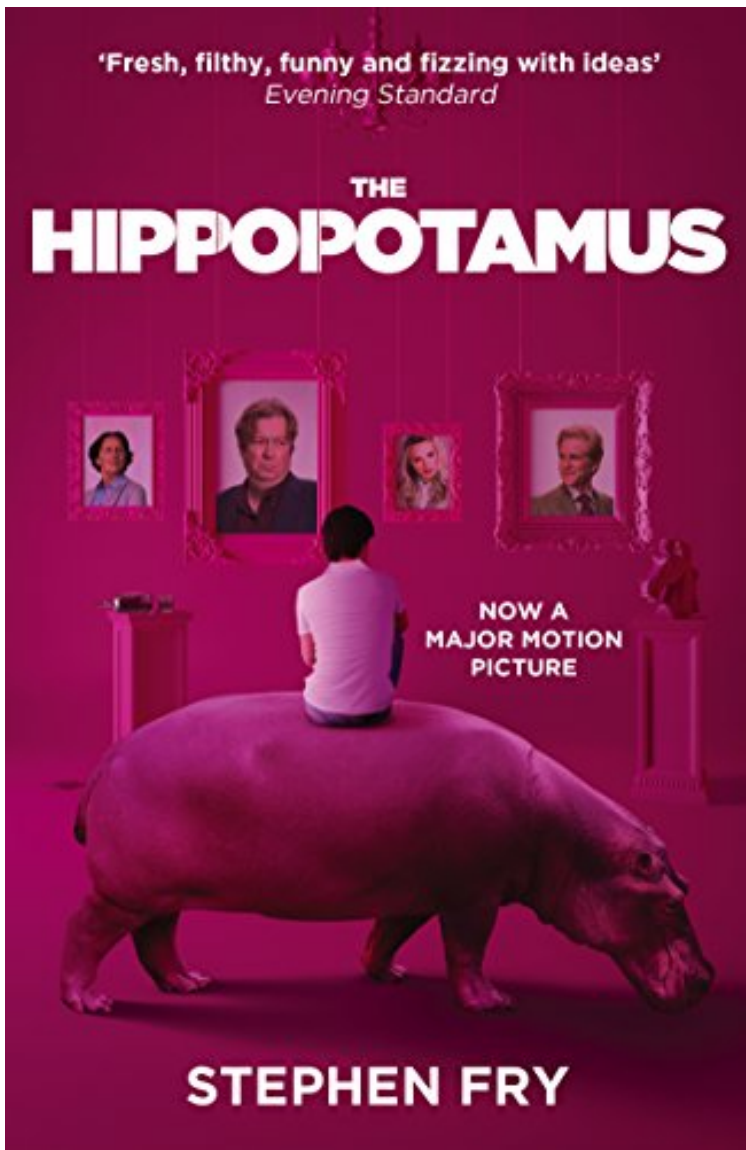


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The Hippopotamus



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteur Ted Wallace is an old, sour, womanising, cantankerous, whisky-sodden beast of a failed poet and drama critic, but he has his faults too. Fired from his newspaper, months behind on his alimony payments and disgusted with a world that undervalues him, Ted seeks a few months repose and free drink at Swafford Hall, the country mansion of his old friend Lord Logan. But strange things have been going on at Swafford. Miracles. Healings. Phenomena beyond the comprehension of a mud-caked hippopotamus like Ted. With this funny and deliciously readable novel, Stephen Fry takes his place as one of the most talented comic novelists of his generation. Extrait FOREWORD You cant expect a moron like me to tell a story competently. Its all I can bloody do to work this foul machine. Ive counted up the words

processed, a thing I do every hour, and, if technology can be trusted, it looks as if you're in for 94,536 of them. Good luck to you. You asked for it, you paid me for it, you've got to sit through it. As the man said, I've suffered for my art, now it's your turn. I don't claim that it has been a wholly grotesque experience. The Project, as you insist on calling it, has kept me from drinking at lunch-time, from drooling after unattainable women and from quarrelling with the unspeakables next door. At your suggestion, I have been leading a more or less regular life these seven months and I am told the benefits can be read clearly in complexion, waistline and eye-whites. The routine has been fixed and perversely pleasurable. Every morning I have risen at round about the hour most decent people are thinking of one more shot before bed, I have showered, descended the stairs with a light tread, champed through a bowl of Bran Buds and guided my unwilling slippers studywards. I switch on the computer procedure my son Roman calls jacking into the matrix goggle with disgusted eyes at whatever guff I've set down the night before, listen to some more of those bloody interview tapes with Logan, light up a Rothman and just bloody well get down to it. If the day has gone well I'll disappear upstairs for a round of light celebratory masturbation what Roman would no doubt call jacking into the mattress and I won't so much as think of a bottle till seven-ish. All in all a proud and pure life. The problem with renting a house in the country is that suddenly everyone wants to know you. I am endlessly having to fend off Oliver, Patricia and Rebecca and others who seem to think my time is limitless and my cellar bottomless. Every once in a while the Bitch will unload a son or daughter for the weekend, but they are both big enough and ugly enough to look after themselves and don't need me to help them roll their joints or fit their coils. Next week Leonora will be moving into the house I've given her and be permanently off my hands. She's far too old to be clinging to me. No, on balance I would say the things been a huge success. As a process, that is, as a process. Whether the product has anything to recommend it is, naturally, for you to say.

