



The Loving Spirit

Daphne du Maurier

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This romance is Daphne du Maurier's first novel.

The Loving Spirit Details

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From Reader Review The Loving Spirit for online ebook

T.D. Whittle says

Plot spoilers ahead

Recently, I read this review by Mark Monday, in which he rated the writing separately from the story (and indeed even rated the writer as a person!). Since I never met Daphne du Maurier, I will refrain from rating her as a human being, but I think MM's idea of separating the quality of the writing from the story itself is useful for me in reviewing *The Loving Spirit*. The writing is first rate, in my opinion; even though this is her first novel, her prose flows effortlessly and her voice is as clear and confident as in her later books. As with *Rebecca*, *The Loving Spirit's* opening paragraph beckons the reader with gentle romance:

Janet Coombe stood on the hill above Plyn, looking down upon the harbour. Although the sun was already high in the heavens, the little town was still wrapped in an early morning mist. It clung to Plyn like a thin pale blanket, lending to the place a faint whisper of unreality as if the whole had been blessed by the touch of ghostly fingers. The tide was ebbing, the quiet waters escaped silently from the harbour and became one with the sea, unruffled and undisturbed. No straggling cloud, no hollow wind broke the calm beauty of the still white sky. For one instant a gull hovered in the air, stretching his wide wings to the sun, then cried suddenly and dived, losing itself in the mist below. It seemed to Janet that this hillside was her own world, a small planet of strange clarity and understanding: where all troublous thoughts and queer wonderings of the heart became soothed and at rest.

For the quality of her prose, I adore Du Maurier and always enjoy reading her. But, then there's the story itself. While I *did* find the book as un-put-downable as *Rebecca*, the story is peculiar?not in a good way? especially in first two books within the book. (The novel is divided into four books, each one telling the tale of a particular member of the Coombes family of Cornwall.) The author writes of an obsessive, mad passion between two people that reminds me of nothing so much as the destructive love of Heathcliff and Catherine in *Wuthering Heights*. Du Maurier herself provokes the reader's memory of this by quoting Emily Bronte's poetry at the beginning of each book; the title of the book is taken from one such poem.

The first problem is that the "loving spirit" (Janet Coombes) is not very loving. She is entirely self-absorbed and her great love affair of her heart and soul is with her own son, and he with her. It's a profound emotional incest which we are meant to understand goes beyond the here-and-now and resides in their eternal souls. It is also grotesquely incestuous in its expression, stopping short of actual sex, but including such passages as this:

"... You'd come alone, without father, without Sam or the others?you alone, for me."

"You wouldn't be sorry to be back?"

"What d'you think?"

He was silent a while, then spoke again, chewing his straw.

"I've in my mind's eye the model of my ship. I can picture the shear of her, an' the long graceful lines. Her sails spread to the wind. She'd run like a devil if I let her, laughing' with the joy of escape, but a touch of my hand an' she'd understand, obeyin' my will, recognisin' I was her master an' lovin' me for it."

He leant over and watched Janet with narrow eyes, sweeping the whole of her.

"What is it, Joseph?" she asked, conscious of his gaze.

He laughed, and spitting out his straw upon the ground, he reached for her hand.

"Women are like ships," he said.

(Book I, chapter X, p.61)

The flirting is overt and the physical eroticism between the pair as obvious as with any famous lovers. One gets the impression from the first narrative (that of Janet) that we are going to see some legacy of this forbidden mother-son rapture ... perhaps because one expects these things to go badly and because of the obvious Heathcliff and Cathy allusions. But no, the overarching narrative is about how this spirit of Janet Coombe remains earthbound (or, in this case, shipbound) beyond death, in order to watch over, guide, and protect her loved ones. Her loved ones to whom she is committed beyond the grave include only those she deemed worthy of her in life, which is those who are like herself: Joseph, her second-born son; his eldest son Christopher (to a lesser degree); Christopher's nephew Tom; and finally, Christopher's daughter Jennifer, with whose life we end the novel.

