**Literary greats: Rebecca - Love, paranoia, obsession**

Seventy years on, and its appeal is as broad as ever. As the NFT reissues Hitchcock's adaptation, Liz Hoggard revisits du Maurier's modern classic

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She's one of the most famous heroines in English literature - up there with Jane Eyre and Elizabeth Bennet - and yet we don't even know her name. Although Daphne du Maurier's novel *Rebecca* was an immediate bestseller when it was published in 1938 - and was made into an Oscar-winning film two years later by Alfred Hitchcock - its narrator is curiously anonymous. Even when she marries the novel's rich widower Maxim de Winter, she simply becomes the second Mrs de Winter. The name we all remember - Rebecca - is that of de Winter's dead first wife, who haunts the novel and drives the heroine half mad with jealousy and fear.

Once dismissed as a Gothic romance, as "women's fiction", Rebecca is now regarded as the most extraordinary psychological thriller - tapping into our most primal fear of the rival: the woman who is more beautiful, more accomplished than ourselves. From Sylvia Plath's legacy to the second Mrs Ted Hughes, to Linda McCartney and Heather Mills, it is hard for a second wife to compete with the memory of the first.

Du Maurier, who was aware of Freud and Jung, has fashioned a strange, hallucinatory novel that exerts a powerful narrative grip. Full of surreal dream sequence and repressed sexuality, it does not flinch from portraying murder or suicide. The writer saw it as "rather grim", even "unpleasant", a study in jealousy with nothing of the "exquisite love story" her publisher claimed it to be.

And yet *Rebecca* is hugely popular. Woman's Hour voted it as one of the top five most romantic novels of all time. Since 1938 it has never been out of print. Its opening line ("Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again") is among the most famous in modern literature. There have been numerous film, stage and TV adaptations. Next month, the British Film Institute releases a new print of Hitchcock's film starring Joan Fontaine and Laurence Olivier.

*Rebecca* tells the story of a lonely orphan working as paid companion to a monstrous American women, Mrs Van Hopper, on the French Riviera. She is swept off her feet by a wealthy Englishman, Maxim de Winter, twice her age, whose wife has died in mysterious circumstances.

After a whirlwind courtship she marries him, and becomes mistress of his house, the Cornish estate Manderley. It's a classic Cinderella story but there is a brilliant twist. Only after their return to Manderley does the newly-wed realise how difficult it will be to lay to rest the memory of his first wife, Rebecca, whose spirit pervades the house, and especially its domineering housekeeper, Mrs Danvers. One of the great female villains in literature, Danvers is clearly in love with her dead mistress and keeps her room a shrine.

The heroine comes to mirror this obsession. She smells Rebecca's scent everywhere, and hears her voice. Even her handwriting in books haunts her. She dreams up a powerful vision of a woman with chalky white skin and a dark cloud of hair. "Another one had poured the coffee from that same silver coffee pot, had placed that cup to her lips, had bent down to the dog, even as I was doing." One day Mrs Danvers finds her in Rebecca's old bedroom, and takes her through every item in the wardrobe, from furs to lingerie. It is an exquisitely masochistic scene.

The heroine begins to doubt Maxim's affections. How could he have ever fallen in love with someone as plain and clumsy as her? Surely she is just a form of pet? (Du Maurier brilliantly taps into the self-hatred that is the other side of romantic surrender.) The climax comes at a fancy dress ball when Mrs Danvers tricks her into wearing the same costume worn by Rebecca before she died.

Appalled, Maxim rejects her. Mrs Danvers corners the heroine in front of an open window and, with sinister calm, suggests suicide is the only option: 'Why don't you go. We none of us want you here. He doesn't want you. He never did. He wants to be alone again in the house, with her.' It's the speech every second wife dreads.

Later that stormy night, the remains of Rebecca's body are discovered at sea. Max confesses that, far from grieving for her, he hated the wilful Rebecca (who, it is hinted, had affairs with both men and women) from the first day of their honeymoon. Maddened by her boast that she was pregnant by another man, a baby that she intended to pass off as his heir, he shot her and disposed of her body on the boat.

