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Rebecca West

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Harriet Hume's unchanging beauty and commitment to her art stand in stark contrast to Arnold Condorex's more worldly goals. After a romantic tryst, she discovers that she can read his mind, but Arnold, with his sights set on moving up in the world, quickly parts from the mysterious lady. As they encounter each other over the years, Harriet's intuitive powers continue to unsettle Arnold, opening his eyes to the darker elements of his political and financial aspirations, even as he remains drawn to her. Beautifully drawn and filled with magical touches, West's fantasy explores innate and learned gender roles, as her characters uncover the mystery surrounding their otherworldly connection.

Dame Rebecca West (1892–1983) is one of the most critically acclaimed English novelists, journalists, and literary critics of the twentieth century. Uniquely wide-ranging in subject matter and breathtakingly intelligent in her ability to take on the oldest and knottiest problems of human relations, West was a thoroughly entertaining public intellectual. In her eleven novels, beginning with *The Return of the Soldier*, she explored topics including feminism, socialism, love, betrayal, and identity. West's prolific journalistic works include her coverage of the Nuremberg trials for the *New Yorker*, published as *A Train of Powder*, and *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, her epic study of Yugoslavia. She had a son with H.G. Wells, and later married banker Henry Maxwell Andrews, continuing to write, and publish, until she died in London at age ninety.

Harriet Hume Details

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Author : Rebecca West

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From Reader Review Harriet Hume for online ebook

Melanie says

This is an odd book, and I would have rated it rather more lowly, but I really liked the tone. There's something about British books written between the wars. They have kind of a sweet sadness that almost has a desperate hope that nothing bad will even happen again. Sometimes you can tell they are firmly ignoring the signs of impending war. Not in this book, but sometimes. And I sometimes wonder if letting go of some dreams isn't better than railing against the world because you can't achieve them.

Nicola says

"...he was struck by something familiar in the aspect of the wall by which he was walking. A pretty green creeper ran half the length of it, and at intervals drooped pale waving tendrils a fore-arm's length down into the street, so that it looked as if a harem had drugged their eunuchs in a body and had stolen to the confines of their prison to have their fingers kissed by a queue of lovers."

What a wonderfully evocative description; I nearly rated this 2 1/2 stars due to the fact that I didn't enjoy it all that much but it's been so beautifully written that I couldn't bring myself to value it as anything less than a full three stars.

The eponymously named Harriet Hume begins this book as a young lady nearly engaged to a young man, Arnold Condorex. After a rapturous day glorying in their love Harriet discovers that she has the ability to see into the mind and heart of her fiancée. That's probably the sort of gift you are going to want to return to the store! She doesn't see it that way, Arnold, after experiencing it, does and picks up his hat and departs. So much for romance.

Their paths cross occasionally over the years and each time Arnold, drawn to the spritely and beautiful Harriet, cannot help showering her with his delicate compliments, like *'You seem a little slut, but no one loves little sluts as I love you.'* or *'dusty trull'*. But he does think well of her and is solicitous of her health *"Curse it, I had forgotten that you are only a silly slut who has walked too far in the heat, and that I had brought you here to rest!"*. Although even with these distinguishing marks of gentlemanly politeness he does occasionally let slip hints that, as he is a man of affairs, he is of greater value than herself *"You are not a person of importance. I doubt if you have many appointments. You had better stay with me in this very pretty room. It will no be for long, since I am sure to weary of you soon, and will kindly send you home in my magnificent motor-car. So make the most of your time."*. Ah, what exquisite generosity the man has.

At some point in each meeting though Arnold's thoughts turn to some unworthy deed or deception which he has lied to himself about and he finds, that in Harriets presence he can no longer do so, and his rage flames out against her. He blames her for exposing his true motivations and every meeting ends with his declaration of his hatred towards her. Poor Harriet to have let a prince like this slip through her fingers.

