



The Birds Fall Down

Rebecca West

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Through a vivid canvas layered with intrigue, conspiracy and murder, Rebecca West has created a story that is at once a family saga, a political thriller, a philosophical drama and a historical novel.

Rebecca West's gripping psychological mystery—part thriller, part historical novel—The Birds Fall Down takes readers inside the intrigue of revolutionaries preparing to overthrow an empire.

During early revolutionary stirrings in Russia, after an unexpected turn of events, Laura Rowan, the coddled granddaughter of an exiled British nobleman, becomes her grandfather's sole companion on a fateful train ride. In France, a young revolutionary approaches Laura and her grandfather with information that will turn her world upside down, and their travels become a thrilling journey into the heart of the struggle against Tsarist Russia.

In this suspenseful novel, West brings to life a battle between entitled imperials and the passionate, savvy communist revolutionaries who dare to face them.

The Birds Fall Down Details

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Author : Rebecca West

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From Reader Review The Birds Fall Down for online ebook

Michelle says

How have I gone all my life without Rebecca West? I picked this up for a dollar because I liked the pattern on the dust jacket and the summary intrigued me--but, oh, what an immense treasure. I fell instantly in love with West's language, and gradually in love with her characters, and then in love with her life. Little nuggets of perfect description adorn the text:

"the nuns at the head of a crocodile of little girls" (p. 74)

"the convex profile of a cow" (p. 225)

"edging the plumpness of a pillow into its slip" (p. 225)

"His manner was to real cheerfulness as false teeth are to teeth." (p. 226)

One of the things that intrigued me was learning more about Russia.

The story was not at all what I expected. I thought from the description that it would be more political in nature, but while there are revolutionaries and monarchists, it is much more personal. The encounter on the train is not a hostage situation or a negotiation between political powers. It is a meeting of old friends now on opposite sides, and their common betrayal. It may have changed history, but not because of any momentous deals brokered or intricate operations plotted. It's just a plan sprung from one man's idealism--but he can barely control it, maybe doesn't control it. West seems to be saying: You can change this one thing, but what does that get you in the end? The universe moves along, a million things are out of your control.

In spite of the seriousness of the novel, it is peppered with humor. I chuckled throughout, especially at Laura's observations of her grandfather Nikolai. The mixture of suspense and humor kept me glued to the pages. I also learned about Russia and Russians in a way I haven't from actual Russian authors. The crosscultural position of Laura, with an English father and a Russian mother and Russian grandparents living in France, lets West explore Russian character more effectively than a solely Russian character in Russia would have.

The Birds Fall Down, like all the best books, is a melding of styles. It is a character-based novel with a hint of a political thriller and bits of social satire. The end is a resolution but also a beginning, and it uses our knowledge of what comes next in history to temper any readerly smugness we may feel with how things wrapped up. I don't think there's a thing I'd change about it, and it has taken its place alongside my most beloved books. Looking beautiful in its lovely dust jacket.

Nikolai growled, "The French lost Strasbourg, they lost Alsace, they lost Lorraine, which they pretended was sacred to them because of their saint, though they are deeply infidel. A republican people deserves to lose all, must lose all."

"But," objected Laura, "when France lost Strasbourg and Alsace-Lorraine, France wasn't a republican, it was ruled by the Emperor."

"No matter," said Nikolai, "the French were a people who once had it in them to make France a republican country, and had it in them to make it one again." (p. 30)

"They grumbled on. They talked about a lot of people. In Russian conversations there always seemed a crowd of faceless personalities doing violent things. It seemed that many of them lived very uncomfortable lives." (p. 121)

"But again neither of them heard her. They were sitting in a fog of solemnity, though surely what they had found out should have made them angry instead of impressing them. Were men perhaps no good? Even when things were still going well at home, she had suspected that though her mother loved her father she did not feel an all-out respect for him." (p. 192)

"Really, you're incredibly silly," exclaimed Laura. "He may be simple, but he can't be so simple that he couldn't pick out a number of differences between you and Christ. People in the Old Testament are as silly as you, but absolutely nobody in the New Testament." (p. 211)

"Rather than die out in the street she would choose to live the natural term of her life standing there on the spinach-green carpet, which had the matted texture of carpets not privately owned, in hotels or theatres or concert halls, and looking through the unsunned twilight at the gross door and listening to the whine of the elevator rope. She had thought the same at Grissaint station, sitting beside her grandfather, and deliberating on Chubinov's warning; she had been willing to spend her life looking at the stained and sordid masonry of the railway-cutting beyond the platform. It was disgusting of her to want to live as much as that." (p. 390)

Diane Zwang says

Historical fiction is one of my favorite genres and I was so happy to finally get one from the list. This novel and author are new to me and I am glad that I liked them both. Rebecca West has several books on the list and I look forward to reading them all.

