

Virtual April 6, 2021 (42:10)

Karel Reisz: **THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN** (1981, 124 min)  
*Spelling and Style—use of italics, quotation marks or nothing at all for titles, e.g.—follows the form of the sources.  
Cast and crew name hyperlinks connect to the individuals' Wikipedia entries*



[Vimeo link for ALL of Bruce Jackson's and Diane Christian's film introductions and post-film discussions in the virtual BFS](#)

[Vimeo link for our introduction to \*The French Lieutenant's Woman\*](#)

[Zoom link for all Spring 2021 BFS Tuesday 7:00 PM post-screening discussions:](#)

Meeting ID: 925 3527 4384 Passcode: 820766

**Directed by** Karel Reisz

**Based on the novel by** John Fowles

**Screenplay by** Harold Pinter

**Produced by** Leon Clore

**Original Music by** Carl Davis

**Cinematography by** Freddie Francis

The film was nominated for five Oscars, including Best Actress in a Leading Role (Meryl Streep) and Best Writing, Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium (Harold Pinter), at the 1982 Academy Awards.

Meryl Streep....Sarah/Anna

Jeremy Irons....Charles Henry Smithson/Mike

Hilton McRae....Sam

Emily Morgan....Mary

Charlotte Mitchell....Mrs. Tranter

Lynsey Baxter....Ernestina

Jean Faulds....Cook

Peter Vaughan....Mr. Freeman

Colin Jeavons....Vicar



Liz Smith....Mrs. Fairley

Patience Collier....Mrs. Poulteney

David Warner....Murphy

**Karel Reisz** (21 July 1926, Ostrava, Czechoslovakia—25 November 2002, London, England) directed 13 theatrical and tv films: "Act Without Words I" (2000), *The Deep Blue Sea* (1994), *Everybody Wins* (1990), *Sweet Dreams* (1985), *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981), *Who'll Stop the Rain* (1978), *The Gambler* (1974), *Isadora* (1968), *Morgan* (1966), *Night Must Fall* (1964), *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960), *We Are the Lambeth Boys* (1958) and *Momma Don't Allow* (1955).

**Harold Pinter** (10 October, 1930, London—December 24, 2008, London) was a British playwright, screenwriter, director and actor. Pinter was one of the most influential modern British dramatists with a writing career that spanned more than 50 years. He wrote 27 screenplays and teleplays, in addition to 29 stage plays and 15 dramatic sketches. Some of his screenplays are *The Trial* (1993), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1990), *The Comfort of Strangers* (1990), *Betrayal* (1983), *The Last Tycoon* (1976), *The Homecoming* (1973), *The Birthday Party* (1968), *The Quiller Memorandum* (1966), and *The Servant* (1963). He played Uncle Benny in *The Tailor of Panama* (2001) and Sir Thomas Bertram in *Mansfield Park* (1999). He was awarded the 2005 Nobel Prize in Literature.



**Freddie Francis** (22 December 1917, London—March 17, 2007 (age 89) in Isleworth, Middlesex, England) won best cinematographer Oscars for *Glory* (1989) and *Sons and Lovers* (1960). Some of his other films are *Cape Fear* (1991), *The Man in the Moon* (1991), *Dune* (1984), *The Executioner's Song* (1982), *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981), *The Elephant Man* (1980), *The Innocents* (1961), *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960), and *Room at the Top* (1959). He was also camera operator on *Moby Dick* (1956), *Beat the Devil* (1953), *Moulin Rouge* (1952), and *The Macomber Affair* (1947).

**Meryl Streep** (22 June 1949, Summit, NJ) is often described as the best actress (93 credits) of her generation. Nominated for a record 21 Academy Awards, she has won three: Best Performance by an Actress in a Supporting Role for *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979) and for Best Performance by an Actress in a Leading Role for *Sophie's Choice* (1982) and *The Iron Lady* (2011). Streep was awarded the AFI Life

Achievement Award in 2004, Gala Tribute from the Film Society of Lincoln Center in 2008, and Kennedy Center Honor in 2011 for her contribution to American culture, through performing arts. President Barack Obama awarded her the 2010 National Medal of Arts, and in 2014, the Presidential Medal of Freedom. In 2003, the government of France made her a Commander of the Order of Arts and Letters. She was nominated for Oscars for *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981), *Silkwood* (1983), *Out of Africa* (1985), *Ironweed* (1987), *Evil Angels* (1988), for which she won Best Actress at Cannes, *Postcards from the Edge* (1990), *The Bridges of Madison County* (1995), *One True Thing* (1998), *Music of the Heart* (1999), *Adaptation.* (2002), *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), *Doubt* (2008), *Julie & Julia* (2009), *August: Osage County* (2013), *Into the Woods* (2014), *Florence Foster Jenkins* (2016), and *The Post* (2017). These are some of her other films: *Everybody Rides the Carousel* (1976), *Julia* (1977), *Manhattan* (1979), *The Seduction of Joe Tynan* (1979), *Still of the Night* (1982), *Falling in Love* (1984), *Heartburn* (1986), *Defending Your Life* (1991), *Death Becomes Her* (1992), *The House of the Spirits* (1993), *Before and After* (1996), *Marvin's Room* (1996), *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1998), *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001), *The Hours* (2002), *Angels in America* (TV Mini-Series) (2003), *The Manchurian Candidate* (2004), *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (2004), *A Prairie Home Companion* (2006), *Rendition* (2007), *Mamma Mia!* (2008), *Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again* (2018), *Mary Poppins Returns* (2018), *Big Little Lies* (TV series, 2019), *The Laundromat* (2019), *Little Women* (2019), *Heads Will Roll* (TV Series, 2020), *James and the Giant Peach with Taika and Friends* (TV Mini-Series, 2020), *The Prom* (2020), *Let Them All Talk* (2020), and *Don't Look Up*, in post-production.

**Jeremy Irons** (19 September 1948, Cowes, Isle of Wight, UK) has won multiple awards, including the Academy Award for Best Actor, for his portrayal of the accused attempted murderer Claus von Bülow in *Reversal of Fortune* (1990). He has acted in more than 104 films and television programs, including Ridley Scott's *House of Gucci*, currently filming, a memorable performance as Ozymandias in Damon Lindelof's 2019 *Watchmen* series, *The Merchant of Venice* (2004), *The Man in the Iron Mask* (1998),

*Stealing Beauty* (1996), *Die Hard: With a Vengeance* (1995), *The House of the Spirits* (1993), *M. Butterfly* (1993), *Damage* (1992), *Kafka* (1991), *Reversal of Fortune* (1990. Oscar for best actor in leading role), *Dead Ringers* (1988), *The Mission* (1986), *Betrayal* (1983), *The Wild Duck* (1983), *Moonlighting* (1982), and *Nijinsky* (1980).



**Reginald "Leo" McKern**, [AO](#) (16 March 1920 – 23 July 2002) was an Australian actor who appeared in numerous British, Australian and American television programmes and films, and in more than 200 stage roles. Notable roles he portrayed include Clang in *Help!* (1965), **Thomas Cromwell** in *A Man for All Seasons* (1966), Tom Ryan in *Ryan's Daughter* (1970), Paddy Button in *The Blue Lagoon* (1980), Dr. Grogan in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981), Father Imperius in *Ladyhawke* (1985), and the role that made him a household name as an actor, **Horace Rumpole**, whom he played in *Rumpole of the Bailey*. He also portrayed Carl Bugenhagen in the [first](#) and [second](#) [installments](#) of *The Omenseries*. (From Wikipedia. [Full entry here.](#))

**Karel Reisz from *World Film Directors, V.II. Ed. John Wakeman. The H.W.Wilson Co., NY 1988***

British director, born in Ostrava, central Czechoslovakia, the son of a Jewish lawyer. His older brother Paul was educated in England, at Leighton Park School in Reading, Berkshire. In 1938, when the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia was imminent, this Quaker school accepted Karel Reisz as a refugee and sponsored his journey by sea to England. His parents, who stayed behind, both died in a concentration camp.

Uprooted from a secure and comfortable home at the age of twelve, Reisz arrived in Reading knowing scarcely a word of English. He adapted

quickly, however, and says that he soon wanted more than anything else to become as English as possible. Leaving school at eighteen, he joined the Czech squadron of the Royal Air Force and trained as a fighter pilot, though the war ended before he saw active service. In 1945 he was repatriated to Czechoslovakia. The war had left it a very different place from the country he remembered, and he soon returned to England, where he studied natural sciences at Emmanuel College, Cambridge University (1945–1947). A socialist during his teens, he was disillusioned by the Stalinist coup in Czechoslovakia in 1947; though he continued to respond to the “vague left wind blowing at that time” through British and artistic circles.

