



The Ambassadors (Centaur Classics) [The 100 greatest novels of all time - #52]

Henry James

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"James's critical genius comes out most tellingly in his mastery over, his baffling escape from, Ideas; a mastery and an escape which are perhaps the last test of a superior intelligence. He had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it... He is the most intelligent man of his generation." —T. S. Eliot

"Henry James set up his own kind of fiction as a norm for the novel as a whole..." —Robert Scholes

"The Ambassadors", which Henry James considered his best work, is the most exquisite refinement of his favorite theme: the collision of American innocence with European experience. This time, James recounts the continental journey of Louis Lambert Strether--a fiftysomething man of the world who has been dispatched abroad by a rich widow, Mrs. Newsome. His mission: to save her son Chadwick from the clutches of a wicked (i.e., European) woman, and to convince the prodigal to return to Woollett, Massachusetts. Instead, this all-American envoy finds Europe growing on him. Strether also becomes involved in a very Jamesian "relation" with the fascinating Miss Maria Gostrey, a fellow American and informal Sacajawea to her compatriots. Clearly Paris has "improved" Chad beyond recognition, and convincing him to return to the U.S. is going to be a very, very hard sell. Suspense, of course, is hardly James's stock-in-trade. But there is no more meticulous mapper of tone and atmosphere, nuance and implication. His hyper-refined characters are at their best in dialogue, particularly when they're exchanging morsels of gossip. Astute, funny, and relentlessly intelligent, James amply fulfills his own description of the novelist as a person upon whom nothing is lost.

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