

Daphne du Maurier's

Short Stories

by Nancy Bilyeau

Near the end of Daphne du Maurier's short story "The Apple Tree," a widower delivers firewood to the local pub and stays for a few drinks before driving home in a blinding snowstorm. His car sent sliding off the road, he abandons it and, exhausted, continues to his dark, empty house on foot. Passing the apple orchard, he stumbles and falls, "and he knew suddenly, by the sharpness of the pain biting his ankle, that what had trapped him was the jagged split stump of the old apple tree he had felled that afternoon." This, though, was no ordinary tree.

Any reader of the story will respond with a gasp, either literal or figurative, while realizing that every paragraph in the short story of psychological suspense led, in a manner both shocking and inevitable, to this moment: the man shouting, "Let me go," swearing and sobbing, "knowing there was no hope, no escape, until they came to find him in the morning, and supposing it was then too late, that when they came he was dead, lying stiffly in the frozen snow...."

The fiction of Daphne du Maurier is rightly celebrated. Her most famous work is the novel *Rebecca*. Since its publication in 1939, waves of readers have seized on the story of a young, insecure woman who meets and marries Max de Winter, owner of a vast Cornwall estate, Manderley, and some violent secrets. Alfred Hitchcock brought the novel to screen in its most famous adaptation, starring Joan Fontaine and Laurence Olivier. Other film and television versions followed, with yet another one announced as going into production by Netflix in the autumn of 2018.

Du Maurier wrote 17 other novels besides *Rebecca*, four of which also received big-screen adaptations, bestowing on them that extra level of fame: *My Cousin Rachel*, *Jamaica Inn*, *Frenchman's Creek*, and *The Scapegoat*. Although she wrote plays and nonfiction—biographies and travel tomes—novels of suspense were her métier, exerting a strong influence today on many successful writers, such as Ruth Ware and Paula Hawkins. Some of du Maurier's novel were set in past cen-

Tippi Hedren in *The Birds* (1963).

Daphne du Maurier's short stories may be found in *The Birds and Other Stories* (2013), *Don't Look Now and Other Stories* (2013), and *The Breaking Point: Stories* (2013). All are published by Little, Brown and Company.

turies, some contemporary, with one, *The House on the Strand*, best described as a time slip.

I'll never forget my introduction to *The King's General*, published in 1946. I was already a longtime admirer of *Rebecca* and *Jamaica Inn* when, invited to a friend's family house in the Adirondack Mountains in the early 1990s, I ran out of something to read (this was before the arrival of the smartphone and Kindle) and explored my host's bookshelf. I pulled out a slightly musty hardback of *The King's General*. Du Maurier's eighth novel

is set during the English Civil War as it raged in the west, with the protagonist, Honor Harris, being the sharp-tongued youngest daughter of a Cornish family. The details of atmosphere and the finely honed characterizations wove their spell as I devoured the book that weekend. Revisiting it last year, I appreciated anew those writer gifts of du Maurier's while not being as besotted with her reliance on the Gothic trope of a secret room in a mansion. Nonetheless, more than ever before I admired her ruthlessness as a novelist, her decision to destroy a passionate love affair between



Honor and Sir Richard Grenville on the eve of their wedding by plunging the heroine headlong into a ravine on horseback. Throughout the remaining three-fourths of the novel, Honor is, as she calls herself, “a cripple.”

There is another line in *The King's General* that rings in my head as I pore through du Maurier's short fiction: “coldly critical, as I always am towards the people I love.” Does it apply to the author's view of her characters too? She deploys a bracing ruthlessness in setting her characters' fates in these highly imaginative stories. Her artistic instincts drove her away from such conventional fictional models as *Rebecca* and *The King's General* and toward darker tales that often defy genre categories. “The Little Photographer” and “Ganymede” boast protagonists who drip the sociopathic cool of a Patricia Highsmith story, while the boldly bizarre “The Blue Lenses” is worthy of *The Twilight Zone*. In “A Border Line Case” the main character, a young actress grieving for her dead father, tries to solve a mystery about him and discovers a truly horrifying truth about herself. Du Maurier wrote so much short fiction—my best count is 24, many of them novella length—that it offers the possibility that telling these tales was something of a compulsion for her.

When she was only 21, du Maurier wrote “The Doll,” which is, amazingly, the story of a young man struggling with the knowledge that the woman he loves prefers a mechanical sex doll. Du Maurier's editor of 40 years, Sheila Hodges, has written, “She started off by writing short stories, and did so in intervals throughout her life, for she enjoyed the genre and the challenge it presented. Many of these stories are very dark, macabre, even sadistic.”

