

THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN

BY JOHN FOWLES

Reviewed by

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The French Lieutenant's Woman is a beautifully written and unusual novel about relationships between men and women. Those of you who have not read the book may snicker quietly and say to yourselves, "I'll bet it's about relationships - anything called a French Lieutenant's Woman is bound to be about relationships and I know what kind." Those of you who have read the book may or may not agree with my appraisal. In any event, I think the book is a great work of art; and I'd like to tell you why I think so.

Its author, John Fowles, is an Englishman living in Lyme Regis, Dorset on the southwestern coast of England. He has written two other novels that I shall also tell you about. I think the three works are interrelated and that The French Lieutenant's Woman cannot be properly appreciated without consideration of the other two. They are, first, the Collector and second, the Magus. Both have been made into movies, but if you have seen either or both, you should cleanse your mind of opinions formed as a result of the film treatments.

Fowles' first novel was the Collector. It achieved some popularity because of its sensationalist plot. It concerns a butterfly collector who decides that he wants to collect the biggest specimen of all - a real live girl. He does so and locks her up in an isolated cottage, where he deals with her in ways

that are described not explicitly but imaginatively. The story creates in the reader a sense of horrified fascination, as well it should, because any red-blooded male has lusted after females in exactly the same way as the collector lusts after his specimen. The book is intentionally erotic, but not pornographic. I am sure it made a fascinating movie, probably labelled "G" or "PG"; certainly nothing in the book could give rise to an "R" or "X" rating. The book, I understand, sold well, especially in paperback; it was a relatively simple, straightforward story, uncomplicated by symbolism, and as enjoyable as any paperback thriller you might pick up at an airport for escape reading.

Fowles' second novel, the Magus, was an entirely different work, one that you would never expect from the sort of man who (presumably) grinds out things like the Collector. The Magus is a terribly complex novel. (Parenthetically, it was turned into a terribly complex movie - the movie made a valiant but wholly unsuccessful effort to capture the flavor of the book.) The Magus needs to be read slowly, with your handy copy of Bulfinch at your side to unravel its many illusions to Greek mythology. I won't even attempt to detail its plot except to say that it, like the Collector, deals with men's relationships with women. In the Magus, however, the relationships are at an entirely different level than the raw and essentially physical level explored so well in the Collector. In the Magus the hero is a young and intelligent British school teacher who accepts a post teaching

English to Greek boys in an international school on one of the Greek islands. The heroine is an airline stewardess, that symbol of womanhood we know so well from advertisements. She is, when you are first introduced to her, the type of girl you read about in bad novels called Love Stories and in worse movies also called Love Stories, and, last but not least, the type of girl idealized in the centerfold of Playboy magazine. The school-teacher deals with his girl friend in exactly the way the Playboy philosophy would dictate. He doesn't necessarily treat her badly, certainly not badly in the physical sense, as the butterfly collector treated his specimen. Rather, he treats her as an object, one for whom he bears no responsibility. The Magus is, for my purposes here, the story of its hero's awakening to the meaning of responsibility and specifically his own responsibility to a woman whose life has become a part of his life. The experience is painful for him, and the reader is made to share both the pain and the enlightenment.

The Magus is encrusted with layers and layers of symbolism. At times the plot is so complex that it becomes surreal; it is not easy to read, but I am sure most of you would enjoy it. I am purposely ignoring most of its story, for the sake of concentrating on the one aspect, men-women relationships, which I find to be the significant, common element that is treated by Fowles' books. We had first the physical level examined in the Collector, then the relationship of the average ordinary modern young man and woman in the Magus.

Finally, we arrive at The French Lieutenant's Woman.

It has been described as a Victorian novel from a modern point of view, but it very nearly defies description. It is partly a love story, partly a novel of suspense, partly erotic, but totally a work of great craftsmanship. The setting is the same English sea-side town where Fowles himself now lives, but the clock is turned back 100 years. The hero, Charles, is a conventionally proper young man who is engaged to a conventionally proper young woman, Ernestina. Charles is the heir to a minor title but a substantial fortune, and his conduct towards his fiancée is, as befits those days before sex was one of our principal topics of conversation, eminently proper. There is another woman in Lyme Regis, however; her name is Sarah, and she is unconventional by the standards of any century and especially those of the nineteenth. She is The French Lieutenant's Woman, a name she acquired from an indiscreet liaison, at an early age, with a French naval officer whose ship was wrecked outside the harbor of Lyme Regis.

