



Courtesy of Elaine Dundy

BIOGRAPHY

Elaine Dundy is an actress and writer born in New York City. After World War II, she traveled to France and later to London, where she met and married writer Kenneth Tynan. After their wedding, she cabled home: “Have married Englishman. Letter follows.” In 1958 she published her first novel, *The Dud Avocado*, which Gore Vidal hailed as “one of the funniest books I have ever read.” A writer for the BBC’s satirical “That Was the Week that Was,” she has also written biographies of Peter Finch and Elvis Presley. Her most recent book is her autobiography, *Life Itself!* She divides her time between London and Los Angeles.

THE DUD AVOCADO

by Elaine Dundy

Introduction by Terry Teachout

978-1-59017-232-2

“Take one zippy, curious, 21-year-old American named Sally Jay... Drop her in the middle of Paris’ Left Bank. Add an Italian diplomat, an American theatrical director, a couple of painters and a white slave trader. Mix until all bubbles. The result: a delightful few hours of sparkling reading entertainment. Summing up: Froth and frolic.” —*Newsweek*

ABOUT THIS BOOK

The Dud Avocado is a lively, hilarious and loving look at Paris in the 1950s as seen through the eyes of a young American woman who has a lot to learn.

Witty, headstrong, and disaster-prone, twenty-one-year-old Sally Jay Gorce has dropped out of college and come to Paris in search of experience with a capital “E.” She takes small roles on the stage in part to be near a charismatic director, befriends a ragtag bunch of artists who frequent Left Bank cafés, and gallivants around the city in the afternoon wearing an evening gown because everything else is at the dry cleaner. Her affair with an older Italian diplomat sours after she discovers he has lied about having both a wife and a mistress—and has designs on marrying *her*. Other romantic entanglements follow, and for a time she lives with a doting artist, but when domestic life becomes too stifling Sally Jay jumps ship and heads on a madcap trip to the French Riviera. There she finds that all is not as it seems, and the scandal that ensues throws cold water on her hopes for love and fame.

Told in the incomparable voice of the dazzling Sally Jay, and featuring a wild cast of characters who truly *are* characters—not one, but two bearded poets in blue berets; a Spanish bullfighter; a decadent contessa; and a smooth-talking con-man—Dundy’s novel takes you to the heart of a long-vanished world.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is the significance of the book’s title?
2. *The Dud Avocado* is told from the first-person point-of-view. How central is Sally Jay’s voice to the story? How would the book have been different if it had been told from a different viewpoint? What would be lost? What gained? How does Sally Jay’s 1950s slang help to evoke her world?
3. How serious is Sally Jay about her acting career? Why does acting appeal to her? How much of the lure of the stage for her has to do with Larry? Why is it ironic that Bax is the one who ends up going to Hollywood?
4. The characters in this book are fond of classifying people. Larry has a system for grouping together types of tourists, and Sally Jay analyzes the “International Set”. Why do they do this? How does the novel’s satirical comedy arise from its ideas of groups and types?
5. Why do you think Uncle Roger seems to be more important to Sally Jay than her parents are?

OTHER NYRB CLASSICS OF INTEREST

Letty Fox: Her Luck

Christina Stead
(introduction by Tim Parks)

The Furies

Janet Hobhouse
(introduction by Daphne Merkin)

The Slaves of Solitude

Patrick Hamilton
(introduction by David Lodge)

Memoirs of Montparnasse

John Glassco
(introduction by Louis Begley)

Paris Stories

Mavis Gallant
(introduction by Michael Ondaatje)

The Pure and Impure

Colette
(introduction by Judith Thurman)

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Mark Twain,
The Innocents Abroad

Henry James, *Daisy Miller*

Edith Wharton,
The Age of Innocence

Ernest Hemingway,
The Sun Also Rises

F. Scott Fitzgerald,
Tender is the Night

Truman Capote,
Breakfast at Tiffany's

Anita Loos,
Gentlemen Prefer Blondes

Norman Rush, *Mating*

Diane Johnson, *Le Divorce*

6. Consider the following statement: "That's my answer to the question: what is your strongest emotion... curiosity. Curiosity every time" (p. 47). Do you agree that curiosity is the primary force that drives Sally Jay?
7. "I only did it because it seemed to be the glamorous thing to do at the time. It was my *ideal* of glamour" (p. 43). How do Sally Jay's idealized visions of people and places get her into trouble? Why does she have such a strong attachment to a romanticized version of life?
8. Describing Larry, Teddy says: "He strikes me as a person who is not quite talented enough for his ambitions. And he is morally lazy" (p. 46). How accurate is Teddy's impression? Why, if Sally Jay is able to judge Larry's poetry critically, is she blind to his other—far graver—flaws? How is it that Teddy immediately detects these things about Larry but Sally Jay doesn't? How dangerous do you think Larry truly is?
9. When speaking of Larry, Sally says, "the charm of his toughness and devilry and elusiveness was fatal" Why is this combination of traits irresistible to her? (p. 108).
10. Both Larry and Sally Jay make references to their similarities. In what ways are they alike?
11. Sally Jay says, "I don't always understand other people's motives" (p. 63). Why, intelligent and perceptive as she is, does Sally Jay often fail to understand the motives of others? Why does it take her so long to see Larry's duplicity? Discuss this in relation to Teddy's dinner party, the trip to the Riviera, and the deterioration of Judy's condition.
12. Part Two of the novel is presented as entries from Sally's journal. How does this change the tone of the novel? What are some reasons that Dundy might have chosen to write the sojourn on the French Riviera in this form? Is the journal a useful device?
13. What is the significance of Sally Jay's "Dreaded Librarian Dream"? What is the connection between Judy and the women at the train station in Chicago? What about Sally Jay appeals to both women? Why does Sally feel a sense of panic or desperation when she is with them?
14. Sally Jay can be self-involved, oblivious, manipulative, and reckless, yet she remains a lovable character. How? Why do we still root for her?
15. Soon after she arrives in Paris, Sally Jay says, "Here was all the gaiety and glory and sparkle I knew was going to be life if I could just grasp it" (p. 27). Is she able to achieve these things in Paris? Does her thirst for these qualities have more to do with her youth or with her personality? Do you think she'll ever be satisfied, or will she continue to seek novelty and adventure throughout her life?