When he graduated from Cambridge, Reisz joined the staff of the St. Marylebone Grammar School in London, where he taught from 1947 to 1949. He says of that period that, “coming straight from the university, the whole impact of that outside world was very, very strong. It was probably the first kind of wide community life I’d come across at all; for though I’d been happy at boarding school and university, I’d felt totally incapsulated there. Teaching was my first sense of social reality: and you can’t deal daily with working-class youngsters and their parents in their own habitat and retain an archaic view of the lower classes as comic relief or criminals, the roles they traditionally filled in British films.”



In 1949, Reisz quit teaching to take his chances as a free-lance journalist and film critic. By 1950 he was a contributor to *Sequence*—originally the magazine of the Oxford Film Society, later an independent journal published in London—and to *Sight and Sound*, which came that year under the editorship of another *Sequence* writer, Gavin Lambert. Like the young contributors to *Cahiers du Cinéma* in

France, the *Sequence* critics became filmmakers themselves—Reisz, Tony Richardson, and Lindsay Anderson (who as Reisz says, was “always the high priest” of the *Sequence* set).

*Sequence* never evolved a clearly defined film aesthetic, mostly because its contributors were less interested in synthesizing theories than in the individual critic’s direct and immediate response, emotional as well as intellectual—to the material before him. They did have certain attitudes in common, however, and believed in something quite similar to the *auteur* theory enunciated by their *Cahiers* colleagues in France: that the best films were those that most fully expressed the personal vision of a single artist—the director. For this reason—and out of political idealism—they were hostile to the commercial film industry, which they saw as tending to stifle free and personal expression and “poetry” in the work of directors as diverse as John Ford, Jean Vigo, Preston Sturges, and Jean Cocteau.

In 1952-1953 Reisz served as program director at the National Film Theatre in London, and in 1953 he published *The Technique of Film Editing*. The book was commissioned by the British Film Academy which, Reisz says, “wanted to find a journalist as Boswell to a lot of senior British directors and editors.” At that point, he had no experience with editing whatsoever but, according to Thorold Dickinson, he worked obsessively on the book “over months of grueling experiment” as he “patiently sifted the relevant technique from the personal reminiscence and...projected miles of film in search of the apt sequence,...noting every detail and measuring every foot.” It was an immensely instructive experience for Reisz as a potential filmmaker, and resulted in a standard work on the history, theory, and technique of editing—“a classic teaching tool” that has had great influence in many parts of the world. A revised edition appeared in 1968.

Reisz still had no professional filmmaking experience, but he was experimenting with 16mm

amateur movies and in 1956, on the strength of one of these, he was appointed films officer to the Ford Motor Company in Britain. Making instructional and promotional films there, he began to learn the rudiments of his craft. The same year, with Tony Richardson, as his co-director, he made *Momma Don’t Allow*, a 22-minute documentary financed by the British Film Institute’s Experimental Fund, photographed by Walter Lassally and with John Fletcher as sound recordist and editor.



John Fowles and Karel Reisz

*Momma Don’t Allow* simply follows a group of young people to a London jazz club and observes them there, with the camera (as Lewis Jacobs wrote) acting as a “casual spectator, focussing upon the passing moment and letting it speak for itself.” Raymond Durnat has since indicted the movie as “badly cut, badly shot, with no feelings for jazz, for dancing, for bodies,

for clothes, or for place,” and there is an element of truth in these harsh strictures. What made it seem remarkable in its time is that the uninhibited young dancers who are its subjects are of the working class and are presented, not as “comic relief or criminals,” but seriously and sympathetically—they are even favorably contrasted with a prim and snobbish group of upper-class youngsters who visit the club on a slumming expedition.

In February 1956, *Momma Don’t Allow* was shown with two other films at the National Film Theatre in a program called Free Cinema. This well-publicized show was greeted with considerable excitement by the critics, and sparked off a short-lived and rather amorphous movement that nevertheless had a good deal of influence on the class-bound British film industry. Five more Free Cinema programs followed at the National Film Theatre between 1956 and 1959, screening work by British, French, American, Polish, and Swiss filmmakers. The more interesting indigenous products of Free Cinema included films by Reisz and Lindsay Anderson, and the movement is most easily understood as an attempt

to apply the ideas evolved in *Sequence*. Turning from criticism to documentary filmmaking—the only door open to them at that time—these mostly middle-class young idealists rejected the commercial cinema's middle-class preoccupations and set out to celebrate “the significance of the everyday.”

There had been some evidence of this kind of social commitment in *Momma Don't Allow*, and there was more of it in Reisz's first solo film, *We Are the*

*Lambeth Boys* (1959, 52 minutes). Before he left the Ford Motor Company in 1957, Reisz had persuaded them to sponsor a series of documentaries called Look at Britain, beginning with Lindsay Anderson's *Every Day Except Christmas* (1957), which Reisz coproduced. *We Are the Lambeth Boys* was the second film in the series. Like *Momma Don't Allow*, it was



photographed by Walter Lassally and edited by John Fletcher, both of them important contributors to Free Cinema. First shown in the last Free Cinema program in March 1959, it went on to win the grand prix at Tours and minor awards at both Venice and Cork.

The film deals with a youth club in Lambeth, then a run-down working-class district of London, and introduces us to some of its members. We see them both at the club—in an art class, taking part in a discussion of capital punishment, enjoying a Saturday night dance; and outside—at school or drudging at hopeless and dreary jobs. Georg Gaston found the paternalistic and “mildly liberal” attitudes embodied in the commentary the weakest part of the film, but praised the “radical poetic urge” expressed in the images, especially at the end, when the young people leave the dance and go off through the dark streets to the ill-lit housing developments where they live: “The dark shapes of the last shot, belonging to the bleak working-class world which faces...[them], grow in the imagination like phantoms.”

Richard Hoggart also admired the film, but regretted that “it does not deal...with ‘the inner life’ with ‘the deeper dissatisfactions’ [of its subjects].” Reisz replied that it was not in the nature of documentary to do so, and he set out to remedy the

deficiency in his first feature, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960). Its hero, Reisz said, “is, if you like, one of the Lambeth Boys. An attempt is made to make a movie about the sentimental and social education of *one specific* boy: thus the ‘inner’ things which the *Lambeth Boys* type of picture simply cannot apprehend...was attempted in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. To put it more simply, and risking pretentiousness, the first work attempted a

picture of the world, the second a portrait.”

In fact, Arthur Seaton, the film's rebellious young hero, came not from Lambeth but from the equally bleak provincial factory town of Nottingham; so did Alan Sillitoe, who wrote the script (his first) from his own semiautobiographical novel. Sillitoe had sold

the rights to Tony Richardson's Woodfall Films, and Richardson, not interested in directing it himself, called in his friend Karel Reisz. Believing that “the only way to know a place is to work there,” Reisz went to Nottingham and made a documentary (with Sillitoe as his scriptwriter) about a miners' welfare center, a practice-run kindly sponsored by the Central Office of Information. This was characteristic of Reisz, who likes to work in “a painstaking, stamp-collector's way....I like to have it all at my fingertips before I start. It is a form of fear, I suppose.”

Sillitoe acted as Reisz's guide to Nottingham. Some of the scenes were shot in the house where Sillitoe's mother still lived, and he said “it gave me a wonderful emotional shock to see Albert Finney standing at exactly the same place at the bench in the Raleigh factory where I had worked.” Reisz worked closely with Sillitoe on successive versions of the script and the film was shot in six weeks on a budget of about L100,000, with Freddie Francis as cinematographer. Tony Richardson produced and his partner Harry Salzman served as executive producer.

The movie opens in the Raleigh bicycle factory where Arthur Seaton (Finney), just completing the week's last shift at his lathe, launches into a stream-of-consciousness soliloquy that expressed the disillusionment, boredom, and resentment of a whole

class and ends with a manifesto: “What I’m out for is a good time. All the rest is propaganda.” In pursuit of that goal he spends his treasured Saturday nights boozing, brawling, and fornicating—breaking “all these lousy laws” with enthusiasm, to prove that he is alive and not ground down or greyed over like his parents and workmates. But he quickly reaches the limits of acceptable hell-raising: his affair with a friend’s wife (Rachel Roberts) ends in a savage beating, which he accepts as earned, and his flirtation with a “nice” girl (Shirley Ann Field) as tough and shrewd as himself leads straight toward marriage.



The British cinema had already been roused from its idylls of the drawing-room by films like Jack Clayton’s *Room at the Top* (1959) and Tony Richardson’s *Look Back in Anger* (1958), both of which had working-class heroes. More authentic, vigorous, and quirky than either of these pioneer works, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* was hugely successful from the beginning, both critically and financially. Ordinary moviegoers responded with excited gratitude to a film that for once dealt honestly with a world they knew. And in the truculent vitality of Finney’s performance they discovered a new kind of star.