It is a remarkable moment: rather than being distraught that her husband is a murderer, the young heroine is relieved that he never actually loved his first wife. More convenient still, an investigation into Rebecca's death reveals that, far from being pregnant, she was suffering from cancer. The implication is that she wanted Maxim to kill her. A verdict of suicide is recorded. The good girl has triumphed over the bad girl.

"*Rebecca*, like *Jane Eyre*, taps into that favourite piece of feminine mythology that the love of a good woman will reform a man," says the psychologist Dorothy Rowe. "And although it's been disproved many times, women still believe it."

Rivalry and mirroring is a key theme in *Rebecca*, agrees Brett Kahr, a marital psychotherapist at the Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships. "Would you like to go out with the first or second Mrs de Winter? Despite the beauty of an actress of the old school like Joan Fontaine, many men might think, 'She's always moping around the house, cowering and cringing.' I think most men fall in love with the first Mrs de Winter and find her much, much sexier."

Hitchcock had a headache with the ending of the film. The censors demanded that Maxim could not be a murderer, so Rebecca is accidentally killed while attacking him. The film ends with an investigation clearing Maxim. When he and his bride return to Manderley after the investigation, they discover the house in flames (recalling the fire in *Jane Eyre*), probably set on fire by the deranged Mrs Danvers. In the book, the couple spend the remainder of their lives abroad, living in a succession of second-class hotels, a life of stifling monotony or quiet bliss, depending how you read it.

For feminists, *Rebecca* is a book about the fear of powerful women, and especially of women who assert their sexual freedom. Rebecca is killed because she defies the patriarchal order. Not only is she unfaithful, she proposes a sham marriage. "I'll play the part of the devoted wife, mistress of your precious Manderley," she tells her husband. "I'll make it the most famous showplace in England if you like - and people will visit us and say we're the luckiest, happiest couple in the whole country." Maxim rejects this sham and is rewarded by a second marriage to an adoring child-woman. It may even be a marriage blanc. There is much talk of single beds, and at one point, the heroine cries out pathetically: "I'll be your friend and companion, a sort of boy."

"When a man's first partner dies after a horrible lingering illness it often happens that all the women he gets involved with afterwards look terribly like her," observes Rowe. "In the novel, the heroine constantly gets the impression that she's not as beautiful as Rebecca. But what if you've been chosen because you're a poor copy of the perfect woman?''

Brett Kahr, author of the forthcoming Penguin book, *Sex and the Psyche*, says: "I think part of the enduring power of *Rebecca* is that it does tap into something extraordinary archaic within our minds. Unconsciously each of us can identify with the character of the second Mrs de Winter. Each of us knows that there was somebody who preceded us, who was loved first and more. It could be an older sibling but more likely it was the parent of the opposite sex."

Maxim de Winter is an autocrat. His very name summons up coldness, inflexibility, even a faintly fascistic streak. Sally Beauman, who wrote Rebecca's Tale, a companion to the original novel, makes an interesting connection with the late poems of Sylvia Plath, especially "Daddy".

And yet there's no denying his delicious male attraction: he's the man who singles us out and rescues us from a life of boredom and petty snobbery. He's the man who gets us. His proposal to the heroine ("I'm asking you to marry me, you little fool") should offend, but women readers everywhere melt.

"It's such a brilliant book," says the writer Justine Picardie. "You can read it at different stages of your life and pick up on quite different things." Picardie is currently writing a novel inspired by an event in du Maurier's life. And in her latest book, My Mother's Wedding Dress, the essay, "Ghost Dresses", is devoted to clothes in *Rebecca*. "At literary festivals, that's the chapter women rush up and want to talk to me about it.'

*Rebecca* reveals much about du Maurier herself, although the clues are carefully submerged. Born in London in 1907, she was the daughter of the most famous actor-manager of his day, Sir Gerald du Maurier. Gerald openly adored his daughters, but was also critical and teasing. They dreaded disappointing him; qualities you can see in Maxim.

A voracious reader as a child, du Maurier was fascinated by imaginary worlds and developed a male alter ego for herself, which she dubbed "the boy in the box". She hated dressing in girl's clothes while growing up, and most of the time did not. Puberty was devastating for her.

