Rebecca

Daphne du Maurier, 1938
HarperCollins
384 pp.

Summary

Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again.

So the second Mrs. Maxim de Winter remembered the chilling events that led her down the turning drive past the beeches, white and naked, to the isolated gray stone manse on the windswept Cornish coast. With a husband she barely knew, the young bride arrived at this immense estate, only to be inexorably drawn into the life of the first Mrs. de Winter, the beautiful Rebecca, dead but never forgotten...her suite of rooms never touched, her clothes ready to be worn, her servant—the sinister Mrs. Danvers—still loyal.

And as an eerie presentiment of evil tightened around her heart, the second Mrs. de Winter began her search for the real fate of Rebecca...for the secrets of Manderley.  
(From the publisher.)

Author Bio

- Birth—May 13, 1907
- Where—London, England, UK
- Death—April 19, 1989
- Where—Cornwall, England
- Education—finishing school near Paris
- Recognition—Dame of the British Empire (DBE)

Daphne du Maurier, who was born in 1907, was the second daughter of the famous actor and theatre manager-producer, Sir Gerald du Maurier, and granddaughter of George du Maurier, the much-loved Punch artist who also created the character of Svengali in the novel Trilby.
After being educated at home with her sisters, and then in Paris, she began writing short stories and articles in 1928, and in 1931 her first novel, *The Loving Spirit*, was published. Two others followed. Her reputation was established with her frank biography of her father, *Gerald: A Portrait*, and her Cornish novel, *Jamaica Inn*. When *Rebecca* came out in 1938 she suddenly found herself to her great surprise, one of the most popular authors of the day. The book went into thirty-nine English impressions in the next twenty years and has been translated into more than twenty languages.


She also wrote an account of her relations in the last century, *The du Mauriers*, and a biography of Branwell Brontë, as well as *Vanishing Cornwall*, an eloquent elegy on the past of a country she loved so much. Her autobiography, *Growing Pains*, appeared in 1977 and *The Rebecca Notebook and Other Memories* in 1981. Her books have translated well to the cinema. Sir Laurence Olivier starred in the filmed version of *Rebecca*; *Jamaica Inn*, *Hungry Hill* and *Frenchman's Creek* have also been notable successes; as well as *The Birds* and *Don't Look Now*, both adapted from a short story.

Daphne du Maurier was made a D.B.E. in 1969. She was married to Lieutenant-General Sir Frederick Browning K.C.V.O., D.S.O. She died in 1989 at her home in Cornwall. Margaret Forster wrote in a tribute to her, "No other popular novelist has so triumphantly defied classification as Daphne du Maurier. She satisfied all the questionable criteria of popular fiction and yet satisfied too the exacting requirements of 'real literature', something very few novelists ever do. (From Wikipedia.)

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**Book Reviews**

*(Sorry. Older works have few, if any, mainstream press reviews online. See Amazon and Barnes & Noble for helpful customer reviews.)*

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**Discussion Questions**

Use our LitLovers Book Club Resources; they can help with discussions for any book:

- How to Discuss a Book (helpful discussion tips)
- Generic Discussion Questions—Fiction and Nonfiction
- Read-Think-Talk (a guided reading chart)
Also consider these LitLovers talking points to help get a discussion started for *Rebecca*:

1. Du Maurier admitted that her heroine has no name because she could never think of an appropriate one—which in itself is a telling comment. What effect does it have on the novel that the heroine has no first name?

2. What kind of character is our heroine—as she presents herself at the beginning of her flashback? Describe her and her companion, Mrs. Hopper.

3. What kind of character is Maxim de Winter, and why does a man of his stature fall in love with the young heroine? What draws him to her?

4. The heroine describes Maxim thus: "His face...was arresting, sensitive, medieval in some strange inexplicable way...rob him of his English tweeds, and put him in black, with lace at his throat and wrists, he would stare down at us in our new world from a long distant past—a past where men walked cloaked at night, and stood in the shadow of old doorways, a past of narrow stairways and dim dungeons, a past of whispers in the dark, of shimmering rapier blades, of silent, exquisite courtesy." Why is this an apt description? In other words, how does it set the tone and foretell the events of the novel?