The actual presence of this "loving" spirit though is hardly noticed at all once Janet dies, so it's a bit of a weak premise to build a book around. The novel is really just a family saga spanning four generations, with only occasional episodes of the supernatural breaking through, focused on four people who share a similar spirit and a pathological obsession with their blood relative who is most similar to themselves. It could be titled *Narcissists In Love* but that would imply a mockery that Du Maurier never seems to adopt. The notion of love in the book is perhaps best understood if one imagines two people facing one another, holding hands, gazing into each other's eyes, and seeing themselves reflected back at them, in a flattering light. Whatever is present in the other that does not look like themselves is their blind spot. It is an adolescent's view of love, in which the other represents, in essence, a "second self"? which is precisely how Janet thinks of her son.

Emotionally, psychologically, spiritually, and erotically, Janet and Joseph are a couple; Joseph goes on to have another kind of obsession with his own son Christopher that leads to a psychotic breakdown when Christopher fails to become a seaman, like himself; Christopher adores his own daughter Jennifer to distraction, and she feels the same about him. The spouses and other children are swept aside, at least emotionally.

So, you might think that all this parent-child obsessiveness would be the thing that leads to the family's downfall? Nope. What leads to their near downfall (it's not a tragedy, in the end) is the jealousy of Joseph's younger brother, Philip, who hates Joseph firstly because, well, mother Janet had been his first great love too, of course. Here's a glimpse into Philip's thoughts when he first meets his adult grand-niece, Jennifer:

There were no more years, no time, no grim and satisfying death; this was Janet herself who stood before him, Janet who flamed in the bows of her vessel, Janet as he had seen her in his dreams as a boy, Janet who had preferred Joseph to himself. (Book IV, chapter IX, p. 276.)

It seems Philip is fated to lose his women to Joseph, as Joseph later sweeps Philip's intended wife right out from under him. Philip seeks his revenge in the only way he can, by bringing financial ruin upon Joseph and his heirs.

There is never any implication in the novel that the passion between the sets of lovers is actually a huge problem that needs to be subdued rather than cultivated. At least, by the end, Jennifer has forged a genuine emotional bond with a man who is not her (now deceased) father ... Of course, he is her first cousin who reminds her of her dad, but that's some kind of progress in this family!

It's a weird book and yet, I could not stop reading it. The main characters are sometimes likeable, but often not; Jennifer rather redeems it for the rest of them. Overall, it was an exhilarating read but not at all what I expected. I thought it would be more like *The House on the Strand* but no; its family relationships are twisted enough to rival Faulkner. I love Faulkner, though, and Du Maurier too. This is simply not her best book.

The depth of compassion one feels reading about, say, Quentin's incestuous obsession for his sister Caddy in *The Sound and the Fury*, ("Did you love them Caddy did you love them? When they touched me I died.") could never be evoked by Janet and Joseph. Caddy is a gorgeous character, as written by Faulkner and viewed through the distorted vision of her three brothers; we get the sense of her, and recognise her as a great heroine of the Southern Gothic tradition. But Janet is not a gorgeous character and not all that well realised. We are told she is beautiful and wild at heart blah blah blah ... but she's an obnoxious ass much of the time. As for the relationship, well, it's grotesque not only because they are mother and son, but because they feed this frenzy in one another. They are both kind of jerks and Joseph is capable of being much worse than a jerk, becoming something of a monster later on in the story.

Anyway, overall, I am going to cast five shiny stars into the ring for the gorgeous writing but only two for the story. I am going to read the rest of her novels that I've not yet read though, so I am assuming this is probably the worst of them.

Annie says

Recently I came across a documentary of Daphne Du Maurier called 'The make believe world of Daphne Du Maurier' where she says that she always believed that she lived in a world of make believe. To her, Cornwall where she was born was alive with things and characters that didn't exist. And something about the way she describes Plyn that made the magical realism seem to almost come alive for me.