At the end of the picture, Arthur Seaton throws a stone in the direction of one of the neat and sterile new housing developments that his girlfriend aspires to. For Alan Sillitoe, this was evidence that his rebellious spirit, though dimmed, survived. Reisz interpreted the gesture differently, telling Alexander Walker that “in a metaphorical way Arthur embodied what was happening in England: he was a sad person, terribly limited in his sensibilities, narrow in his ambitions and a bloody fool in the bargain—by no means a standard-bearer for any ideas of mine. I never work with spokesmen....The stone-throwing is a symptom of his impotence, a self-conscious bit, telling the audience over the character’s shoulder what I think of him. I wanted to continually contrast the

extent to which he is an aggressor with the extent to which he is a victim of this world.”

David Robinson described Reisz’s direction as “astonishingly assured and mature for a first feature assignment....completely free of excess ornament, self-indulgence or pyrotechnic.” This was the common view, but Georg Gaston, in his book on Reisz, examines in some detail the calculated use of camerawork, sound, and pacing that lies behind the picture’s “documentary look,” showing that its style is not as “totally self-effacing and detached

as so many critics believe.” For example, most scenes are shot from the middle distance at eye level, but this makes it all the more effective when a close-up suddenly obliges us to identify with one or another of the characters at a moment of crisis, or a crane shot reminds us of the ugliness and overcrowding of their environment: “This tension between moderate and extreme distancing is employed throughout the film in a rhythmic way, until distancing becomes one of Reisz’s most expressive ways of commenting on the situation before us.”

In 1962-1963, Reisz produced Lindsay Anderson’s *This Sporting Life*, generally regarded as one of the two finest products of British social realism in the 1960s (the other being *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*). At the same time, Reisz and Finney were planning to make a second film together. Forced for financial reasons to abandon one about the Australian bandit Ned Kelly, they accepted an invitation from MGM to remake the 1937 Richard Thorpe shocker *Night Must Fall*, about a young psychopath who, having committed one ax-murder, arrives at a nearby house with a mysterious hatbox and charms his way into a job as handyman. Reisz and Finney (who coproduced) thought this could be turned into something more serious, presenting the working-class killer as another “victim of this world.”

Clive Exton’s script, though freighted with a certain amount of social and psychological significance, retained too much of the dated

theatricality of the original Emyln Williams play—Finney said “we meant to stick to sociology, but that damned head in the hatbox proved too powerful.” As the young killer Danny, Finney was required to play, in effect, three different roles in his adopted home—a charming child with the rich old widow (Mona Washbourne), a brutal lover with her daughter (Susan Hampshire), and a violent clown with the maid he makes pregnant (Sheila Hancock). Still inexperienced, he was tempted into overacting, alienating the fans who had adored him as Arthur Seaton and Tom Jones.

Reisz fared no better than Finney at the hands of the critics. He has said that in each of his pictures he has adopted a manner that “tries to be expressive of the main character”; dealing with a psychopath, he arrived at a hectic and self-conscious style full of portentous zoom shots. Hitchcockian cross-cutting, and murky symbolism, and was unjustly accused of “going commercial.” In fact the movie has some fine moments, like the wordless opening sequence, in which Danny’s frenzied first killing is intercut with matching shots of calm scenes in the nearby house that, with brilliant economy, both establish character and ominously foreshadow the impending connection between Danny and the three women who live there.

Far from retreating into some safely saleable project after this failure, Reisz went on to make *Morgan: A Suitable Case for Treatment* (1966), a film extravagantly eccentric in both content and style. Morgan Delt (David Warner) is a painter of animals and a kind of holy fool of the 1960s—a man as mad with love as Danny had been with hate. Morgan loves animals, children, flowers, and everything that is vulnerable or beautiful or good. He loves his diehard Marxist mum (Irene Handl) and he adores his upper-class wife Leonie (Vanessa Redgrave).

In a sad and anxious way Leonie loves Morgan too, but not enough to go on living with him. When she divorces him, Morgan resorts to a whole series of bizarre schemes (culminating in a kidnapping) to prevent her from marrying a saner but nastier man named Napier (Robert Stephens), a dealer in bogus modern art. None of these plots works and Morgan, who often wishes he were something other than his unhappy self, takes refuge in the identity of a gorilla, an animal he particularly admires. Modeling himself on King Kong, he makes a spectacular assault on



Leonie’s wedding party.

Though he winds up in a lunatic asylum, Morgan seems happy enough once he is properly mad (and has the sly satisfaction of knowing that Leonie is pregnant with his baby). David Mercer’s script (from his own television play) had been inspired by the later-fashionable theories of R.D. Laing, who maintains that schizophrenia is a not-dishonorable

response to the materialism, selfishness, and hypocrisy of the “sane” world. In these terms, Morgan Delt can be seen as another aggressive victim of a sick society.

Mercer wrote that “our film is about a human being under stress and about the manner in which he

ultimately preserves his integrity against society.” It bothered some of the film’s critics that most of the people in it seem in less attractive ways as close to madness as the hero, but for Richard Roud this in no way weakened the movie’s argument—although Morgan’s enemies “are all as unbalanced as he is, they at least do not have his integrity; they cover up. And I suppose what Reisz is saying is that the world belongs to those who can adjust, settled for something less than their dreams—but isn’t it a pity?”

The critics were very divided about *Morgan*. Robert Robinson thought it “an extraordinary aberration on the part of the director whose access to the authentic...had seemed so assured.” Alexander



Walker cited Alain Resnais as “the liberating influence that Reisz acknowledges for the way *Morgan* dispenses with linear narrative without becoming chaotic. His intercut fantasies—the shots from the safari films or the old Tarzans—are direct and effective entries into the character’s inner life. It is the exterior world that unfortunately betrays Reisz Reisz.... The whole film appears conceived as one super fantasy, often in thrall to Dick Lester,,and Reisz’s technical style compounds the fantasy-feeling with its frenetic pace, frozen frames, accelerated motion, and that pallid trademark of ‘with-it’ cinema—overexposed photography.”

Georg Gaston, on the other hand, traces the picture’s slapstick techniques further back to where Lester learned them, in the silent comedies of Mack Sennett, and found this eccentric style entirely appropriate to the film’s eccentric purpose.

Pauline Kael made a different point—that *Morgan* is “not an ordinary movie and whether it’s good or bad is of less interest than why many young people respond to it the way they do, especially as, in this case, they are probably responding to exactly what we think makes it bad. Sometimes bad movies are more important than good ones just because of those unresolved elements that make them such a mess.” And indeed, this film was lovingly adopted as a cult object by the emerging “youth generation” in Britain and the United States. It appeared, as Alexander Walker explained, “just when the youth movement was hankering for a hero who felt like themselves, a misfit whose self-contained view of the world didn’t require one to endure the pains and frustrations of coming to terms with other (and generally older) people’s but instead offered a more seductive line of retreat—into oneself.”

David Warner’s performance in *Morgan* was called “one of the most bizarre and brilliant...in the 1960s cinema,” but it was Vanessa Redgrave who received an acting award at Cannes, She was the star



of Reisz’s next film, *Isadora* (1968), a biography of the San Francisco woman who, early in the century, became (as Vincent Canby put it) “the high priestess of modern dance, of free love and of emancipated women everywhere.”...When the picture had its world

premiere in Los Angeles in December 1968, it was almost three hours long. The reviews were poor and Universal withdrew it, cutting it with Reisz’s “unwilling halo” to about 130 minutes. How much damage was done to the film’s original intentions is not really clear; according to one account, the severest cuts came in scenes dealing with the aging Isadora.

Vincent Canby found the released version still “a big, rich, physically beautiful movie that is romantic but so unsentimental as to seem almost

cruel”; he thought it lacked a coherence—“spiritual” as well as narrative—that might have existed in the original....

Deeply hurt by the mutilation of *Isadora* and its reception, Reisz says that he collapsed into a state of inertia for about a year while “licking my wounds.” there followed two prolonged but finally abortive projects—proposed adaptations of John LeCarré’s *The Naive and Sentimental Lover* and of André Malraux’s *The Human Condition*. It was not until 1973 that Reisz made another film, and that for television—a 47-minute version of a Chekhov story, called *On the High Road* and produced as part of a BBC series by Reisz’s friend Melvyn Bragg. In between he made commercials, as he has always done in the intervals between movies. He confesses to a slight feeling of shame “for advocating the rich full life on easy terms,” but maintains that commercials have taught him much about visual economy, as well as subsidizing his independence.

Reisz’s next feature followed from Paramount in 1974. His first American movie, *The Gambler* was scripted by James Toback in close collaboration with the director. James Caan stars as Axel Freed, a New York English professor who is also a compulsive gambler.

...Reisz himself said in interviews about the movie that in all his films he was “interested in showing...a man who takes chances, a man who tries, someone whose attempt at personal heroism becomes a perversion....I am concerned with the individual who chooses to live outside the system and refuses to be coerced by the establishment.

