

The *difficult* Green Flash

One of the most impressive characteristics of WG the writer was the confidence with which he would allow ideas to mature in his mind, sometimes for many years, before finally, once the time was right, committing them to paper. Though he quite rightly saw the first Poldark quartet as "one very long novel which broke off at convenient points"¹ rather than as four standalone books, or as one book and three sequels, he did not write them that way. Between *Ross Poldark* (December 1945) and *Demelza* (December 1946) he collaborated with Valerie Taylor on their screenplay, *Take My Life*, then between *Demelza* and *Jeremy Poldark* (October 1950) completed five other assignments – novels *Take My Life*, *Cordelia* and *Night Without Stars* plus screenplays *The Forgotten Story* and *The Merciless Ladies* – and finally, before *Warleggan* (November 1953), another novel and screenplay (*Fortune is a Woman* and *Night Without Stars* respectively). He started to think about his Poldark characters before the war² but didn't publish the concluding book of the first batch until fifteen years later. If I had "one very long novel" in my head I would wish to write it down, instalment by instalment, without interruption, until it was done; realised; until I was free of it – but not WG. He first thought of writing about the 1960 Agadir earthquake when he visited the city a few years after the event. He recalls in *Memoirs*, 2.7:

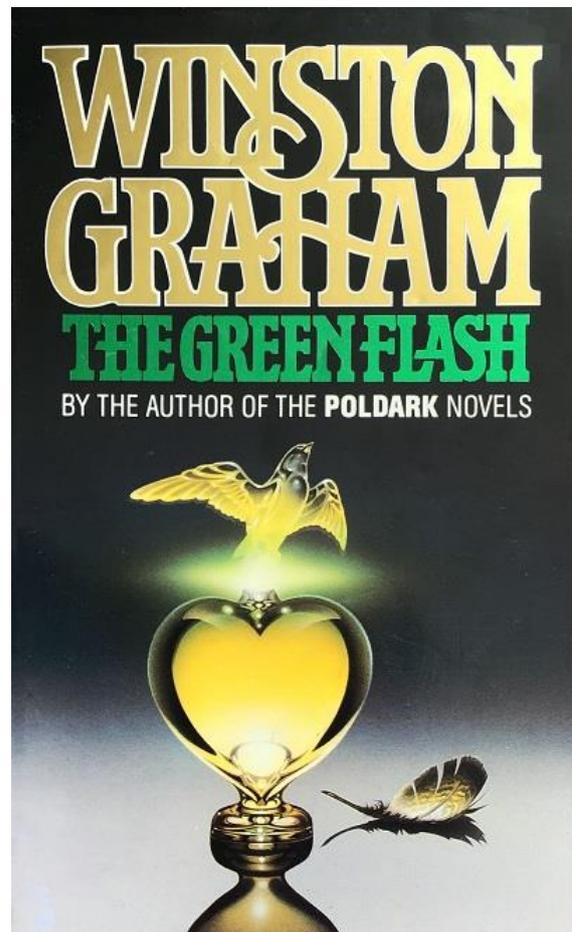
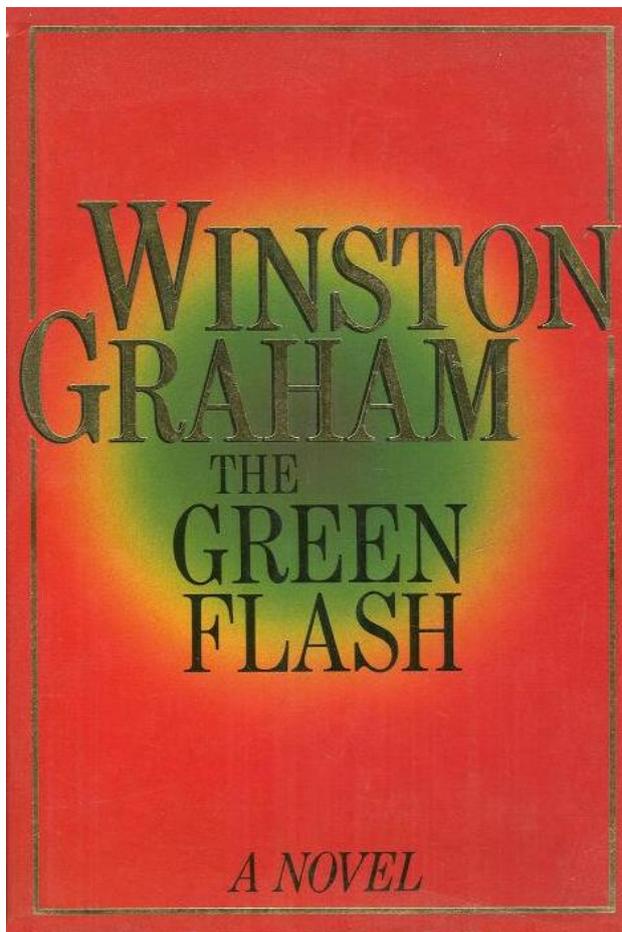
I decided that when the novel that I was then writing was finished, I would write [about] this. When that time came, however ... I shelved it, and it was only some years later that I finally used the idea.