As a young woman, she was shy but sexually adventurous, fearing she had what she called "Venetian tendencies". It is likely that her confused sexuality informs *Rebecca*. Later, her passion for Ellen Doubleday, the elegant wife of her American publisher, inspired her 1951 novel, *My Cousin Rachel*, another extraordinary tale of sexual jealousy and shifting loyalties.

Du Maurier found the boy could be put back in the box, and embarked on flirtations with men. She had an affair with the youthful film director Carol Reed, then wrote her first novel in eight weeks at the age of 21. A year later she married Lt Col Sir Frederick Browning. Although du Maurier was later bisexual (her female lovers included Gertrude Lawrence, who also had an affair with her father) the couple were married for 33 years and had three children.

When she wrote *Rebecca* at the age of 30, du Maurier was living in Egypt, homesick, bored by colonial life and trying to keep an exacting husband happy. She was pregnant with her second child and terrified of giving birth. Being an Army wife did not suit her: she hated entertaining and had no idea how to give orders to the servants. "Her feelings of inferiority in this respect, and of being intimidated went straight into the character of the second Mrs de Winter," writes Margaret Forster in her masterly 1993 biography.

Du Maurier's escape was to fantasise about life back in Cornwall. Manderley is based on a real house, the 17th-century mansion, Menabilly in Fowey, that du Maurier leased for 20 years. It was arguably her greatest love affair (she spent most of the money from her books on its restoration) and dubbed it her "house of secrets".

Du Maurier pours herself into both female antagonists: the obedient wife of the novel and the rebellious Rebecca. Writing in the Virago edition of the novel, Sally Beauman observes: "She divided herself between them and the splitting, doubling and mirroring devices she uses throughout the text destabilise it but give it resonance.''

Picardie adds: "You feel very shifting ground in the novel. First of all Rebecca is the good one who can never be lived up to, and then she starts to be the bad one. As a reader, I am on the side of the narrator, but it is unsettling, that you are also on the side of a murderer. You want him to escape the noose. It's very subversive as a book."

The Hollywood producer David Selznick bought the film rights to Rebecca in 1939. Hitchcock wanted Robert Donat to play de Winter, but Donat wouldn't play a murderer and feared the film would emerge as a "woman's picture". After a long search, Selznick saw Olivier as Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, and offered him the role. He came to regret it. A product more of stage than screen, Olivier drove him to distraction, alternately slowing down the action to make his role more showy, and then speaking very rapidly.

Anne Baxter, Loretta Young, Margaret Sullavan and Vivien Leigh all auditioned for the second Mrs de Winter. Sullavan, a favourite, was considered too strong. The film director George Cukor suggested the little-known Joan Fontaine. Selznick wanted Olivia de Havilland from *Gone with the Wind*, but when she heard her that her loathed sister, Fontaine, was being considered, she refused to be tested.

Fontaine got the part. Hitchcock, known for terrifying his actresses, told her that everyone on the set hated her, in order to magnify the required shyness and unease of the role. The film was a huge success and received 11 Oscar nominations.

Du Maurier, who was created dame in 1969, died in 1989. Next year there will be major celebrations for the centenary of her birth. And she continues to influence new generations of women writers.

Nearly 70 years later *Rebecca* outsells much contemporary fiction. So what is the secret of its appeal? Of course we love a mystery thriller. The plot of the novel works backwards, almost Pinteresque in structure. But it is the human dynamic that grips us. It is billed as a romance, but du Maurier insisted she wanted to write about the balance of power of marriage, and not about love. She always said she wanted to retell the story of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and faced accusation of plagiarism when *Rebecca* was first published.

The truly great thing about *Rebecca* - the reason women and men love it - is that it is a mystery that can never be solved. Was Maxim cruelly treated by Rebecca, or does he manipulate the truth? And how much can we believe our omniscient narrator? Her account is heartbreaking but no one is quite what they seem in this novel.

Most remarkably, Rebecca remains the most powerful character in the novel. "The mad woman in the attic or the dead woman at the bottom of the sea is a very old archetype," says Picardie, "It would be terrible to see Rebecca in the film: she has to be left to everybody's imagination. That's her power, because everyone will have a different Rebecca in their life."