

MANTISSA

Book Review presented to
The Chicago Literary Club
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Mantissa is the latest novel by John Fowles, the author of The Collector, The Magus, and The French Lieutenant's Woman. It is an ambitious and, I believe, largely unsuccessful attempt to explain his views on literary criticism, expound his philosophy of life and answer his critics, all in one short piece of imaginative dialog in novel form.

I reviewed The French Lieutenant's Woman for the Literary Club more than ten years ago, and in preparing this review, I of course could not resist the temptation to go back and see what I said then. I discovered, not much to my surprise, that Fowles and I have changed in that time span. My review of French Lieutenant's Woman was highly favorable; I urged everyone to read the book, and also to read The Collector and The Magus as well.

I am not sure how many of you acted on my advice, or had read the books anyway. If you have missed reading the books you may have seen the movies based on them. The first, The Collector, was quite a successful thriller which introduced Samantha Eggars and her spectacular green eyes to

American audiences. The second, The Magus, was one of the all-time screen disasters. Anthony Quinn and Candice Bergen must cringe when its name is mentioned. The last, The French Lieutenant's Woman, appeared within the last year or so and was highly regarded both by the critics and audiences. I saw it and was very impressed by the unusual skill employed to translate a complex novel to the screen. The film could not be totally faithful to the novel, for a variety of reasons, but the film-maker's trick of turning it into a film about a film based on the novel preserved Fowles' intentions almost perfectly, in my view.

I mention the films of these three prior works of Fowles because I think they are relevant to an appraisal of Mantissa and to an understanding of what Fowles was about in writing it. Fowles has had great success in America; several of his books have been Book-of-the-Month Club selections, and American reviewers have almost universally been kind to him. By contrast, the British literary establishment, and particularly the Times Literary Supplement, have savaged him unmercifully. I have read that his books have enjoyed far greater readership in America. Fowles lives in Lyme Regis, in Dorset, the setting of The French Lieutenant's Woman, and it is said that he got so tired of having visiting American tourists pounding on his door and asking for autographs that he moved to more isolated quarters.

Mantissa is related to the three earlier novels I have mentioned in its basic subject matter, an exploration of the complexities of male-female relationships. In my review of The French Lieutenant's Woman, I said that I thought that the three novels could be looked at as a trilogy, exploring progressively the different levels at which men and women relate to each other. The Collector is about an abduction, a primitive, physical expression of desire. The Magus is a romance, an exploration of a somewhat sophisticated modern courtship. The French Lieutenant's Woman is a far more complex look at the problems which sensitive, intellectually aware characters can cause each other as they work towards the three endings of the novel which Fowles provided for the mystification of his readers.

Mantissa, published a little more than a year ago, takes up, in an entirely new context, the same basic subject matter. The setting of Mantissa is ostensibly a hospital, in which the author awakes to find himself suffering from amnesia. He is attended by an attractive young woman doctor and an equally attractive West Indian nurse. It very quickly becomes apparent that the hospital setting is merely a literary device, and that the real setting of the book is the author's mind as he deals with the Muses, particularly Erato, who appears to him as the doctor, as the nurse, as a punk rocker, and in various other guises. The book may be autobiographical, and it certainly is an account of the

author's dealings with the feminine aspects of his psyche, his anima, although the name, Jung, is never mentioned except in a punning reference to Erica Jong, the author of Fear of Flying. Parenthetically, Fowles makes it clear that he does not approve of her brand of feminism.

Mantissa represents a development of Fowles' work in two aspects: first, the exploration of male-female relationships, as outlined above, and second, the use of self-conscious and self-referential techniques of authorship. The latter, which were totally absent from The Collector, first surfaced in The Magus, and became explicit and significant in The French Lieutenant's Woman. Another reviewer of Fowles' work once said, "...his most sensitive characters tend to realize that he is writing them....Fowles's principal interest is the process of writing itself, and the idea that his characters can exist away from his control. They escape into areas of free will by becoming aware that they are someone else's creation."

I do not believe that Mantissa displays any aspect of Fowles's development in a manner that does him credit, either as an author or as a person. There can be no question that Fowles is writing about himself in Mantissa. At one point, his muse, or anima, is arguing with him. She says, "You're just a degenerate tenth-rate hack. God, no wonder the Times Literary Supplement calls you an affront to serious English fiction." He replies, "I happen to regard

that as one of the finest feathers in my cap." Only a man deeply wounded by critical attacks could write that. But only a man on an ego trip could write a book like Mantissa, in which the reader is expected to be titillated by the surreal, erotic adventures the author conducts in his head with his muse-anima.

Ten years ago, I found The French Lieutenant's Woman to be a serious, thought provoking, absorbing novel about characters whom I came to care about. Now, ten years later, having just read Mantissa, I am not at all sure about The French Lieutenant's Woman. Looking inside the author's head, at his invitation, and finding a collection of what could best be described as banalities interrupted by soft-core pornographic episodes, makes me wonder whether The French Lieutenant's Woman was all that deep. I have re-read The Magus in the past few years, because a revised version appeared and I was curious to see what changes Fowles had made and why. I found it disappointing. I tried to re-read The French Lieutenant's Woman when the film appeared but found I could not get past the first two chapters.

My tastes have changed in ten years, and I think Fowles' writing has changed, as has Fowles' view of himself as an author. At one point in Mantissa, he cites the OED definition of "mantissa", "an addition of comparatively small importance, especially to a literary effort or discourse". Then he says, "With women one always ends in a

bag of reality, alias words. From time to time one even asks oneself if they have not invented literature just to get their own back, deliberately to confuse and to distract their masculine betters; to make them waste their vital intellectual aspirations and juices on mantissae and trivia, mere shadows on walls." Fowles has been a better author than that passage would indicate. There is no doubt about his story telling abilities. Two works which I have not mentioned, Ebony Tower and Daniel Martin, are ample proof of his ability to write captivating stories. But as a philosopher or critic, Fowles does not give a good account of himself in Mantissa, which, despite its self-deprecatory, ironic style, still purports to be a serious work.

In my paper bound edition of Mantissa, no fewer than seventeen excerpts from reviews of the work are quoted on the back page and in the opening three pages. The reviews are from the Washington Post, the Boston Globe, John Barkham, Chicago Tribune, Dallas Morning News, Playboy, Des Moines Register, Milwaukee Journal, Time, Worcester Telegram, Kirkus, The Oregonian, The Atlantic, Publishers Weekly, New York Daily News, Nashville Tennessean, and the Columbia State. Some publications whose reviews I consider more significant are not on that list. Perhaps the most apt of the excerpts is from Playboy: "A literary delight . . . light and lively sex scenes make it totally accessible." Enough said.