Plyn doesn't exist, but Ferryside does. Where Daphne spent her summer holidays. A place that inspired her to pen down her first novel. The loving spirit. From the very start, her love for the Cornish countryside is so apparent. Wide open spaces, the sprawling blue skies overhead, the tiny swaying sails in the distance: I could almost feel the grass bend and the stalks break under my bare feet. Such is the elegance and dexterity of her prose. And even though her voice here isn't as refined as in her later novels, especially *Rebecca*, it is strong with a whiff of the greatness it will ultimately mould into.

The central point of the story is Janet Coombe: the eye of the storm, the point of origin of the centrifugal force that pulls in and binds the four generations of the ship building family of Coombe. The inspiration for this character was found in a shipwreck named *Jane Slade* that fascinated the young Daphne and the matriarch's footprint can be found resonating throughout the book, even after her death. She is the loving spirit.

Janet Coombe is a young girl more fascinated with the sea than with the wordly obsessions of her contemporaries and community. She is a free spirit who longs to merge her soul with the sea but ends up conforming to social designs and marries her cousin. But her spirit, reflecting the mighty waves hidden just under the surface of the calm ripples, never fades away. Even through the birth of her children, her spirit remains wild and ultimately it takes the form of her son, Joseph. Joseph embodies the spirit of Janet and being a man succumbs to his love for the uncharted waters. It is in him, that Janet finds her respite. And after her death, it is through him and the ship that she lives on. Like a benevolent ghost and a tempestuous spirit.

The brushstrokes of feminism paint deftly. From the matriarch who pines for the sea but finds the cover, the shield of being a woman in countryside Plyn invisible iron bars and heavy shackles that drag her landward, to her progeny who deftly lifts the veil to come into her own.

There is an element of duality. The land versus the sea. The old versus the new. That which is known and familiar and comfortable and binding versus the ever shifting and unreliable and the sly. The story reflects the changes in Cornwall from the arrival of the Industrial Revolution on its shores. The fear of the unknown, the need for the comfort of a familiar embrace and finally the slow and gradual shift into a new age.

*“Alas-the countless links are strong
That binds us to our clay,
The loving spirit lingers long,
And would not pass away.”*

Lucie says

"High above the clustered houses and the grey harbour waters of Plyn, the loving spirit smiles and is free."

Here's the thing about me: I don't really like family sagas. I tried to read two of them in the past year or so, and every time, it wasn't exactly my cup of tea. Going into *The Loving Spirit*, I was mainly curious to see if Daphne du Maurier could change my mind, but most importantly, I wanted to see what her debut novel was like, as I had already read *My Cousin Rachel* and *Jamaica Inn*.

Well. Let me tell you that: du Maurier got me there, for I absolutely loved this novel!

To be honest, the introduction made me look forward to the book so much, for it talked of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, how du Maurier had been inspired by her - as a matter of fact, the title *The Loving Spirit* comes from one of Emily's poems and it was complete with a few quotes, beautifully written, per usual. I actually noticed the similarities with *Wuthering Heights* that were pointed out and it even made me want to reread the book and then *The Loving Spirit* all over again.

Then, I started reading and I absolutely fell in love with the entire novel. As I'm fascinated by the sea, I could relate to Janet so much and I understood what called to her. She was such a strong and likeable character, it was a very good idea to start off with her. My only complaint was her relationship with her son, Joseph. I understand why the author wrote it that way, but it made me so uncomfortable. I just couldn't get past it, especially when he called her 'beloved' or 'my love', later in the novel. I get that du Maurier doesn't write their relationship to tell us that it's normal, but it made me very uncomfortable. Besides, I had a hard time buying Annie and Joseph's relationship when they fell for each other. That is all. *[edit: despite that, I*

realised that I loved this novel way too much, so it's a five stars anyway.]

Anyhow, except for these relationships, the characters were so interesting, complex and deeply flawed. Every time I finished reading about one of them, I became so sad, because I didn't want to say goodbye, and then I read about the next generation and felt for them. In a way, the Coombe family became mine, as I was along them in their hardships, their joys, their pains, their dreams. It's hard for me to pick a favourite out of Janet, Joseph, Christopher and Jennifer, but I have to say that during Christopher's part, I cried a lot. It must be because I emphasized with some aspects of his story arc so well, who knows?