Reisz has described *The Gambler* as an “action film” in which he tried to emulate the “marvelous pacing and rhythm” he so admired in American Westerns and gangster movies. The

same is true of his next picture, a chase movie with elements of *film noir*. Another American production, *Who'll Stop the Rain* (1978) was adapted by Judith Rascoe and Robert Stone from the latter's novel *Dog Soldiers* (the film's title in Britain), which uses a two kilo sack of heroin as a powerful metaphor for the way the corrupting contagion of the Vietnam War entered the American bloodstream.

The heroin is smuggled into the United States in a muddled protest against the war by John Converse (Michael Moriarty), a disillusioned war correspondent. Converse secures the reluctant involvement in this scheme of his wife Marge (Tuesday Weld) and an old Marine buddy named Ray Hicks (Nick Nolte), a martial arts expert and self-styled samurai with a rigorous but violent code of honor—another of Reisz's “individuals who choose to live outside the system.” The shipment arrives while Converse is still in Vietnam. Marge and Hicks, who have fallen frantically in love, are soon running for their lives across the Southwest, pursued by a corrupt narcotics agent and his thugs. There is a climactic shoot-out at an abandoned hippie commune in the New Mexico mountains, bizarrely accompanied by rock music and a psychedelic light show. In the end, Hicks is dead and John and Marge Converse are left to attempt a fresh start in a world where (as the Credence Clearwater title song puts it) no one knows how to stop the metaphoric rain that pours “confusion on the ground.”

Georg Gaston, who in his book on Reisz carefully analyzes the director's camerawork,



imagery, editing, and use of sound in all his films through *Who'll Stop the Rain*, suggests that in the latter “light, or the absence of true light [is] the dominant and most revealing metaphor....Faint, eerie lighting and fast film stock” is used to convey the romantic but dangerously hazy vision of characters under the influence of drugs, and “the story of pursuit...takes place mostly under the black sky of night or under the grey light of smog and haze. Eventually, the sky begins to clear, until at the end light floods the screen. This final light (accentuated

through the use of overexposure) is, however, not the light of easy hope but of glaring truth...a pure, blinding whiteness reflecting the wasteland where they have ended and the drugs which have brought them there.”

Discussing Reisz's two American films, Roy Armes said that they made “strikingly apparent the continuing discrepancy between Reisz's refusal to endorse wholly the stance of his central character and his inability to find any alternative social or political base for the film's themes.” Philip French, on the other hand, in his review of *Who'll Stop the Rain*, called it “the best movie made in America by a European director since John Boorman's *Point Blank* and one of the few about the Vietnam experience likely to prove of permanent interest.”

The rehabilitation of Reisz's reputation continued with *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981), the most discussed and successful of his films since *Morgan*. The woman of the title is yet another individual “outside the system” and refusing “to be coerced by the establishment.” She is Sarah Woodruff, an enigmatic former governess in Victorian Dorset who had been “disgraced” by a French prisoner. Scorned and whispered about in the smugly conventional seaside resort of Lyme Regis, she daily and dumbly awaits her lover's improbable return on the Cobb, a windswept stone breakwater.

There she is discovered by Charles Smithson, a gentleman scientist from London who is intrigued by her and then infatuated. He breaks off his engagement to another woman, is financially ruined,

but loses Sarah as well and becomes very seriously ill. In the end, when Sarah's "passionate sense of freedom" and his own sufferings have purged away the complacency of his "supposedly advanced liberal views," they meet again as equals. "The period recreation is enormously detailed," wrote David Robinson, "without being overemphatic or pedantic....Asheton Gorton's production design and Freddie Francis' photography record a past world, seen in pre-Raphaelite colour and compositions. Again, though, the images are interpretative, not only decorative. When the couple discover their liberty, the scene has changed to the cool, sophisticated sunlit setting of a Voysey house."



The film is based on a bestselling novel by John Fowles, the epigraph of which is from Karl Marx: "Every emancipation is a restoration of the human world and of human relationships to man himself." The novel is a pseudo-Victorian romance in which Fowles had played with the notion of the "omniscient author" and other novelistic conventions in order to raise questions about the nature of fiction and the way it trains our perception of reality. He had gone so far as to provide his story with alternative endings—both "happy" and otherwise. It was this aspect of the book that had made it seem unfilmable to the numerous directors who had tackled the project over the previous eleven years—among them Fred Zimmerman, Mike Nichols, Franklin Shaffner, and Reisz himself (to whom Fowles had sent the novel when it was still in manuscript).

Reisz finally agreed to direct the film on condition that he could have Harold Pinter as his scenarist. But it was Reisz himself who devised the radical and much-debated solution to the problems raised by the novel's structure. This was to enclose the simple central plot in a new story about a film production team that has come to Lyme Regis to shoot *The French Lieutenant's Woman* on location. Meryl Streep plays an actress named Anna who is cast as Sarah Woodruff; Jeremy Irons plays an actor named Mike who is cast as Charles Smithson. Anna and Mike begin an adulterous affair that is a pale

twentieth-century shadow of the great Hardy-esque romance between Sarah and Charles; one of these liaisons ends "happily" and one does not. The device allows Reisz and Pinter to explore the conventions of cinematic romance as Fowles had explored those of literary romance. And it provides endless scope for ironic contrasts and comparisons between past and present, acting and feeling, art and reality.

The period story takes up about three-quarters of the film's duration and seemed to many critics, as to Richard Corliss, "often troubling and sensuous and gravely beautiful." The modern story was "less riveting," allowing the characters too little time "to develop a screen relationship of any scope." Andrew Tudor also pointed out that "the twin stories provide a form of closure where Fowles's novel leads us on into yet more reflection...Where the book is exhilaratingly discursive, the film is constrained by its own structure and altogether too rigid." It seemed to the same critic, nevertheless, that in Sarah "is crystallized precisely that humanizing and emancipatory spirit around which Reisz's cinema has so often revolved." And Richard Corliss wrote that Meryl Streep's performance "does precise and breathtaking justice to Fowles, to Sarah and to the actor's art...Intelligent passion on the screen, two passionate intelligences behind it: a provocative combination." *The French Lieutenant's Woman* won two awards from the British Film Academy, for best actress (Streep) and best sound (Carl Davis), and was also nominated for three Oscars.

Because all of his films have been adapted from the works of others, Karel Reisz has come to be regarded as "an interpreter rather than a creator of film." There is, as he acknowledges, "no Reisz style"—only a modest, generous, and unsparing effort to find the manner that best expresses his understanding of the central character in each of his films. At the same time, he maintains a more or less ironic distance from these characters, and plans his films so carefully that they sometimes seem "no more than the sun of... [their] strategies," lacking in felt life.

Reisz is nevertheless a master of his art, who at his best can combine sound and image with profound and resonant effect. As George Gaston says, “he seems to understand as well as anyone...that the most effective film images have the same fundamental qualities that great poetic images have.” In *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and *Morgan* he made two of the key British films of the postwar years. His later pictures have disappointed those who had confidently labeled him as an exponent of social realism, but in 1980 Richard Roud still thought him “potentially the most important British filmmaker of his generation,” and the excitement engendered by *The French Lieutenant's Woman* lends weight to this view.

Some years ago he said in an interview that “all my intellectual background is in English. I don't feel like a foreigner living in another country, but I also don't feel English....the older I get, the less English I feel.”



**Andrew O'Hagan: Karel Reisz Remembered**  
**(London Review of Books)**

Karel Reisz must have been a border-crosser all his life. He was born in 1926, in the Czech mill town of Ostrava, an afternoon's walk from the Polish border.

At the age of 12, he was forced to leave, and in every sense he left for good: he was a child of the *Kindertransport*. He came to England, where he eventually served in the RAF, before studying natural sciences at Cambridge. He later became a teacher and a writer for film journals, one of which, *Sequence*, he co-founded with Lindsay Anderson and Gavin Lambert. Along with Anderson and Tony Richardson, Reisz aimed to bring a version of auteurism to British film, and they did as much with the documentary movement Free Cinema. In 1959, Reisz directed *We Are the Lambeth Boys*, and he made his first feature film a year later, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. He went on to direct *Night Must Fall*, *Morgan: A Suitable Case for Treatment*, *Isadora*, *The Gambler*, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, *Who'll Stop the Rain?*, *Sweet Dreams* and *Everybody Wins*.

His work has influenced more than one generation of British film-makers, and what he did for the stage - Beckett, Pinter, Tom Murphy, Terence Rattigan - has changed the game for several more to come. You might say the drama in Karel Reisz's life existed at quite a deep level, but it also existed in his conversation. At tables, in cars, in foyers, on the phone, Karel Reisz and his wife, Betsy Blair, were always at the centre of talk. The *London Review* decided to orchestrate a tribute to this most elegant and spirited of men, and immediately there was only one way to make it work - by getting the people who knew him talking.