Set in time during the fall of Tsarists Russia and the rise of communism, the novel is about exiled Count Nikolai living in France. The story centers around Nikolai, his granddaughter Laura, and Nikolai's assistant Kamensky. Nikolai and Laura set off on a train ride and meet a man that will forever change the course of their journey. There are many themes to this novel. 1) Relationships: Husband and wife; father and daughter; employer and employee. 2) Political: tsarists and revolutionary. 3) Nationalism: France, England, and Russia. Throughout the novel there is an underlying theme of loyalty and who to trust. I was engaged throughout, invested in the relationships and curious to see how it would all come together. A well written novel.

"Do not believe what this fool has said about the Tsar. He is speaking of him as if her were a man. So he is, but he is the man chosen to be an intermediate between God and Man, and he takes on himself the guilt of earthly power, so that other men, unsullied by political action, can the more easily work out the destiny which in the end brings them to reconciliation with God."

Moneer says

I think it will be amazing
this is what my friends told me.....

Mosca says

4½ stars out of 5.

I may return, sometime and revise this rating.

This book has spun me around many times during this reading. And because it has been the first book by Rebecca West that I have read, I'm not certain of my qualifications to judge her as a writer just yet. But she is clearly a master of her craft.

As an American from the Deep South, I found her use of the English Language (UK) rhythmically difficult for my reading customs. And that is not her failing. But nonetheless her prose was not at all easy for me—at first. That said, by the end of this work I was amazed by her timing and her plot structure. She caught me completely off guard; and she composed an ending that will be hard to forget. I did not sleep well last night—it was that depressing.

I know that this work is inspired by actual historical events—at least on the surface. But from a 21st century perspective, this North American reader perceives a deeper human analysis.

I am not distressed by her prose, nor by her style. Her understanding of History is superb. Her skills as a writer are indisputable.

But her judgment of people is very difficult to take. She does not seem forgiving. And it is also difficult to think of any character in this book that is admirable. I feel complicit in their abuses. And I'm assuming that is exactly her intentions. Perhaps her indictments of us are valuable. But she aims her blows right at our souls. And it hurts terribly.

Manik Sukoco says

A harrowing train journey set against an exotic background of spies and intrigue, a beautiful and accomplished heroine, dramatic surprises and distinguished and extraordinary characters; this book has it all. The main plot revolves about the political complexities developing in Europe and Russia around 1901, and while the action takes place chiefly in France, the main protagonist, Laura, is a well-born Englishwoman still too young to have been presented at court. From her British father she inherits down-to-earth commonsense, and from her Russian mother an instinctive love of Russia and sympathy with the Russian soul. Whenever we are in danger of being carried away by extravagant idealism and lofty speculation, Laura jumps in and effectively pricks the bubble.

Laura takes the train to Paris with her mother Tania, to visit her wealthy grandparents, exiled from St. Petersburg two years previously as a result of high political manœuvres. Her sick grandmother needs urgent medical attention and Tania is very worried. Laura and the aging count, whose physical and spiritual size dwarfs that of any ordinary mortal, are packed off by train to stay with an American great-aunt somewhere on the coast. Kamensky, the count's devoted right-hand man, is at the last moment prevented from joining them by a trivial incident.

Soon after the train gets under way the carriage is invaded by an aristocratic but scruffy Russian who subjects the count and Laura to a long and involved narrative. He claims that the Tsar is scheming to lure Count Diakonov back to Russia for a mock trial, after which he will be left to languish and die in prison. He has been betrayed by trusted members within his household. Finally convinced, the count insists on leaving the train, has a heart attack on the station platform and dies later in a nearby hotel where he is installed in the

state bedroom. Though fussed over by various well-meaning local dignitaries, Laura is fearful and very much alone.

Re-enter (a) Kamensky and (b) Laura's father, roused at the last moment from the House of Commons. We return on the train to Paris and further events take their exciting course.

One of the many interesting things about this book is that it came out in 1966, when Rebecca West was in her 70's, at the culmination of a long career, which suggests that she worked on it and had it in mind for a large part of her life. Her involvement with, and love for, Russian culture, history, and religion are readily apparent. The book is built around three great monologues: Chubinov's revelations in the train, the count's sublime meditations on his deathbed, and Kamensky's apology. While appreciating her grandfather's loyalty and devotion to the Tsar, his heroism as a soldier, his wisdom as an administrator, his deep and all-embracing faith, his difficulty in discovering at the end any serious cause for self-reproach, Laura is under no illusions. How can he not see that he's done exactly as he pleased all his life?

