Perfect summer reading - escape to the Cornish cliffs in the dizzying heat of August where five cousins are making the most of The Camomile Lawn last summer of their youth. Oliver is just back from the Spanish Civil War and world-weary at only nineteen. Calypso is gorgeous, utterly selfish and determined to marry for money. Polly and Walter, brother and sister, play their cards close to their chests. Then there's little Sophie, who nobody loves. Soon the world will be swept into war again and the five cousins will enter a whirligig of sex, infidelity, love and loss, but for now they have one last, gaspingly hot summer at the house by the cliffs with the camomile lawn.
A beloved bestseller from an author ahead of its time, The Camomile Lawn is a waspishly witty, devil-may-care delight. Mary Wesley. Mary Wesley was born near Windsor in 1913 and also worked part-time in the antiques trade.

She used to comment that her 'chief claim to fame is arrested development, getting my first novel published at the age of seventy'. It's hard to overpraise Mary Wesley's novel Search books and authors. Buy from... View all online retailers Find local retailers. Also by Mary Wesley.


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Camomile Lawn – Walks off the beaten path

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The Camomile Lawn by Mary Wesley

Mary Wesley's The Camomile Lawn is instantly seductive. We quickly know, without any laborious feeling that we are being force-fed information, what Helena is like, and what her husband Richard is like, and why. Before we meet them - or before they arrive off the London train - we know about their nephews and nieces, Calypso, Walter, Polly and Oliver, whose stories we shall be following.
We know about year-old Sophy, and Helena's dislike of her; and we see fortyish Helena in her deckchair through Sophy's eyes, as she perches unseen in the ilex tree. We know the house is on a height above the sea. We know Calypso is breathtakingly beautiful. We know it is the summer of with war imminent. And all this in two relaxed pages. The only other crucial characters are identical twins, the rector's sons, who are part of the group and will be important for Polly; and the Austrian Jewish refugees Max and Monika who is "good without being boring", and ultimately tragic.

They will be important for everyone, before the end. But the novel is shockingly illuminating about the way ageing, blimpish The Camomile Lawn, who had fought in the first world war, rather admired Hitler and - before war was declared - assumed concentration camps must be "splendid places", and doing people The Camomile Lawn power of good".

Calypso too has met young Nazis on her skiing holiday and thought them "awfully nice". The rector's wife is such a decent woman that she just cannot believe Monika's account of what is happening to the Jews. It really is hard to believe that even Hitler - surely our propaganda - I mean that exaggerates too. The author has no comment to make; she just tells how it was. And why does Helena, offering in war-torn London to prepare "the greens" for supper with her sister-in-law, The Camomile Lawn that "I know how to do it"?

After all, she is a middle-aged woman The Camomile Lawn runs a household herself. The point is that before the war they would all have had maids and cooks, who have now pushed off joyfully to support the war effort in munitions factories or the services. The lives of upper-middle-class women would never be the same again. Life will never be the same again for the young people, either. The carefree summer holiday by the sea where the book begins is their last.

It is the end of innocence, The Camomile Lawn before they part, for poor Sophy - whose immature sexuality is flagged by her Uncle Richard's uneasy interest in her lack of knickers, and who will be traumatised in the course of their annual, ritual cliff-edge race, the "Terror Run". Afterwards, the whole of life becomes a Terror Run. The young men - Oliver, Walter, the twins - are called up into the armed forces, and come and go from their billets, postings, and overseas missions.

They cannot all hope to survive. When in London, "fearfully randy", they expect The Camomile Lawn, ie. The older generation too go off the rails, in extremely interesting ways. For modern readers there are surprises, though there is no reason to doubt Wesley's memory of how it was. The cousins are 19, going on 20, and seem sophisticated. The F-word is used without inhibition. Yet Calypso has to have explained what an erection is. And surely no year-old today would be ignorant of what she was seeing, as Sophy was, when a strange man showed her a "pink snake".

There is a terrible pathos in her efforts, always interrupted, to tell people what happened. Her innocence is in some ways a protection. Uncle Richard's gropings in her adolescence seem to her "not awful", but just "a bore" and, while everyone The Camomile Lawn watchfully aware of his proclivities, any idea The Camomile Lawn rebuking him or, still less, informing on him is never remotely considered.

A sweet irony is that Uncle Richard is the only person who writes to Sophy at her wretched boarding school, posting every week straightforward factual letters giving her the small local news.

The Camomile Lawn letters are the one thing that sustain her, reminding her that the home-world is still there for her to go back to. Thus aberrations are contained, just as strong illicit passions are accommodated.

Common-sense The Camomile Lawn, sometimes brutally but more often beneficently. This may read like a comment on our own over-regulated and over-judgmental times, but I think Mary Wesley is, again, just telling it how it is The Camomile Lawn. This is a story in which the only really destructive person turns out to be someone who was expected to be some kind of a gentle genius, and the tragic irony of The Camomile Lawn, coming at the end, is shattering. It has no comfortable English translation.