**Michael Wood (film critic):** Those working-class lads seemed to be everywhere in British films of the 1960s, grunting and sweating their way through the class system, using sex as a narrow and repressed form of guerrilla warfare. We are often told about the new realism of those films - *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, *This Sporting Life*, *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* - but it was English realism: that is to say, a form of fantasy. What attracted us was not the depiction of places and ways of life many of us knew better than the film-makers but the stark and classy direction and the stylised resentment. The antics and the acting up were more important than the anger, and even the earlier documentaries of the Free Cinema movement emphasised personality and poetry. 'An attitude meant a style,' the programme for the first Free Cinema event said in 1956. 'A style meant an attitude.' *Saturday*

*Night and Sunday Morning* was the best of all these movies, because it best combined rebellious energy (on the screen) and casual austerity (behind the camera), and because it showed to the full Karel Reisz's sympathy for people who, in Robert Musil's words, go out on an adventure and lose their way. This was a key element in all his films, whether they were set in Nottingham, London or Las Vegas. I think especially of the confused and manic Morgan in the film of that name, and of the driven Alex Freed in *The Gambler*, a wonderfully cool treatment of an overheated theme. No one matters more to British cinema than Karel Reisz, and no one does it more honour.



**Freddie Francis (cinematographer):** We met on *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, his first big film. I'd been making them for a long time, this film and that film, and Harry Salzman, the film's producer, knew me well enough. So when Karel took on *Saturday Night*, Harry thought it would be nice to have someone to hold his hand. I kidded Karel about that for years later. But I suppose he was pretty worried on that film at first. Well, he was worried for the first day. But he made up his mind on reading the script how he wanted it, and was then brilliant at planting that in everybody's mind. He wouldn't go into anything unless he had it under his good control. I mean people like me directing films, I would do anything. Working with Karel was special. Just so nice.

**Alan Sillitoe (writer):** He helped me so much with the script of my novel *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. He showed me the documentaries he'd

made, and at last I felt I was on the main line. He was in Nottingham making a documentary for the Central Office of Information on how miners spent their leisure time and he asked me to do the commentary. So next minute we were down the pit for a day, crawling on our bellies a thousand feet below ground and we saw how the poor buggers lived. It took a lot of tea to get the dust out of our throats.

The filming was good. We were all just first-timers doing our thing. He had such an analytical brain - I don't want to say un-English, but he was persistent. As well as all that he had such a suave ability to get his own way, such humane and acute powers of observation. At one early point he had to abandon England because of the unions fucking things up and making it intolerable. I was a member of a trade union at 14 and knew already how they cut their own jobs from underneath them. Karel was in the tradition of the great black and white movie-makers. He had a script, he believed in it - and he worked to get everything settled that he could.

**Stephen Frears (film director):** In 1965, I was working at the Royal Court in London, which was a bit like being on call to the Borgias, a place full of brilliant and terrifying men. Then Karel came to direct a play by the Italian playwright Franco Brusati. His friend Lindsay Anderson, under whose colours I was hiding, had recommended me to be the assistant director on the play. Soon the play collapsed and I was transferred (I'm not sure I was consulted) to work on the film that Karel had decided to make, called *Morgan*, written by David Mercer, who was at that time heavily influenced by R.D. Laing.

Filming began in a café on the Uxbridge Road. I'd never been on a film set before. Karel would stand, surrounded by large men, and slowly they would work out quite elaborate shots. He seemed authoritative and knowledgeable, both part of the world and yet of a high seriousness, searching for the important thing under the text. I can still hear his voice: 'Very, very good. Let's go once more.' He would patiently explain this world and this form he had introduced me to. It seemed the most interesting and sophisticated and glamorous place I had ever been in my life.

One weekend, as we filmed in an empty gallery in Mayfair, Groucho Marx walked past the window. Once I opened the cutting-room door and there was Truffaut. Karel took me into his life and

into his family and he took on the business of turning me into whatever it is I've become. It seemed as if I had acquired no values from my own upbringing, as if I had no previous idea how human beings should treat each other, as if I was completely formless when I met him. I think he'd recently arrived at a happy

domesticity and he kept his own penetrating intelligence and experience of the wickedness of the world at the service of stability. So, as there was till the end, there was much sitting around the kitchen table, much

talk of films and plays and paintings, of cricket and soccer and politics, much gossip, much delight in goose livers and gherkins, endlessly funny stories about Hollywood, which seems not to have been a place of decadence and power in the 1950s but a long Sunday-afternoon party. He made few films because he could only do what interested him and was impatient with any other way of going about things. He could look at a cut of a film and tell you precisely what was wrong with it, show you where the direction went against what you were trying to say. On my first film, *Gumshoe*, he showed me how completely I'd ballsed it up, how I'd concealed the very bits of information the audience needed to understand the film, and at his instigation we had the film re-edited.

**Vanessa Redgrave (actor):** I first met Karel through my husband Tony Richardson when we went to a party at the Royal Court - wine and cheese, all dressed up, looking quite nice actually - and Karel saw me there. Then I got word he would like to see me for *Morgan*. I was excited when I got the part, but then it was postponed for a while and anyway I was pregnant just then. I remember being struck that he was so incredibly intelligent. He had this patience and he took endless time to explain things. There was a standing joke on the set that when Karel said 'excellent' you knew he was going to do a lot more takes. He kept your spirits up, but it was all a sort of tenacity to get the best out of you. People can be meticulous in different ways, but you felt Karel's sort



was Czech. There was a fantastic humanity to the work, though his films insisted they didn't have a manifesto. Perfection is not the aim, they said, and I thought that was difficult to understand - I'd grown up with classical ballet where perfection was always the aim. For me now, though, Lindsay Anderson and

Karel and Tony begin to seem right in their doubting of perfection. Life is not full of perfection. They were holding a mirror up to nature, in that old Shakespeare way, showing the sordid, the joyful, the grey despair and the farcical...

**James Toback (writer and director):** I include myself among a fairly extensive group of film-makers I've known during a three-decade career, none of whom even on his best day should want to be judged next to Karel on the merits of character. The self-absorption, the petty rivalries, the absurd, childish, overweening demands, the ravenous greed which characterise in varying degrees the behaviour of the rest of us never appeared to engage Karel sufficiently to make any claim on him. My experience with him on *The Gambler*, my original screenplay which served as the basis for his movie, was, in essence, my entire education in film. Under the subtle guise of preparing and making a movie, Karel functioned as a one-man school. Everything I have learned about construction, organisation and complication of script; relation to actors ('case by case, no different from dealing with people in the rest of one's life'); handling of studio executives ('make yourself clear. Decide what you want and what you need. Articulate it and then stick to it as best you can'); management of crew ('clarity and intelligent apportionment of time'); visual composition ('make your intentions clear with fluidity and elegance but without calling undue attention to the shot'); and editing ('be spare and sharp and, when called for, abrupt'): everything - the seed of whatever I try - comes from Karel.

**Roger Spottiswoode (film editor and director):** Some thirty years ago I found myself locked in a London cutting-room with him for several months as

we edited *The Gambler*. One day, he took a phone call from Los Angeles. It was unusually long and when he finally hung up he had a bewildered expression on his face. 'They want me to remake *Woman of the Dunes*,' he said. He went on: 'I told them there had been a rather exquisite film of that title quite recently. Just a few months ago, in fact. "Yes," they told me, "but now so-and-so wants to do the part."' He mentioned a well known LA actress. Karel went on: 'So I asked them, What about the existing film, won't that be a problem? And they said: "Certainly not, so-and-so is going to buy all the prints and burn them. End of problem."' There was a moment's pause, then the smile returned to his face, and he laughed. 'Amazing, isn't it?' he said. 'Nice to be reminded why it's so much simpler to live here and not there.'

**Meryl Streep (actor):** 'You must tell us everything!' Karel leaned forward to listen to life with a compassionate mind and a mischievous heart.

Intolerant of pomposity, his favourite alter ego was a puffed-up blowhard with the plummy voice he used in stories he told on himself. Many of us have curiosity about the world, its art, people, plays and ideas, but who will now have wit and generosity of spirit equal to Karel's in dissecting, debunking, forgiving them all?

**John Bloom (film editor):** Karel could drive you completely mad. He had a way of looking at the possibilities of a scene like no one I've ever met. I mean in the cutting-room. He got every essence out of the material. He could go down blind alleys as well and end up doing the most wonderful things. His habit was to take a scene that had been quite well edited, and take it apart, feeling there was something else there, something more and something better. Between us, on *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, we felt there were no guidelines, about where to go into the past and where to come into the present. It was that kind of story, and we dwelled on how to do it. It was Jeremy Irons going off to do *Brideshead Revisited* that gave

us the extra time and we worked out what to get from him when he came back.

Karel had a way of leaning forward and bringing you into his confidence before delivering a funny line, and the articulacy was something else. He was talking about Klaus Kinski one day and he leaned forward and said to me: 'You know, Klaus Kinski really is a *daft* actor.' No one ever used the word 'daft' so compellingly....



**Penelope Wilton (actor):** He said to me one day not long ago: 'This is a young man's job. You have to stand

for ten hours, and I'm not sure I've got the right shoes on.'