One of the things that shines in du Maurier's works is the setting. *The Loving Spirit* was set in Plyn Boat Yard, in Cornwall, and I could feel the sea whenever I was reading the book. It became an actual character in the novel (as well as something else I can't mention because spoilers!) and I loved it so much, since I'm obsessed with the sea.

I haven't even talked about the social context and how the Coombe family tried to fit in the change occurring in Great Britain at that time, but it was so well-done. As it's a family saga, we got to follow the family's company through generations and it definitely showed how everything changed at the turn of the 20th century and after World War One.

Overall, I absolutely loved *The Loving Spirit*, but some aspects of the relationships made me a little uncomfortable, which is why I didn't rate it five stars. Other than that, it's the first time I've loved a family saga, du Maurier's writing was as stunning as ever, the setting compelling and I already want to reread it. I shall miss the Coombe family greatly.

Melania 🍒 says

4/5

Natalie Richards says

It pains me to admit that this was not a book I really enjoyed reading, but it is du Maurier`s first novel and she definitely got better the more books she wrote.

Jan says

This was her first book (written in the 1930's). Having read all of Daphne's fiction, this one was a wonderful surprise. Not 'stodgy' or dry.....a page turner with wonderful characters that follow a genealogy line in Cornwall.

I'd re-read this again and again!

Lisa says

Concerning four generations of the Coombe family of Plyn (another fantastically realised setting, as seems always to be the case with du Maurier), and the restless yet loving spirit that unites them.

More than anything this book feels like a love letter to the Cornish coast, one whose sentiments I share entirely and would imagine that any reader would find hard to resist.

Catherine says

This is by far the best book I have ever read. I am currently searching for more books by this author. The transgenerational and "loving sprit" of this story is remarkable. I love reading stories of women, who much like myself, have lived a trying life, only to rise above all turmoil and really see life for what it is. Most rewarding read.

Totoro says

[illegible]

Elizabeth says

This is a real gem of a debut novel and as far as du Maurier is concerned, this is probably one of her most underrated works. Those who read this book for the first time in 1931 must have wondered at the skill this new writer had in conjuring up haunting descriptions of the Cornish landscape, of being able to create absorbing but very real characters of the fictional town of Plyn, as well as that underlying supernatural element infused in the book which is so characteristic of du Maurier's style of writing. If the book did nothing to hint at the author's later greatness in the early days of its publication, then it certainly can inspire a generation of readers to look back over the legacy of work and appreciate how much talent and promise du Maurier evinced from the start.

If I can be honest, I wasn't even sure I was going to like this book initially. There wasn't much by way of plot - simply it covers the life story of four generations of a shipbuilding family in a Cornish fishing village. But it's precisely that "lack" of plot that allows for a truly powerful character study of four separate individuals that make up a generation within the Coombe family, each searching for his or her own way in the world, that missing part of their soul which completes them. The pace is slow, but never does it slacken to the point of stagnation. You feel like you have to keep reading, which is again, something which you will often find yourself doing when you pick up a du Maurier novel. I'm amazed at du Maurier's ability to convey the concept of the loving spirit in what are essentially four very different characters, all within the backdrop of great social changes in England. As an aspiring novelist myself, it seems almost crazy to think that she wanted to tackle four major character growth arcs within the same book without interrupting the flow of the theme of the loving spirit, and yet she pulled it off beautifully.

While there is plenty of drama, humour and poignancy in each of our characters' tales, there is also a great deal of spirituality in the novel itself, as if it were in part, an exercise of self-discovery on du Maurier's part. Despite the suffering undergone by the characters with the passing of years, there is a great sense of hope, compassion and equanimity that fills the reader with an uplifting sense of purpose in the world. I only wonder at how the readers of the 30s must have felt when they first read it, but it has stood the test of time remarkably well and I feel it will continue to do so for many years to come, given its fundamental themes of love and seeking for completion and peace in something greater than yourself.

