

On the Beach

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It was Maggie who suggested the book. Adrian was sure he'd read something by Nevil Shute before, but he didn't recognise the title. Sally, who was always on her phone, discovered that 'On the Beach' was available free on the internet. After an extended debate about how much better it was to read a real book, the group agreed it would be good to discuss something that had been written in 1957.

They always met on the third Tuesday of the month so there was no doubt about that, or the time, but the location needed to be fixed. Maggie would have the painters in, so her house wouldn't be available for the next meeting. Sally offered, but she lived out in the sticks, and no one ever wanted to make the trip, not even if the journey was shared. In the end the matter was settled: October's meeting would be at Tina's place. There was easy parking and it was relatively central for everyone. Maggie would give Adrian a lift, and Sue would collect Bill at 1.00pm on the dot. After the usual round of farewells, the group dispersed: homework set.

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Tina plumped up the cushions and counted the number of seats she'd provided around the glass topped coffee table, specially polished for the occasion. The doorbell rang. It was Maggie, always the first to arrive, this time with Adrian in tow.

Soon the room was alive with chatter – hospital appointments cancelled, test results due, grandchildren and their achievements, holiday plans and how the painters were getting on.

There were just enough chairs to go round, and the assembled company gradually fell silent. They were in Tina's house, and it was her job to say: 'Who wants to start?'

Adrian began, forthright as ever. 'I didn't like it at all: in fact, I didn't even get to the end. It was so predictable, and so miserable. I could tell what was coming from the very first page.'

Sally took issue with Adrian's interpretation. 'I disagree. I found it quite gripping. OK, so the characters were true to type, but the book gives a powerful sense of a society slipping into oblivion. I think the ship's excursions were a bit long winded, but the idea makes sense: a submarine and a search for life. I think that's plausible, don't you?'

Bill. 'I agree with Sally, but I thought the writing was really dated. Everyone is so polite and so well behaved. All stiff upper lip. I have to say that grated with me. I'm pretty sure there would be more violence and more disruption, not just the city cleaners giving up work.'

Tina: 'It's a story though, it doesn't have to be true to life. The lunacy of that mad car racer, what was his name, James? No, I think it was John, anyway, no one would behave like that – deliberately poisoning a little dog!'

Bill: 'But they were all going to die, so it does make sense, even for the dog.'

Sally: 'I didn't like those parts, and I didn't believe the stuff about euthanasia, but the everyday aspect was impressive, and the sense of continuity – planting things in the garden, being a good farmer, starting a course on shorthand and typing. I agree it was a bit laboured, but there was a serious point, everything we do is somehow oriented to the future, even if we don't think of that way. One of the reviews I read said it was "Heartbreaking but hopeful" at one and the same time'.

Adrian: 'I didn't think it was either. The whole romantic interest was tedious, and to be honest I'm glad they all died.'

Sally: 'That's just the ending. I thought the process was described really well: using bicycles and horses because there was no petrol, supplies of things dwindling in the background and people making do, accepting their fate in an uncomplaining way. OK so they needed to drink up the good wines, and there is a lot of brandy in the story, but that's as far as it goes. Being decent, faithful and chaste, these are the more powerful themes.'

Bill: 'That's what I mean about being old fashioned.'

Tina: 'I didn't like the ending. I thought that at least someone would survive.'

Adrian: 'But they didn't did they!'

Tina: 'No, but it took me a while to realise that so many characters were in a state of denial. I wanted a good yarn, and this was not what I was expecting.'

Sue: 'I was just so busy I didn't get time to read the book, but what about the title? Why is it called "On the Beach"?''



Credit: still shot from the 1959 film, 'On the Beach'. <https://archive.org/details/on-the-beach-1959>

As the rest of the group knew from past experience, Sue *never* (underline never) did the reading – but she was always keen to join in, and she was always first to the tea and cake that was provided afterwards.

Maggie: 'I think it is partly metaphorical: the whole book is set at the end of the world, and a beach is a liminal place. That's one answer. Another is that the final scene is of one of the characters bidding a last good-bye from a beach.'

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Ten minutes or so before the discussion was due to end, the book group at Tina's house was disrupted by multiple phones receiving an emergency alert at the same time. The members looked at the messages and then at each other, puzzled. Surely this must be some kind of joke? But it wasn't. 'Nuclear weapons - crossing the Atlantic and coming this way. Take cover immediately'.