

OLD FILTH

By Jane Gardam
Reading Group Guide
Prepared by Brian Gittis

Book Description

Sir Edward Feathers has had a brilliant career, from his early days as a lawyer in Southeast Asia, where he earned the nickname Old Filth to his final working days as a respected judge at the English bar. Yet through it all he has carried with him the wounds of a difficult and emotionally hollow childhood. Now an eighty-year-old widower living in comfortable seclusion in Dorset, Feathers is finally free from the regimen of work and the sentimental scaffolding that has sustained him throughout his life. He slips back into the past with ever mounting frequency and intensity, and on the tide of these vivid, lyrical musings, Feathers approaches a reckoning with his own history. Not all the old filth, it seems, can be cleaned away.

Borrowing from biography and history, Jane Gardam has written a literary masterpiece reminiscent of Rudyard Kipling's *Baa Baa, Black Sheep* that retraces much of the twentieth century's torrid and momentous history. Feathers' childhood in Malaya during the British Empire's heyday, his schooling in pre-war England, his professional success in Southeast Asia and his return to England toward the end of the millennium, are vantage points from which the reader can observe the march forward of an eventful era and the steady progress of that man, Sir Edward Feathers, Old Filth himself, who embodies the century's fate.

Discussion Questions

1. The anagram FILTH (Failed in London, Try Hong Kong) brings the theme of adaptation to the forefront of the novel. One of Filth's defining characteristics is his ability to adapt to adverse circumstances. How does Filth's adaptation to the struggles of old age compare to his professional adaptation? Do any other types of change become essential to Filth's survival?
2. Though Sir Feathers' life does not take the form of a tragedy, can he be said to have a tragic flaw?



Praise for *Old Filth*

A Best Book of the Year choice by:

The New York Times Book Review
The Washington Post (Jonathan Yardley)
The San Francisco Chronicle
New York Magazine
The Globe & Mail
Slate

“Read the very British novel by Jane Gardam. You will find a character that defies stereotyping.”—The Grand Rapids Press

“Gardam's novel is an anthology of such bittersweet scenes, rendered by a novelist at the very top of her form.”—New York Times

“Gardam is an exquisite storyteller, picking up threads, laying them down, returning to them and giving them new meaning [...] “Old Filth” is sad, funny, beautiful and haunting.”—Seattle Times

“‘Old Filth’ [...] will bring immense pleasure to readers who treasure fiction that is intelligent, witty, sophisticated and -- a quality encountered all too rarely in contemporary culture -- adult.”—Washington Post

“In assured, bone-hard prose, Gardam draws lines between Filth's all-but-orphaned youth, the traumas he suffered during and after the Blitz, and his bewildering new life as a widower in the modern English countryside.”—Entertainment Weekly

“This mordantly funny novel examines the life of Sir Edward Feathers, a desiccated barrister known to colleagues and friends as Old Filth (the nickname stands for ‘Failed in London Try Hong Kong’).”—New Yorker

“A broad and colorful and complete tale, with a poignant heart.”—Philadelphia Inquirer

“Anglophile readers wondering who their next favorite British writer will be need to look no further than Gardam.”—Booklist (starred review)

3. Eddie finds himself in a complicated situation when Isobel tries to seduce him. Though he evidently wants to act he ultimately restrains himself. Would a decision to go to bed with Isobel have changed his life?

4. The constantly fluctuating mood of *Old Filth* is, by turns, warm and cold. At some points, especially in Eddie's childhood, Gardam's voice is almost playful. But the story also has a dark undercurrent. At the end of the novel, a closing moment of optimism as Filth arrives in Hong Kong is interrupted by his sudden death. Is *Old Filth* an optimistic book?

5. Though Filth and Betty may strike us in many ways as conventional, the revelation that Betty had a lover suggests that their marital problems ran a little deeper. From what you know about these characters, can we speculate as to what these problems might have been?

6. On a related note, how does Filth and Betty's relationship compare to that of Oliver and Vanessa? Filth's reaction to their life suggests it is a modern relationship scandalous to Filth's generation. Does it seem like their relationship will last? To what extent does it reflect the time in which they are living?

7. Filth is largely contemptuous of the rising generation—especially their lack of culture. Yet we learn that Filth himself is not particularly well-read and does not boast an extensive knowledge of art or music. How much of Filth's scorn for the rising generation is part of the subjective of experience of aging that many people experience? To what extent does this novel suggest an actual decline in British culture that would justify Filth's resentment?

8. By giving them different names, Gardam practically makes the young Eddie Feathers and Old Filth two separate characters. Are they really? How much of Eddie can we still see in Old Filth? Are the characters in this novel completely different people in their old age?

About the Author

Jane Gardam's first book, *Black Faces, White Faces* (1975), a collection of short stories, won both the David Higham Prize for Fiction and the Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize. Subsequent collections of short stories include *The Pangs of Love and Other Stories* (1983), winner of the Katherine Mansfield Award and *Going into a Dark House* (1994), which was awarded the PEN Macmillan Silver Pen Award (1995). Gardam's first novel, *God on the Rocks* (1978), was adapted for television in 1992. It won the Prix Baudelaire (France) in 1989 and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. Her other novels include *The Queen of the Tambourine* (1991), which won the Whitbread Novel Award; and *The Flight of the Maidens* (2000), which was adapted for BBC Radio 4's Woman's Hour.

In 1999 Jane Gardam was awarded the Heywood Hill Literary Prize in recognition of a distinguished literary career.

"Readers of Jane Gardam's novel, *Old Filth*, will no doubt find it a masterpiece in storytelling."—Dallas Morning News

"The marvelously versatile Gardam dips into British imperial history for her extraordinary portrait of a Raj orphan."—Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

"Both witty and poignant, this work is more than a character study; through her protagonist, Gardam offers a view of the last days of empire as seen from post-9/11 Britain."—Library Journal