5. In what way does the relationship between the young heroine and Maxim change during the months after their arrival to Manderley?

6. What role does Mrs. Danvers play in this story—in her relationships to the characters (dead and alive) and also in relation to the suspense within the novel?

7. What is the heroine led to believe about Rebecca? In what way does the dead woman exert power over Manderley? At this point, what are your feelings about the new Ms. de Winter? Are you sympathetic toward her plight...or impatient with her lack of assertion? Or are you confused and frightened along with her?

8. What is the heroine's relationship with Maxim's sister Beatrice and her husband Giles? What about the advice Beatrice offers the heroine? ?

9. Both Beatrice and Frank Crawley talk to the heroine about Rebecca. Beatrice tells the heroine, "you are so very different from Rebecca." Frank Crawley says that "kindliness, and sincerity, and...modesty...are worth far more to a man, to a husband, than all the wit and beauty in the world." What are both characters trying to convey to the heroine...and how does she interpret their words?

10. What are some of the other clues about Rebecca's true nature that the author carefully plants along the way?

11. How might the costume ball—and the heroine's appearance in Rebecca's gown—stand as a symbol for young Mrs. de Winter's situation at Manderley?

12. Were you surprised by the twist the plot takes when Rebecca's body is found...and when Maxim finally tells the truth about his and Rebecca's marriage? Did the strange details of plot fall into place for you?
13. How, if at all, do Maxim's revelations change your attitude toward him? Did you feel relief upon first reading his confessions? Can you sympathize with his predicament, or do you censure his actions? What do you think of the heroine's reaction? In her place, how might you have reacted?

14. How does this new knowledge alter the heroine's behavior and her sense of herself?

15. After Favell threatens to blackmail him, Maxim calls on Colonel Julyan. Why? Why does Maxim act in a way that seems opposed to his own best interests?

16. In the end, what really happened to Rebecca? What is the full story of her death? Is it right that Maxim is absolved of any crime? Was he caught in an untenable position? Was Rebecca simply too evil—did she end up getting what she deserved?

17. How do you view the destruction of Manderley? Is it horrific...or freeing...or justified vengeance on Rebecca's part? Would the de Winters have had a fulfilling life at Manderley had it not burned?

18. Now return to the beginning of the book. How would you put into words, or explain, the sense of loss and exile that permeates tone of the opening? (You might think about a spiritual as well as physical exile.)

(Questions by LitLovers. Please feel free to use them, online or off, with attribution. Thanks.)
A Tale of Three Houses: Menabilly, Milton Hall and Manderley

By Vishwas R. Gaitonde

"Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again."

The opening sentence of Daphne du Maurier’s Rebecca has stuck in readers’ minds ever since the novel was published 75 years ago. Manderley, the sprawling mansion where Rebecca is set and which exerts its own powerful presence in the novel, sometimes warm, often sombre, is popularly believed to be based on Menabilly, the manor that the du Mauriers lived in for two decades from 1943 to 1969. An early Georgian manor in Fowey on the southern Cornish coast, the estate has long been the seat of the Rashleigh family, who were powerful merchants from the time of Henry VIII. But when the Rashleighs stopped living in the house on a regular basis, it went to seed. They rented it to du Maurier, who renovated it from her own purse.

The prominent role Manderley plays in the novel makes the house a character in its own right. Here is the description of one room that occurs early in the novel:

It was a deep, comfortable room, with books lining the wall to the ceiling, the sort of room a man would move from never, did he live alone, solid chairs beside a great open fireplace, baskets for the two dogs in which I felt they never sat, for the hollows in the chair had tell-tale marks. The long windows looked out upon the lawns, and beyond the lawns to the distant shimmer of the sea.

There was an old, quiet smell about the room, as though the air in it was little changed, for all the sweet lilac scent and roses brought to it throughout the early summer. Whatever air came to this room, whether from the garden or the sea, would lose its first
freshness, becoming part of the unchanging room itself, one with the books, musty and never read, one with the scrolled ceiling, the dark panelling, the heavy curtains.

It was an ancient, mossy smell, the smell of a silent church where services are seldom held, where rusty lichen grows upon the stones and ivy tendrils creep to the very windows. A room for peace, a room for meditation.

