



WEST WORDS

THE INTERNATIONAL REBECCA WEST SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

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FROM THE PRESIDENT

On September 16, 2011, I had the pleasure to address a crowd of more than 30 at the fifth biennial Rebecca West Conference. The conference theme this time around was “Rebecca West and Power,” a highly suitable theme for our author. Open any one of West’s books or articles, and an aspect of power—of human as well as divine power, of “good” as well as “bad” power, or of powerlessness—will greet you sooner or later.

The conference was held at Carl Rollyson’s institution, CUNY Baruch, in mid-town Manhattan. I promised an exciting two days, and I did not exaggerate. Rebecca West conferences have never been dull—and not only because of cutting-edge scholarship, sophisticated papers, and animated discussions. There’s often some more unusual excitement going on as well.

Who can forget Anne Bobby’s premiere of the one-woman play *That Woman* back in 2003, impersonating Rebecca West in front of the book shelves in the Mercantile Library? What a tour-de-force that was. Eight years later, Anne gave another utterly riveting performance of *That Woman* at the conclusion of the 2011 conference.

All those present at the London conference three years ago can attest to what happened during Julian Moore’s revelations about the criminal background of West’s father, Charles Fairfield. This was nothing short of sensational.

Another kind of excitement prevailed when one of the presenters at a previous conference took swigs from a whisky flagon during his talk while blaming the liberal media for the quagmire that was the war in Iraq. We can certainly do without that sort of excitement, but it goes to show that Rebecca West has a way of needling some people into what Yeats called “passionate intensity.”

Yes, the Rebecca West conferences are always memorable for one reason or another, and not least of all because of the collegial climate, the casual atmosphere at the talks, the sense of community (since everybody can attend all panels), and the presence of members of Rebecca West’s extended family. This last aspect is really a totally unique feature of our organization.

At the start of the fifth conference, it was appropriate to look back over the past eight years since the founding of the Society. To mention only one statistic—the number of registered participants who gave talks at the biennial conferences—the first Rebecca West conference in 2003 still hasn’t been topped. At that time, 27 scholars gave talks (not counting registered audience members who were not presenters). The number of presenters dropped slightly to 22 in 2005, it remained stable in 2007 with 22, and then went up a bit, in 2009 (in London), to 25 presenters. The fact that we had 23 presenters at last year’s conference signals that the interest in this event, and the scholarly attention given to Rebecca West, remains undiminished.

What further inspires optimism is the fact that every conference attracts both “hard-core” West devotees as well as a sizeable portion of scholars and students new to the movement. In fact, the last conference was composed of slightly more than 50 percent new participants! All this demonstrates that we have maintained the momentum of the conference series and remain a viable organization of literary studies.

Now let us set our eyes on the next conference in 2013: “Rebecca West: Celebrity, Publicity, Memory!” —Bernard Schweizer

WEST IN THE CLASSROOM

Celia Marshik, Associate Professor of English at SUNY Stony Brook, teaches *The Return of the Soldier*. “It’s always been in the context of a course on WWI literature, which I’ve offered at several levels (as an upper division course for majors, in an honors seminar, and in an MA course). Students have generally responded with enthusiasm. They appreciate a depiction of how the war appeared to women at home, and while they tend to make a complete villain of Kitty, I can generally get them to understand West’s critique of how the gender system warps men and women by the end of the class. It helps when I bring in clips of the kind of movies Jenny sees; they can then think about what a woman of her class could or would know. I usually use the novella in a quasi-pairing with Evadne Price’s *Not So Quiet... Stepdaughters of War*, which gives them a point of comparison for discussing representations of shell shock, class and gender.”

I taught a course on what I called “Psychological Fiction” this spring, during which we read *The Return of the Soldier* (along with Defoe’s *Roxana*, James’s *The Beast in the Jungle*, Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, and du Maurier’s *Rebecca*, among others). The students found fascinating parallels among these texts, especially involving characters’ movement from ignorance to awareness of gender and class systems. We watched most of the film of *The Return of the Soldier* as well, commenting particularly on the added scenes that are intended to make explicit what remains implicit in the novel: the parties at Baldry Court where Chris manifests his alienation and his hallucinations in the psychiatric hospital. —Ann Norton

CONFERENCE 2011 RECAP

For the Fifth Biennial Rebecca West conference—"Rebecca West and Power"—we returned to Manhattan, this time to Baruch College in the Chelsea neighborhood. West biographer and emeritus Rebecca West Society President Carl Rollyson hosted us admirably with the help of Baruch's College of Journalism and the Writing Professions. The weather was glorious, and we enjoyed some excellent food and drink in local restaurants on a busy fall weekend. As usual, several new scholars attended, including undergraduate and graduate students, and many West devotees returned to discuss a variety of her works and their representations.

