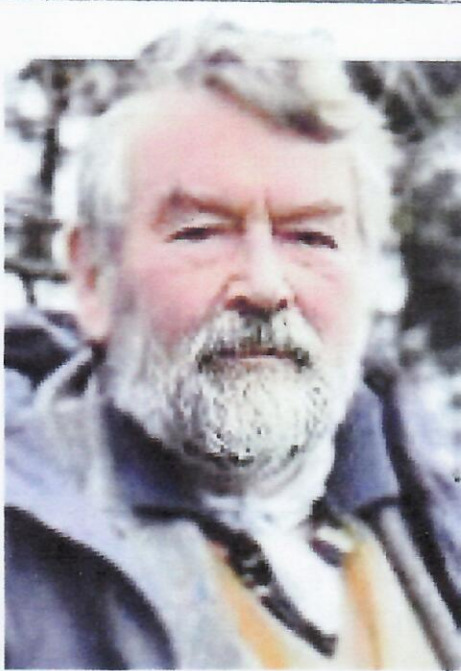


THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN

By John Fowles 1926 – 2005



John Fowles was born on 31st March 1926 and moved to Lyme Regis in 1968. He bought Belmont House, the former home of Eleanor Coade, just after finishing writing "The French Lieutenants Woman." He had a great interest in the town's history and he became curator of Lyme Regis Museum in 1979, a post he held for ten years. He died in 2005 in Axminster Hospital from a heart attack.

The inspiration for this book came when, in 1966, Fowles had an image of "a woman who stands at the end of a deserted quay and stares out to sea." He was determined that she belonged to the Victorian age and had 'mysterious' and 'vaguely romantic' qualities. He made a note of this vision and hence it gave him the start of "The French Lieutenant's Woman" which he wrote in 1969.

The book became a best seller but received criticism for being a "feminist novel" and in an interview in 1985 John Fowles did declare himself "a feminist." One critic refers to the novel as "histiograph metafiction"! Another writes that it is "a good love story" (much better to understand!!) It was, however, named one of the "Notable books of 1969" calling it a successful blending of two worlds as the author writes in modern terminology of the Victorian era. "He has evoked in perfect detail the Victorian world of repressed sexuality and cruel hypocrisy."

Set in the mid 1900s we find Sarah Woodruff living in Lyme Regis as a disgraced woman supposedly abandoned by a French ship's officer who had returned to France. Lieutenant Varguennes was shipwrecked and injured his leg. He was nursed back to health by Sarah at the home of Captain and Mrs Talbot where she was governess to their children. Although he flirted with her and wished to seduce her he was married as she later found out. It was believed that she had had an affair with him and because of this she lost her job and was unable to gain employment as she was labelled a disgraced woman. The vicar manages to persuade Mrs Poutney, a wealthy widow, to take in Sarah as a paid companion. Mrs Poutney lived in Lyme Regis at Marlborough House, with a magnificent prospect of Lyme Bay which was much to Sarah's delight.

She spends most of her time on The Cobb where she stares out to sea awaiting the return of the Lieutenant. Sarah has a "fixed delusion that he is an honourable man and will one day return to her."



Charles Smithson was a wealthy gentleman and was heir to a minor title. He was engaged to Ernestina Freeman, the daughter of a wealthy "self made man" - a tradesman! Charles' hobby is collecting fossils and he considers himself something of a naturalist. So, Lyme Regis is the perfect place for them to holiday as Charles can go fossil hunting whilst Ernestina can visit her Aunt Tranter. He had "already visited what was perhaps the most famous shop in Lyme in those days - The Old Fossil Shop, founded by the remarkable Mary Anning." Whilst out walking with Ernestine he sees Sarah for the first time on The Cobb and becomes curious about her and asks who she is. To which Ernestine replied "It must be poor Tragedy, a nickname, well one of her nicknames. The fishermen have a gross name for her, they call her "The French Lieutenant's (whore) woman."



Charles is intrigued and wishes to find out more about her but when he approaches her for the first time and when she turned to him "He felt immediately as if he had trespassed : as if The Cobb belonged to that face and not to the Ancient Borough of Lyme." Charles soon has clandestine meetings with Sarah and eventually falls in love with her.

The conflict between Charles' love for Ernestina and also for Sarah takes up the major portion of the novel.

The conclusion of the story is open to the readers interpretation as John Fowles was unable to decide how to finish his novel. He considered three endings :-

- Does Charles marry Ernestina?
- Does Charles have a successful relationship with Sarah?
- Is Charles left wandering the world without a partner?

You'll have to read it to find out!

The book is a brilliant novel and one of the most successful and highly praised books of the '60s.

In 1981 it was made into a film starring Meryl Streep and Jeremy Irons. Adapted as a film, by Harold Pinter, it received great success and was nominated for 5 Academy awards. Among these were Best Actress and Best Writing but unfortunately it lost out to "On Golden Pond" starring Henry Fonda and Katherine Hepburn. However Streep won a BAFTA and a Golden Globe for Best Actress and Pinter was nominated for a Golden Globe for Best Script. The film's music and sound track won BAFTAs and the film was awarded "Best Motion Picture - Drama."

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