If there was any doubt remaining that Rebecca West wrote this as a commentary on the position of women in society it was removed by this:

"But why," his spirit asked itself, "is this more terrible than the other two discoveries she has made

regarding me?"

Detestably, since he had not spoken aloud, she answered; "Because then you were outwitting women, and there has been such an immense deal of propaganda in favour of regarding this as a proof of high spirits in a gentleman, that it is neither here nor there. But now that you have turned against your own sex, where the obligation of honour is recognized, then perhaps things are going not so well with you."

This was definitely a peculiar little book and I didn't quite know what to make of it. Ms West has three other works on the combined list so I'll have more opportunities to evaluate her style in the future.

Catie says

Mentioned in, *The Diary of a Provincial Lady* by E. M. Delafield.

belva hulp says

I thought I was going to like/love this book. I failed and failed miserably. Perhaps if the book had been a mere 150 pages rather than 300, perhaps if I had found the characters even somewhat believable as fantasies, perhaps, perhaps, perhaps.....

The plot, if there is one, is that of a man with high expectations of his future drifting in and out of the life of an exquisite & mind reading sprite of a lovely but poor pianist.

He wishes to be rich and powerful at any cost and she seems content with her lot. He marries into money, compromising any ethics he may have in building his career and in the end finds himself a ruined man. Harriet remains the same.

The book is written in a sweet, flowery manner and I could have enjoyed it in a brief novella but was unable to in full book form.

I don't know that I can recommend this one and that makes me sad.

Bob says

Coming to this through some kind of Bloomsbury lens, and flush with my enjoyment of *The Fountain Overflows*, I needed some adjustment to the fabulous (as in 'like a fable') aspect of the narrative, but I suppose one could draw a few comparisons to *Orlando*. About 3/4s of the way through, I was losing patience as the characters felt like they were becoming purely puppets representing the preposterous ideas men and women form about one another (though the antithesis is also art vs. commerce as well as male vs. female). The ending won me over by entirely abandoning all dreary verisimilitude, and is actually reminiscent of Flann O'Brien. Quite an oddity and well worth reading.

Blyth says

I read Harriet Hume to close out the set of novels whose characters personify Virginia Woolf's themes from "A Room of One's Own." All three novels - written by Woolf, Rebecca West, and Vita Sackville-West -

contrast the feminine appreciation for beauty with the masculine urge to dominate.

This novel details a strange love affair in which the heroine inexplicably develops the ability to read the thoughts of her suitor. As one might imagine, it doesn't take long for things to sour. In this case, she withers to hear his preference for worldly pleasures - financial success and power - over the ethereal pleasure of loving Harriet and appreciating the simple beauty of nature. Realizing their incompatibility, he leaves her but then flails in the life he has pragmatically constructed as he cannot bear the glare of her witness to his ugly ambitions: "She had come between him and every human being's right not to know quite what he is doing."

Just as it was difficult to understand why Vita Sackville-West's characters were making such a fuss over the self-absorbed Lady Slane in *All Passion Spent*, it was insulting (as a woman) to see Harriet waste a minute over the disgustingly dull Arnold. At one point, Harriet gets up to leave and Arnold protests: "You are not a person of importance. I doubt if you have many appointments. You had better stay with me in this very pretty room. It will not be for long, since I am sure to weary of you soon, and will kindly send you home in my magnificent new motor-car. So make the most of your time. And to tell you the truth, oh, my love, I find great joy in having you here among all my treasures!"

While all three authors are riffing on Woolf's expressed frustrations about gender inequality, and using their admirable powers of expression to trump up the case for women as the superior sex while they're at it, only *To the Lighthouse* manages to escape caricature and infuse her observations with enough empathy to make a great novel.

Phrodrick says

The central plot is fine but...overly florid and wordy

I think I was supposed to like this book. I really tried. I do not think I got the point of Ms West's Style.

