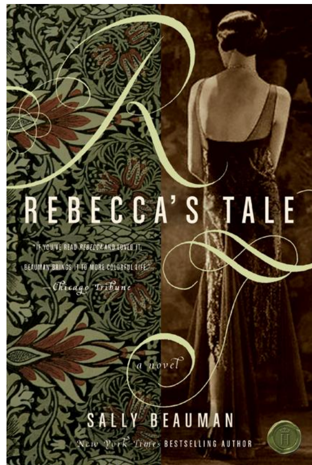
Book Interview



Sally Beauman

Rebecca's Tale
ISBN13: 9780061174674

Q: Did you read *Rebecca* as a child? What was it that led you to want to add to this famous story?
A: Yes, I read Rebecca first as a child, when I was about 11—it had been one of my mother's favourite novels. I didn't greatly like or admire it then—I was taken in by the disguise the novel wears, and dismissed it as romantic fiction with a few Gothic trimmings. It wasn't until I was older and at university that I reread it, and saw how wrong I had been. I began to understand how subtle and cunning a book it is—and that capacity of the novel, its ability to change and reveal new sub-texts and meanings, has brought me back to it since, many times. That's why I wanted to write *Rebecca's Tale*, because I felt that there were aspects of the original novel that would repay exploration. I felt I could investigate the shadows and mysteries of du Maurier's novel, while still being free to write a novel that was my own.

Q: What are some of the attractions and challenges of returning to a classic novel and adding a new reinterpretation? Did you try to respect du Maurier's novel, or did you think she "got things wrong"?
A: Well, I certainly didn't think she got things wrong! *Rebecca* is a brilliant novel, a near-faultless achievement on du Maurier's part. I have the greatest respect and admiration for the book, and the last thing I wanted to do was to suggest it might have been written differently—what would be the point? I could say that, in part, I wanted to deconstruct *Rebecca*, to set up an independent but linked narrative that might suggest interesting ways of re-reading and re-evaluating the original novel. But mainly I wanted to revisit a fictional territory that is important to me and to many, many readers. I wanted, however, to explore that familiar landscape in unfamiliar ways; I wanted a different perspective on Manderley . . . Last and by no means least, of course, I wanted to write a novel that could stand on its own, one that was written in my own chosen voices—I didn't want to be trapped into a pastiche of the narrative voice du Maurier chose to use. So I steered clear of the second Mrs de Winter, and used characters that were either minor or offstage in the original book, then wedded them to characters of my own. There were dangers there—especially since I chose to give a voice to Rebecca herself; but I'm glad I risked them. Writing the Rebecca section of my own novel, finding a voice for this extraordinary woman—that was one of the most exhilarating things I've ever done.

Q: Henry James once said that his character Isabel Archer from *The Portrait of a Lady* came to him in a dream and told him the novel could not end the way he had it. Did you feel haunted by the character of Rebecca?
A: Yes, I felt haunted by Rebecca, and still do. I believe she haunts all readers of the novel and that is one of the factors that gives it such power. There are very few characters in fiction that have this capacity—whom else would one nominate? Jane Eyre, Heathcliff, Catherine Earnshaw? There are many very great novels, *Bleak House*, for example, or *Mansfield Park*, or *Middlemarch*, or indeed most of the novels of Henry James, where the power of the narrative comes from a different source, and where the characters don't have this stubborn, haunting and disturbing vitality. It's interesting, I think, that when looking for other characters in fiction that have a similar power to Rebecca, one is instantly drawn to comparisons with the Brontes: du Maurier was *soaked* in the Brontes after all and the echoes between *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca* persist throughout her novel. Yet, unlike Jane Eyre, who takes charge of her own narrative and never relinquishes it, Rebecca is silenced: she is seen only through the eyes of others, and assessed by a woman (the second Mrs de Winter) who is her polar opposite, a woman perhaps incapable of understanding her. Rebecca always eludes us—I think that's the essence of her power. And that was central to my thinking as I wrote: I wanted to give her a voice, but I didn't want to make her explicable, I wanted her essential unknowability to remain. In short, I didn't want to turn her into a case history—case histories should be banished from novels! I wanted to create a woman who could be read in scores of different ways.

Q: Do you plan to write reinterpretations of any more classic novels? What classic novels do you think would benefit from a reinterpretation?
A: I have no plans, ever, under any circumstances, to revisit any other classic novel. I wrote *Rebecca's Tale* purely because of my fascination with du Maurier's novel and because I believed there was fictional territory that I could fruitfully explore. Generally speaking, I distrust this "re-interpretation" approach, which has now virtually become a genre of its own. In recent years, we've had Updike revisiting *Hamlet*, we've had re-examinations of *Moby Dick*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Great Expectations* . . . and then there's the more straightforward question of sequels. I hate 99.9% of sequels: I don't want a lesser writer whisking me to Tara—leave it alone!

Of course, I'm well aware that that particular criticism can be levelled at me—it's for readers to decide whether the journey I made, and the route I took has a value of its own. But in my own defence I would add that *Rebecca* is, perhaps, a special case. It revisits *Jane Eyre*—and du Maurier was roundly castigated for taking that risk when her novel was first published. I felt du Maurier had commenced a literary dialogue with Charlotte Bronte, a dialogue I could continue in my turn.

Q: During her career, Daphne du Maurier was often unfairly categorised by reviewers as a "romantic novelist". Do you think female writers today still face the same problem?
A: Yes. It's an aspect of gender snobbery, of course, and based on the assumption that novels by women are innately smaller and more trivial than those by their male peers. Absurd, yet a female writer has to work twice as hard as a male one to escape this kind of censure—that was true during du Maurier's lifetime, and I would say it's still true today; there has been some change, thanks to Women's Studies and so on, but it's still moving at a glacier's pace—it's too damn slow.

I find the entire process both pernicious and arrogant: it is as offensive to women readers as it is to women novelists since it implies a want of taste and intelligence on both their parts. The "romantic novelist" tag infuriated du Maurier, and quite rightly: that particular slur was a product of lazy thinking, of feeble critical acumen. *Rebecca* is a profoundly anti-romantic novel, I would say; it uses the conventions of romantic fiction to explode and shatter the entire concept of romance. Is it romantic to end up as Mrs de Winter does, shackled to a murderer and a perjurer? Is it romantic to allow such a man to determine your very identity? I'd say that *Rebecca* is a novel fuelled by rage, not romance—and in some ways the same is true of my own *Rebecca's Tale*.