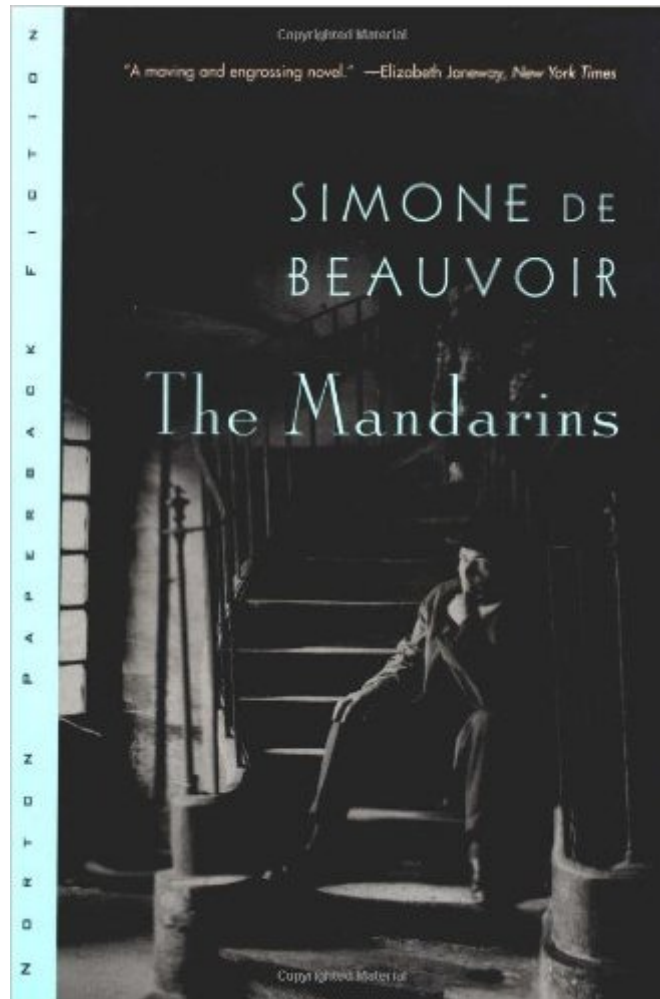


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# The Mandarins (Norton Paperback Fiction)



## Synopsis

"Salty, frank, and realistic." • San Francisco Chronicle In her most famous novel, *The Mandarins*, Simone de Beauvoir takes an unflinching look at Parisian intellectual society at the end of World War II. In fictionally relating the stories of those around her • Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Arthur Koestler, Nelson Algren • de Beauvoir dissects the emotional and philosophical currents of her time. At once an engrossing drama and an intriguing political tale, *The Mandarins* is the emotional odyssey of a woman torn between her inner desires and her public life. "Much more than a roman à clef . . . a moving and engrossing novel." • New York Times

## Book Information

Series: Norton Paperback Fiction

Paperback: 608 pages

Publisher: W. W. Norton & Company (July 17, 1999)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0393318834

ISBN-13: 978-0393318838

Product Dimensions: 5.4 x 1.2 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.2 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars • See all reviews (20 customer reviews)

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## Customer Reviews

There are plenty of great books and films about the squalor of life during wartime, and even more about shellshocked soldiers coming to grips with life during peacetime. But surprisingly few novels deal with civilians faced with the task of rebuilding the devastated world around them. *The Mandarins* would have to be at the top of that very short list. Most critics, here and elsewhere, have tended to focus on the book as Beauvoir's record of her affair with Nelson Algren, but like all great artists, Beauvoir transforms the raw material of her life into something far more profound and encompassing, especially as it is played out against the grand, ruined backdrop of postwar Paris. The resulting book succeeds on so many levels: as roman à clef (Camus, Sartre, Koestler, and obviously Algren all feature prominently), as novel of ideas (of the "where do we go from here?" variety), as a love story (really two love stories--we can't forget Henri/Camus, whose story takes up

half the book!), as a Jamesian exploration of brash New World vs. exhausted Old World culture, and finally as a portrait of an intelligent, civilized woman wrestling with her darkest impulses in the wake of Europe's darkest moment. Is the book overly long? Probably. Melodramatic? At times. Too cluttered with phrases of the "smiled knowingly" variety? Without a doubt. But it's redeemed time and again by the keen intelligence Beauvoir brings to bear on her characters and herself. For days after I put the book down, I found myself literally pining for the company of Anne, Lewis and Henri. Is there any greater testament to a novel than that?

