

E. M. Forster



E. M. Forster, by [Dora Carrington](#)
c. 1924–1925

Born	Henry Morgan Forster 1 January 1879 Marylebone , England
Died	7 June 1970 (aged 91) Coventry , England
Occupation	Writer (novels, short stories, essays)
Alma mater	King's College, Cambridge
Period	1901–1970
Genre	Realism , symbolism , modernism
Subject	Class division, gender, homosexuality

Edward Morgan Forster (1 January 1879 – 7 June 1970) was an English novelist, short story writer, essayist and [librettist](#). Many of his novels examine class difference and hypocrisy, including [A Room with a View](#) (1908), [Howards End](#) (1910) and [A Passage to India](#) (1924). The last brought him his greatest success. He was nominated for the [Nobel Prize in Literature](#) in 16 different years.^[1]^[2]

Early years

Forster, born at 6 Melcombe Place, [Dorset Square](#), London NW1, a building no longer standing, was the only child of the Anglo-Irish Alice Clara "Lily" (née Whichelo) and a Welsh architect, Edward Morgan Llewellyn Forster. He was registered as Henry Morgan Forster, but accidentally baptised Edward Morgan Forster.^[3] His father died of [tuberculosis](#) on 30 October 1880 before Morgan's second birthday.^[4] In 1883, he and his mother moved to [Rooks Nest](#), near [Stevenage](#), [Hertfordshire](#) until 1893. This served as a model for *Howards End* in his novel of that name. It is listed [Grade I](#) for historic interest and literary associations.^[5] He had fond memories of his childhood there.

Among Forster's ancestors were members of the [Clapham Sect](#), a social reform group within the [Church of England](#). Forster inherited £8,000 in [trust](#) (the equivalent of about £990,000 in 2017)^[6] from his paternal great-aunt [Marianne Thornton](#) (daughter of the abolitionist [Henry Thornton](#)), who died on 5 November 1887.^[7] The money was enough to live on and enabled him to become a writer. He attended as a day boy [Tonbridge School](#) in Kent, where the school theatre has been named in his honour,^[8] although he is known to have been unhappy there.^[9]

At [King's College, Cambridge](#), between 1897 and 1901,^[10] he became a member of a discussion society known as the [Apostles](#) (formally named the Cambridge *Conversazione* Society). They met in secret, and discussed their work on philosophical and moral questions. Many of its members went on to constitute what came to be known as the [Bloomsbury Group](#), of which Forster was a member in the 1910s and 1920s. There is a famous recreation of Forster's Cambridge at the beginning of *The Longest Journey*. The Schlegel sisters of *Howards End* are based to some degree on [Vanessa](#) and [Virginia Stephen](#).^[11]

Forster was gay. In 1906 he fell in love with [Syed Ross Masood](#), a 17-year-old future Oxford student he tutored in Latin. The Indian had more of a romantic, poetic view of friendship, confusing Forster with constant avowals of his love.^[12]

After leaving university, he travelled in continental Europe with his mother. They moved to Weybridge, Surrey, where he wrote all six of his novels. In 1914, he visited Egypt, Germany and India with the classicist [Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson](#), by which time he had written all but one of his novels.^[13] As a [conscientious objector](#) in the First World War, Forster served as a Chief Searcher (for missing servicemen) for the [British Red Cross](#) in [Alexandria](#), Egypt.^[14] Though conscious of his repressed desires, it was only at this time, while stationed in Egypt, that he "lost his R [respectability]" to a wounded soldier in 1917.^[15]

Forster spent a second spell in India in the early 1920s as private secretary to [Tukojirao III](#), [Maharajah](#) of [Dewas](#). *The Hill of Devi* is his non-fictional account of this period. After returning to London from India, he completed the last novel of his to be published in his lifetime, *A Passage to India* (1924), for which he won the [James Tait Black Memorial Prize](#) for fiction. He also edited the letters of [Eliza Fay](#) (1756–1816) from India, in an edition first published in 1925.^[16] In 2012, [Tim Leggatt](#), who knew Forster for his last 15 years, wrote a memoir using unpublished correspondence with him dating from those years.^[17]

After *A Passage to India*

In the 1930s and 1940s Forster became a notable broadcaster on [BBC Radio](#) and a public figure associated with the [Union of Ethical Societies](#). In addition to his broadcasting, he advocated individual liberty and penal reform and opposed censorship by writing articles, sitting on committees and signing letters. His weekly book review during the war was commissioned by [George Orwell](#), who was the talks producer at the India Section of the BBC from 1941 to 1943.^[18] He was awarded a [Benson Medal](#) in 1937.