We gradually discover Manderley through the eyes of the narrator, the second wife of Maxim de Winter who owns the house, as she explores the rooms, wings and passages of the sprawling mansion (usually stealthily, and with nervousness) on her own, or is shown around by her husband or Mrs. Danvers, the forbidding housekeeper with a white skull’s face, parchment-like skin and hollow eyes and dressed in black. As she finds her way around Manderley, the narrator discovers the exquisite writing desk in the morning room where Rebecca, her husband's first wife, carried out her correspondence, her stationery in the drawer, the exact place where she used to keep a white alabaster flower vase, and her menu preferences, all making that room come "vividly alive" with her personality. As this process continues, the spectral presence of Rebecca begins to fill the house until the house and its former mistress are inseparably entwined in the narrator’s mind.

Novelists often create composite characters based on several acquaintances rather than a copycat image of a single individual. Manderley is virtually a character, as we have seen, and like a human character, is not based on a single house but is a composite. Manderley has long been held as the original of Manderley. Like Menabilly, Manderley was cloistered enough not to be visible from the road or the sea. Even du Maurier’s daughter, Flavia Leng, harbours fond memories growing up in the house which, she said, was the inspiration for Manderley. However, according to du Maurier’s son Christian “Kits” Browning, Manderley was also based on Milton Hall near Peterborough, the largest private house in Cambridgeshire, the hereditary home of the Fitzwilliam Earls who traced their ancestry to William the Conqueror. His mother shifted the location to Cornwall (though Cornwall is never explicitly specified).

Milton Hall...

Du Maurier first visited Milton Hall as a girl of ten along with her mother and sisters, and made several visits thereafter. As an adult, she wrote to the owner, Lord William Thomas Fitzwilliam, the
10th Earl, that the interiors of Manderley were based on her recollections of the large rooms and "big house feel" of Milton Hall during the World War I period. And it was at Milton Hall that the young Daphne saw a tall, dark, sinister-looking housekeeper. It is not known if they ever spoke to each other, but du Maurier never forgot the woman or her looks, and the chilling character of Mrs. Danvers was born, Mrs. Danvers who joined the staff when Rebecca de Winter was a young bride and who became her servitor and confidante and later, her fierce supporter and the keeper of old memories.

After the British film director Alfred Hitchcock immigrated to the United States, his first project was to bring Rebecca to the big screen. The movie was to be shot entirely in Hollywood not just for financial reasons but also because Britain was in the thick of World War II and shooting a movie there could present logistical problems. But Hitchcock wanted to get the details right, especially as Margaret Mitchell had become dismayed at how little the antebellum plantation Tara in the recently-released movie Gone With the Wind resembled the Tara of her novel. Manderley contributed much more to the atmosphere of Rebecca than Tara did to Gone With the Wind, and Hitchcock was wary about upsetting du Maurier.

Hitchcock had visited many of the stately homes of England, and was familiar with their layouts. When he learnt that Milton Hall was an inspiration for Manderley, he sent photographers to capture its exteriors and interiors. Other mansions in England and Canada were photographed as well. But Hitchcock and the movie producer David Selznick were not impressed by the results, and the set construction was left to Selznick's team. The result was architecture that was distinctly Victorian and quite unlike either Menabilly or Milton Hall. However, the movie followed the novel's storyline fairly closely, and du Maurier was pleased with it overall.
Rebecca has almost always been regarded or talked about as a gothic romance novel. In my commentary on its opening sentence, I argued that Rebecca, touted as a Gothic romance, was really a study of power in its various forms. So it was satisfying to hear from “Kits” that his mother was also irritated whenever people labelled her work a romantic novel; she regarded it as a study in jealousy.

The seed for the plot of Rebecca (a timid second wife haunted by the knowledge that her husband was still in love with his dead first wife) also came from the author's own life. Her husband Frederick “Boy” Browning was once engaged to a lady called Jan Ricardo (who signed her name with the ‘R’ standing out large and prominent, as Rebecca de Winter would do in the story). Ricardo committed suicide, and it is thought that du Maurier long suspected that her husband remained attracted to his dead first love.