The plot is fairly straight forward. Harriet Hume is a beautiful professional pianist. Her lover is Arnold Condorex. Arnold is what the English would call a striver. Born into middle class or less, he is determined, At All Costs to be not merely rich and powerful, but accepted by those born to be rich and powerful.

His great skill is as a negotiator (one who finds compromises). Because he chooses his career over Everything including his love for Harriet Hume (she is most often referred to by both names), he will over time compromise every value, marring into wealth not for love, building his career on an ethical compromise and so forth until he compromises one time too often. Ultimately he finds himself financially ruined, livening in a loveless home, despised by even his man servant.

Harriet will develop magical abilities and will know his every misstep, from leaving her for his career to the final deal that will mean his total destruction. She will reappear in his life at each critical moment and try to warn him. He will always choose to act against her warnings.

George says

3.5 stars. It's an original story about two people who initially meet and fall in love, but events happen to

affect the relationship. The location is London in the 1920s and a lot of time is spent in Harriet's place of residence. The story centres on Harriet Hume, a young pianist and Arnold Condorex, a young politician. Over the next ten or more years we are provided with commentary on Arnold's career and life and to a lesser extent, Harriet's career and life. The writing is clever and an interesting commentary on male / female relationships and roles. This is an unusual book in that we never fully know who Harriet and Arnold are. I enjoyed the reading experience, though there was a part in the second half of the novel that I found a particular day in the life of Arnold a little dull. This is my first Rebecca West novel and probably not the best place to start reading West books. It's a thought provoking read. I will certainly be reading more of Rebecca West.

Amerynth says

I really enjoyed "Harriet Hume: A London fantasy." As this isn't considered one of Rebecca West's best novels, I look forward to reading more from her in the future.

Harriet is a young woman with a strange connection with her lover Arnold Condorex -- she can see into his mind and knows what he is thinking and hiding from even himself. She pops up into his life at critical moments and shakes his world.

I really liked the build up of the story and West's use of language and the landscape. This was a fun read.

Pip says

Not being a fan of fantasy I disliked the fantastical elements, such as the tale the anonymous Harriet wove about three trees in her garden being three historical sisters joined by garlands of flowers. The only bit I enjoyed was the description of the garden itself, and some descriptions of London that West rendered beautifully. Harriet was tiny, beautiful and an accomplished pianist. She was a symbol of the arts, rather than a real woman. She dressed always in the colour of parchment. Was this symbolic of a page yet to be written on? I don't know. Arthur was ambitious, jealous of those born with more advantages than he had himself, and prepared to be unprincipled in his incessant search for power and prestige. As a political satire this book worked much better. That Arthur had invented the kingdom of Mondh (la Monde - the world, perhaps?) to gain importance was quite clever, it reminded me of Wag the Dog, although, of course, this was written in the 1920's, so West could be credited with prescience. I was uncertain about the end. Arthur realised his faults, but did he destroy beauty in the process? He had dismissed Harriet as a woman and therefore unimportant. He had called her all kinds of derogatory names, but was he protesting too much? She returned to haunt him throughout his life. It was really the story of Arthur Conderex and the perils of ambition rather than that of Harriet Hume, the lover of beauty. West spends a lot of time talking about opposites, I would have preferred a more nuanced approach.

Paul says

4.5 stars

This is my first Rebecca West and Harriet Hume is one of West's lesser known novels. It has mixed reviews,

possibly I think because it is not easy to see what West is doing. It is also an unusual modernist novel because it involves a fantasy element. It is a London novel and there are some good descriptions of London streets in the 1920s. The story is a double handler between two protagonists; Harriet Hume and Arnold Condorex. Harriet is a pianist with intuition and sensitivity, Arnold is a worldly aspiring politician. The book opens with them having a romantic tryst. Harriet discovers she can read her lover's thoughts and intentions and sees that his career and power is what motivates him and she is secondary. They part and meet again six years later by chance when again Harriet can see Arnold's hidden motives and baser thoughts. The next meeting is over a decade later when Arnold has real political power and again Harriet can see through him; by this time she hates him as his political plotting is beginning to unravel and he has financial problems. The book draws to a close with a final meeting as Arnold's career is in ruins.