The conference began with welcoming words from Jeffrey Peck, Dean of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences, as well as an introduction from Carl Rollyson and some opening remarks from current president Bernard Schweizer. An undergraduate panel from Professor Rollyson's journalism class officially launched the talks, discussing their reactions to *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (and yes, they read the whole thing!). The sincere but sometimes puzzled attempts of the students to work through the intricacies of West's oeuvre elicited a mix of sympathetic, supportive, and at times bemused reactions. More on *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* followed. Martin Hipsky explored the "tension between romanticized essences and realist singularities" in West's magnum opus, and Seamus O'Malley analyzed West's "complicated relationship to empire" and what he called her "modernization of liberal imperialist discourse."

We were then treated to Dragana Jurisic's stunning slide show of her journey through the former Yugoslavia "in the footsteps of Rebecca West." A "returned émigré" herself, she based her travels on some simple but crucial questions: "What did she see? What do I see? What has changed? What is continuous?" Jurisic hopes to publish her photos in book form, "as a way of drawing attention to West's masterpiece and to the importance she attached to this region, where there is 'no end of history.'"

After lunch we heard two talks that paired West with other "women of power." Phyllis Lassner examined the ways in which Elizabeth Bowen and West, both of whom traveled to postwar Germany, created a "hybrid" genre she called "expressionist literary journalism" in



Carl Rollyson



Left to right: Christopher Odierno, Ilya Mavashev (standing), Rocco Schirripa, Saho Inoue, Genevieve Baldassano (standing), Marcus Martinez, Herman Ma

order to "analyze the relationship between the ambiguously unfolding history of postwar Germany and the obsessively dangerous myths that underwrote its past." Susan Hertog discussed the main ideas of her recently-released dual biography *Dangerous Ambition, Rebecca West and Dorothy Thompson: New Women in Search of Love and Power* (Ballantine Books, 2011). Thompson and West were "brilliant and ambitious writers who shattered social expectations and conventions in their search for love and power" and who loved male writers who both supported and hindered them.

Our keynote speaker, Dr. Lene Hansen, was our first from a non-literary field; she is Professor of International Relations in the Department of Political Science at the University of Copenhagen. Hansen's work on the Western debate on Bosnia led her to *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, and she discussed the myriad reasons why Rebecca West and the academic field of International Relations should be a good match. She posited that BLGF "is believed to have influenced Western policies towards the Bosnian War, a foreign policy-making status not often bestowed upon individual texts" and that "there is a clear affinity between several of Rebecca West's key concepts and those of the field of International Relations, including power, imperialism, national identity, security, sacrifice, and resistance." Hansen described how "an intertextual and genealogical analysis of this book and its concept of the Balkans casts light on the way in which BLGF was appropriated by the discourses of the 1990s," which shows "the need for foreign policy analyses that take unconventional texts, genres and forms of knowledge into account." She also examined the ways in which "Rebecca West's understanding of the international is intertwined with questions of gender" and "her thoughts on women's security connect with contemporary debates in Feminist Security Studies." We enjoyed considering West's magnum opus from a political science perspective—clearly a fit—and I hope to see varied disciplines represented at future conferences.

We honored Susan Hertog—an enthusiastic participant in the

Rebecca West Society and now one of her biographers as well—at the reception following the keynote, and then somehow managed to seat about fourteen of us at a local restaurant (kudos to Bernard for organizing this society-subsidized dinner and then untangling the bill!). It was the perfect ending to a lively first day.

On Saturday we held our general membership meeting for a small but dedicated group. Bernard Schweizer was re-elected as President as well as Ann Norton as Vice President and Debra Rae Cohen, Helen Macleod Atkinson, Dennis Drabelle, and Debra Rae Cohen as Trustees. Happily, we elected Caroline Krzakowski as the Bibliographer. Caroline has been very involved with the West Society since 2007. She received her Ph.D. last fall and currently teaches at New York University. We are lucky to have her on the board!

