

W. Somerset Maugham

BRITISH WRITER

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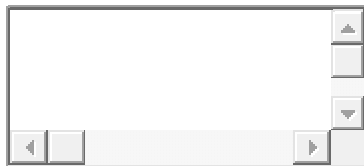
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Alternative Title: William Somerset Maugham

W. Somerset Maugham, in full **William Somerset Maugham**, (born Jan. 25, 1874, [Paris](#), France—died Dec. 16, 1965, Nice), English novelist, playwright, and short-story writer whose work is characterized by a clear unadorned style, cosmopolitan settings, and a shrewd understanding of [human nature](#).

Maugham was orphaned at the age of 10; he was brought up by an uncle and educated at King's School, Canterbury. After a year at [Heidelberg](#), he entered St. Thomas' medical school, London, and qualified as a doctor in 1897. He drew upon his experiences as an obstetrician in his first [novel](#), *Liza of Lambeth* (1897), and its success, though small, encouraged him to abandon medicine. He

traveled in Spain and Italy and in 1908 achieved a theatrical triumph—four plays running in London at once—that brought him financial security. During [World War I](#) he worked as a secret agent. After the war he resumed his interrupted travels and, in 1928, bought a villa on Cape Ferrat in the south of [France](#), which became his permanent home.

His reputation as a novelist rests primarily on four books: [Of Human Bondage](#) (1915), a semi-autobiographical account of a young medical student's painful progress toward maturity; [The Moon and Sixpence](#) (1919), an account of an unconventional artist, suggested by the life of Paul Gauguin; [Cakes and Ale](#) (1930), the story of a famous novelist, which is thought to contain caricatures of [Thomas Hardy](#) and Hugh Walpole; and [The Razor's Edge](#) (1944), the story of a young American war veteran's quest for a satisfying way of life. Maugham's plays, mainly Edwardian social comedies, soon became dated, but his short stories have increased in popularity. Many portray the conflict of Europeans in alien surroundings that provoke strong emotions, and Maugham's skill in handling plot, in the manner of [Guy de Maupassant](#), is distinguished by economy and suspense. In *The Summing Up* (1938) and *A Writer's Notebook* (1949) Maugham explains his philosophy of life as a resigned atheism and a certain skepticism about the extent of man's innate goodness and intelligence; it is this that gives his work its astringent cynicism.