Elizabeth (Alaska) says

We are all bowmen in this place
The pattern of the birds against the sky
Our arrows overprint, and then they die.
But it is also common to our race
That when the birds fall down we weep.
Reason's a thing we dimly see in sleep.
--Conway Power, *Guide to a Disturbed Planet*

At the turn of the 19th/20th Century, Nikolai Nikolaievitch Diakinov has been exiled by the Tsar, and he lives in Paris feeling himself disgraced. He also knows himself to be innocent. And yet he continues in his firm belief that the Tsar deserves his absolute allegiance because the Tsar is an instrument of God. Diakinov repudiates those who oppose the Tsar, and that opposition is making itself known. How could terrorist revolutionaries use his ambiguous position to their advantage?

Laura Rowan is his 18-year old granddaughter, half English and half Russian. Accompanying him on the train to stay with relatives while her grandmother undergoes some medical treatment, they are confronted by a friend from long ago who has a story of treachery to disclose. One must pay close attention while he tells his story over the course of three or so somewhat long chapters. Along the way, this story divulges family history, Russian culture, and presages the coming revolution.

The GR description bills this as a political thriller or a suspenseful thriller. Naturally, I anticipated it as such. I think "thriller" is an exaggeration. Although Laura Rowan came to fear for her own life, I was never in that camp. I don't mean to say she was not believable, but that in the thrillers I've read (admittedly not a voluminous amount), there is more than a character believing herself in danger that would make the reader believe it to be true.

This is not a fast-paced novel with lots of plot. That is both its advantage and disadvantage depending on one's likes and expectations. There are sections of this that West seemed to take too long to develop, but when I got past them, I was glad of the time she took establishing foundation upon foundation. It is dense, and I'm sure I missed things I might see with another reading. If I were younger, with an extra 20 years of reading ahead of me, rather than the probable fewer than 20 I can expect, I would likely consider a second

reading.

I had a couple of random thoughts while reading this. Several of the women seem not to like men much. I wondered, off-handedly, if misogyny is the hatred of women, what is the corresponding word for the hatred of men? (I just googled: the word is misandry.) And, as I was nearing the end on the US Independence Day, I noted how different are the results of various revolutions of the past 200+ years.

As much as I wanted it to be, this is not a 5-star read, simply a good 4-star read. I'll happily turn to Rebecca West again.

Jane says

One afternoon, in an early summer of this century, eighteen-year-old Laura Rowan sits on the garden steps of her house embroidering a handkerchief. She overhears a conversation between her father, an English Member of Parliament, and her mother, Tania, the daughter of an exiled Russian royalist. Tania's decision to take Laura to Paris to visit her grandfather, Count Nikolai Diakonov, means that Laura will unwittingly become a witness to the momentous events leading up to the Russian Revolution...Through a vivid canvas layered with intrigue, conspiracy and murder, Rebecca West has created a story that is at once a family saga, a political thriller, a philosophical drama and an historical novel.

I think this is a review from 1986. I was by turns frustrated and enchanted by this book. For much of my reading, I really didn't understand what was going on. Towards the end, I did; and as it actually ended, I really did. It is political life everywhere. Treachery and idealism and greed and power and cluelessness. Our lives are woven into these things. Laura is a perfect protagonist. She is romantic and naive and loving and needy and seemingly clear-headed and judgmental. It was so long. But, I think, to really appreciate its artistry, I'd need to read it again. I am overwhelmed. And SO glad I persisted...after stopping reading for several months.

Pip says

The subject of this novel was an intrigue based on real events we are informed in the introduction. The story is seen from the viewpoint of an insightful but naive eighteen year old girl, whom the author skilfully portrays as sometimes unaware of what is happening while her observations give hints to the reader. The developments pit a Russian revolutionary against a Russian reactionary with a dialectical discussion thrown in for good measure. There are passages where the discussion, usually from the grandfather of our heroine, about the differences between the Russian and the English soul become tedious but other sections fascinate like a good whodunnit. Some of the descriptions are quite sublime, but others are less compelling. Overall, the fascinating historical background to the story, the sang-froid of the main character and the uncertainty about whether she has reached the right conclusions, kept this reader engaged to the end.

Claire Goodbody says

I have collected a number of Rebecca West's books since I discovered her two years ago. She is my favourite

author of political historical thrillers and commentary. Each time I re-read her works I am appreciate her intelligence of the intricate plots and machinations of our political systems. She speak of these systems in all their aspects including family. She has a playful and deep sense of humour; gently or sharply apparent through the dialogue or narrative. Her works will always keep me coming back for more. If this is one of your interests, I highly recommended her works.

Meredith says

This book won't be for everyone, but I found it amazing. The story is developed primarily in a few long conversations, which were so fascinating that I read the book in a very short time. Intrigue, things that are hinted but not outrightly stated, even conclusions the reader draws that the protagonist remains unaware of. Details, precise crafting....wow, this was a real find. I am eager to read more of Rebecca West based on my experience with this one.