Forster was homosexual (open to his close friends, but not to the public) and a lifelong bachelor.^[19] He developed a long-term relationship with Bob Buckingham (1904–1975), a married policeman.^[20] Forster included Buckingham and his wife May in his circle, which included [J. R. Ackerley](#), a writer and literary editor of *The Listener*, the psychologist [W. J. H. Sprott](#), and for a time, the composer [Benjamin Britten](#). Other writers with whom Forster associated included [Christopher Isherwood](#), the poet [Siegfried Sassoon](#), and the [Belfast](#)-based novelist [Forrest Reid](#).

Forster lived in this house, home of his friends Robert and May Buckingham, and died here on 7 June 1970. The sign on the wall above the garage door marks the 100th anniversary of his birth

From 1925 until his mother's death at age 90 in March 1945, Forster lived with her at the house West Hackhurst in the village of [Abinger Hammer](#), [Surrey](#), finally leaving in September 1946.^[21] His London base was 26 [Brunswick Square](#) from 1930 to 1939, after which he rented 9 Arlington Park Mansions in [Chiswick](#) until at least 1961.^{[22][23]} After a fall in April 1961, he spent his final years in Cambridge at King's College.^[24]

Forster was elected an honorary [fellow](#) of [King's College, Cambridge](#), in January 1946,^[22] and lived for the most part in the college, doing relatively little. In April 1947 he arrived in America to begin a three-month nationwide tour of public readings and sightseeing, returning to the East Coast in June.^[25] He declined a [knighthood](#) in 1949 and was made a Companion of Honour in 1953.^[22] At age 82, he wrote his last short story, *Little Imber*, a science fiction tale. According to his friend [Richard Marquand](#), Forster was highly critical of American foreign policy in his latter years. This was one of the reasons why he consistently refused offers to adapt his novels for the screen, because Forster felt that such productions would inevitably involve American financing.^[26]

At 85 he went on a pilgrimage to the Wiltshire countryside that had inspired his favourite novel *The Longest Journey*, escorted by [William Golding](#).^[25] In 1969 he was made a member of the [Order of Merit](#). Forster died of a

stroke^[27] on 7 June 1970 at the age of 91, at the Buckingham's home in [Coventry](#), [Warwickshire](#).^[22] His ashes, mingled with those of Buckingham, were later scattered in the rose garden of Coventry's crematorium, near Warwick University.^{[28][29]}

Novel

The monument to Forster in [Stevenage](#), Hertfordshire, near Rooksnest where Forster grew up. He based the setting for his novel *Howards End* on this area, now informally known as Forster Country.

Forster had five novels published in his lifetime. Although [Maurice](#) was published shortly after his death, it had been written nearly sixty years earlier. He never finished a seventh novel, *Arctic Summer*.

His first novel, *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905), is the story of Lilia, a young English widow who falls in love with an Italian, and of the efforts of her [bourgeois](#) relatives to get her back from Monteriano (based on [San Gimignano](#)). Philip Herriton's mission to retrieve her from Italy has features in common with that of [Lambert Strether](#) in [Henry James's](#) *The Ambassadors*. Forster discussed that work ironically and somewhat disapprovingly in his book *Aspects of the Novel* (1927). *Where Angels Fear to Tread* was adapted as a 1991 [film](#) directed by [Charles Sturridge](#).

