

THE
CONNELL SHORT GUIDE
TO DAPHNE DU MAURIER'S



Rebecca

“The Connell Guides are brief, attractive,
erudite, and to the point. Bravo!”

SIR TOM STOPPARD

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE
NOVEL IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by *Theo Tait*

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Rebecca

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Introduction

In April 1937, when she was 30 years old, Daphne du Maurier told her publisher Victor Gollancz that she wanted to write “rather a sinister tale about a woman who marries a widower... Psychological and rather macabre.” A few months later, having given birth to her second daughter in London, she returned to Alexandria, where her husband Tommy Browning, a senior officer in the Grenadier Guards, had been posted – and began to write her fifth novel in the heat of the Egyptian summer. It was difficult. Du Maurier hated Egypt and its climate. Being somewhat shy and reclusive, she found it hard to perform her duties as the wife of the battalion commander – the round of cocktail parties and social functions. Her husband was ten years older than her, efficient and meticulous; Du Maurier felt that she had no talent for running a large house, even though that largely involved giving orders to the servants. She felt isolated and longed for England.

“I was homesick for Cornwall,” she wrote later: her family had a holiday home near Fowey. In particular, she found herself thinking about Menabilly, a large, empty house hidden in the woods on an isolated headland. She had heard that the owner had been married first to a very beautiful woman, and had then married again, to a much younger one. There was a rumour that he had left

the place empty because he found his first wife in the arms of her lover there. Various other influences played on her mind. She was jealous of her husband's one-time fiancée Jan Ricardo. According to her biographer Margaret Forster, "she was still haunted by the suspicion that Tommy had found the beautiful, dark-haired, glamorous Jan more attractive than herself"; her "feelings of inferiority in this respect, and of being intimidated, went straight into the character of the second Mrs de Winter". "Seeds began to drop," wrote du Maurier in *The Rebecca Notebook*. "A beautiful home... a first wife... jealousy... a wreck, perhaps at sea, near to the house..." She also remembered a tall, sinister-looking housekeeper whom she had seen at a large house she had visited as a child in Northamptonshire.

Du Maurier threw away a first draft of the novel, 15,000 words long, in Egypt, leaving her with little more than a title, *Rebecca*, and a few notes. "Very roughly," she wrote to Gollancz, "the book will be about the influence of a first wife on a second... she is dead before the book opens. Little by little I want to build up the character of the first wife in the mind of the second... until wife 2 is haunted day and night... a tragedy is looming very close and crash! bang! something happens..." But she was unable to think what this something might be. She and her husband returned to England in December, with only a quarter of the novel finished. The rest of it

was written by the sea in Cornwall, and in Hampshire, where Browning was stationed.

By this point, du Maurier was already a successful author with four novels and two family biographies behind her. Her previous book, *Jamaica Inn* (1936), a tale of wreckers and smugglers in 19th century Cornwall, had been a great success. But her publishers could immediately see that *Rebecca* would be even bigger. Gollancz was delighted; her editor, Norman Collins, remarked: "The new Daphne du Maurier contains everything that the public could want."

Rebecca was published in 1938. It was immediately a great popular success, though the critical reaction was lukewarm. Reviewers mostly praised it, but in rather derogatory terms, noting its "popular appeal" and dismissing it as an "unashamed melodrama". *The Sunday Times* labeled *Rebecca* a "romance in the grand tradition". "Nothing in this is beyond the novelette," declared *The Times* - though its reviewer admitted that there was "an atmosphere of terror which... makes it easy to overlook... the weaknesses". "It would be absurd to make a fuss about *Rebecca*," wrote V.S. Pritchett, one of the period's leading critics in the *Christian Science Monitor*. "It will be here today and gone tomorrow like the rest of publicity's 'masterpieces'." Only *The Observer's* Frank Swinnerton discerned something more, describing "the fearlessness with

which Miss du Maurier works in material so strange” as “magnificent”. The “sniggers of meticulous sophisticates”, he felt, should be ignored. *Rebecca* sold in large numbers, with 60,000 copies quickly sold in Britain and America, and was made into an admired Alfred Hitchcock film in 1939.

It has continued to be popular ever since, if not prestigious. For instance, when F. Scott Fitzgerald wanted to disparage his former friend Ernest Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), he described it as “a thoroughly superficial book which has all the profundity of *Rebecca*”. Yet du Maurier’s novel has never been out of print; today, 75 years after publication, it still sells thousands of copies around the world every month. It has been immensely influential on popular storytelling. Well-respected writers have provided a prequel and a sequel – respectively, Sally Beauman’s *Rebecca’s Tale* (2001) and Susan Hill’s *Mrs De Winter* (1993) – while various other writers, from Stephen King to Antonia Fraser, have paid homage to it in their own works of fiction.