John Jr. says

Approaches to writing fiction vary as much as tastes in reading it: that's a way of recognizing that *The Birds Fall Down* disagrees with some readers, in large ways or small. One reason I admired it, when I read it in the mid-90s, was precisely its unusual features. Broadly speaking, it concerns the upheavals in Russia that led to the end of the tsar's court and the triumph of the Communists, but it doesn't take place in Russia. Roughly a quarter of its length is devoted to a long talk on a French train--what the *New York Times* reviewer in 1966 called a "monstrous conversation"--between an exiled aristocrat and a terrorist, but their talk isn't the kind you or I might have. It presents instead, like some of the speeches in the movie *Network*, a heightened reality akin to operatic arias, to use a term that's been applied both to this discussion and to those excursions in *Network*. And despite its discursive qualities, the novel shares something with mysteries and spy thrillers; it's genuinely gripping, featuring clues one might at first have missed and secrets one begins to suspect, finally involving life-or-death stakes.

I could even say (though I might be overreaching a bit) that this novel of clashing ideas and ideals is also about the life and death of worlds, not in the science-fiction way but in the sense of entire cultures. Those cultures, as well as the novel's style, are increasingly remote now to most of us in America, so *The Birds Fall Down* seems to some readers alien rather than comfortable, though for me this is a virtue--it has the appeal of the exotic. That may sound merely aesthetic, so I should add that the foreign realm into which the book transports the reader was entirely real and that what happened there was deeply consequential for the entire 20th century.

Anyone wanting more detail can easily consult that *Times* review I mentioned, but be forewarned: it offers criticism rather than ordinary reviewing, in the sense of assessing virtually the entire story. Spoilers, in other words.

A personal note: My recollection is that I discovered this novel during one of many trips with my mother to Half Price Books, a used bookstore, in Dallas, Texas, and that she suggested either this work in particular or at least Dame Rebecca West's writing in general. It was one of many recommendations she made and books she gave me. How she came by her broad knowledge of literature (as it still seems to me) is something I never found time to ask her about, and that part of her past is now beyond retrieving, unlike the history

restored by Dame Rebecca in this book. Though my mother had been born into a family much inclined to reading--one of her older relations had founded an important part of the University of Texas library system, if I remember right--she must have been preoccupied from the mid-50s with raising a family and from the mid-60s had been a single parent with a full-time job who nonetheless managed to earn a graduate degree (in library science, not surprisingly). When did she discover all those authors to whom she introduced me? Willie Morris, Ray Bradbury, P. D. James, Barbara Pym, Rebecca West, Thomas Merton... the list is long and wide-ranging. I can say only that I'm glad for it.

Paul Gaya Ochieng Simeon Juma says

Life can be difficult at times. Moving forward can at times appear to be an uphill task sucking up all the energy in us.

That is how I felt when I started this book. I had to push myself to read it since I myself bought it and I didn't want to see my money going to waste.

The book is about trust and betrayal. Nikolai has lived with Kamensky in England before he meets up with Vasili Illyevitch who exposes the true character of Kamensky. He is a spy for the Tsar of Russia.

Vasili elaborates why he believes that Kamensky is Gorin the spy. He tells us biz past experiences with him which leads us to believe that indeed Kamensky is a spy.

If you are to read this, you need a lot of patience.

Deanne says

Did like this, but some elements of the whole conspiracy plot were confusing, what exactly was the point? What had set this latest plot in motion? and how did the identity of the state police spy suddenly become evident.

Jan-Maat says

Starts out as an everyday story of upper-middle class/upper class folk in early 20th century Britain told from the point of view of the adolescent daughter.

There are intimations of the husband and wife having a strained relationship, as the wife departs for France with her daughter to meet her elderly Russian Father. He was a senior government official and the story slowly opens out in to a wider political story taking in the crisis in the Russian socialist-revolutionary party after the Azef scandal. Enjoyable as all this is, from the point of view of reading a novel rather than experiencing these kinds of things, the Azef affair - when a Russian revolutionary terrorist group was led by a Tsarist secret agent who in order to maintain his cover organised the assassination of minor members of the Tsar's family and leading figures in government - this all with the connivance of the government, was far odder than a believable novels tend to be.

Cphe says

A wonderful writer West. This is a lengthy novel about belief, betrayal, deception, ideals, but it's also a coming of age story.

Events take place primarily in France although the novel is about Russia and the political climate at the turn of the century.

Laura Rowan was quite an unusual heroine for the period caught up in events beyond her imagination or control. Quite a few twists and turns with the plot and enough spies, double spies and subterfuge on offer to keep the most jaded reader engaged.

Finished the novel a few days ago but the story and writing continue to linger. Another from the Boxall 1000 list.