Next, Forster published *The Longest Journey* (1907), an inverted *Bildungsroman* following the lame Rickie Elliott from Cambridge to a career as a struggling writer and then to a post as a schoolmaster, married to the unappealing Agnes Pembroke. In a series of scenes on the hills of Wiltshire, which introduce Rickie's wild half-brother Stephen Wonham, Forster attempts a kind of [sublime](#) related to those of [Thomas Hardy](#) and [D. H. Lawrence](#).

Forster and his mother stayed at Pensione Simi, now Hotel Jennings Riccioli, [Florence](#), in 1901. Forster took inspiration from this sojourn for the Pension Bertolini in *A Room with a View*^[30]

Forster's third novel, *A Room with a View* (1908), is his lightest and most optimistic. It was started as early as 1901, before any of his others; its earliest versions are entitled *Lucy*. The book explores the young Lucy Honeychurch's trip to Italy with her cousin, and the choice she must make between the free-thinking George Emerson and the repressed aesthete Cecil Vyse. George's father Mr Emerson quotes thinkers who influenced Forster, including [Samuel Butler](#). The book was adapted as a [film of the same name](#) in 1985 by the [Merchant Ivory](#) team, and as a [televised adaptation of the same name](#) in 2007 by [Andrew Davies](#).

Where Angels Fear to Tread and *A Room with a View* can be seen collectively as Forster's Italian novels. Both include references to the famous [Baedeker](#) guidebooks and concern narrow-minded middle-class English tourists abroad. The books share many themes with his short stories collected in *The Celestial Omnibus* and *The Eternal Moment*.

Howards End (1910) is an ambitious "[condition-of-England](#)" novel concerned with different groups within the [Edwardian](#) middle classes, represented by the Schlegels (bohemian intellectuals), the Wilcoxes (thoughtless plutocrats) and the Basts (struggling lower-middle-class aspirants). Critics have observed that numerous characters in Forster's novels die suddenly. This is true of *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, *Howards End* and, most particularly, *The Longest Journey*. *Howards End* was adapted as a [film](#) in 1991 by the Merchant-Ivory team and as a [miniseries](#) in 2017. An opera libretto *Howards End, America* was created in 2016 by [Claudia Stevens](#).

Forster achieved his greatest success with *A Passage to India* (1924). The novel takes as its subject the relationship between East and West, seen through the lens of India in the later days of the [British Raj](#). Forster connects personal relationships with the politics of colonialism through the story of the Englishwoman Adela Quested, the Indian Dr. Aziz, and the question of what did or did not happen between them in the [Marabar Caves](#). Forster makes special mention of the author [Ahmed Ali](#) and his *Twilight in Delhi* in his Preface to its Everyman's Library Edition. *A Passage to India* was adapted as a [play](#) in 1960, directed by [Frank Hauser](#), and as a [film](#) in 1984, directed by [David Lean](#).

Maurice (1971) was published posthumously. It is a homosexual love story that also returns to matters familiar from Forster's first three novels, such as the suburbs of London in the English [home counties](#), the experience of attending Cambridge, and the wild landscape of [Wiltshire](#). The novel was controversial, given that Forster's homosexuality had not been previously known or widely acknowledged. Today's critics continue to argue over the extent to which Forster's sexuality and personal activities influenced his writing.^[31] *Maurice* was adapted [as a film](#) in 1987 by the [Merchant Ivory](#) team.

Early in his writing career, Forster attempted a historical novel about the Byzantine scholar [Gemistus Pletho](#) and the Italian [condottiero](#) [Sigismondo de Malatesta](#), but was not satisfied with the result and never published it, though he kept the manuscript and later showed it to [Naomi Mitchison](#).^[32]

Critical reception

Forster's first novel, *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, was described by reviewers as "astonishing" and "brilliantly original".^[33] *The Manchester Guardian* (forerunner of *The Guardian*) noted "a persistent vein of cynicism which is apt to repel," though "the cynicism is not deep-seated." The novel is labelled "a sordid comedy culminating, unexpectedly and with a real dramatic force, in a grotesque tragedy."^[34] [Lionel Trilling](#) remarked on this first novel as "a whole and mature work dominated by a fresh and commanding intelligence".^[35]