I am fully aware that there's a deal of tarding up to be done. I assume you'll make some decision about whether or not to create a unified point of view . . . a consistent third-person narrative, an omniscient author, an innocent eye or an innocent I, all that Eng. Lit. balls. Since half of it's in letter form you could always titivate here, dandify there and call it an Epistolary Novel, couldn't you? My favourite candidate for a title is Other Peoples Poetry, I have a feeling however that your filthy marketing people will regard this as a notch too poncey. It seems to me to be the best title, the only title. So whatever cheap alternative you dream up instead, to me this book will always be Other Peoples Poetry and nothing else. Your suggestion, What Next? or Now What? or whatever it was, strikes me as a touch too Joseph Heller and a whole smashing uppercut too market-led, as I believe the phrase is. Otherwise I'm rather fond of The Thaumaturge; that would go down as my tip for place. No doubt you'll come up with your own clever-arse idea. Roman thinks Whisky and Soda would be rather neat. The details here below are more or less accurate. If you develop a publisher's yellow streak, you can always change the names and dates buggered if I care. Meanwhile, on delivery of this, the second quarter of my advance is due: I'm off back to the smoke to find myself a tart and a bar, so sling the cheque over to the Harpo, in which place too a message can be left, delivering itself of your professional opinion, for what little it's worth. E.L.W. CHAPTER 1 The fact is I had just been sacked from my paper, some frantic piffle about shouting insults from the stalls at a first night. Theatre criticism should be judgement recollected in tranquillity, my wet turd of an editor had shrilled, still trembling from the waves of squeal and whinge that actors, directors, producers and (wouldn't you just believe it) pompous, cowardly prigs of fellow reviewers had unleashed upon him by fax and phone throughout the morning. You know I support my staff, Ted. You know I venerate your work. I know no such bloody thing. I know that you have been told by people cleverer than you that I am a feather in your greasy cap. I also knew that he was the kind of anile little runt who, in foyers and theatre bars the West End over, can be heard bleating into their gin and tonics, I go to the theatre to be entertained. I told him so and a full gill more. A month's salary, deep regret, the telephone number of some foul rehab clinic and my lance was free. If you're a halfway decent human being you've probably been sacked from something in your time . . . school, seat on the board, sports team, honorary committee membership, club, satanic abuse group, political party . . . something. You'll know that feeling of elation that surges up inside you as you flounce from the headmaster's study, clear your locker or sweep the pen-tidies from your desk. No use denying the fact, we all feel undervalued: to be told officially that we are off the case confirms our sense of not being fully appreciated by an insensitive world. This, in a curious fashion, increases what psychotherapists and assorted tripe-hounds of the media call our self-esteem, because it proves that we were right all along. It's a rare experience in this world to be proved right on anything and it does wonders for the amour propre, even when, paradoxically, what we are proved right about is our suspicion that everyone considers us a waste of skin in the first place. I boarded the boat that

