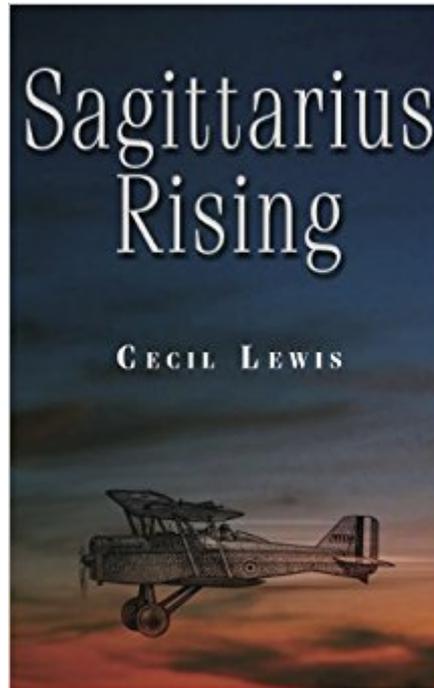


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Sagittarius Rising



Synopsis

'This is a book everyone should read. It is the autobiography of an ace, and no common ace either. The boy had all the noble tastes and qualities, love of beauty, soaring imagination, a brilliant endowment of good looks . . . this prince of pilots . . . had a charmed life in every sense of the word' - George Bernard Shaw
Sent to France with the Royal Flying Corps at just seventeen, and later a member of the famous 56 Squadron, Cecil Lewis was an illustrious and passionate fighter pilot of the First World War, described by Bernard Shaw in 1935 as 'a thinker, a master of words, and a bit of a poet'. In this vivid and spirited account the author evocatively sets his love of the skies and flying against his bitter experience of the horrors of war, as we follow his progress from France and the battlefields of the Somme, to his pioneering defence of London against deadly night time raids.

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Customer Reviews

Cecil Lewis's SAGITTARIUS RISING probably does deserve its classic status. It is, after all, a memoir of the role of aviation in the First World War. Aviators at that time were true pioneers, and most of them were brave - or foolish - daredevils to boot, tempting fate every time they took to the

sky in their fragile machines. I read the book mainly because this new edition from Penguin Classics (2014) features an introduction by one of my favorite authors, Samuel Hynes. Hynes's *FLIGHTS OF PASSAGE* is perhaps one of the best WWII memoirs about flying. And, more recently, Hynes wrote an excellent and very personal sort of history of WWI aviators, *THE UNSUBSTANTIAL AIR*. I loved both of those books. Unfortunately, although I loved the Introduction, the Lewis book fell a bit flat for me as a memoir. The style seemed overly ornate and the language dated - to be expected, I suppose, but Lewis's many stories and anecdotes of the flying exploits by him and his fellow pilots too quickly became redundant, to the point that I began skimming long portions of the narrative. Yes, he talks of his training, mates lost in fiery crashes, stupid mistakes made by himself and others, of his growing sense of mortality, and, sometimes, burnout and dread which got him posted temporarily back to England from France. He describes his many sorties over the long days of the Somme, near misses and mechanical failures, getting lost and forced landings - all those things are in there. He also gives a glimpse into his post-war days as a civilian pilot instructor in China - mostly a fruitless enterprise. Lewis wrote his book twenty years after the war, when he was not yet forty, but felt like his life was half over. (In fact he lived to be 99.) He makes a number of comments about war that are still true in these days of global war and terrorist strikes everywhere, and the accompanying political rants so ubiquitous in today's news. "People who cannot learn from their mistakes are damned ... What have we learned from ours? We are, collectively, the most evil and destructive of human creatures. We back up our greeds and jealousies with religion and patriotism ... No one knows where to put their faith, so they believe nothing. Moral and social standards are confused ... The fear of feeling the ground slipping from under their feet drives whole nations back into mediaeval despotism ... But emulating the ostrich, though it may bring relief for a space, does not solve the problem. It leads straight back to self-immolation on the altar of outworn patriotism, that is, to barbarism ..." Lewis made these observations in 1936. Hmm ... Not much has changed in eighty years, has it? He contemplated higher things too, remembering "the cynical wartime prayer: 'O God - if there is a God, save my soul - if I have a soul.'" But Lewis believed he had a soul - "a drop of the Life Force" - although he wasn't sure about heaven and displayed a dark sense of humor. "If, in heaven, my grosser qualities were to be purged away, leaving me all 'good,' so much the worse. The devil was the pepper in my curry; remove it, and how flat the dish would taste." And, speaking of his 'grosser qualities,' Lewis is disappointingly circumspect about his 'jolly good times' when he was on home leave, although there are intimations of a girl friend or two. Perhaps it's his 'gentlemen don't tell tales' training. Nevertheless, there is not very much of his personal life here, aside from some time spent with this philosopher father, who enlisted in the army, refusing to take a