The twist lies in the fact that du Maurier was also sexually attracted to women. Biographers such as Margaret Forster and Jane Dunn have reported that she had flings and affairs with many women, such as her French teacher at school, the actresses Molly Kerr and Gertrude Lawrence, the secretary to novelist Edgar Wallace, and her great love, Ellen Doubleday, the wife of her American publisher, Nelson Doubleday. She had to keep her passions secret. For starters, her father Sir Gerald du Maurier was avowedly and vociferously anti-homosexual. Moreover, homosexuality was then a crime in Britain, and the government did not shy from prosecuting any homosexuals who were caught. Oscar Wilde's body and spirit were broken by his trial and incarceration. The brilliant mathematician, cryptanalyst and computer scientist Alan Turing, whose cracking of the German cipher played a significant part in Britain's victory in World War II, the same Alan Turing who was awarded the Order of the British Empire, died by his own hand after he was hounded and persecuted when his homosexuality was discovered. In such an atmosphere, du Maurier kept her inclinations cloaked.
But her same-sex attraction notwithstanding, du Maurier was so consumed by her husband's (most likely presumed) continuing attraction to his former fiancée that she crafted it into a gripping novel that has never gone out of print since its publication. Dunn thinks that du Maurier did not view or identify herself as a lesbian, rather, “as a ‘half-breed’: female on the outside, but in her heart not a man but a romantic adolescent boy.” It is possible that she was bisexual. It is certain that she was far more complex than any of the characters she created.

Yet the real love of Daphne du Maurier’s life was neither a man nor a woman; it was Menabilly. It was love at first sight when she first saw it in 1928, trespassing on its deserted grounds and untended, overgrown garden, gazing at its mullioned windows and ivy shrouded walls and yearning to be its mistress. It was a feeling of sheer joy when she moved in along with her family at the end of 1943. “I had always wanted it for years, and I got it,” she said, though she was a tenant, not the owner. Flavia remembers her mother leaning against the ivy and kissing the grand old stone walls, her face flushed and euphoric.

Small wonder, then, it was the house that Daphne du Maurier chose to mention in the novel’s famous opening line:

"Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again."
An Obituary

by Richard Kelly - Professor of English, University of Tennessee

If Daphne du Maurier had written only Rebecca, she would still be one of the great shapers of popular culture and the modern imagination. Few writers have created more magical and mysterious places than Jamaica Inn and Manderley, buildings invested with a rich character that gives them a memorable life of their own.

In many ways the life of Daphne du Maurier resembles that of a fairy tale. Born into a family with a rich artistic and historical background, the daughter of a famous actor-manager, she was indulged as a child and grew up enjoying enormous freedom from financial and parental restraint. She spent her youth sailing boats, travelling on the Continent with friends, and writing stories. A prestigious publishing house accepted her first novel when she was in her early twenties, and its publication brought her not only fame but the attentions of a handsome soldier, Major (later Lieutenant-General Sir) Frederick Browning, who married her.

Her subsequent novels became bestsellers, earning her enormous wealth and fame. While Alfred Hitchcock's film based upon her novel proceeded to make her one of the best-known authors in the world, she enjoyed the life of a fairy princess in a mansion in Cornwall called Menabilly, which served as the model for Manderley in Rebecca.

Daphne du Maurier was obsessed with the past. She intensively researched the lives of Francis and Anthony Bacon, the history of Cornwall, the Regency period, and nineteenth-century France and England. Above all, however, she was obsessed with her own family history, which she chronicled in Gerald: a Portrait, a biography of her father; The du Mauriers, a study of her family which focused on her grandfather, George du Maurier, the novelist and illustrator for Punch; The Glassblowers, a novel based upon the lives of her du Maurier ancestors; and Growing Pains, an autobiography that ignores nearly 50 years of her life in favour of the joyful and more romantic period of her youth. Daphne du Maurier can best be understood in terms of her remarkable and paradoxical family, the ghosts which haunted her life and fiction.

While contemporary writers were dealing critically with such subjects as the war, alienation, religion, poverty, Marxism, psychology and art, and experimenting with new techniques such as the stream of consciousness, du Maurier produced 'old-fashioned' novels with straightforward narratives that appealed to a popular audience's love or fantasy, adventure,
sexuality and mystery. At an early age, she recognised that her readership was comprised principally of women, and she cultivated their loyal following through several decades by embodying their desires and dreams in her novels and short stories.