The reason that I love Simone so much is defined in this book. What happens when you live with atrocities? What happens when you have to see lives terribly torn apart by evil? What can a person do? De Beauvoir takes these questions and makes them human, and gives hope to our world. But, with any great existentialist thinker, makes the point that living is hard. To exist well we must make choices and be able to live with them. All of the characters in this book show the angst and chaos of war. How they are able to live with each other and themselves is displayed with amazing depth and insight. The complexities of women are shown vividly - especially if you have read *The Second Sex*. Each of the woman characters are shown struggling with their societal place as Other, yet, show this transcendence that is even more important to her gender. This is also an incredible demonstration of the power and pain of love. I read this book as a teenager and found that I reread it at least once a year to remind me of the beauty and pain of life. It is a wonderful book about being a woman, and a thinker. I recommend it to anyone who is disturbed about events in this world and how to deal with them.

De Beauvoir was one of the greatest minds of this century. The sheer force of her intellect is overwhelming, but thankfully she was also an imaginative, honest, and often funny writer. *The Mandarins* has long been considered her masterpiece, and with good reason. A fictionalized account of a group of intellectuals struggling in postwar Paris, *The Mandarins* allows us the reader to peer into a world inhabited by fascinating, difficult, confused and life-affirming individuals. The novel deals with issues that still haunt France, indeed all of Western society, today; specifically the choices people made when the world around them became dominated by oppression, fascism, and the suppression of certain freedoms. How does one come to terms with the fact that atrocities occurred under one's nose? How much freedom was taken away, and how much was given up voluntarily? Why is responsibility so important? And how does one act responsibly? Though existential in nature, the themes addressed in this book transcend labels. It is a painful struggle to

accept one's freedom, and the responsibility it entails. The Mandarins show how different people come to terms with their conditions. The novel becomes all the more juicy because it is based on real people; Anne is de Beauvoir, Henri is Camus, Anne's husband is Sartre, Anne's daughter is de Beauvoir's lover. Apparently, the rich clothes designer who clawed her way to the top and collaborated with the Nazis is based on Coco Chanel. De Beauvoir caused quite a stir with the publication of this novel; I imagine she must have ticked off a lot of Paris "society"

My reactions to Simone's massive novel about life with J.P. Sartre, Albert Camus, and Nelson Algren are violently mixed. It's fascinating to read about an era where prize-winning novelists were resistance fighters and political organizers, and though they're continually bemoaning their powerlessness, I'm amazed by how much what they do and say matters in their vanished world. On the other hand, it's discouraging the way Simone turns Sartre into a plaster saint, and Camus into a heroic godlike creature every woman desires. The big revelation this novel delivers is how focused on men the author, a feminist icon, was, and how hostile she is to all women other than herself. It wasn't just the era she lived in, because Colette, born a generation before Simone, wrote many warm and appreciative portraits of women, and didn't delude herself about the flaws in the characters of the men she loved. One of the philosophical preoccupations of the novel is Sartre's idea of "Bad Faith", which as I interpret it, is the creation of a morality or an ideology that protects us from the anxiety of having to make choices about our life. The Camus character in the novel is continually struggling with one anguished choice after the next about freedom, betrayal, life and death, but the choices of the women are limited to choices between one man and another. And even then, the choices about when to end the love affairs are almost always made by the men. Perhaps Simone's bad faith about the inability of women to be happy without being the acolytes of men is what makes her style pedantic and turgid, resembling James Michener far more than her literary predecessor, the clear-eyed and elegant Colette, so that the novel is slow going, relying on the basic vitality of the times and the characters to pull you along.

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