The whole novel revolves entirely around the two main characters and sometimes they tend to talk in speeches which can be a trial. The ending is the fantasy part and to attempt to explain would give it away. I suspect most readers will guess by the end; but that's not the point. The two characters are opposites; possibly the male and female principles. Victoria Glendinning (in the virago introduction) argues that the two are opposites. The female principle is artistic, unaggressive, unconventional, moral and subjective. The male principle being objective, conventional, aggressive and amoral. It is also suggested that Condorex is based on H G Wells (he gets everywhere; I'm reading about him as Hypo Wilson in *Pilgrimage*!); West had an affair with him. Glendinning's conclusion is that West is making the point that neither can survive nor thrive in isolation.

However, West is doing more than this in her construction of opposites. Condorex represents power, the establishment and a masculine type of capitalism and so there is an element of political satire. Condorex's values are pretty much those of the political class with a sense of hierarchy and entitlement which Hume finds repulsive: Condorex judging that revulsion to be because of her gender. Condorex has a drive for power and makes his name with an issue of *Empire*; West as part of her satire looks at Imperialism too. Condorex, although he seems to understand Hume's point of view feels he cannot be other than he is: " "But a man must rise in the world!"(this) intention was unalterably a part of himself. He could not more remove it than he could uproot his own breath. ... It dominated him, he was its instrument."

Condorex abandons his lover to court other women who can assist with his career. Although Condorex comes across as reprehensible; West does give the impression that he is both perpetrator and victim. Arnold and Harriet become more distant over time and Arnold realises she is his opposite and wishes to destroy her. West rejects this type of dualism as too simplistic and the world is more complex; as she says herself at a later date;

"This refusal leaves man to indulge in some of his characteristically false logic. His mind, which is inadequate for the purpose of mastering his environment and therefore always oversimplifies, sees the universe in antitheses, in dichotomies. He says, foolishly enough, for one cannot cut into clean halves two substances that pass into each other by insensible gradation, that there is light and darkness, life and death, pleasure and pain."

West is critiquing dualism whilst admitting we fall into the habit of accepting it. Condorex has rejected the imagination and the artistic sense that Hume has which leads to the sterile nature of his life and his lack of morals. However Hume as a musician has partially entered the masculine domain as a performer and owner of her own talents. It is also clear that Condorex has a choice whether to follow his heart and stay with Hume, when life would be very different, the question really is; does he have that choice or is he destined to follow the path he does because he is unable to follow his heart. West makes it clear there is a different path for Condorex to follow, it is less clear that he has the ability to follow it.

Although the novel is clearly a political satire, its subtitle is still *A London Fantasy*. West, through Harriet weaves fairy tales through the book and Harriet has the ability to transform her garden in some way which becomes clearer towards the end of the book as the novel enters more fully into the fantasy area. West uses fantasy to suggest an alternative reality using fantasy and fairy tales as a mirror to highlight faults in society. Harriet's powers are celebratory and life-affirming. Many of the critics of this novel miss the point that West

is not creating a linear and logical plot. More interesting analyses of the plot use Derridean ideas like jouissance and a celebration of heterogeneity, fecundity and excess; dealing with dualism by synthesis. Other interesting analyses of the novel follow ideas related to Foucault's narrative of sovereignty and its relation to the modernist novel. There is a lot going on here; it's an interesting and underrated novel.

Book Wormy says

Harriet Hume Rebecca West

★★★

Harriet Hume is the story of the relationship between the title character and an ambitious young man Arnold Condorex. Early in their relationship Harriet develops the ability to read Arnolds mind and while some of what she finds there is flattering he spends most of his time thinking about how to advance himself and a serious relationship with Harriet is not going to do that.