In fact, the resulting novel, *Tremor*, was published in 1995, some three decades later. Now read these lines by Tim Heald in *Radio Times*:

With the typescript of The Four Swans ... newly delivered, he is about to embark on a new modern book. Typically, he picked up the idea in a chance conversation with a man he met on the beach at Terrigal Bay, New South Wales.

The book in question, *The Green Flash*, appeared in November 1986, but the *Radio Times* quote is from 4 October 1975, *eleven years* earlier – and

between the two dates lies a tale to be told, not of patient restraint but of "infinite" difficulties obdurately resisted and eventually overcome.



UK: (i) Collins, 1986 (ii) Fontana, 1987

Although WG did not "embark" on *The Green Flash* at that time, that may have had less to do with "difficulties" than with the fact that the BBC were keen to commission a second series of *Poldark* and so needed a seventh novel. In any event, his next book proved to be *The Angry Tide* (1977). But after that came *Shadow Play*, produced in Salisbury in 1978 and (as *Circumstantial Evidence*) in Guildford, Richmond and Brighton a year later, then, also in 1979, revision and republication of 1944's *The Merciless Ladies*, with still no "new modern book" in sight.

In a letter to Denys Val Baker dated 8 January 1982, WG discloses that he *had* finally started the book after completing his *Merciless Ladies* makeover.³ In *Memoirs* 2.11, he recounts the struggles he had deciding on the novel's setting – "the film world and the theatre, law, medicine, art, literature were all thought through and none seemed to fit the bill" –

before he settled at last on the perfumery business. Desmond Brand, to whom the novel is dedicated, who was then managing director of Helena Rubinstein, granted him free access to all departments of his firm but, having steeped himself in the arcana of all aspects of the trade with his usual meticulous and painstaking research, WG once again "gave it up for a year or more", upon which his "ideas returned to the old Cornish scene", which resulted in the eighth, ninth and tenth Poldark novels, *The Stranger from the Sea* (1981), *The Miller's Dance* (1982) and *The Loving Cup* (1984) – and still no *Green Flash*.

In 1984, nine years after first mentioning it to Heald, and despite enduring reservations, he tackled for a second time the "obstinate" modern novel he "had to get out of (his) system". As the story developed, further study was required – of fencing, of Scottish upper crust social life and mores, of "the seedy and criminal side of the perfumery world"; Scotland Yard and the judiciary were consulted. Eventually, in spite of so many problems (or perhaps because of them, for WG was nothing if not stubborn) a typescript was completed and submitted to Collins.

WG suggests in *Memoirs* that, although his "chance conversation" in Terrigal Bay *partly* informed the character of David Abden, the book's male protagonist, "other men" contributed also. When did the conversation take place? It is known that WG was in Australia in the early months of 1973, when he was interviewed by Gloria Newton for *The Australian Women's Weekly*,⁴ so that period is most likely. But the derivation of the book's female protagonist, Shona, goes back further still, to 1960, some quarter of a century before the novel was written. The Grahams spent the summer of that year in Cap Ferrat on the Côte d'Azur, living next door to the Gregory Pecks, during which time Peck's mother-in-law, Alexandra Passani, made a deep and durable impression on the author. Known as Chouchoune (which WG misspells Shoshone)⁵, she and Winston were of a similar age – she, in fact, a year older. In 1987, he described her to Susan Hill as:

*tall, elegant, very handsome, highly intelligent ... I think I admired her more than any other woman I ever met*⁶

and in *Memoirs* 1.8 wrote:

Madame Passani [below, date unknown] was a distinguished Russian woman ... an intellectual of great charm and force of character, with formidable good looks that appeared and disappeared with her moods ... [She] took a great fancy to us, and our friendship blossomed and lasted for years. Her charm of character and personality made a great impression on me, and generations later she surfaced as Shona in The Green Flash.