When we did *Deep Blue Sea* at the Almeida, it was strikingly obvious that Karel wasn't caught up in the Englishness of it all, but saw the Rattigan play as a play about sexual obsessiveness. He cut through the seeming dryness of the piece, the old-fashionedness, and made it totally available to a new audience. He had that power. You found out about the play with him, though of course he changed his mind all the time. He wasn't holier than holy about the text, but he was quite deliberate in the way he went about making a world out of what the playwrights had opened up. With a lot of film directors, the technical side takes over and it becomes frighteningly obvious how much film isn't an actor's medium. But Karel never left you alone, never left you by yourself, and that is the most you could ever say about a director. He was a taskmaster of the most benevolent kind....

**John Guare (playwright):** When I first met Karel, 37 years ago, I knew that he was the first adult I'd met who made the fact of being an adult more interesting. He showed me it could be so much more hilarious than the post-adolescent daze I had been stumbling around in. You always faced the truth with Karel: not in some horrifying way, but when he said 'how are you?' you knew the answer had to mean something. Sometimes, the interest Karel showed in you was more than you had in yourself. Once in the early 1970s I came to visit and when I went to make a phone call and saw my name was one of the ones in

the phone's memory, I was amazed to think of myself as part of their world. Once he was in New York and we were working on a play and he got appendicitis and was rushed to hospital. He said: 'Don't tell anyone.' He didn't want to worry anyone. 'Humility' is a weak word for a strong man. He had been through things most people wouldn't understand.

The world was always coming to see Karel. I remember the doorbell rang and I opened it and standing there was Alain Resnais. He was carrying a very high, very narrow suitcase, and he wheeled it into the kitchen and we all sat down and had coffee. Eventually, I had to ask him what was in the suitcase, and he opened it and there it was: tin after tin of baked beans to take back to Paris. When he was a child baked beans became a key taste in his life. Karel understood him immediately.

Karel was asked once to do one of the *Star Wars* pictures, which technically he could've done with his left hand. But he didn't want to go there. The idea of doing something emotionally inert just for the technical exercise wasn't for Karel. Whether it was Alex Freed in *The Gambler* or Meryl Streep's character in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Karel wouldn't allow those characters to let him down. I always think his view of things was essentially about freedom: the Albert Finney character at the end of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, or the gambler being paralysed by his obsession. How do you find your freedom in the middle of paralysis? The day Karel's life changed, from one universe to the other, when he was 12 years old, was all about that: how do you survive when all the rules change suddenly?

### **Nobel Prize biography of Harold Pinter**

**Harold Pinter** was born on 10 October 1930 in the London borough of Hackney, son of a Jewish dressmaker. Growing up, Pinter was met with the expressions of anti-Semitism, and has indicated its importance for his becoming a dramatist. At the outbreak of the Second World War, he was evacuated from London at the age of nine, returning when twelve. He has said that the experience of wartime bombing has never lost its hold on him. Back in London, he attended Hackney Grammar School where he played Macbeth and Romeo among other characters in productions directed by Joseph Brearley. This prompted him to choose a career in acting. In 1948 he was accepted at the Royal Academy of

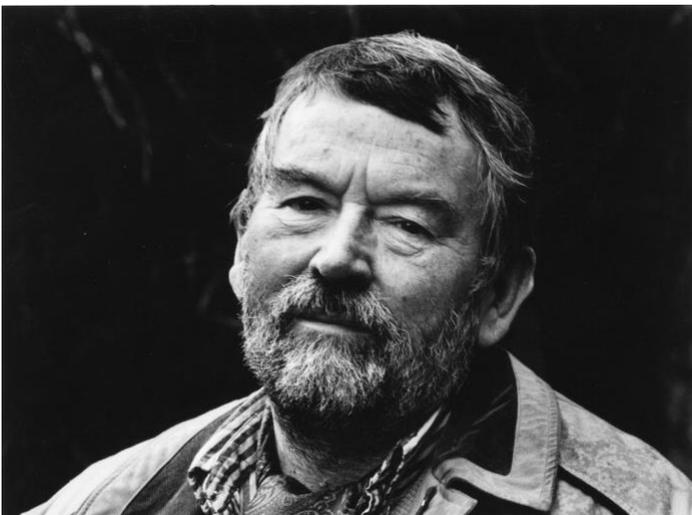
Dramatic Art. In 1950, he published his first poems. In 1951 he was accepted at the Central School of Speech and Drama. That same year, he won a place in Anew McMaster's famous Irish repertory company, renowned for its performances of Shakespeare. Pinter toured again between 1954 and 1957, using the stage name of David Baron. Between 1956 and 1980 he was married to actor Vivien Merchant. In 1980 he married the author and historian Lady Antonia Fraser. Pinter made his playwriting debut in 1957 with *The Room*, presented in Bristol. Other early plays were *The Birthday Party* (1957), at first a fiasco of legendary dimensions but later one of his most performed plays, and *The Dumb Waiter* (1957). His conclusive breakthrough came with *The Caretaker* (1959), followed by *The Homecoming* (1964) and other plays.



Harold Pinter is generally seen as the foremost representative of British drama in the second half of the 20th century. That he occupies a position as a modern classic is illustrated by his name entering the language as an adjective used to describe a particular atmosphere and environment in drama: "Pinteresque". Pinter restored theatre to its basic elements: an enclosed space and unpredictable dialogue, where people are at the mercy of each other and pretence crumbles. With a minimum of plot, drama emerges from the power struggle and hide-and-seek of interlocution. Pinter's drama was first perceived as a variation of absurd theatre, but has later more aptly been characterised as "comedy of menace", a genre where the writer allows us to eavesdrop on the play of domination and submission hidden in the most mundane of conversations. In a typical Pinter play, we meet people defending themselves against intrusion or their own impulses by entrenching themselves in a

reduced and controlled existence. Another principal theme is the volatility and elusiveness of the past. It is said of Harold Pinter that following an initial period of psychological realism he proceeded to a second, more lyrical phase with plays such as *Landscape* (1967) and *Silence* (1968) and finally to a third, political phase with *One for the Road* (1984), *Mountain Language* (1988), *The New World Order* (1991) and other plays. But this division into periods seems oversimplified and ignores some of his strongest writing, such as *No Man's Land* (1974) and *Ashes to Ashes* (1996). In fact, the continuity in his work is remarkable, and his political themes can be seen as a development of the early Pinter's analysing of threat and injustice.

Since 1973, Pinter has won recognition as a fighter for human rights, alongside his writing. He has often taken stands seen as controversial. Pinter has also written radio plays and screenplays for film and television. Among his best-known screenplays are those for *The Servant* (1963), *The Accident* (1967), *The Go-Between* (1971) and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981, based on the John Fowles novel). Pinter has also made a pioneering contribution as a director.



**John Fowles March 31, 1926 – Nov. 5, 2005**  
**(London Times)**

JOHN FOWLES was a novelist whose books made a resounding impact on the 1960s generation of readers of serious fiction, while at the same time enjoying great commercial success, not only in this country, but also in the United States. With *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) his reputation reached its zenith, and the more discerning sections of his

enthusiastic public, who may have had doubts about the preponderating component of sheer mystery that propelled his early successes, heaved a sigh of relief. Here, unmistakably, was a writer who could not merely produce intelligent and beguiling novels like those which had preceded it, but who was also seriously devoted to the craft of fiction, who clearly in this work demonstrated a mission to rescue the English novel from the insular parochiality into which it was seen to be falling, who, above all, was determined to resuscitate a realism of the 19th-century sort, which he thought to be the English novel's most natural province.

From this point onwards, Fowles's works seemed to be entitled to invite the most rigorous criticism, and they did indeed stimulate much discussion on the direction of the contemporary English novel. And yet the unease remained, and it was not generated solely by the tremendous commercial success which at that time tended to be regarded with suspicion by the more austere sections of the critical establishment.

Rather, as time went on, it became more difficult to define in what the substance and solidity claimed as Fowles's contribution to the modern novel specifically consisted. To be regarded (perhaps with Anthony Burgess) as the most intelligent as well as technically brilliant writer in English of his generation, came to seem increasingly to be a liability, and the skills which had been hailed in Fowles's earlier books still cried out for a substantial theme on which to deploy themselves.

This did not greatly dismay Fowles, who was happy to pursue this vein of mystery in such works as *The Maggot* (1985), to diversify into translation and adaptation from the French, to work on film scripts, to edit, and to chronicle local history, especially that of Lyme Regis where he had lived for many years. John Fowles was born in 1926 at Leigh-on-Sea, Essex, the son of Robert Fowles, a prosperous cigar merchant, and his wife Gladys. He was educated at Bedford School where, he was later to say, he "learnt all about power, hierarchy and the manipulation of law".

In 1944 he went to Edinburgh University, but was then called up into the Royal Marines, in which he served in 1945-46.

