

The half-believer: Pico Iyer on Graham Greene

by [Chris Herlinger](#) in the [March 20, 2013](#) issue



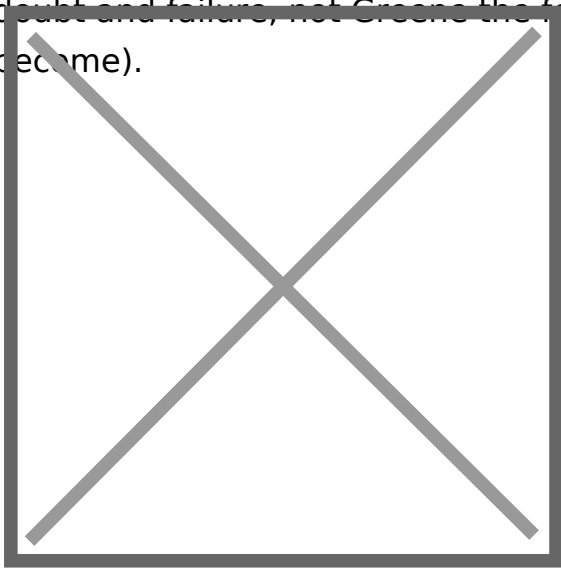
Above: portrait of Graham Greene by Margaret Wood. Below: photo of Pico Iyer by Derek Shapton.

*The paperback edition of Pico Iyer's book *The Man Within My Head*, which is both a memoir and an essay on novelist Graham Greene (1904–1991), came out earlier this year. Iyer, a British-born essayist, reporter, travel writer and novelist, is the author of *Video Night in Kathmandu* and many other books. He has been described as “Thomas Merton on a frequent flier pass.” I had a chance to talk to him about his interest in Greene's novels.*

To what can we ascribe the durability of Graham Greene as not only a literary figure but a figure “within people's heads”?

That may arise out of his gift for intimacy on the page, the sense of vulnerability his characters incarnate and the fact that he seems to be as open in his fiction as he was guarded in real life. His novels read like confessionals, and to that extent they may speak to many readers—of any faith or none.

I was stunned at how many writers have been possessed by Greene, for better or worse. Paul Theroux, John Banville, Gloria Emerson and Alan Judd all wrote novels haunted by figures clearly based on Greene, who stands sometimes for prophetic wisdom (in Theroux's *Picture Palace*) or moral clarity (in Emerson's *Loving Graham Greene*), sometimes (in Banville and Judd) for almost demonic mischief making. David Lodge dedicated an early novel to Greene and yet included a parody of Greene in that same novel. Greene's official biographer, Norman Sherry, who spent 27 years trying to catch Greene, seemed to end up as Greene the figure of self-doubt and failure, not Greene the fearless adventurer (whom perhaps he'd hoped to become).



Is there a core to Greene's work?

I think it's precisely the fact that Greene doesn't sit easily or simply within any religious tradition that allows him to speak to so many. He read theology constantly and always refers to God, but it's a God he doesn't always claim to know and often doesn't even claim to believe in. He called himself a "Catholic agnostic" and often said that he had faith (the emotional pull that for many lies at the heart of religion) but not belief (the rational conviction).

To me, he always placed kindness before anything, and many of his novels are illustrations of how anyone can act compassionately and with understanding, even if faith is flagging. The whisky priest in *The Power and the Glory* famously does everything possible to violate the letter of his creed—drinking, taking on a mistress, being negligent in his duties—and yet in a moment of crisis acts with self-sacrifice and devotion, embodying the spirit of his faith in a way that even a cardinal or saint might envy.

Did Greene redefine what it might mean to be a religious person in a world without a set of defined markers?

As I see it, Greene was extending a forgiving hand toward even the most fallen person and noting how even if we—as he—can never quite make it to the belief we want, we can still try to act from the sense of compassion and sympathy that faith speaks for. If nothing else, he seemed to believe that religion gave stakes to events and turned right and wrong into a matter of good and evil.

If Greene could never be a perfect Catholic, he was certainly always much further from a nonbeliever's position, and even tougher on cynicism or disengagement. More than almost any writer I can think of, Greene was fascinated by goodness—and peace and kindness—even though, and sometimes because, he felt those qualities weren't his. His books could be said to be hymns to selflessness and purity written by one who longed for those graces but felt he had never deserved them.

He disarms us because he comes at faith through the back door, through the sinner rather than the saint and by stressing humanity rather than holiness. But if you pursue those deeply enough and steadfastly enough you can arrive at a man giving up his life for others.

You've said that Greene the Catholic doesn't interest you because that role was not of interest to him at the deepest level. Yet it's impossible to talk about him without talking about religion.

I would say he is the poet laureate of the half-believer, or of the person who longs for belief, and most of his work takes place in that shadowland where the man of faith suddenly encounters doubt and the nonbeliever is suddenly shaken by something that looks very close to a miracle or an act of faith.

Greene did famously convert to Catholicism in his early twenties in order to marry his devout wife Vivien (who had first written to him because he had misrepresented an aspect of the Virgin Mary); but I would say he took the church into his life as he took his wife: both became frequent sources of solace and guidance and inspiration but also frequent antagonists, whom he deserted and treated badly.

The day after the mass shootings in Colorado last year, I heard some people say that they could never do what that shooter did. I don't agree—I think good people have the capacity to murder. And I think that's a

perspective Greene would share.

A Greene character isn't a churchgoer who says, "I could never act like the devil." Rather, he's a self-proclaimed (self-chastised) nonbeliever who says, "I could never act like a saint"—and then does so, almost in spite of himself. Greene is always reminding us of how little we know of one another. And intentions in his work are slippery, which is why he keeps on flaunting his paradoxical belief that good motives can be the quickest way to hell. Greene shows imperfect men transcending themselves.

Were he writing of the terrible tragedy in Colorado, Greene wouldn't concentrate on the deranged killer; he would describe a man taking his girl-friend to the movies, even though he's not faithful to her—and is on the brink of breaking up with her and is secretly texting some new love. And then, when the violence breaks out, Greene would show that man giving up his life to save the girlfriend he no longer loves.