In some of her novels, however, she went beyond the technique of the formulaic romance to achieve a powerful psychological realism reflecting her intense feelings about her father, and to a lesser degree, her mother. This vision, which underlies *Julius, Rebecca and The Parasites*, is that of an author overwhelmed by the memory of her father's commanding presence. In *Julius* and *The Parasites*, for example, she introduces the image or a domineering but deadly father and the daring subject of incest.

In *Rebecca*, on the other hand, du Maurier fuses psychological realism with a sophisticated version of the Cinderella story. The nameless heroine has been saved from a life of drudgery by marrying a handsome, wealthy aristocrat, but unlike the Prince in *Cinderella*, Maxim de Winter is old enough to be the narrator's father. The narrator thus must do battle with The Other Woman - the dead Rebecca and her witch-like surrogate, Mrs Danvers - to win the love of her husband and father-figure. The fantasy of this novel is fulfilled when Maxim confesses to the narrator that he never loved Rebecca; indeed, he hated her, a confession that allows the narrator to emerge triumphantly from the Oedipal triangle.

The Freudian subtext of *Rebecca* is embodied in a form that represents the first major Gothic romance of the twentieth century and perhaps the finest written to this day. It contains most of the trappings of the typical Gothic romance: a mysterious, haunted mansion, violence, murder, a sinister villain, sexual passion, a spectacular fire, a brooding landscape and a version of the mad woman in the attic. Du Maurier's work, however, is much more than a simple thriller or mystery. It is a profound and fascinating study of an obsessive personality, of sexual dominance, of human identity and of the liberation of the hidden self.

*Rebecca* and the two short stories, 'The Birds' and 'Don't Look Now', stand out among du Maurier's work as landmarks in the development of the modern Gothic tale. She breathes new life into the old form of the Gothic novel to come up with a classic tale of The Other Woman. Millions have identified with the plain, nameless narrator of *Rebecca*, a woman who defines her personality by overcoming the mother-figure of Rebecca to win the lasting love of her father-lover. 'The Birds' and 'Don't Look Now' established the twentieth-century sense of dislocation. The accepted order of things suddenly, and for no apparent reason, is upset. The great chain of being breaks and people find themselves battling for their lives against creatures they always assumed inferior to themselves: birds and children. The continuity of time itself is in question in 'Don't Look Now' as the future bleeds into the present.

Daphne du Maurier was not the sort of person to join the ranks of authors who appear regularly on television talk shows to promote their books. As her fame grew through her novels and the films based upon them, she became more reclusive. She viewed success as 'a very personal thing, like saying one's prayers or making love'. The greatest blow dealt to her came with the death of her husband, 'Boy' Browning, in 1965. In order to ease her pain she had at first taken over some of his things for herself. She wore his shirts, sat at his writing desk, used his pen to answer the hundreds of letters of condolence and by this process came to feel closer to him. The evenings were the hardest to endure: 'the ritual of the hot drink, the lumps of sugar for the two dogs, the saying of prayers - his boyhood habit carried on throughout our married life - the goodnight kiss.'
After his death, du Maurier moved from Menabilly to Kilmarth, a house once owned by a medieval steward named Roger Kylman in 1327 and subsequently by the Rashleighs, the descendants of whom are the current owners. It was in this historic house that du Maurier lived out the rest of her life, a house that she immortalised in the novel *The House on the Strand*.

In November 1988, I visited Daphne du Maurier in Kilmarth. She appeared quite small, sitting in a chair surrounded by piles of newspapers she had been reading. I had known her face from photographs taken in her youth, a beauty made haunting and foreboding by the deep shadows around the eyes. In her eighties, those eyes retained the same dark mystery of the recluse who had chosen to live amongst her memories and the ghosts that filled the room in photographs, paintings and memorabilia. In the dining room there was a large oil-painting of her as a young woman, many photographs of her father in jaunty poses, numerous medals that had been awarded to her husband during the war and a photograph of Dwight Eisenhower inscribed to him. 'Boy' Browning and Gerald du Maurier were the great heroes of her life and her fiction, the two ghosts of her past that embodied all the love, adventure and romance that through her writing she generously and skillfully shared with us all.

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