After demobilisation he went to New College, Oxford, where he read French, graduating in 1950. After Oxford, Fowles taught for a number of years,

first in France at the University of Poitiers, where he was a lecturer in English for two years, and then for a year at a boys' school on the Peloponnesian island of Spetsai.

This experience, and his enduring love of Greece, provided him with the setting for *The Magus*. After his Greek sojourn he returned to England and taught for ten years in London, until he became a full-time writer, emancipated from salaried employment by *The Collector* in 1963.

Though the book was not necessarily liked in all quarters, this story of a drab suburban clerk who sadistically imprisons a girl he admires in a foolproof prison of his own devising, financed by his football pools winnings, drew attention to its author's disturbing powers. It was succeeded not by another novel but by *The Aristos*, a somewhat formidable undertaking for one seeking recognition as a novelist. In stern, numbered paragraphs, this collection of aphorisms nevertheless amounted to a fictional portrait of an earnest young man discoursing with himself on all the major themes of his times.

*The Collector* had been successfully filmed in 1965, but it was *The Magus* (1966) which gave John Fowles's name lustre and a popular following. On a Greek island where he has gone to teach, Nicholas Urfe, the novel's cynical and unsympathetic protagonist, is bewitched and beguiled by a manipulative Prospero-like figure and a young woman of apparently unfathomable mystery with whom Urfe falls in love, learning thereby to disdain, to his cost, the down-to-earth qualities of the Australian girlfriend he has left in London. This book gave full play to Fowles's eclectic learning, his technical skill and range of cultural reference, as well as to his mastery of sophisticated whodunnit techniques.

Its translation into what he saw as a crudely simplified movie, which starred Michael Caine as the unfortunate Urfe, and Anthony Quinn and Candice Bergen as the mysterious denizens of the island, did not please its author. At the same time this process did, perhaps, reveal a basic vulgarity at the heart of

the dazzling display of literary pyrotechnics of which the book was the vehicle.

*The French Lieutenant's Woman* appeared to dispose of such objections. Here Fowles chose as his fictional terrain the Victorian period, and as his theme Victorian attitudes to love, sex and marriage, treated in the prose style of Thackeray but from the viewpoint of a 20th-century writer. *The French Lieutenant's*



*Woman* was at once historical novel and social criticism, and its alternative endings reinforced the author's manipulative power and distance from his subject.

The meticulous historical detail, the sheer effectiveness of the plots and—for once in a Fowles

novel—a sympathetic protagonist, gave the novel a large following both among cognoscenti and those who like a good love story. Its sales were prodigious, it won the WH Smith Literary Award of 1970 and it was spoken of for many years after as the most important literary event of the period.

Fowles felt deeply about the artistic achievement his book represented and, having rights over director, script and casting, delayed its appearance as a film for a number of years until Harold Pinter was secured as the screenwriter. The resulting film, which appeared in 1981, featured Meryl Streep and Jeremy Irons, but though it was excellent box office, by general consent it did not match the complexity of its original.

Fowles thereafter was to suffer from the expectations his manifest capabilities raised. *Daniel Martin* (1977) was overlong, woolly in places and lacking in a sense of direction. And a revision of *The Magus*, published in the same year with the eroticism much heightened and elaborated, again suggested that Fowles's creative inspiration had fallen foul of his gift for mystery, word painting and elegant pastiche.

*Mantissa* (1985), for all its wealth of mythological correspondence, gave the impression of being shored up by the glossy sex that had been *The Magus*'s strongest suit.

But Fowles, who admitted periods of writer's block, particularly after the death of his first wife, refused to shut up shop creatively, and extended his energies into activities outside fiction. He had always

been interested in translation from the French since his version of Perrault's *Cinderella* was published in 1974. His *Don Juan* (1981) was an adaptation of Molière and his *Lorenzaccio* (1983) an adaptation of the play by Alfred de Musset.

He edited John Aubrey's *Monumenta Britannica* in two parts, which appeared in 1980 and 1982, and Thomas Hardy's *England* (1984). Lyme Regis, became, through the long years of his sojourn there, the object of a number of studies of various kinds, ranging from *A Brief History of Lyme* (1981) to *Lyme Worthies* (2000). *The Journals of John Fowles* appeared in two volumes, the first in 2003 and the second this month.

As a man Fowles was retiring-almost aggressively so-preferring remote Dorset to the London literary coteries, and shunning interviews and publicity. John Fowles married, in 1956, Elizabeth Whitton. She died of cancer in 1990, and he married Sarah Smith in 1998. There were no children.

### **Roger Ebert on FLW (11981)**

Reading the last one hundred pages of John Fowles's "The French Lieutenant's Woman" is like being caught in a fictional labyrinth. We think we know where we stand in the story, and who the characters are and what possibilities are open to them, and then Fowles begins an astonishing series of surprises. He turns his story inside out, suggesting first one ending, then another, always in a way that forces us to rethink everything that has gone before. That complex structure was long thought to make Fowles's novel unfilmable. How could his fictional surprises, depending on the relationship between reader and omniscient narrator, be translated into the more literal nature of film? One of the directors who tried to lick "The French Lieutenant's Woman" was [John Frankenheimer](#), who complained: "There is no way you can film the book. You can tell the same story in a movie, of course, but not in the same way. And how Fowles tells his story is what makes the book so good." That seemed to be the final verdict, until the British playwright [Harold Pinter](#) tackled the project.



Pinter's previous screenplays, such as "[Accident](#)" and "[The Go-Between](#)," are known for a mastery of ambiguity, for a willingness to approach the audience on more than one level of reality, and what he and director [Karel Reisz](#) have done with their film, "The French Lieutenant's Woman," is both simple and brilliant. They have frankly discarded the multi-layered fictional devices of John Fowles, and tried to create a new cinematic approach that will

achieve the same ambiguity. Fowles made us stand at a distance from his two doomed lovers, Sarah and Charles. He told their story, of a passion that was forbidden by the full weight of Victorian convention, and then he invited us to stand back

and view that passion in terms of facts and statistics about, well, Victorian passions in general. Pinter and Reisz create a similar distance in their movie by telling us two parallel stories. In one of them, Sarah Woodruff ([Meryl Streep](#)) still keeps her forlorn vigil for the French lieutenant who loved and abandoned her, and she still plays her intriguing cat-and-mouse game with the obsessed young man ([Jeremy Irons](#)) who must possess her.

In the other story, set in the present, two actors named Anna and Mike are playing Sarah and Charles. And Anna and Mike are also having a forbidden affair, albeit a more conventional one. For the length of the movie's shooting schedule, they are lovers offscreen as well as on. But eventually Mike will return to his family and Anna to her lover.

This is a device that works, I think.

Frankenheimer was right in arguing that just telling the Victorian love story would leave you with just a Victorian love story. The modern framing story places the Victorian lovers in ironic relief. Everything they say and do has another level of meaning, because we know the "real" relationship between the actors themselves. Reisz opens his film with a shot that boldly states his approach: We see Streep in costume for her role as Sarah, attended by a movie makeup woman. A clapboard marks the scene, and then Streep walks into the movie's re-creation of the British coastal village of Lyme Regis.

"It's only a movie," this shot informs us. But, of course, it's all only a movie, including the story about the modern actors. And this confusion of fact and fiction interlocks perfectly with the psychological games played in the Victorian story by Sarah Woodruff herself.

The French lieutenant's woman is one of the most intriguing characters in recent fiction. She is not only apparently the victim of Victorian sexism, but also (as Charles discovers) its manipulator and master. She cleverly uses the conventions that would limit her, as a means of obtaining personal freedom and power over men. At least that is one way to look at what she does. Readers of the novel will know there are others.

"The French Lieutenant's Woman" is a beautiful film to look at, and remarkably well-acted. Streep was showered with praise for her remarkable double performance, and she deserved it. She is offhandedly contemporary one moment, and then gloriously, theatrically Victorian the next. Opposite her, Jeremy Irons is authoritative and convincingly bedeviled as the man who is frustrated by both of Streep's characters. The movie's a challenge to our intelligence, takes delight in playing with our expectations, and has one other considerable achievement as well: It entertains admirers of Fowles's novel, but does not reveal the book's secrets. If you see the movie, the book will still surprise you, and that's as it should be.

**Lucy Bolton: "The French Lieutenant's Woman: A Room of Her Own" (Criterion essays)**

As she says so herself, Sarah Woodruff is a remarkable person. But in the world of Victorian England, with the restrictions and hypocrisies that bind women in prisons of compliance or exile, she struggles to establish and express her own subjectivity and creativity. This is the simple key to the heart of the mystery of "the French Lieutenant's Woman," or "poor Tragedy," as the Lyme Regis locals call her.

And it is this mystery that entralls and entraps paleontologist Charles Smithson, leading him to adopt

what he perceives to be the conventional role of the gallant savior, only to learn that he is being used in a strategy of emancipation, but not in the way that he thinks.

