chequer Board, another great read, is set just after the war. A man learns he

will die of a wound suffered during the war. He decides to set out on a quest to learn the fates of three men he met in a hospital ward before he dies. Shute's writing is vivid and captivating, and the humanity he evokes drives the story.

No Highway is one of my favorites. It's the first of Shute's books I read, and one of the few books I've read in one sitting. It's the gripping tale of an aircraft engineer who develops a new theory of metal fatigue and finds that a brand new airliner's tail has a fatal flaw: the theory predicts it will fall off after several thousand hours. The engineer is flying to Canada to investigate one of these crashed airliners when he discovers that he is actually flying on one of the same models, and it has flown just about the number of hours that his theory warns about. This book was later made into a fine movie, *No Highway in the Sky*, starring Jimmy Stewart and Marlene Dietrich.

After *No Highway* came another of Shute's best, *A Town Like Alice*. It's a huge tale, beginning in World War II on Malaysia, and picking up after the war in London and Australia. I can't give out too many details, but a lot of people have fallen in love with Shute and his storytelling by reading this book. Some of

Shute's ideas about how isolated communities can thrive economically are applicable even today (for instance, in Iowa). There have also been several fine movies and a mini-series made from this book. I



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recommend the version starring Brian Brown and Rachel Ward.

After *Alice* came *Round the Bend*. This book starts as a fascinating tale of a man founding a round-the-world air freight

company. But one of the man's chief mechanics starts a new religion among the aircraft mechanics, a religion based on the love that people put into good work. (Not a bad idea for a man who retained his love of engineering long after he had become a full-time writer.)

On the Beach, Shute's best-known book, is, at first blush, depressing. People in Australia await the end of the world: deadly radioactive clouds are drifting their way from the rest of a silent world. But Shute recasts this. If you knew you would die in a few weeks, what would you do? How would you live? How would you affirm who you are and what your life means? Even in our post-Cold War days, these are questions worth considering as we ponder subtler threats around us. The movie based on the book, starring Gregory Peck, is also worth watching.

Shute's final book is another of my favorites. *Trustee From the Toolroom* sends a simple man who writes about the building of miniature working machines on a world-spanning quest to save his niece's legacy after her parents are lost at sea. He must trust to fate and the kindness of strangers in order to prevail. His amazing journey would need a Tom Hanks to adequately translate onto the big screen.

I haven't had space to mention all of Shute's books. You can find my complete bibliography of his books at <http://www.kdsi.net/~dbrown/shute/index.htm>. You can find the books themselves at your local library or bookstore.

Also, if you're visiting Fairfield, check out 21st Century Bookstore, and, if it's Saturday, say hi to Shirley Norway, one of Nevil Shute's daughters. □