The fact that Chouchoune died in 1985 is probably significant in the story of the novel's protracted evolution, since its portrait of Shona, who is eventually diminished by age, is not entirely flattering and WG might have felt a freedom to write about a late friend's memory that, were she living, would have been curbed. There is precedent for this – in 1970's *Angell, Pearl and Little God*, his Wilfred Angell, a scheming, niggardly, cowardly gourmand, was closely based on a fellow Savilian named Wilfred Evill *who had died seven years earlier, in 1963.*⁷



Couchoune and WG, 1960

Ian Chapman, WG's friend and still then Collins' chairman, was thrilled with the manuscript, telling the author it "was the novel he had been waiting twenty years for [him] to write ... This is it." WG's new American publishers, Random House, were "equally delighted", so, when the novel was published, hopes ran high for an enthusiastic reception from critics and public alike. And the first reviews were either wholly positive:

*The more than 400 pages of this first-class novel encompass a complex story peopled by familiar city types – smart business people, crooks outwardly respectable in good social standing, more or less reformed jail birds and a few pathetic homosexuals earning precarious livings on the fringes of the perfumery trade. An English reviewer quoted on the dust jacket puts Winston Graham as a storyteller in the same class as R. C. Hutchinson and Graham Greene. I agree with him.*⁸

*Winston Graham keeps an unfailing grip on a narrative that tightens with every page.*⁹

*Defies one not to read on ... an absorbing, unpredictable chronicle.*¹⁰

*The story brilliantly recreates the atmosphere of the time, and takes the reader from the world of the wide boys of London to the Scottish Highlands.*¹¹

... or mainly so:

*We watch the development of a cold, calculating schoolboy into a cold, calculating adult. Not a pretty sight, but it makes an excellent story.*¹²

From the versatile Graham ... a grabby psychological suspense novel set in the murky half-lit world of on-the-make London. [Plot synopsis omitted.] Graham is a master of characterization, and these vaguely unpleasant power-houses of characters entertain and occasionally fascinate: in

*particular, David as narrator turns the mood nasty with his selfish, hypercritical observations. The suspense line suffers, though, at the expense of a lingering look at David's particular brand of moral and emotional development. So: despite fragmentary action, a compelling, ugly portrait.*¹³

*Abden is not an easy character to like in the beginning, and several hundred pages of his smug, exceedingly clever point of view make for more than a few tedious passages. Yet the writing is solid, the characterization good, and Abden's emotional maturity is convincingly portrayed and ultimately affecting.*¹⁴

The notes of reservation in the last three may have been a portent that all was not quite as well as it seemed. This was confirmed when Random House saw fit to include on the front jacket-flap of their 1987 American first edition this little homily:

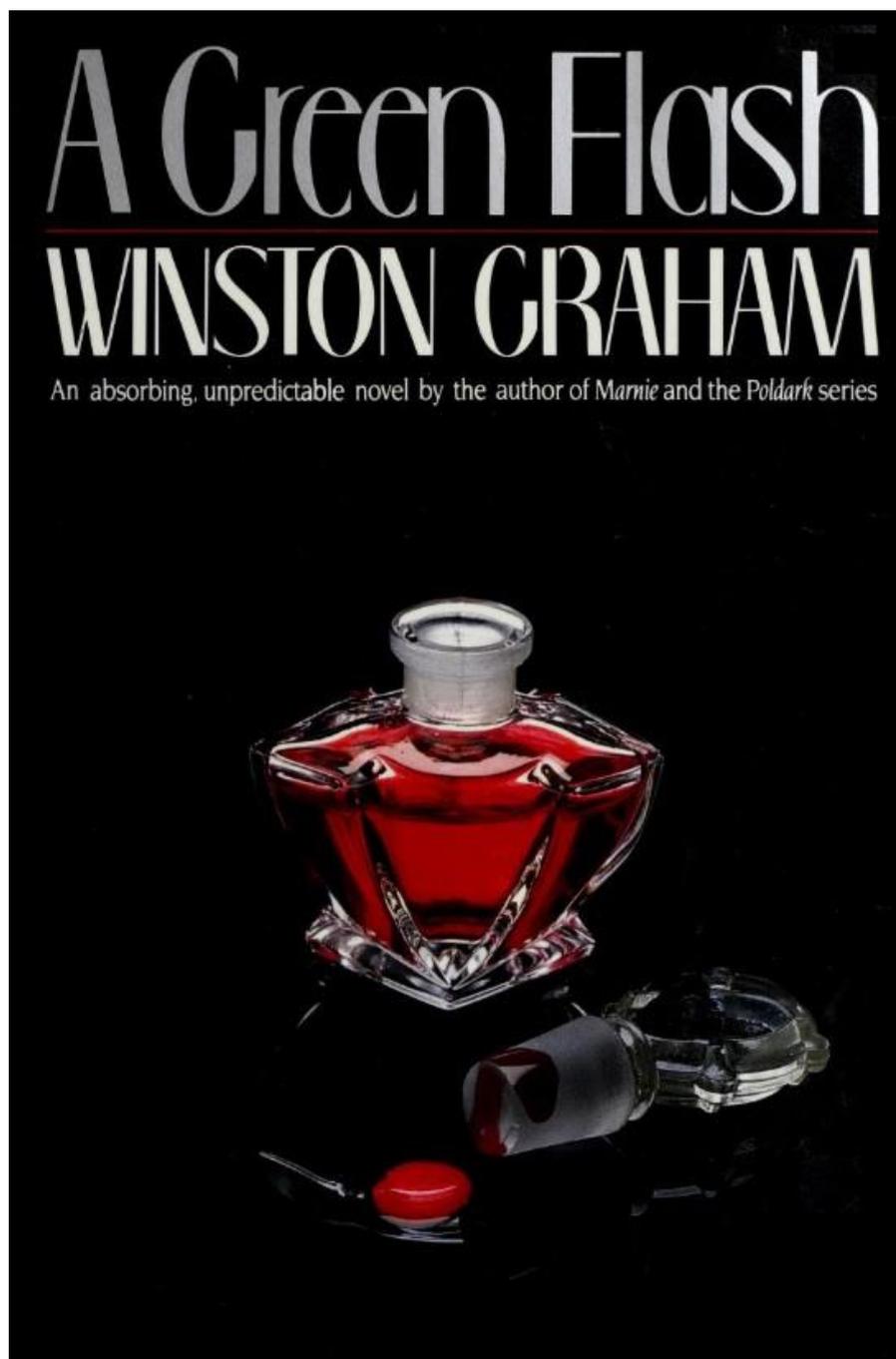
To the Reader:

Don't judge David Abden too quickly. Somewhere in your life you might have met a young man like him. But life, this novel—and young men—are full of surprises. David moves in a stylish, seductive, secretive world: the high-stakes trade of high-grade cosmetics. Is he a saint, sinner, loser—or winner? Read David's story through to the last paragraph of the last page before you decide....

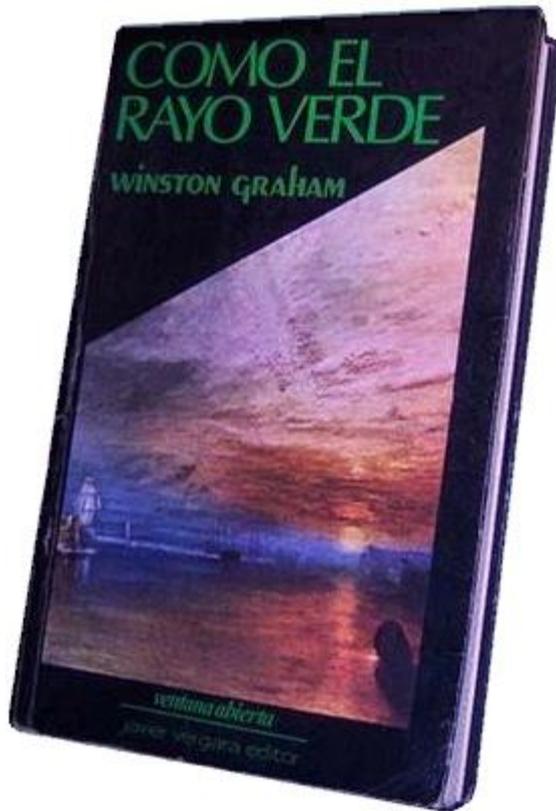
It reads rather like the health warning on a pack of cigarettes; if I saw it as a potential customer the message I would take from it is that "you're probably not going to enjoy this very much, but if you persevere you may find it gets better as you go along" – in other words, less a ringing endorsement to buy than a case of Hapless Publisher Shoots Self in Foot. Hard on the heels of that came news that the company's paperback division had decided not to publish the book (indeed, no US paperback

edition has ever appeared) and ultimately sales on both sides of the Atlantic of *The Green Flash* proved to be disappointing.