For decades *Rebecca*, along with the rest of du Maurier’s work, was filed away as “romantic fiction”, “gothic fiction” or “gothic romance”, meaning that it did not qualify as proper “English literature”. In recent years, however, du Maurier’s reputation has risen – partly because gothic fiction and female writers have become a more respectable subject for academic and critical

attention, and partly due to the three classic films that have been made of her stories, two by Alfred Hitchcock – *Rebecca* and *The Birds* (1963) – and one by Nicholas Roeg, *Don’t Look Now* (1973). Today, writes the cultural critic Christopher Frayling, “her work looks increasingly rich and dark”: atmospheric and straightforwardly entertaining, but also offering interesting perspectives on individual psychology, family, class and gender roles. *Rebecca* is generally regarded as du Maurier’s masterpiece.

A summary of the plot

Chapter 1: The book begins, famously, with the nameless narrator describing her dream of returning to Manderley, a grand house near the coast in the west country, and finding it empty and neglected.

Chapter 2: The narrator and her husband, in refuge from painful events in the past, live in a small, spartan hotel somewhere in southern Europe – dreaming of England and of Manderley. The narrator remembers her first meeting with her husband, Maxim de Winter, when she was staying in a hotel in Monte Carlo, the paid companion of Mrs Van Hopper, a vulgar American.

Chapter 3: Mrs Van Hopper inveigles Maxim, an acquaintance, into a conversation. He is clearly embarrassed by Mrs Van Hopper, and makes jokes

at her expense; later he writes to the narrator apologising for his rudeness.

Chapter 4: While her employer is ill, Maxim insists that the narrator should have lunch with him, and takes her for a drive; he is kind and attentive, though odd. Mrs Van Hopper explains that his first wife Rebecca died in an “appalling tragedy”, drowning in a bay near Manderley.

Chapter 5: Maxim and the narrator continue to spend the mornings together; she hides her activities from Mrs Van Hopper. She falls in love with him, but thinks him indifferent. When she asks whether he spends time with her out of charity, he gets angry – but kisses her.

Chapter 6: Mrs Van Hopper plans to go to America. When the narrator tells Maxim, he responds by asking her, curtly, to marry him. She accepts, and Maxim tells Mrs Van Hopper – who tells him that she will never manage as “mistress of Manderley”.

Chapter 7: They arrive at Manderley from London. As the narrator is introduced to the staff – especially the intimidating housekeeper, Mrs Danvers – she feels uneasy in her new role.

Chapter 8: As she tries to run the house, the narrator commits various minor blunders.

Chapter 9: Maxim’s kind, bluff sister Beatrice and her husband Giles come to visit, along with the estate manager Frank Crawley.

Chapter 10: Maxim and the narrator walk down to the sea, and the dog leads her to a run-

down cottage in a cove; Maxim is angry, revealing that he never goes to that “god-damned” place.

Chapter 11: The narrator receives various local dignitaries; she finds it all difficult, and thinks everyone is comparing her to Rebecca. Frank tries to reassure her, and also tells her that Rebecca died at night, having gone sailing on her own.

Chapter 12: The narrator breaks a china cupid, and hides it out of embarrassment. Mrs Danvers accuses a servant, Robert, of stealing it; the narrator has to tell everyone that it was her.

Chapter 13: While Maxim is away in London, the narrator discovers a dissolute character called Jack Favell paying a visit to the house.

Chapter 14: The narrator goes to Rebecca’s bedroom and is surprised by Mrs Danvers there. Mrs Danvers has kept the room exactly as it was, and speaks about her great admiration for Rebecca.

Chapter 15: Beatrice takes the narrator to visit Maxim’s grandmother in a nursing home. On their return, the narrator hears Maxim upbraiding Mrs Danvers furiously for allowing Jack Favell into the house.

Chapter 16: Maxim agrees to hold the traditional fancy dress ball at Manderley. On Mrs Danvers’s advice, the narrator dresses up as an ancestor of Maxim’s depicted in a painting. She keeps her decision a secret; when she comes down, Maxim is furious and orders her to change.

Chapter 17: Beatrice explains Maxim’s fury:

Rebecca had worn exactly the same outfit at last year's ball, and Maxim has assumed that she is playing some trick on him. Beatrice begs her to put on an ordinary dress and come back down. The night is a terrible trial for her.

