**How Daphne du Maurier wrote Rebecca**

**Matthew Dennison, *The Daily Telegraph*, 19th April 2008**

**Suspicion within Daphne du Maurier's own marriage fuelled the tense, macabre plot of Rebecca, says Matthew Dennison**

In 1937, Daphne du Maurier signed a three-book deal with Victor Gollancz. She was 30 years old, the author of four previous novels, including, most recently, Jamaica Inn. She knew already the title of the first of the books she would write for Gollancz: Rebecca. Beyond that point, she had scarcely thought.

On and off for the past five years she had been toying with an idea. Its theme was jealousy.

It came to Daphne the year she married Frederick "Boy" Browning, whom she called Tommy. Tommy had been engaged before - to glamorous, dark-haired Jan Ricardo. The suspicion that Tommy remained attracted to Ricardo haunted Daphne.

She accepted from Gollancz an advance of £1,000 - the equivalent of 18 months of Tommy's pay as a Lieutenant Colonel of the Grenadier Guards - and prepared to set to work.

Nothing came. The paper in her typewriter remained blank. Sluggishly, she wrote 50 pages, all consigned to the waste-paper basket. To Gollancz she wrote a desperate apology: "The first 15,000 words I tore up in disgust and this literary miscarriage has cast me down rather..."

Daphne was in Alexandria with Tommy, the Second Battalion of the Grenadier Guards and a crowd of English expats she loftily dismissed as "horrible Manchester folk". Waking from a dream into the bright light of a foreign hotel, the narrator of the novel with which she struggled so hopelessly would find herself "bewildered at that glittering sun, that hard, clean sky".

In Egypt that summer Daphne, too, was bewildered: unnerved by the climate, the landscape and the prescriptive regimental social life. Gollancz expected her manuscript on her return to Britain in December. "I'm ashamed to tell you that progress is slow on the new novel," she wrote to him. "There is little likelihood of my bringing back a finished manuscript in December."

Without Daphne's failure of maternal instinct, Rebecca would never have been written.

"I am not one of those mothers who live for having their brats with them all the time," she wrote later. She and Tommy had departed for Alexandria on 30 July, leaving behind them four-year-old Tessa and the three-month-old Flavia.

On their return, Daphne straight away formulated a plan to spend Christmas apart from her daughters. Child-free quiet was the only hope for Rebecca. She was not, she assured her own mother, "a brute".

In her daughters' absence she worked quickly. Eighty years ago this month, no more than four months after she started work, Daphne delivered her manuscript.

If she was characteristically hesitant about Rebecca's qualities, her hesitation was not shared by anyone in Victor Gollancz's office. Her editor, Norman Collins, reported simply: "The new Daphne du Maurier contains everything that the public could want."

Gollancz did not hang around. He ordered a first print run of 20,000 copies and within a month Rebecca had sold more than twice that number. It remains Daphne du Maurier's best-loved novel, continuously in print through eight decades.

In 1993, when Susan Hill published her sequel to Rebecca, Mrs De Winter, du Maurier's US publishers Avon estimated ongoing monthly paperback sales of Rebecca at more than 4,000 copies. No mean feat for a novel whose writer haltingly described it as "a bit on the gloomy side", and which V S Pritchett, in the Christian Science Monitor of 14 September 1938, predicted would be here today, gone tomorrow.

Coyly and with a degree of considered obfuscation, Daphne du Maurier "remembered" Rebecca's gestation in The Rebecca Notebook of 1981. "Seeds began to drop. A beautiful home... a first wife... jealousy, a wreck, perhaps at sea, near to the house... But something terrible would have to happen, I did not know what..."

She categorised Rebecca as a study in jealousy, although she admitted its origins in her own life to few. She feigned surprise at the novel's enduring popularity, but was vocal in her disappointment when Gollancz failed to honour subsequent novels with print runs reflecting Rebecca's commercial success.

Agatha Christie earned her ire by echoing the question so many readers had asked her: why does the narrator have no name?

Perhaps du Maurier looked with greater amusement on reports that Field Marshal Rommel kept a copy of Rebecca at his headquarters: though ultimately it would not be used, the Nazis mined Rebecca as the source for a code for German agents infiltrating Cairo.

Rebecca is, as Daphne intended it, "about a young wife and her slightly older husband, living in a beautiful house that had been in his family for generations".

Its nameless narrator is traditionally identified with Daphne herself - she has "a very lovely and unusual name" which people frequently misspell; she is shy and socially ill at ease. In Monte Carlo she falls in love with a handsome, inscrutable man old enough to be her father.

Maximilian de Winter, like the narrator, is staying at the Hôtel Côte d'Azur. He encounters the narrator in her role as paid companion to an exacting American matron, Mrs Van Hopper.

An air of mystery clings to de Winter. He is a man on the run, desperate to escape the shadows of the past, the memories and associations of his beautiful Cornish house, Manderley. He proposes marriage, the narrator accepts. They return to Manderley and the ghosts of de Winter's past.

The house hides dark secrets. All concern de Winter's first wife, Rebecca, a triumphantly lovely creature - like Jan Ricardo. Norman Collins reported to Victor Gollancz that Rebecca "brilliantly creates a sense of atmosphere and suspense" and Manderley is as much an atmosphere as a tangible erection of stones and mortar.

Both house and novel acquire a dream-like quality. Into this steps the nightmarish figure of Mrs Danvers, gothic housekeeper and devoted Rebecca acolyte. Mrs Danvers unsettles the second Mrs de Winter, who finds herself overmastered by Manderley - its grandeur, its memories, its personnel and, most of all, its master, whose behaviour here seems so remote, so changed.

Du Maurier's storytelling instinct was better developed than her prose style and the plot crackles. The pages fly. Tension and suspense mount. As she wrote in her notes prior to beginning work, "I want to built 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."

That something involves hatred, adultery, shipwreck and deceit. To bring about the novel's happy ending demands no less than the reader's collusion in a husband's murder of his wife.

Rebecca contains elements of romance, murder mystery and the gothic novel: it defies easy categorisation, but parallels with Jane Eyre are unavoidable. Its plot - like Rebecca's boat at the centre of its mystery - is less than wholly watertight. Yet it worked in 1938, when Victor Gollancz was able to market is as "an exquisite love story", and it works today.

Readers unmoved by the second Mrs de Winter's surrender to Maxim respond to Rebecca's darker face - as Daphne described it, "a sinister tale about a woman who marries a widower... Psychological and rather macabre".

Daphne du Maurier found Egypt no place for romance or suspense. In bright rented rooms in Alexandria, inspiration failed her. The sun of North Africa seared into her imagination an image of unconventional exoticism, a "sleeping" Cornish mansion with which she had already fallen in love and which later would become her home for quarter of a century - Menabilly, the novel's Manderley.

Rebecca is a love letter to a lost homeland; it is a story about the balance of power between men and women. Like Virginia Woolf's Orlando, written the previous decade, it is a hymn to a vanished race of men who were somehow larger and better than mere mortals.

Rebecca is, of course, a study in jealousy. But it is also about holding on to happiness: "I wanted to go on sitting here, not talking, not listening to the others, keeping the moment precious for all time". Repeatedly it lures the reader towards that dreamer's goal, at the same time acknowledging its impossibility: "We can never go back again, that much is certain."

Daphne and Tommy Browning, like Rebecca and Maximilian de Winter, were not faithful to one another. Jan Ricardo, tragically, died during the Second World War. She threw herself under a train.