commission. Bottom line: SAGITTARIUS RISING is a worthy, if not terribly interesting book. I would recommend it to readers interested in the history of aviation and warfare. (But I still think that the Hynes books are much better.)- Tim Bazzett, author of the memoir, BOOKLOVER

Cecil Lewis first came to my attention when I read "Captain Ball" by Alex Devaney. His words, "The most self-confident aces began to wonder when their turn would come. Faced by the empty chairs of men you had laughed and joked with at lunch. And, miraculously, you were still there. Until tomorrow", quoted there, just touched me, and my curiosity about him led me to this book. It has been on my To Read list ever since. Now I finally got to it, it was fantastic. Cecil Lewis lived in dangerous times and penned his memories of them (some 20 years later) in a wonderful way. He didn't seem to make himself look anything other than what he really was. At least, I didn't get the feeling he was trying to show himself as a hero. Yes, he spoke of his feats. But he as easily told of his mistakes and errors, even making fun of himself on their account. Quite a character, he seemed to be. And a great read this book was. Wish I'd known the man himself.

For those of us who love reading, who treasure a very few books as much beloved friends, we are sometimes fortunate enough to find a volume that touches our hearts, and is instantly propelled to a special level of reverence. Such is Cecil Lewis's Sagittarius Rising. This incredibly sensitive and perceptive man's book, while concerning many months of the WWI years, is not a war story. Instead, the author speaks from the perspective of 20 years after the events described, to tell of living these years, of his daily joys and fears, of how it felt to be passing through tumultuous, terribly important times, knowing that he was experiencing history, and trying to show us that history is made by ordinary men. Cecil Lewis led an extraordinary life by any measure. Sagittarius Rising is an extraordinary tale.

Frightening to discover the parallels between the observations of pre-WWII Cecil Lewis (WWI Pilot) and the current state of cultural affairs. Fascinating read that provides a first-person, young man's view of the birth of air combat and the Great War to end all wars.

Very Interesting and revealing story of air combat during WWI. It has the grit and emotion of a first person narrative, underscored by a youthful narrator.

"We were trained with one objective - to kill". "We had one hope - to live". A wonderfully written book, at one stage the author states "When it was over (WW1) we had to start over". Imagine the trauma? Once into the book, one is completely absorbed... think about six (6) pages describing clouds. Extraordinary. He talks about the first time flying in moonlight, in darkness and no instruments. How did they do it? Cecil Lewis describes going on to China after the WW1 to start up the fledgling airways, the hard work training locals and language barriers. This is a 'keeper', for, to revisit will always be a renewed thrill.

This is a wonderful book on the joys and tribulations of flying!! The author does a superb job of capturing the thought process of a pilot as they tackle the different realms of flight. As a pilot I have to laugh at some of the passages as they mimic some of the thoughts that I have had while flying. I'm not a huge WW1 fan, but with all of the great praise thrust upon this book I ventured forth and purchase it. I wasn't disappointed at all and I've already read through half of it while reading another outstanding aviation book. This book belongs in the library of anyone who wants to collect all the great aviation writers.

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