Chapter 18: The narrator wakes to find Maxim gone; she believes that Maxim has never loved her, and still loves Rebecca. She confronts Mrs Danvers in Rebecca's old bedroom. Mrs Danvers is unrepentant, and encourages her to jump from the window. Then a ship runs ashore in the bay.

Chapter 19: A diver is sent down to look at the ship, and finds Rebecca's boat there, with a body in it. Maxim reveals that the body is Rebecca's – even though he had identified a body washed up down the coast as hers – and that he, in fact, killed her.

Chapter 20: Maxim tells the narrator, at last, that he loves her: far from loving Rebecca, he hated her. She was an immoral and unfaithful “devil”. He says that he shot Rebecca, after she had told him that she was pregnant with an illegitimate child, then took her out in her boat and sunk it.

Chapter 21: Colonel Julyan, the local magistrate, reveals that the boat has been raised, and Rebecca's body identified. There will need to be a new inquest, though Julyan appears satisfied that a simple mistake of identification has been made.

Chapter 22: The narrator and Maxim go to the local market town for the coroner's inquest. Tabb the boat builder reveals that the boat has been

deliberately scuttled. The coroner asks Maxim for an explanation. The narrator faints.

Chapter 23: The coroner reaches a verdict of suicide. Jack Favell then arrives at Manderley, announcing that he knows it wasn't suicide. He reveals that he and Rebecca were lovers; and tries to blackmail Maxim. Maxim summons Colonel Julyan. Favell tells him that Maxim murdered Rebecca.

Chapter 24: Favell argues that Maxim killed Rebecca out of jealousy. Julyan asks for proof. Favell calls Ben, the “local half-wit” who is often down at the cove, as a witness; but Ben says he saw nothing. They discover that Rebecca had had a doctor's appointment the day that she died.

Chapter 25: They decide to visit the specialist, Dr Baker, now retired in Barnet. Mrs Danvers learns that Favell suspects Maxim of murder. Julyan also now seems to have his suspicions.

Chapter 26: Dr Baker, a women's specialist, reveals that Rebecca had indeed visited that day, under the name of Mrs Danvers, and was “seriously ill” – suffering from terminal cancer.

Chapter 27: Julyan promises to let it be known that Rebecca committed suicide, but suggests that the narrator take a short holiday abroad while the gossip dies down. Maxim phones Manderley, and discovers that Mrs Danvers has disappeared, shortly after receiving a long distance call – presumably from Favell. Worried, Maxim decides

to return to Manderley. He and his wife drive back, and as they near Manderley they see that the house is on fire.

Models and precursors

Gothic romance

What do people mean when they refer to *Rebecca* as a Gothic romance? The academic Richard Kelly suggests that it has “most of the trappings” of the genre: “a mysterious, haunted mansion, violence, murder, a sinister villain, sexual passion, a spectacular fire, a brooding landscape...” The quintessential Gothic romance is Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794).

Nowadays remembered chiefly as the target of Jane Austen’s Gothic satire, *Northanger Abbey* (1817), *The Mysteries of Udolpho* is set in 16th century Europe and tells the story of a young, orphaned French noblewoman who is imprisoned in Udolpho, a castle in Italy, by her aunt’s husband – a scheming brigand who tries to force her to marry his friend. Eventually she escapes, and is reunited with her true love. The novel spawned a genre, which typically includes many of the following features: a persecuted heroine, usually an orphan; wild, remote landscapes and forests;

large, crumbling castles or mansions; psychological terror; a Byronic villain; a family secret or curse.

The form is descended from fairy-tale and medieval romance, but in Radcliffe’s version of it the supernatural is always explained away: apparently ghostly events are revealed to have a rational explanation – usually an attempt by the villain to terrify and gain control over the woman and her property. Gothic romance was usually written by women, for women; it is sometimes called “the female Gothic”, or “the feminine Gothic”. Tania Modleski suggests that it provided “an outlet for women’s fears about their husbands and fathers”. Offering an exaggerated vision of the typical male-dominated family, it “spoke powerfully to the young girl struggling to maintain psychic autonomy” in a house where a remote but all-powerful father or husband “ruled over an utterly dependent wife”.

During the course of the 19th century, Gothic romance was progressively domesticated, made more modern and realistic. Henry James pointed out that in the work of Mary Elizabeth Braddon – “novels of sensation” such as *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) – the lurid terrors of Radcliffe’s stories were transposed to the contemporary “country house or the London lodgings”. Much of du Maurier’s work was in this tradition. *Jamaica Inn*, like *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, features a young orphaned heroine who has to live with her aunt