Subsequent books were similarly received on publication. *The Manchester Guardian* commented on *Howards End*, describing it as "a novel of high quality written with what appears to be a feminine brilliance of perception... witty and penetrating."^[36] An essay by [David Cecil](#) in *Poets and Storytellers* (1949) describes Forster as "pulsing with intelligence and sensibility", but primarily concerned with an original moral vision: "He tells a story as well as anyone who ever lived".^[37]^[page needed]

US interest in Forster and appreciation for him were spurred by [Lionel Trilling](#)'s *E. M. Forster: A Study*, which called him "the only living novelist who can be read again and again and who, after each reading, gives me what few writers can give us after our first days of novel-reading, the sensation of having learned something." ([Trilling 1943](#))

Criticism of his works has included comment on unlikely pairings of characters who marry or get engaged, and the lack of realistic depiction of sexual attraction.¹

Key themes

Forster was President of the Cambridge Humanists from 1959 until his death and a member of the Advisory Council of the British Humanist Association from 1963 until his death. His views as a [humanist](#) are at the heart of his work, which often depicts the pursuit of personal connections in spite of the restrictions of contemporary society. His humanist attitude is expressed in the 1938 non-fictional essay *What I Believe* (reprinted with two other humanist essays – and an introduction and notes by [Nicolas Walter](#) – as *What I Believe, and other essays* by the secular humanist publishers G. W. Foote & Co. in 1999). When Forster's cousin, [Philip Whichelo](#), donated a portrait of Forster to the [Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association](#) (GLHA), [Jim Herrick](#), the founder, quoted Forster's words: "The humanist has four leading characteristics – curiosity, a free mind, belief in good taste, and belief in the human race."

Forster's two best-known works, *A Passage to India* and *Howards End*, explore the irreconcilability of class differences. *A Room with a View* also shows how questions of propriety and class can make human connection difficult. The novel is his most widely read and accessible work, remaining popular long after its original publication. His posthumous novel *Maurice* explores the possibility of class reconciliation as one facet of a homosexual relationship.

Sexuality is another key theme in Forster's works. Some critics have argued that a general shift from heterosexual to homosexual love can be observed through the course of his writing career. The foreword to *Maurice* describes his struggle with his homosexuality, while he explored similar issues in several volumes of short stories. Forster's explicitly homosexual writings, the novel *Maurice* and the short story collection *The Life to Come*, were published shortly after his death.

Forster is noted for his use of [symbolism](#) as a technique in his novels, and he has been criticised (as by his friend [Roger Fry](#)) for his attachment to [mysticism](#). One example of his symbolism is the [wych elm](#) tree in *Howards End*. The characters of Mrs Wilcox in that novel and Mrs Moore in *A Passage to India* have a mystical link with the past, and a striking ability to connect with people from beyond their own circles. Henry James, E. M. Forster and Somerset Maugham were the earliest fiction writers to portray characters from diverse countries – France, Germany, Italy and India. Their work explores cultural conflict, but arguably the motifs of humanism and cosmopolitanism are dominant. In a way this is anticipation of the concept of human beings shedding national identities and becoming more and more liberal and tolerant.

Notable works by Forster

Novels

- *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905)
- *The Longest Journey* (1907)
- *A Room with a View* (1908)
- *Howards End* (1910)
- *A Passage to India* (1924)

Plays and pageants

- *Abinger Pageant* (1934)
- *England's Pleasant Land* (1940)
- **Short stories**
 - *The Celestial Omnibus (and other stories)* (1911)

- [*Maurice*](#) (written in 1913–14, published posthumously in 1971)
- [*The Eternal Moment and other stories*](#) (1928)
- *Collected Short Stories* (1947) a combination of the above two titles , containing:
 - "The Story of a Panic"
 - "[*The Other Side of the Hedge*](#)"
 - "The Celestial Omnibus"
 - "Other Kingdom"
 - "The Curate's Friend"
 - "The Road from Colonus"
 - "[*The Machine Stops*](#)"
 - "The Point of It"
 - "Mr Andrews"