plies its fatuous course between newspaperland and real London and watched the Sunday Shite building grow upwards in space as slow knots were put between self and dismal docklands and, far from feeling mokey or put upon, I was aware of a great swelling relief and a pumping end-of-term larkiness. At such times, and such times only, a daughter can be a blessing. Leonora would by now have high-heeled her way, it being half past twelve, to the Harpo Club. You probably know the place I meant to use the real name, lawyers being lawyers revolving doors, big bar, comfy chairs, restaurants, more or less acceptable art on the walls. By day, smart publishers and what used to be called the Mediahedins; by night, the last gasp of yesterdays Soho bohemians and washed-up drunks taking comfort from the privilege of being sucked up to by the first gasp of tomorrows ration. In the back brasserie Leonora (hardly my idea, a name that tells you all you need to know about the child's footling mother) hugged, snogged and squealed. Daddee! What brings you here in the daytime? If you take that slithery tongue out of my ear, Ill tell you. She probably imagined that a slightly famous daughter and her even more slightly famous father displaying easy affection for one another in such a manner would provoke envy and admiration in those of her tight-arsedly bourgeois generation who only ever saw their parents for tea in hotels and wouldnt think of swearing, smoking and drinking with them in public. Typical bloody Leonora; there are pubs all over the country where three generations of ordinary families drink and swear and smoke at each other every bloody night, without it ever crossing their minds that they are simply sensationally lucky to have such a just brilliantly fabulous relationship with their wonderful daddies. I dropped the Rothmans and lighter on the table and let the banquette blow off like a Roman emperor as it took my weight. The usual dirt averted their eyes while I took in the room. Couple of actors, nameless knot of advertisers, that queen who presents architecture programmes on Channel Four, two raddled old messes I took to be rock stars, and four women at a table, one of whom was a publisher and all of whom I wanted to take upstairs and spear more or less fiercely with my cock. Leonora, whom I had never wanted to spear, the gods be thanked in these unforgiving times, was looking thinner and more lustrous eyed than ever. If I didnt know it was unfashionable I would have supposed her to be on drugs of some kind. Whats all this? I asked, picking up a portable tape-recorder on the table in front of her. Im profiling Michael Lake at one, she said. For Town Around. That fraud? His dribble of three-act loose-stooled effluent is the reason Im here. What can you mean? I explained. Oh Daddy, she moaned, you are the limit! I saw a preview on Monday. I think its a perfectly brilliant play. Of course you do. And thats why you are a worthless keybasher who fills in time sicking out drivels for snob glossies until a rich, semiaristocratic queer comes to claim you for a brood-mare, while I, for all my faults, remain a writer. Well, youre not a writer now, are you? A jessed eagle is still an eagle, I declared, with massive dignity. So what are you going to do? Wait for offers? I dont know, my old love, but I do know this. I need your mother off my back until Im sorted out. Im two months behind as it is. Leonora promised to do what she could and I skedaddled from the brasserie in case the Lake fake was early. Playwrights more than most are not above throwing good wine or bad fists when the valueless offal they have vomited up before a credulous public has been exposed for what it is. I sat at the bar and kept an eye on the mirror dead ahead, which gave a full view of the influx from the entrance door behind me. The lunch crowd twittered around the bar area awaiting their meal-tickets or their spongers; the daytime scent of the women and the sunlight pouring through the window created an interior atmosphere so distinct from the dark, flitting nimbus that hangs over the place at night that we might have been lapping in a different room in a different decade. In America, where boozers are often under the street, like the cutesy bar in that ghastly television series they repeat every day on Channel Four, a daytime atmosphere is positively banished. The punter, I suppose, is not to be reminded that there is a working world going on outside, lest he start to feel guilty about pissing it away. Like an increasing number of niminy-piminy Europeans, Americans bracket drinking with gambling and whoring, as deeds to be done in the dark. For myself, I have no shame and dont have to steal off to Tuscany or the Caribbean to be able to drink guiltlessly in the sunlight. This casts me as a freak in a lunch-time world where the fires of anything vinous are extinguished by spritzing sprays of mineral water and the blaze of anything hearty is drizzled in balsamic vinegar or damped down with blanketing weeds of radicchio, lollo rosso and rocket. Christ, we live in arse-paralysingly drear times. Once, since were on the subject of designer lettuce, at a luncheon for literary hacks, the novelist Weston Payne prepared a salad of dock, sycamore and other assorted foliage collected from the residents garden in Gordon Square. He dressed these leaves in a vinaigrette and to universal applause served them up as cimabue, putana vera and lampedusa. One grotty little pill from the Sunday Times went so far as to claim that putana vera could be bought in his local Chelsea Waitrose. A bottle of London tap-water chilled and passed through a soda-stream was slurped with

every evidence of delight under the name of Aqua Robinetto. Very fitting really. After all, for twenty years Westons novels had been palmed off as literature to these same worthless husks without their ever noticing a thing. I sometimes think that London is the worlds largest catwalk for emperors. Perhaps it always was, but in the old days we werent afraid to shout out, Youre naked, you silly arse. Youre stark bollock-naked. Today you only have to fart in the presence of a dark-haired girl from the Sunday Times, whose father is either a sacked politician or a minor poet like myself, and youll be puffed and profiled as the new Thackeray. You cant imagine, if youre younger than me, which statistically speaking you are bound to be, what it is like to have been born into the booze-and-smokes generation. Its one thing for a man to find, as he ages, that the generations below him are trashier, more promiscuous, less disciplined and a whole continent more pigignorant and shit-stupid than his own every generation makes that discovery but to sense all around you a creeping puritanism, to see noses wrinkle as you stumble by, to absorb the sympathetic disgust of the pink-lunged, clean-livered, clear-eyed young, to be made to feel as if you have missed a bus no one ever told you about thats going to a place youve never heard of, that can come a bit hard. All those pi, priggish Malvolios going about the place with do you mind, some of us have got exams tomorrow, actually expressions on their pale prefectorial little faces. Vomworthy. It seems the popsy up on a stool next to mine read some of the off-pissedness in my face, for she gave me a long sideways stare, unaware that I was inspecting her inspection by way of the mirror. She slipped her bony but appetising buns off the stool and made for a chair in the corner, leaving me the sole occupant of the bar pasture, to graze the gherkins and crop the cashews alone. Knew her from somewhere. Five got you two that she was a diarist for the Standard. Leonora would know. Revue de presse "My goodness what fruity language Fry uses! You can feel his enjoyment, and also the huge force of hi desire to please you, as you read this." William Leith, Mail on Sunday "One of the funniest people writing on either side of the Atlantic...like a combination of Evelyn Waugh and Kingsley Amis but funnier than either." Publishers Weekly From the Hardcover edition.