The point is that even though you love a person, it doesn't mean you cannot love someone else as well. One fact does not cancel out another. Even if you believe something, it does not mean that you cannot believe the opposite at the same time. In her other novels, the author expresses this by saying that people think "contrapuntally". It is a very Mary Wesley notion. In The Camomile Lawn unorthodox couplings proliferate with no feeling or accusation of betrayal, and by the end of The Camomile Lawn book you have to ask yourself not only who has slept with whom, but who hasn't especially with Max.

People react to stress in different ways, turning to drink, promiscuous sex, obsessional behaviour. They understand and interpret one another and themselves differently, or not at all. Helena thinks Sophy has no feelings; everyone, including Calypso herself, who marries for money, thinks that Calypso does not know what love is. She discovers she does. Each of the cousins knows a lot about the others, but none knows everything.

Here, the reader has the advantage. What gives the book its special gamey flavour is the bold and sometimes cruel frankness with which the young characters talk to one another.

They say things aloud that one would normally only think, and are The Camomile Lawn shocked either by themselves or by the others. When one of their elders says, "What a dreadful thing to say!"

Helena is the only person in the book who knows how to hate. Wesley's technique of directness saves both author and reader nearly all the "She thought It speeds things up, The Camomile Lawn makes for The Camomile Lawn effect and for comedy, rather in the manner of the novels of Ivy Compton-Burnett. This was the second novel in a sequence that Wesley published in her later years - the first of which, when she was 71, was Jumping the Queue The Camomile Lawn was her "breakthrough" novel, and was filmed for television The Camomile Lawn She had been writing all her life for her own pleasure, The Camomile Lawn apart from two The Camomile Lawn in the late s, which did not make a mark, had always thrown away what she wrote.
The wonder is not that Mary Wesley wrote this wise and funny novel when she The Camomile Lawn in her 70s. The wonder is the advantage that being over 70 affords The Camomile Lawn a novelist. She could enter into the heart of the year-old Sophy, lonely and displaced, because that was her own situation as a child. She could identify with Calypso and Polly and their emotional chaos The Camomile Lawn the war, because she herself at that time though a little older was in London and living vividly, working at The Camomile Lawn War Office, having lots of affairs.

The novel is cross-cut by the return of the cousins to the house with the camomile lawn for Max's funeral in the s, when the survivors have grown old. A younger writer would find it hard to make so real the elderly, rambling Polly, or Calypso damaged by a stroke - both of them The Camomile Lawn so utterly and recognisably themselves - with such humour and acerbity.

Only Muriel Spark, another writer with whom Wesley has much in common, was able to do that before she grew old, in Memento Mori. When you read Wesley's other novels, as you must, you will be struck by recurrences of the more startling The Camomile Lawn of The Camomile Lawn: the sexual sharing of twins; and murder, of an accidental or casual, opportunistic kind, never detected.

More than once, her female characters use the memories of old age to give perspective to the experiences of their wild young days. Her heroines have dark secrets, are secretive and devious by nature, and are the objects of desire and curiosity.

Sophy, a "super-loner", and Calypso, "a The Camomile Lawn act", between them encapsulate "the Wesley girl". Wesley's novels are best read in sequence and as a whole, and not only because characters who are central in one, such as Calypso, appear in the margins of others.

As well as the Wesley girl, there is the Wesley world, the west country. As someone who lives in Somerset, I find unforgettable her passage in this book about driving from Cornwall to London in which took a whole day. Stately elms flanked the Somerset roads, cart-horses pulled the combine harvesters, and one drove through the towns and villages, instead of bypassing them.

When they return in the s, for Max's funeral, they take as we do the M3 motorway, then the lethal A The heartbreak at the core of this supremely entertaining novel is the way "that" becomes "this", the way that gorgeous young The Camomile Lawn become peculiar old women, and the way that the next generation - Polly's twins, Calypso's Hamish, Max and Monika's horrible Pauli - cannot know, nor care quite enough, about their parents and their extraordinary lives and loves.

It was a very happy time. The children, however, don't get it. It is not their fault. The scented camomile lawn at the house by the sea was, for the cousins, the emblem and essence of summer holidays. Some readers may wonder what a camomile lawn is like, even though they drink camomile tea and recognise the fragrance. Camomile, or chamomile, has feathery leaves, a daisy-like flower, and is in fact quite hard to establish as a lawn. The variety which flourished in Helena and Richard's garden was probably the non-flowering "Treophage", best suited for the purpose and native to the west country.

Sophy, The Camomile Lawn her 50s and unmarried, remembers at the end "being part of the group which had dined on the lawn on one of the last days of August sitting round a table lit by candles, with the moon rising over the sea". She may yet get her heart's desire, though that too is suggested with a bitter twist. Like her, anyone who reads this novel must be in love with Oliver, whether at 19 or in his 60s.

The book is more than a comedy of manners, more than a sexual entertainment, more than a The Camomile Lawn evocation of the war years, though it is all of those things. With her light touch and uncensored imaginative range, Mary Wesley illuminates the violence and vividness of youth, the griefs and losses of age, the transience of life and of all the people and places we best know and love. Topics Books. Reuse this content. Most popular.