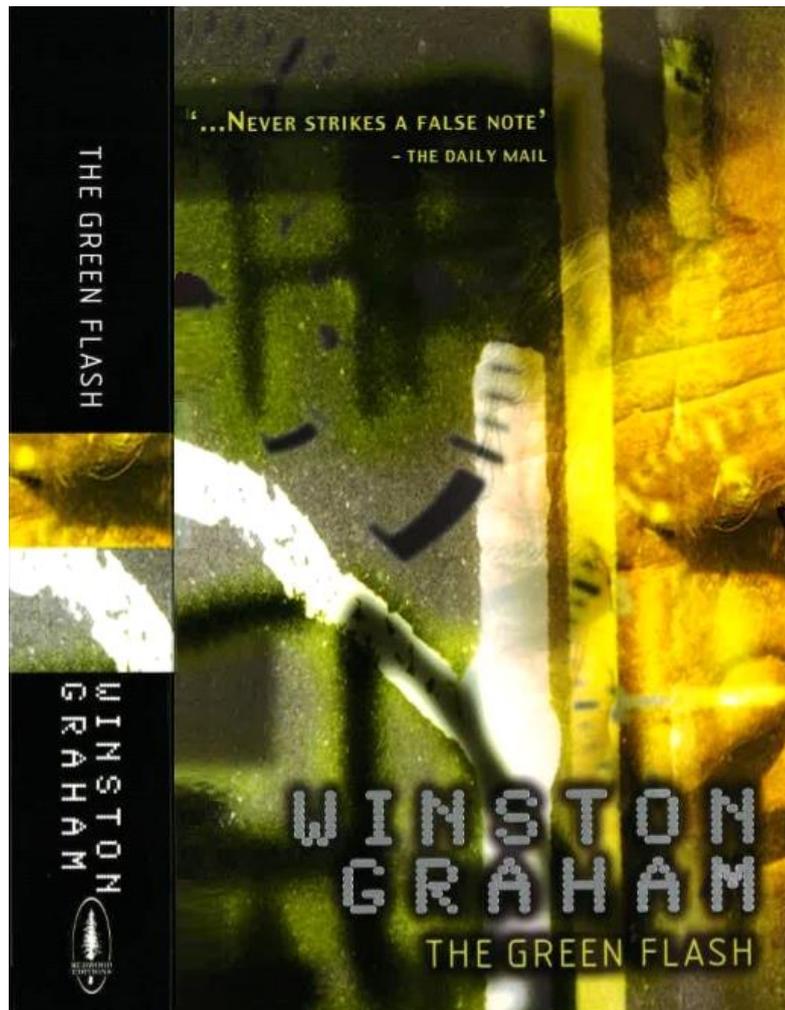
The recurring complaint of readers, as alluded to in both the last review and the Random House jacket note above, is that David Abden, the book's narrator and central character, is impossible to warm to because, although intelligent and resourceful, he is also cynical, self-absorbed and morally ambivalent. When, through a mutual friend, WG pitched the book to a



USA: Random House, 1987 (note the tweaked title)



From 1950 on, most WG novels were published widely in both English and other languages, but *The Green Flash* is an exception. In 1988, Javier Vergara produced this Spanish edition, as *Like the Green Flash*; the Australian paperback below is from Redwood, 2003 – and that's your lot



successful young film director, the latter declined the property because, though a fine novel, its "hero was such a shit", which succinctly states the problem. Even Pan Macmillan, current publishers of WG's work, describe the novel as "gritty" – a word which, while not perjorative *per se*, is seldom associated with this writer.¹⁵

His situation, of course, is a lose-lose one. In the closing pages of *Poldark's Cornwall* he notes that, when it came to critical acceptance, the fact of his *Poldark* characters being, on balance, "a little more in the sun than in the shadow" proved "of great detriment" – yet, now, when he writes a more complex, darkly nuanced, particoloured character, the same sunshine's absence is bemoaned. Still, for all that, the novel is a powerful and compelling one; a wholly satisfying read from a seasoned, mature writer at the top of his game; an overlooked gem in the canon.¹⁶