The novel is the story of Charles' relationships with Ernestina and Sarah. Yes, in answer to your next question, there is one passage describing a physical relationship. In answer to the next question after that, it has redeeming social significance and anyway it is so brief as to be nearly negligible. Nearly, but not totally, since The French Lieutenant's Woman is a novel about what men do to women and vice versa, and it covers that subject as thoroughly as any novel (or any other book) that I have

ever read. I defy anyone to read the book, and read it carefully and sympathetically, without emerging with a new and enlightened view of what men's relationships with women are about. I am not saying that the novel promotes Women's Lib, although in a sense it can be read that way. Rather, it illustrated to me what Sigmund Freud meant when he said, "I have studied women all my life and I still do not understand what they want."

Fowles uses several interesting techniques that require comment. The book can be said to have three endings - one, a conventionally happy - they lived happily ever after - ending in which Charles marries his fiancée, Ernestina; another in which Charles casts aside Ernestina and his fortune, pursues Sarah and finally marries her; and a third in which Charles also casts aside Ernestina and his fortune to pursue Sarah, but does so unsuccessfully. But this last may not be an undesirable ending, for Sarah is not a conventional heroine in any sense. She has the sensitivity and intelligence of many conventional heroines, but so does Charles' fiancée, Ernestina. There is no simple dividing line in the treatment of Ernestina and Sarah that would make you love one and hate the other. Both are women whom you will compare with women you know and like (or love). But Sarah is definitely different. She compels Charles' attention and she will compel yours. She is direct and candid, but in the manner of a Victorian lady, and you will respect her. Sarah asks the most difficult questions and asks them in such a way that neither

Charles, nor any reasonably intelligent reader, can fail to attempt answers. Sarah is definitely an intellectual, and The French Lieutenant's Woman is the only novel I have ever read in which the plight of the female intellectual is presented with such sympathy and understanding that the reader must finally re-examine his own views about women.

In our society, where women are often the victims of discrimination in business, government, education and most other facets of life, what are your attitudes towards the intelligent woman? As in Sarah's case, her worst enemies are other women. Men are doubtful allies. Regardless of your views on genetic differences, there is one unarguable genetic difference - male and female - and Fowles makes it abundantly clear how difficult it is for a man to accept responsibility for his fellow man, when she is a woman. But you are responsible, and John Fowles doesn't let you forget it.

One of the beauties of Fowles' book is that, even though it can be read as a Victorian novel, it has woven into the story great masses of factual information which makes the reader able to become a participant in the world of Charles, Ernestina and Sarah. They talked more elegantly than we do. There were manners and courtesies that we lack, and it is always enjoyable to read about these. There were also less attractive aspects of Victorian life and the contemplation of these shows us that the differences between Victorian society and our own are not so great.

The French Lieutenant's Woman is also an existential novel. Each chapter is headed by an epigraph, most of them chosen from Victorian authors and especially Matthew Arnold, whom Fowles obviously admires deeply. The epigraphs to the final chapter deserve quotation:

"Evolution is simply the process by which chance (the random mutations in the nucleic acid helix caused by natural radiation) cooperates with natural law to create living forms better and better adapted to survive."

"True piety is acting what one knows."

The final chapter is the one in which the last alternate ending is presented - Charles' pursuit of Sarah is unsuccessful. To Fowles this leads to a moral, if you must have a moral - the world is what we make of it, Sarah has acted as she knows she must act and poor Charles is left to consider his fate, which is to endure.

I think it would be a mistake, however, to leave you with the impression that the final chapter, because it is final, is in any sense the most important or that it is intended as a conclusion to the story that is of greater importance than the other two. To me, at least, this is clearly not so. Charles entered the life of Ernestina; both their lives were changed. Charles entered the life of Sarah and similarly both their lives were changed. Charles and the reader learn what it can mean to

accept responsibility for these changes. It is vastly more difficult for a man to accept this responsibility when the woman is truly intelligent, and Sarah illustrates this beautifully. God only knows what she wants; she certainly doesn't know, herself. We, men and women together, have made a world in which her quandary is serious and insoluble. The Women's Libbers would like to change the world somehow to avoid these quandaries. I doubt that they can do it. I urge you to read The French Lieutenant's Woman and decide for yourself.