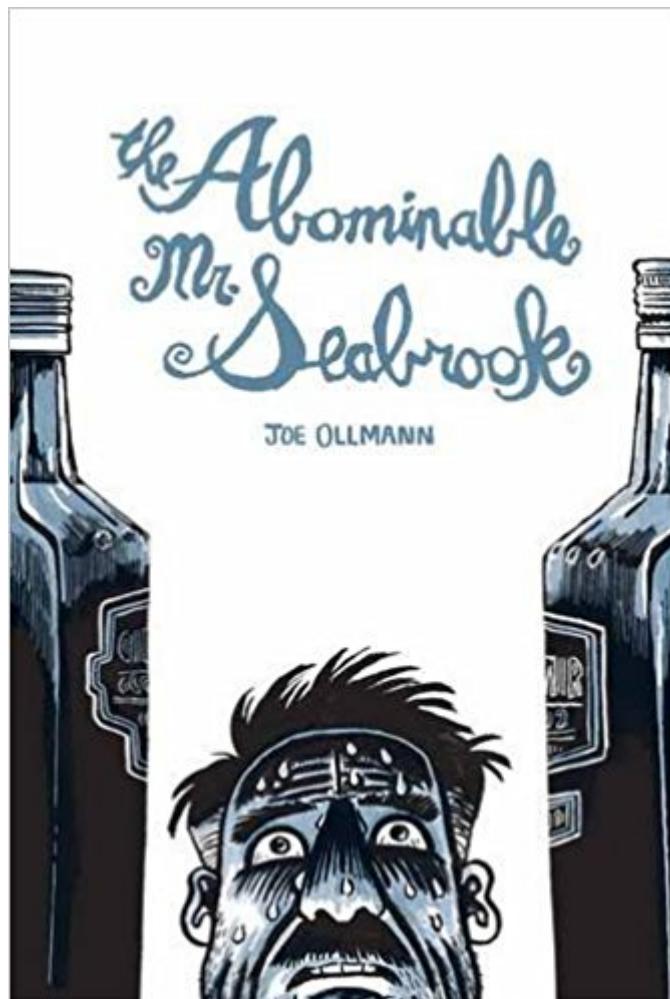


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The Abominable Mr. Seabrook



Synopsis

"Ollmann spent 10 years researching Seabrook's strange, ramshackle life, and it shows: his book is wonderfully rich and detailed. Nothing seems to escape his attention or his compassion."

— Rachel Cooke, *The Guardian*
The daring and destructive life of the man who popularized the word "zombie" In the early twentieth century, travel writing represented the desire for the expanding bourgeoisie to experience the exotic cultures of the world past their immediate surroundings. Journalist William Buehler Seabrook was emblematic of this trend—participating in voodoo ceremonies, riding camels cross the Sahara desert, communing with cannibals and most notably, popularizing the term "zombie" in the West. A string of his bestselling books show an engaged, sympathetic gentleman hoping to share these strange, hidden delights with the rest of the world. He was willing to go deeper than any outsider had before. But, of course, there was a dark side. Seabrook was a barely functioning alcoholic who was deeply obsessed with bondage and the so-called mystical properties of pain and degradation. His life was a series of traveling highs and drunken lows; climbing on and falling off the wagon again and again. What led the popular and vivid writer to such a sad state? Cartoonist Joe Ollmann spent seven years researching Seabrook's life, interviewing surviving family and accessing long neglected archives, in order to piece together the peripatetic life of a forgotten American writer. Often weaving in Seabrook's own words and those of his biographers, Ollmann's *The Abominable Mr. Seabrook* posits Seabrook the believer versus Seabrook the exploiter, and leaves the reader to consider where one ends and the other begins.

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Customer Reviews

"Ollmann skillfully captures Seabrook's ardent desire to experience life and write about it even as he's killing himself with drink...As both a narrative and a story in pictures, this is an early candidate for the year's best graphic biography." *Publishers Weekly* starred review "[Ollmann is] a world leader in the school of social-realist cartoonist/writers, and his epic new graphic-novel biography *The Abominable Mr. Seabrook* is his most ambitious and fully realized work yet." *The Montreal Gazette* "Ollmann packs in as many excursions, marriages, benders, and kinky dalliances as he can. It's a compelling look at an interesting literary figure who is mostly forgotten today." *Mental Floss* "An unflinching look at Seabrook, his literary accomplishments and failures, his terrible self-destructiveness, and the awful spiral that took him from the heights of American letters to an ignominious suicide after his discharge from a psychiatric facility." *Boing Boing*

Joe Ollmann lives in Hamilton, Ontario with his wife and child. He is the winner of the Doug Wright Award for best cartooning for his book *Mid-Life*.

William Seabrook was a popular writer of the "Lost Generation", notably weirder than most, and pressed by psychological dysfunction to run in oddball directions and write about what he found. His reports were personal and often had a lurid and/or supernatural edge. Among other adventures, he spent a year in Haiti, mingling among the locals, finally producing a book about voodoo (*The Magic Island*, which introduced the term "zombie" to the American culture). His odyssey was a strange one, carrying him through alcoholism and eventually mental hospitals and ultimately suicide. For his small but unusual place in history, some people will be drawn to hear his story. Today Seabrook's books are obscure, and some are out of print. Seabrook's own story is hard to piece together. He wrote a fascinating autobiography (*No Hiding Place*) shortly before he died, but he seems to have sanitized some elements to make it more palatable. Joe Ollmann has here collected the various conflicting stories and built a coherent, and presumably true-to-life, narrative in graphic novel format. It's a story worth telling, and nobody else has done it; at least not in an accessible form. My gripe is that I find Ollmann's book on the flat side. I've read Seabrook's autobiography and found it personal and passionate, even if he did fudge some details; Ollmann's rendition strikes me as factual but without passion. I'm guessing that, as Ollmann proceeded with this project (which he says went on

over ten years!), he found himself liking Seabrook less. This wouldn't be surprising; Seabrook was fascinating from a distance but did some nasty stuff up close. And he crossed taboo lines both of his era and ours, most obviously being sexual sadism. Ollmann makes a point of illustrating Seabrook's sexual misadventures straightforwardly (they were too big a part of Seabrook's life to omit) but intentionally devoid of any eroticism, and I think this was a stylistic mistake. I understand that Ollmann didn't want to produce a smutty sex book that glorified degrading stuff, but to render Seabrook's efforts mundane makes the book itself mundane. In life, Seabrook was compulsively drawn to chase his passionate compulsions wherever they led, and the heartfelt appeal of his quests just doesn't come through here. Maybe I'm not being fair to Ollmann; maybe the telling just wasn't on my wavelength, and others will be touched as I was not. I hope that's the case because I'm glad the book was written, and I hope it reaches a lot of people.

Ollman's work is unusually good at exploring his characters' inner lives. Here he has found a subject with inward convolutions so complex and messy that he can push this talent to remarkable extremes. The reader comes away from this biography with the palpable sense that Seabrook was in many ways a screw-up, but he was also an absolutely unique and self-made adventurer, mystic and libertine as well (note: like Seabrook's own work, it pokes semi-respectfully into some dark corners and this may not be to everyone's taste). Ultimately, the philosophical dilemma this tension creates both for Ollmann and for Seabrook himself is beautifully illustrated and worth the read. Well done.

Fantastic drawings, but the story is meh. If Mr. Ollmann gave this wonderfully artistic biography treatment to a more worthy subject, I'd be interested in buying it. Also, the book should be offered in a larger format, because much of the text was minuscule due to the word bubbles being shrunk down to fit the small book size. I have 20/20 vision and I had to bring the book close to my face to decipher the words many times.

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