The film adaptation of John Fowles's celebrated 1969 novel was directed by Karel Reisz in 1981, from a screenplay by Harold Pinter. The challenge of the adaptation lay in the novel's multiple endings, each demanding a retrospective repositioning of the story as a whole and of the characters, as well as in its omniscient narrative voice, which filters the nineteenth-century events through a twentieth-century lens, discussing every aspect of the characters' lives, ranging from the fashion of their clothes to their belief in hell.

Fowles's postmodern take on narrative convention and literary sensibility produced a metafiction that comments on reader expectations in both the Victorian and the contemporary period and explores the social hypocrisies of the earlier era through an excoriating depiction of class, gender, science, and economics. It's a tour de force but posed a uniquely difficult task for the filmmaker.

Pinter's screenplay is a masterful achievement in that it not only offers a sense of alternative and layered storytelling but also provides a unified focus for the thrust of the film's experience, which is different from the novel's more detached and scholarly appeal. Fowles's book employs various literary devices—which also include epigraphs and footnotes—in order to conduct a clinical exploration of the Victorian novel and a forensic examination of Charles's character and society. The film does away with the more esoteric literary theory—while keeping the postmodernity of the multiplicity of meanings—and, from Fowles's wide-ranging social critique, focuses in on the lot of women, through two stories of men's obsessive love, both driven by the enigma of the motivations and desires of the women in question.

Pinter's strategy for remaining faithful to the novel's contemporary take on the Victorian age is to set these two stories in the different eras and run them in parallel: the one concerning Sarah Woodruff and



Charles Smithson in Victorian England, and the other an affair between Anna and Mike, the two actors playing the parts of Sarah and Charles in a film being made of the novel....

Along with the tension and the danger in the film, there is immense beauty. The scenes shot in the forest are exquisitely atmospheric, with the sounds of birdsong and rustling leaves captured in all their muffled dampness, evoking the feeling of a vivarium or conservatory. Sunlight glimmers through the trees far overhead, and Sarah strolls freely, with her hair unkempt, swinging her arms. When she recounts the

story of the mysterious Varguennes, the French lieutenant, to a rapt Charles, her monologue is delivered theatrically and precisely, while Charles does not say a word. It is a captivating scene, which in retrospect explains Sarah's plight: she has placed herself beyond

the pale, unlike other women, in order to avoid the marriage and childbearing that are expected of her and to find herself and her freedom. It is ironic that, in order to gain that freedom, she ensnares and destroys Charles, and she does so skillfully and with intelligent insight into how he will respond to every prompt she offers. This entrapment is not echoed in the relationship between Mike and Anna. Mike pursues Anna, even though he acknowledges that she is "a free woman," to which she affirms swiftly and definitely, "Yes, I am."

Desperate to see Anna, Mike asks his wife, Sonia, played with poignancy and dignity by Penelope Wilton, to have the cast over for Sunday lunch. This study in awkwardness finds Mike trying to grab Anna for stolen kisses, while Anna and Sonia share a meaningfully sad exchange about the beauty of the garden. Anna says that she envies Sonia, to which she replies, "Oh, I wouldn't bother to envy me, if I were you." She has an unfaithful husband who is in love with another woman—this woman—and the artifice of her situation is painfully visible. Similarly trapped is the spoiled Ernestina, who has nowhere to go when Charles breaks off their engagement. She tries to run out of the room and is faced by household staff, so she

tries to run into the garden but finds herself in the conservatory, surrounded by barred windows. She is imprisoned in a world of archery and tea parties, home furnishings and social niceties, and to be a jilted fiancée is surely a disgrace from which she will not easily recover. Marriage, domesticity, and social convention seem to offer a thoroughly bad deal for women in the film, whether in the Victorian era or 1980s England.

Following the sexual encounter with Sarah that proves so revelatory, Charles loses his fiancée, his position in society, and, seemingly, his ability to do



anything other than search for the departed Sarah. Visions of gray-faced, downtrodden women leaving the workhouse, or ghoulishly made-up ladies of the night, become the backdrop of Charles's search, as he scours their faces for a glimpse of Sarah. When ultimately she makes herself known to

him, she is indeed the woman she wanted to be: free, working, creating. As Charles observes, she "has found her gift." As Anna looks at herself in the mirror during the film's wrap party, she seems aware of the dangers of being trapped, and the need to be free. It is panic that drives her to leave the party with things unresolved with Mike. And as he leans out of the window and yells, "Sarah!" it is confirmed for us that his passion is for the idea of the enigmatic woman who is out of his reach.

This sinister, entrancing, and atmospheric film is also a powerful provocation to thought about the desirability of the enigmatic woman in patriarchy. It is Sarah's fabricated identity as a fallen woman that entrances Charles and appalls her society, but it exists because of her need to hang her difference on something tangible. Her desire not to fit into the roles that society offers her requires that she find a home for her exceptionality. As a woman who simply requires a room of her own in which to create, and the freedom to be left alone to do so, she has to sacrifice a lustful Sir Galahad in order to satisfy her needs. As a free, working, creative actor, Anna is haunted by the shadow of Sarah's entrapment and her drive for freedom. Perhaps becoming aware of the casualties of

her sexual liaison, she returns to a notion of integrity and independence, leaving Mike alone with her character's wig of auburn curls, in the room where Sarah finally found peace.

[Click here](#) for a brief video of Meryl Streep and Jeremy Irons talk about working with Karel Reisz on *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. (Criterion)



### **Diane Christian: Note on *The French Lieutenant's Woman***

The sense of sexual propriety and male/female relations is powerfully explored in Reisz's film. When Anna is reading and studying her script in bed, she recounts to her costar Mike the considerable count of brothels in Victorian London (one house in 60). She says that when her character Sarah tells Charles in the cemetery scene that she can't go to London because she would then become what people already say she is, that Sarah is simply saying this is one of the few ways an impoverished and unprotected woman can make a living—selling sex.

The careful control of sex is clearly a Victorian theme. The chaste Ernestina guards her virtue and her maid's virtue (should the servant lad from liberal London make any advances Ernestina wishes to be informed immediately). Like Artemis/Diana, the chaste goddess of the hunt whom Ernestina calls to mind as she practices archery, Ernestina's virtue is central to her identity and value. She is a good woman because sexually pure.

Sarah on the other hand presents herself to Charles as a whore, the willing woman of the French Lieutenant. She excites him and raises his desire with her sexual appetite and passion and tragedy. But neither woman is quite simply her label. Sarah is in

fact a virgin who seduces Charles by saying she's a whore, and earnest Ernestina confesses she is willing to abandon any convention to have Charles. Labels leak and Charles is like Freud's "Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in the Erotic Life"—he is torn between a sexless ideal and a sexually-charged unworthy, his own divided psyche.

In the modern parallel story, Mike is married like the French Lieutenant of Sarah's story, and Sarah is in a sexual relationship with a Frenchman, David. Mike has wife, garden, child, and he's completely smitten with Anna. Anna has a sexual romance with him but maintains her relationship with David. The excitement of the actors' transgression is less exciting than the excitement of the movie story they play where there's stronger sense of order and meaning. When at the end Anna leaves him before their big decisive conversation, Mike calls out the window after her, but he calls out "Sarah."

The women in both stories resist romance or refuse it in conventional terms. Sarah seeks a kind of freedom or equality by being a 'widow' (Mrs. Roughwood, not Miss Woodruff). What Anna seeks is more elusive; she has co-billing and sexual equality but she leaves the romantic Sarah wig—as romance is not enough or is perhaps a thing of the past. She is sexually free, open to both men but perhaps needs another role or story. Perhaps she's afraid it's all acting. She stares in the mirror as Sarah does when she draws herself. Anna's art is roles; she will go on to another movie and another story and another leading man. Maybe in three years she'll find a self that will ask forgiveness and love of Mike. But it seems to me far less likely—partly because sexual action is so much less defining/meaningful in permissive society. In the novel there is a child as sign of the significance of one sexual experience, in the film, not.

The men depend on the women to define the game. They play conventional pursuers and rescuers and men, and the conventions for men are limiting also.

Reisz shows us the conventions of screen romance as Fowles shows the conventions of novel narrative. At the start is the gaze, the look—Sarah hooded and romantic on the Cobb, valiant Charles alerting her to danger and being drawn to her mysterious beauty and dark story.

The loosing of carefully bound or hooded hair is another convention, as is nature. Sarah is drawn to the wild sea, the primeval undercliff wood. She's a figure to Charles of emotional intensity, passion to his scientific rationality.

All of these standard gender tropes and markers are put in a kind of useful question, because the characters are human characters—complicated, perverse, noble, not fully achieved but searching.

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**April 20 1993 Jane Campion *The Piano***

**April 27 2000 Joel and Ethan Coen *O Brother, Where Art Thou?***

**May 4 1982 Ingmar Bergman *Fanny and Alexander***

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