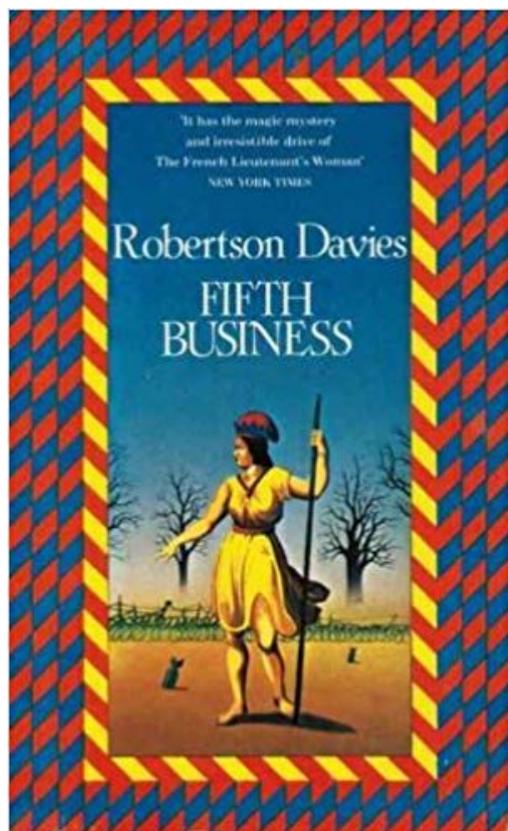


## Fifth Business *by* Robertson Davies



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**ISBN:** 0352396113  
**ISBN13:** 978-0352396112  
**Author:** Robertson Davies  
**Book title:** Fifth Business  
**Pages:** 320  
**Publisher:** STAR (May 19, 1977)  
**Language:** English  
**Category:** Contemporary  
**Size PDF version:** 1626 kb  
**Size ePUB version:** 1325 kb  
**Size FB2 version:** 1871 kb  
**Other formats:** mbr txt docx lit



## Reviews of the *Fifth Business* by Robertson Davies

### Malodora

I really liked the Fifth Business, the first book of the trilogy. It was intriguing and maintained my interest very well and I liked the way the three boyhood characters reunited in an inexplicable encounter at the end of the tale. The Manticore was not as interesting to me and the coincidence of encountering Eisengrim yet again was much harder for me to swallow by this time. David's story was not nearly as engaging as Dunstan's and I could not swallow the explanation for his arrested sexuality. He just was not real for me. By the third book, I had lost interest and only skipped through the bizarre saga of Paul's life. I admire Davies' writing and enjoy all his literary references, but I had trouble following through on the entire trilogy. I suspect I missed something critical in the story line for the second book, but I am not sure I want to put in the effort to find it out. I do like that Davies' story is intentionally ambiguous on multiple levels.

### Phallozs Dwarfs

My go-to literature guru recommended this 1970's era read. The three unique novels revolve around the murder/death of Boy Staunton from Deptford, a rural village in Ontario, Canada. But, more so, the ramifications of the flight of an errant snowball on three boys. From pre-WWI, the first novel, *Fifth Business*, is told from Dunstan Ramsay's point of view. He is an unwitting catalyst in the snowball saga and his obsession with its victim and her family. It was an okay story, but the writing kept me captivated. So, on to the second book, *The Manticore*. This one told the story of Boy's family from his son David's perspective. It focused on Jungian theory of psychology. Other than an interesting education about that school of thought, nothing about this novel really made sense for books 1 and 3. *Anima/Shadow* maybe. The third book, my favorite, *World of Wonders*, was a tragic intricate tale told by the snowball victim's premature baby turned magician. It takes us from the depths of Deptford to London, Paris, the mountains of Switzerland. The most colorful book of the three that tied up plot lines intriguingly. There was a bit too much diversion into hagiography or lives of saints that apparently was central to Davies. It left me flat. But, all in all, this was so beautifully written, that I enjoyed my long journey with these three reads.

### **terostr**

This first book of the Deptford Trilogy was one I found intriguing, but I don't think it's to everyone's taste. The style is a bit old-fashioned (which perfectly suits the protagonist's voice) and the pace is steady rather than quick. The protagonist, Dunstan, is a perfect "Mr. Chips" kind of boys' school teacher, but it means that his love affairs are described in a more dispassionate manner than most modern readers would like. The book is well plotted. Dunstan's preoccupation with saints adds to the tone of the book, and I did not find it detracted from my interest. The revelation at the end, however, came as a complete surprise and I would have liked some foreshadowing. I recommend it for those who enjoy a slower-paced, intriguing character study that requires some thought and concentration.

### **Perius**

As this story starts, it has a decidedly memoir-ish feel to it, despite the fact that, early on, the lead character, Dunstan Ramsay, says he views the Bible in the same way he views *1,001 Arabian Nights*. So I made the mistake of being slightly disappointed early in the story when no mythical energy seems to be flowing. But the mythological angle gets played soon enough as Ramsay becomes captivated by Catholic saints.

One thing that tends to happen in good stories is what I call the envelope effect. This is when something in the front of the novel informs the rest of the story by serving as its envelope. We have two such devices in this story. First there is the title, which refers to "Fifth Business" as an opera term. It relates to the role of the baritone in opera. The tenor is the leading character, the soprano his love interest, and so forth, all the way down to the baritone, who is fifth business, after all those other parts and voices. That's how Ramsay lived, by putting others ahead of himself. As he goes through life as "Fifth Business", the reader becomes more fascinated by and sympathetic to his character. Another envelope is the first sentence in the story: "My lifelong involvement with Mrs. Dempster began at 5:58 o'clock p.m. on 27 December 1908 at which time I was ten years and seven months old." The entire rest of the story fits into that envelope, it is fascinating how Davies pulls that off.

This is the first novel in a series of three novels called the Deptford Trilogy, and it is sneaky good. As I said earlier, I was disappointed early on, when it seemed to be just a memoir, but the story and its telling are sneaky good. By the end of the novel, you will be very glad you read it.

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