Caroline then became the hero of the day by filling in for seminal West scholar Jane Marcus, who was unable to attend, and giving an impromptu talk on her recent work, "Rebecca West and Postwar Foreign Relations." She focused on the ways in which West's fiction and non-fiction of the postwar period perform diplomatic work and consider questions of British responsibility on the international stage. Caroline joined Margaret Stetz, who discussed West's 1928 story "Sideways," first published in the *Saturday Evening Post*, as West's "first attempt to negotiate the ideologies and prejudices at the heart of the Curtis Publishing Company's cultural power" by "developing a new 'sideways' feminist heroine." Margaret never fails to entertain as well as instruct; we guffawed at the various voices she used to imitate West and her characters.

The next panel addressed issues of "supernatural" power. Gail Toms discussed some of West's early work, particularly the essay "Man and Religion," which explores her early theory of "masculinized religion": that "man subverted God in order to authenticate and legitimize his superiority over woman." Christine Grausso examined the ways in which Kitty, Margaret, and Jenny in *The Return of the Soldier* "are representative of Plato's three parts of the human soul or psyche" and how this novel relates to West's unpublished essay "The New God." Bernard Schweizer (author of *Hating God: The Untold Story of Misotheism*)

examined West's "rebellion against a cosmic rule that she perceived to be deeply flawed and possibly malevolent" as well as her "mourning over divine impotence," a "conundrum" that "foregrounds West's perennial concern with the right kind of power."

Baruch provided us with a delicious lunch, after which we heard three talks about trauma in West's most canonical novel, *The Return of the Soldier*. Michelle Kramisen showed how West, without access to published research on shell shock, used historical facts and her own journalistic skill "to create a realistic view of a family struggling to cope with a traumatized man forever changed by war." Annemarie Steffes discussed Kitty and Margaret's "separate, specifically female, domestic trauma" of the loss of a child, which is denied narrative space and thus "reinscribes and reflects the suppression of maternal trauma in the cultural narrative." Joanna Scutts suggested that the novel "represents a world in which reality is increasingly filtered through, and shaped by, the aesthetics and values of a print media," which anticipates contemporary concerns "over the seemingly limitless power of the media to shape and control human experience."

The next panel examined representations of West's work and her own and others' efforts at adaptation. Samantha Extance examined the experimental, expressionist 1982 South African adaptation of *The Return of the Soldier* as a ballet, a production most of us had not known of before the conference. Debra Rae Cohen examined West's connection to The Scenario Institute from 1943-1947, for which she wrote film adaptations and which "represented a contested moment in British film history." Cohen suggested that West's letters about her embattled dealings with The Scenario Institute—during a time when directors, writers, and producers on both sides of the Atlantic struggled for aesthetic and financial control—show her beliefs about "what film could and couldn't do." Ann Norton described the long, tangled history of *A Life of Her Own*, MGM's 1952 adaptation of West's

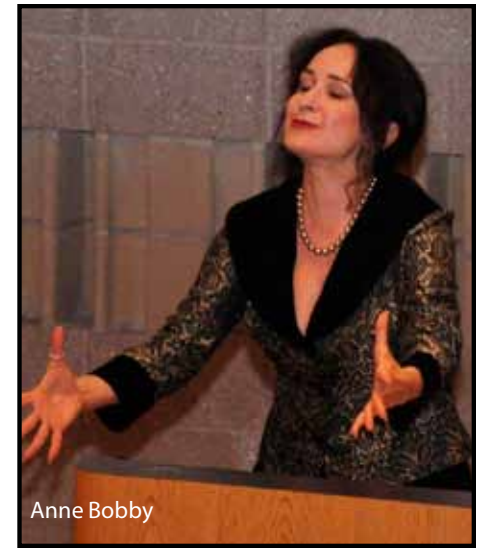
1935 story "The Harsh Voice," as an example of how West's "nuanced literary and political voice" clashed with Hollywood's "sanctimonious conformity."

