When Lord Jim first appeared in 1900, many took Joseph Conrad to task for couching an entire novel in the form of an extended conversation—a ripping good yarn, if you like. (One critic in The Academy complained that the narrator was telling that after-dinner story to his companions for eleven solid hours.) Conrad defended his method, insisting that people really do talk for that long, and listen as well. In fact his chatty masterwork requires no defense—it offers up not only linguistic pleasures but a timeless exploration of morality. The eponymous Jim is a young, good-looking, genial, and naive water-clerk on the Patna, a cargo ship plying Asian waters. He is, we are told, the kind of fellow you would, on the strength of his looks, leave in charge of the deck. He also harbors romantic fantasies of adventure and heroism—which are promptly scuttled one night when the ship collides with an obstacle and begins to sink. Acting on impulse, Jim jumps overboard and lands in a lifeboat, which happens to be bearing the unscrupulous captain and his cohorts away from the disaster. The Patna, however, manages to stay afloat. The foundering vessel is towed into port—and since the officers have strategically vanished, Jim is left to stand trial for abandoning the ship and its 800 passengers. Stripped of his seamans license, convinced of his own cowardice, Jim sets out on a tragic and transcendent search for redemption. This may sound like the bleakest of narratives. But Lord Jim is also touching, elevating, and often funny. Here, for example, the narrator describes the ships captain (proving that clothes do indeed make the man): He made me think of a trained baby elephant walking on hind-legs. He was extravagantly gorgeous too—got up in a soiled sleeping suit, bright green and deep orange vertical stripes, with a pair of ragged straw slippers on his bare feet, and somebodys cast-off pith hat, very dirty and two sizes too small for him, tied up with a manilla rope-yarn on the top of his big head. You understand a man like that hasnt a ghost of a chance when it comes to borrowing clothes. This is formidable prose by any standard. But when you consider that Conrad was working in his third language, the sublime after-dinner story that is Lord Jim seems even more astonishing an accomplishment. --Teri Kieffer
This is one of those books that anybody who has been through high school should have been exposed (or at least exposed to the CliffNotes on the novel). I remember being assigned this book as a junior or senior and bluffing my way through without really reading it. I even got a literature degree without reading it. Finally, after many years, I felt that I should give the novel its due, and picked up a copy.

The novel is the story of Jim, an overly romantic seaman, who during a moment of crisis loses his courage. He is first mate on a pilgrim ship bound for Mecca and after the ship collides with an unseen object and is in danger of sinking, he abandons ship leaving the human cargo to fend for itself. He is dogged by his guilt and spends years drifting around the East trying to find the right occasion by which he might redeem himself. Eventually he ends up in the forests of Malaysia where he becomes a god-like protector of the indigenous people and is given the title of Lord. But no matter how successful Jim might appear to his followers, and to the omnipresent narrator of the novel, he still cannot forget his moment of weakness. Jims self-centeredness prevents him from moving forward with his life and condemns him to a life of voluntary exile, all the time proclaiming that he is not good enough to live in the outside world. He is willing to risk all future happiness and fortune to be able to face his demons once again without losing his nerves. Ironically, it is his last heroic act that destroys all the good that Jim has painstakingly built up, essentially bringing chaos to his Eden like world.

Published at the very beginning of the twentieth century, Lord Jim, in many ways anticipated the experimental writing techniques that would be brought to fruition in the works of Joyce, Faulkner, and others. Conrad is not only interested in telling a tale, he is interested in different points of view, nonlinear narrative techniques, and solving the complexities inherent in a tale within a tale formula. Although some readers might find Conrads prose a little tedious, perseverance and careful reading will reveal passages of unexpected beauty that will cause the reader to pause -- then slowly re-read.

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