The stories sometimes reveal du Maurier's own mental state better than her novels. Her last collection, gathered under the title *The Breaking Point*, was written after du Maurier learned of her husband's long affair from his mistress. Though her marriage to Frederick Browning was by any definition a chilly one, the two of them living apart much of the time, du Maurier was devastated by the revelation of infidelity, and friends worried she was close to a nervous breakdown. More than one critic has noted these stories were some of the darkest in a very dark oeuvre: “The Alibi” is about a man's craving to murder a stranger and “Ganymede” is about an English professor on holiday and his selfish obsession with a handsome 15-year-old Italian waiter. Real-life parallels are most inescapable in “Blue Lenses”: a woman with a serious eye condition comes out of her operation



Daphne
du Maurier

blind for weeks, only to see the nurses and doctors with the heads of animals betraying their true natures, and, most shocking of all, her husband.

“The Apple Tree,” written years earlier than the stories collected in *The Breaking Point*, is the story of a marriage that on the surface may have seemed boringly normal, successful in the eyes of the couple's servants and their neighbors in the village, but underneath is filled with hatred and guilt and resentment. It is told through the point of view of the husband, a man who can barely conceal his relief over the death of his wife, whose aggressive martyrdom he found unbearable, yet there are clues throughout of his cruelty, neglect, and sexual rejection of her. Who was the real victim in their quietly hellish marriage?

If the most successful writers of today's “domestic suspense,” such as Gillian Flynn, are skilled at misdirecting the reader through unreliable point of view, Daphne du Maurier surely deserves credit for mastery of that technique in her fiction and particularly her short fiction. A close reading of one of her best-known stories, “Don't Look Now,” adapted into a Nicolas Roeg film, reveals that the point of view of the main character, John, is completely unreliable. Having gone to Venice with his wife to try to recover from their grief over the death of their daughter, John is horrified, frustrated, and angry when his wife says that a blind psychic has just told her their daughter is happy in the afterlife. He ignores all the signs that not only are the psychic visions real but that a predatory murderer is loose in Venice. He realizes his figurative blindness, his refusal to “look now,” at the moment the knife is at his own throat.

While *Don't Look Now* was a successful film of the 1970s, it dwarfed in reputation

by perhaps the most famous adaptation of any piece of fiction by Daphne du Maurier: *The Birds*. What's interesting is that while Alfred Hitchcock's other adaptations of du Maurier are faithful to the source, this movie bears little resemblance to her short story besides its basic plot engine: a group of humans trying to survive an inexplicable and terrifying series of bird attacks. The locale moves from the Cornish coast to the small town of Bodega Bay, California. But that's just the beginning. In Hitchcock's film the star is Melanie Daniels (Tippi Hedren), a San Francisco society beauty who is intrigued by lawyer Mitch and tracks him down in Bodega Bay but, in the middle of confronting not just an ex-girlfriend's but a mother's jealousy, finds herself attacked by birds.

Du Maurier employs absolutely none of these soap opera devices in her story. It is a master class in “show don't tell.” We know nothing of the main character, Nat, except he is an injured veteran of World War II working a few days a week on a Cornish farm, a self-sufficient husband and father of two young children. But it's enough. He uses all of his intelligence and resourcefulness in the savage struggle with the birds, and du Maurier's gift for description is employed to chilling effect: “What he had thought at first to be the white caps of the waves were gulls. Hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands... They rose and fell in the troughs of the seas, heads to the wind, like a mighty fleet at anchor, waiting on the tide.”

The end of the short story “The Birds” is more apocalyptic than Hitchcock's film. Battered inside, the family hears noises that Nat alone recognizes as the sound of planes crashing in a futile attempt to wipe out the birds. Nat's family's only contact with the outside world is the radio, broadcasting increasingly alarming reports until it emits only silence. “There isn't going to be any news,” said Nat. “We've got to depend on ourselves.” The story ends with Nat smoking his last cigarette, switching on the “silent wireless” one more time.

All du Maurier's short fiction ends with a shiver. And although the fate of the world is not at stake, the final paragraph of “The Apple Tree” chills as well: “It was no use. He could not move. Exhausted, he laid his head upon his arms, and wept. He sank deeper, ever deeper into the snow, and when a stray piece of brushwood, cold and wet, touched his lips, it was like a hand, hesitant and timid, feeling its way towards him in the darkness.” ✦

.....
Nancy Bilyeau is the author of the historical thriller The Blue. She lives in New York City.