The last panel addressed West's writings on law. Wyatt Bonikowski discussed West's portrayal of William Joyce in *A Train of Powder* as enacting "Freud's notion of civilization as marked by the struggle between Eros and Thanatos." Bonikowski examined how Joyce, "and the figure of the traitor more generally," embodied for West the death drive that characterized Fascist discourse. Dennis Drabelle continued the commentary on *A Train of Powder*, arguing that in "Greenhouse with Cyclamens I," Rebecca West was too lenient toward the American hangman John C. Woods. As noted in Gregory Freeman's recent book *The Last Mission of the Wham Wham Boys*, Woods was actually a most experienced executioner who may well have purposely hanged poorly some of the Nazis condemned at the Nuremberg Trials, taking it upon himself to make sure they suffered for their crimes. Patricia Laurence compared Elizabeth Bowen and Rebecca West's representations of the Mr. Setty—Mr. Hume murder case, which both "cast a kaleidoscopic eye on the trial, complicating notions of guilt, innocence, and the discipline of punishment with modernist conceptions of the opacity of personality, characters, and indeed, criminals."

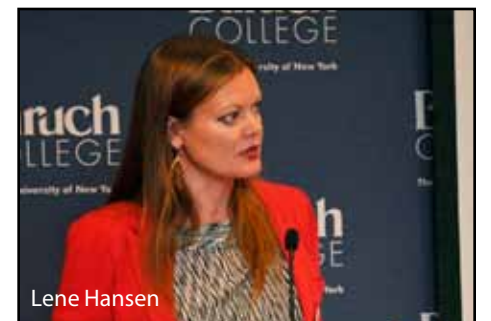
A magnificent conclusion awaited us after these engrossing panels: Anne Bobby performed the one-woman play that had premiered at the first West conference in September 2003, *That Woman: Rebecca West Remembers*. Anne's performance as West, young and old, was once again stunning: humorous, wistful, and passionate in turns, she conjured up the feisty, funny, and brilliant woman and writer on whom we had been focused for two packed days. Brava, Anne, and bravo to all who made this fifth Rebecca West conference another extraordinary event.

—Ann Norton

Photos by Glenda Hydler



Anne Bobby



Lene Hansen



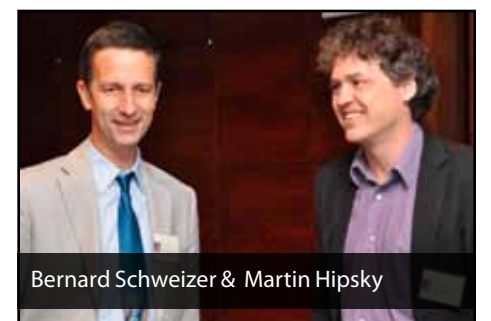
Debra Rae Cohen



Dennis Drabelle



Susan Hertog & Helen Atkinson



Bernard Schweizer & Martin Hipsky

Claudia FitzHerbert, in her review of *Strindberg: a Life by Sue Prideaux* (Yale UP), in the April 14, 2012 edition of *The Daily Mail*, begins with West's passionate conviction about the playwright. "A gospel must fall on sympathetic soil, or it dies. There will never be —except among the perverse—any enthusiasm in England for the works of August Strindberg, the foremost European masculinist and hater of women," wrote Rebecca West with suffragette flourish in 1913, a year after the playwright's death. A century later, the perversion is on the other foot: why would anyone not be interested in the work of the man who pioneered the staging of hate-fuelled carnals? ...Yet Rebecca West was not completely wrong. While actors love the challenge of his luridly naturalistic psychological dramas, theatre managers tend to be craven about the feel-bad factor of his greatest work. The result is that Strindberg is done well, but not often. Sue Prideaux begins her absorbing new study with the wistful observation that outside Scandinavia he remains "best known for two things: Miss Julie and alarming misogyny."

Benjamin Moser, in the November 27, 2011 edition of the *New York Times*, reviewed *Parallel Stories* by Peter Nadas (translated from the Hungarian by Imre Goldstein) "a novel 1,100 pages long that took four years to translate" and "though at times masterly...the book is too maddening to be called a masterpiece." He goes on to discuss other "doorstop" texts. "The extremely long books I have loved the most are all, in one way or another, light reading. It's as if their authors realized they were asking for a month or more of your time and decided to help you along. Hence the gossipy bubblyness of *In Search of Lost Time*, the melodrama of *Les Misérables*, the bitchiness of *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, the romance of *War and Peace*, the heavy petting of *Belle du Seigneur*. No one would accuse the authors of these books of sacrificing moral and aesthetic seriousness for the sake of entertainment...[but] Nadas appears to be espousing a theory of the novel. He said as much in a 2005 interview. The last two chapters are that way, he explained, 'because I find that the world does not have a symmetrical structure.' But did Marcel Proust or Victor Hugo or Rebecca West—for that matter, did anyone ever—believe that it did?"