Highly recommended, but given its slow pace it's probably better suited for du Maurier fans.

Yasmine says

It wasn't really love at first sight between The Loving Spirit and I, but after finishing it, I feel a strange nostalgia at leaving the Coombe family and the Cornish scenery behind...

The first two narratives did not appeal to me as much as the last two - I couldn't quite feel close to Janet and Joseph, to their restlessness (which I found at times too selfish..) and to their very close relationship which made me quite uneasy at times I must say.

I felt much more sympathy towards Christopher and Jennifer, restless free spirits too, but more likable on the whole.

Du Maurier's writing is exquisite, and Cornwall is beautifully rendered by her quill. Upon closing the book, my only wish is to run to the hills of Plym and feel the same love and thrill the characters have felt upon gazing at the sea...

A beautiful family saga, with supernatural undertones, melancholy, nostalgia, but also love and freedom - and also, a book that only got better, chapter after chapter.

Mark says

'She longed for the other one to be with her tonight, he who was part of her with his dark hair and his dark eyes so like her own'

Good grief, this is one of the most uncomfortably creepy accounts of mother love I have ever had the misfortune to read. All I could think of whilst Janet had her 'thing ' for her son was "Call the social services".

I know I sometimes used to wish my mum would have been slightly more affectionate but for Heaven's sake, control yourself madam. Very odd, very odd.

Janet Coombe's creepy adoration of her second son and his obsession with her gave this whole book a veneer of yeuch even though she was dead by page 100 and he had popped his clogs by page 195 leaving almost another 200 pages to cleanse the palate. Nevertheless I could never expunge the frankly weird relationship from my mind.

As a result, the supposed '**creation on the grand scale.....a rich vein of humour and satire**, *Really, please do point that out* **observation**, *Okay I can give you that one* **sympathy**, *mehhh* **courage**, *maybe, of sorts* **a sense of the romantic** *yeah but it is the wrong people being romantic with each other, I would resort to the normal 'Get a room' but in this case. horribly, I think they just might* **are here'** would not be a quotation with which I could wholly concur.

Sophie says

J'ai eu un peu de mal à rentrer dans l'histoire, mais j'ai adoré et eu du mal à le lâcher une fois que c'était fait. J'ai vraiment l'impression que Janet reste le personnage principal de l'histoire, avec la mer bien sur. Ce roman m'a fait rêver de baisers salés et de nuits bercées par les vagues. A déguster.

Charlotte says

N'ayant lu que Rebecca de Daphné Du Maurier j'avais hâte de découvrir un autre roman et je n'ai pas été déçue ! Même si je n'ai pas eu le coup de coeur que j'avais eu pour Rebecca j'ai trouvé cette lecture très plaisante.

J'aime beaucoup la plume de Daphné Du Maurier, très fluide et poétique. On se laisse porter par les descriptions, on ressent la présence de la mer, des embruns salés et cela rend le roman très immersif.

J'ai beaucoup apprécié le fait de suivre ces quatre générations de personnages même si j'ai eu une grosse préférence pour Christopher et Jennifer. J'ai eu plus de mal avec Janet et Joseph, dont la relation m'a très vite mise à mal à l'aise par le côté un peu malsain qui s'en dégage... Joseph est un personnage très particulier mais avec lequel je n'ai pas du tout accroché. Il m'a paru bien trop égoïste, voire carrément détestable à certains moments, vis à vis de son entourage tout au long du roman.

En résumé, même si ce n'est pas forcément le roman que je vous conseillerais en premier pour découvrir Daphné du Maurier, cela reste une très bonne lecture.

Asha Seth says

I proclaim it for the hundredth time - **You can never go wrong with a Maurier novel.**

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A family saga of the Coombes from Plyn in Cornwall across four generations.

Janet Coombe - Joseph Coombe - Christopher Coombe - Jennifer Coombe.

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Four stars and not five only because I felt that the reader could be spared the tedious descriptions of a regular day in the lives of the myriad characters in the novel.

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Review to follow soon.