Needless to say Harriets ability to read Arnolds mind leads to the end of their relationship, however over the intervening years the two meet and its clear that despite the distance between them Harriet has maintained her ability and while she thinks she can help Arnold by warning him the consequences she can see from his actions he is too wrapped up in himself to want to listen.

So the premise is good and there are parts of the books I really enjoyed especially the fairytales that Harriet tells Arnold, however there are lots of things I disliked, firstly the way Arnold refers to Harriet throughout the novel he calls her a slut and a liar and while these are used affectionately they really got on my nerves. Arnold is unlikeable he is selfish and when he is not happy he blames other, he is not worth Harriets time and yet she is drawn to him for some reason.

Harriet herself is annoying she is passive and doesn't take charge every time she meets Arnold she behaves like a dog parted from its owner I mean seriously she should have kicked him in the nuts and found someone worthwhile to pine over.

I find it hard to like a book where you really just want to shout at the main characters and this was one of those books.

Chrissie says

This novel is about Harriet Hume and Arnold Condorex. It is set in London somewhere around the 1920s. From the start, when they meet, an attraction arises. They meet and then they part. He glimpses her four years later. They meet again six years after that and then finally after another five years. Where will that first attraction lead?

However, it is not the plotline but rather how the story is told that will determine your appreciation of the book. The telling moves forward chronologically but flipping between **her** telling of the story and **his**. Each character is very different and so are their words. Harriet is light and ethereal. You cannot pin her down. Arnold is in search of power, success and status. Over the intervening years each tells of events in a very

different way. When they meet, we hear what each one says to the other and that initial attraction burns bright.

Harriet throws out words in a flurry of florid, flamboyant ideas. She speaks of fairy tales, nature, leaves, flowers and animals, what **she** sees and feels. She is able to read his thoughts, which he finds ridiculous and utterly absurd!

Arnold's words reflect who **he** is—his dealings in attaining position and power and money. His talk of politicians, agreements related to British rule in India and crooked deals are as difficult to make sense of as Harriet's magical world where trees are people!

As I said, you flip back and forth from one to the other. Where do you end? In a ridiculous, but also very funny scene with policemen and Arnold waiting outside Harriet's window. To understand what **has** happened and what **will** happen you must read the book, which does end on a (view spoiler) and amusing note.

Clearly, Rebecca West was a feminist but also a feminist of her time.

The audiobook I listened to was narrated by Lucy Scott. She does read it quickly, which bothered me until I understood it should not be read in any other way. Her narration is very good. Once you get the hang of the book's set up and its message, you realize this.

The author has two messages. They are delivered in an amusing but also well thought out fashion. You see this at the end. The messages? (view spoiler) One ponders if Harriet's abilities are magical or if she merely has a strong sense of intuition.

Each of the books I have read by the author are very different; you cannot guess what one book will give you having read another.

Black Lamb and Grey Falcon 5 stars

The Return of the Soldier 4 stars

Harriet Hume 3 stars

The Fountain Overflows 1 star

The Judge TBR

Rebecca says

Tinted with fantasy romance. The heroine's a recital of Harriet Cohen, concert pianist 'n' muse to Elgar, Sibelius, DH Lawrence, H.G. Wells...

"works of art feel towards human beings exactly as we do towards ghosts."

Asa says

A young man, Arnold Condorex, has an affair with Harriet Hume, a beautiful piano player. Then he leaves her to have a successful career in politics, but she shows up at different stages of his life to make him see how his life is going wrong. The book is also called "A London fantasy" and every time he meets Harriet again something fantastical happens, such as all the statues in London coming to life or three young women turning into trees. The writing is wonderful and I love the London that is portrayed in here and really enjoy the fantastical element, but I never really cared for the characters. It's very distracting when Arnold keeps calling Harriet "trollop" and "bitch" and it's not supposed to be insulting, and I have no idea why Harriet cared for him at all. She wasn't a real person but rather some sort of symbol of femininity.