Christopher Hitchens's last book, and his death, occasioned many mentions of West, since he wrote an introduction to the Penguin reprint of *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*. In his review of Christopher Hitchens's *Arguably*, from the *Telegraph*, September 20, 2011, Nicholas Shakespeare calls it "a tremendous book. The spectre of [Hitchens's] mortality

(underplayed here) has concentrated his mind wonderfully. Unlike Waugh, Hitchens's face has outgrown the mask. He shares most in common with Rebecca West, the subject of one of the best pieces: 'She knew that the facing of death could be life affirming, and also that certain kinds of life are a version of death.'" David Free, in the September 7, 2011 edition of *The Australian*, writes that Hitchens "is also constantly on the lookout for the general moral lesson. Discussing Rebecca West's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*...he calls West 'one of those people, necessary in every epoch, who understand that there are things worth fighting for, and dying for, and killing for.'"

Nicholas Bagnall reviews *Working the Room* by Geoff Dyer, in the August 29, 2011 edition of the *Telegraph*. "[Dyer's] subjects range from accounts of childhood to thoughts on, for example, Turner, DH Lawrence and Rebecca West—a fairly wide net, and he doesn't keep to literature. Of West, who wrote for us in the days when I edited these pages, he records her calling her book about Yugoslavia 'a wretched book that won't interest anybody.' (She was, of course, wrong, for once.)"

Geoffrey Wansell lists *The Fountain Overflows* among his recommended "Retro Reads" in the July 1, 2011 edition of *The Daily Mail*. I find his thumbnail characterization curiously off the mark: did he and I read the same novel? "It's a lovely, gentle book, a bit like *The Railway Children* without the trains or the tear-jerking ending."

My favorite use this year of West's most famous quote comes from Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, whose passionate editorial I cannot resist quoting at length. In the May 30, 2011 edition of the *Independent*, she deplores young women's ignorance of strong, successful, influential women in political, legal, and artistic spheres. She names, for instance, Dame Barbara Mills, who had recently died. "I asked a number of young professionals if they knew who she was. No, not a clue. Not even the lawyers among them. She was nobody to them—a formidable barrister who ran the Serious Fraud Office and was the first female Director of Public Prosecutions." She continues by asking them if "the awesome Frenchwoman Christine Lagarde would become head of the International Monetary Fund. Again, no recognition." Concluding that this "has not been a good spring for feminism," she reiterates some blunt facts after excoriating "the West" for its smug denial of unrelenting sexism. "In the South and East, (even in the super-economic nations like India and China) millions of female infants, girls and women still don't have the right just to be, to see

another day. Uncounted numbers are aborted, beaten, bullied, burnt, starved, covered up, killed, raped, used and abused, subjugated, forced to marry and reproduce. So yes, when we compare our lives to theirs, we are fortunate. However, it is just when things feel OK that things slip back."

Such as? "[H]ere comes a new fad, 'Slut-Walkers' —women in scanty underwear or provocative T-shirts who have taken to demonstrating against male violence, thus making a mockery of rape and of women's rights. And Hugh Hefner, that irrepressible sex machine, is opening another Playboy Club in London. Just like before, with cute gals wagging furry pom-poms on their butts in costumes which lift and squeeze. To beat the recession, he offers glamour jobs to unemployed graduates and bimbos dying to wave their assets in front of tipsy blokes with deep pockets and long arms." So "when Michelle Obama took girls from an inner-city London school to Oxford, to get them to imagine reaching for the top, she should have told them what happens to women who do. Or about the dangers which appear when they assume equality with men. Or how she has to play the unthreatening woman for the sake of her husband's position. Just as Kate Middleton does. Or that the sexualisation of young women is proving the most effective whip against female progress. Of course she didn't, couldn't."

She saves West's words for the final zingers. "Feisty fighters who refuse to give up the struggle for real and enduring parity between the sexes get dreadful invective, particularly from sleepless internet bullies on the prowl. On my wall I have this quote by the author Dame Rebecca West: 'I do not know what feminism is. I only know that people call me that when I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat or a prostitute.' Feminism itself has become a term of abuse just when we need it most. Time to reaffirm it and not wear a bunny-tail or whore kit or apron, please." Readers, please note: Ms. Alibhai-Brown gets the quote right! Among other things.