WG observed more than once that every character he wrote must have in them something of himself, otherwise they wouldn't come alive.¹⁷ So what characteristics of the "shit" David Abden can be identified in his creator? Most obvious is the love of fast cars. Passages such as these:

It had the Vantage engine and a manual gearshift, which was so much faster as a car and sweeter to drive than the automatic version, except that it has a pig of a clutch ... "You don't buy Astons for silent travel." (Chapters 8 and 9)

The [Jaguar's] engine was sensational, whispering power with none of the traction-engine noise of the Aston. Just to look at it, cramming the enormous bonnet, gave me an aesthetic lift. It answered the slightest call like a dream. On the other hand, at anything over ninety the Aston would tuck in its tail and lie solid on the road with some sort of centripetal adhesion; at over a hundred and twenty the Jaguar began to feel lighter and a bit less secure. (Ch. 17)

and

[The Ferrari] wasn't so quiet or so good-mannered as the Jaguar, nor so well finished as the Aston Martin, but the engine and the handling were matchless, and the throaty

exhaust noise stiffened the back hairs on your neck every time you started up ... Whom, the engine, newly tuned, started like a giant bird ... Back a foot to give myself room. Then whom into the street ... (Chapters 24 and 30)

are not the result of yet more research, but spring, informed by experience, straight from the heart; so too Abden's abiding affection for Shona, plainly inspired by the profound admiration of Madame Passani acknowledged by WG above. The dysfunctional relationship between Abden and his father may be seen as an extrapolation of WG's own filial disquiet, characterised by a closer emotional attachment to one parent than the other.¹⁸

As of February 2020, WG's son Andrew has written just one review on Amazon, this book its subject. He declares it "one of his [father's] very best. The characters are unusual and grip you from very early on and the plot development is convincing and subtle." Why would he post just this one review? Perhaps because he too feels that there's a balance here which needs to be redressed; that *The Green Flash* deserves a higher profile, more acclaim, more love. Perhaps he's right.

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NOTES AND SOURCES

¹ *Woman*, 10 December 1977

² *Memoirs of a Private Man*, Macmillan, 2003, Book One, Chapter Five

³ The letter is held in the Denys Val Baker archive of Kresen Kernow, Redruth

⁴ Cover date 14 March 1973

⁵ In letters to the Pecks dated 1 November 1963 and 30 January 1967 and also in *Memoirs*, 1.8

⁶ *Bookshelf*, BBC Radio Four, 26 February 1987

⁷ "*Hang Your Halo in the Hall!*" *A History of the Savile Club* by Garrett Anderson, The Savile Club, 1993

⁸ Leonard Ward, *Canberra Times*, 12 April 1987

⁹ *Mail on Sunday*, date not noted, 1986

¹⁰ *Daily Mail*, 6 November 1986

- ¹¹ Tim Scott, *Book and Magazine Collector*, February 1991
- ¹² Norman Shrapnel, *Guardian*, 21 November 1986
- ¹³ *Kirkus Reviews*, 15 July 1987
- ¹⁴ Lonnie Beene, *Library Journal*, Vol. 112, page 191, West Texas State University, 1 September 1987
- ¹⁵ panmacmillan.com/authors/Winston-Graham/The-Green-Flash
- ¹⁶ And what it is about? Here's the RH jacket blurb:

Loner. Lover, salesman, swordsman. Consummate con man. Fancier of fast cars, fast money and fast female friends.

He has a nose for fine fragrance. An eye for easy profit. And an instinct for the jugular.

A Green Flash is the stinging, unpredictable, contemporary story of a man on the make, of his affair with a rich, athletic socialite – and the violent, unutterable childhood memory he carries with him.

Above all, this is a novel "in praise of older women": of David's bedeviling attraction to Shona, founder of the industry's most elegant, exclusive line. A woman at once worldly and romantic, calculating and impulsive.

A Green Flash is a drama of perfumes, passions, character and destiny. Of a strange inheritance, a deadly flash of steel, and a magical flash of green – that glorious natural phenomenon seen only in certain parts of the world, and only, some believe, by true lovers

¹⁷ *Memoirs*, 1.10, *Sussex Express*, 28 October 1977, *et al.*

¹⁸ *Memoirs*, 1.2

Photos from Cecilia Peck – with thanks.

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