In the April 30, 2011 edition of *The London Times*, John Sutherland complains that current British fiction featuring steamy sex will never win the Booker Prize. "Tacitly, as a reading public, we don't believe that smut and our best works of fiction are natural bedfellows (construe that image as you will). The proof? Let's call it 'No sex please, we're Booker.' The first Booker Prize was awarded in 1969. Dominating the judging panel's deliberations that year was Rebecca West, the 71-year-old

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Books, Essays, Articles

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REBECCA IN MACEDONIA

At dusk, every evening for a week,
Rebecca West ascends the steps
Towards St Naum's monastery church.
Sometimes ahead, sometimes behind her,
Is a small man, lively as a land spirit,
Stanislav Vinaver, Serbian poet.
They are nel mezzo del cammin,
Already too late for Evensong
Too early for the Great Silence.

I watch them from the shore below.
He is in a crumpled brown suit,
His head is shaped like a pine cone;
Her unruly hair is peppered with grey,
She wears a duck-egg woollen dress,
On her left shoulder a brooch, a panther
About to leap into bejewelled oblivion.

Dark cypresses like tent poles
Hold the sky in suspension, a baldachin
Above the tideless mirror of water.
We are in Macedonia in nineteen thirty six,
And only one of us is a ghost.

The war is just a distant possibility
A few years down the line
Everything can still be averted –
The labour camps, the drownings,
The gassings, the firing squads,
The bloody ricochet of history,
Her glance towards the bombs falling over London,
Like ripe watermelons exploding into redness.

For the moment there's only
The flood of Stanislav's words.
So often just much too much,
She says as she turns her head away
And sees the late-flowering lilacs,
The violet crosses of petals --
Not Scotland but Macedonia, she whispers.

Too many languages, too many names, too many lovers
Still to come; this Europe, this lake, too many deaths,
Her own half-million word long book
On Yugoslavia which was and exists no more,
The trials at Nuremberg, the meaning of treason, and
The meaning of silence suddenly grasped:

It is the secret of Macedonia in which we float
Suspended like a yolk of setting sun,
Imprisoned in our knowledge
Of this late spring,
As we pray for nothing else to begin
Nothing else to end.

Vesna Goldsworthy

From *The Angel of Salonika*, published in *Salt Modern Poets* series (15 November 2011)

Winner of the Crashaw Prize 2010

The Times Best Poetry Books 2011

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The International Rebecca West Society Needs Your Help!

The next biennial conference
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- Donors of \$400 or more receive a copy of *Survivors in Mexico* signed by the editor.
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Thank you!

West in the News Continued

grande dame of English letters. As a young woman West had enjoyed a very vigorous relationship with H. G. Wells, the great shagger of English literature. They nicknamed each other Panther and Jaguar, because they tore at each other's bodies so savagely in bed. Their bonkathon, which lasted for years, is wryly commemorated in David Lodge's recent docunovel, *A Man of Parts*. "Bonkathon? If only West could respond! Better yet: if only she could sue him for libel. Imagine the trial transcript.

Advice columnist Bel Mooney, in the *Daily Mail*, April 12, 2012, advises a woman considering an affair with wise words from West. "Dear Bel, I'm 37 and have been with my partner for 15 years...We've had our ups and downs like anyone else but I adore my partner...When I was in my teens I had a huge crush on a guy called Sam which lasted for years...I was driving to the shops the other day when I saw him walking along the street...He was very drunk. I took him home. The next day I called to see if he was OK. He asked if I was married; he said he wanted a date...I am a great believer in 'fate' and would love to go out with Sam, but my boyfriend is the kindest, most thoughtful person I know. What do I do? I don't want to cheat or hurt my boyfriend but I really think this means something... I believe in destiny as he literally fell into my path. What would you advise?" Mooney answers, "The great 20th century writer, Rebecca West, wrote memorably that 'only part of us is sane.' She was suggesting that the good side of the human spirit wants peace and happiness, but the dark, mad side 'prefers the disagreeable to the agreeable, loves pain and...despair, and wants to die in a catastrophe that will set back life to its beginnings and leave nothing of our house save its blackened foundations.' That quote is often in my mind when I read about affairs...If you and Sam were destined to be together then how come you've only seen him twice in 20 years, until the day he accidentally staggered into the path of your car because he was plastered...[T]urn your back on a meaningless teenage crush (as you should have done years ago) and celebrate what Rebecca West called, 'the longer day of happiness.'"

WEST WORDS

The International Rebecca West Society Newsletter

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