Rebecca, published in 1938, was Daphne du Maurier’s most successful novel. In 1940, film director Alfred Hitchcock won Best Picture Oscar with his first Hollywood film, ‘Rebecca’, based on the book Rebecca and starring Laurence Olivier and Joan Fontaine.

The narrator of the story, a naive young woman, marries Maxim de Winter, an aristocrat several years older than herself. They return to his large country home, Manderley, in Cornwall, to a life that his new wife knows little about. Inexperienced, self-conscious and lacking in confidence, the new Mrs de Winter finds her life dominated by the shadow of Maxim’s first wife, Rebecca, who died at Manderley a year earlier. The narrator becomes obsessed with the presence of Rebecca. She finds her new husband distant and unapproachable. She feels the servants and friends of the family are comparing her unfavourably with his first wife, and she feels more and more inadequate.

Only when a ship is blown off course at sea, does the new Mrs de Winter begin to learn just how much her husband needs her.

Daphne du Maurier was born in London in 1907 into a richly artistic family. She grew up in a lively household where famous writers often visited. She was the favourite daughter of her father, actor Gerald du Maurier, and led an indulged idyllic childhood with tremendous freedom. However, as Daphne and her two sisters became adolescents, their father became very possessive, discouraging friendships with boys and demanding their attention. Daphne later wrote several short stories that reveal the strong influence of her dogmatic father.

When Daphne was a young woman, her family bought a country home in Cornwall, in the south-west England. Daphne fell in love with Cornwall’s wild seas and isolated coves. She realized that she had found her spiritual home, and later she set many of her books there. Daphne was fiercely independent and embarrassed by her indulgent upbringing, and was determined to support herself. In 1927 she wrote her first novel The Loving Spirit in Cornwall. When it was published, it brought her fame. It also brought her a husband, Major Frederick Arthur Montague Browning, a war hero, was 34 years old when he sailed in to Fowey harbour in Cornwall in October 1931 to find the author of the book he so much admired. A year later, they married. They had a quiet wedding in Cornwall, after which they sailed off and moored for the night in ‘Frenchman’s Creek’, which Daphne later used as the title of one of her novels. They had two daughters and one son.

Daphne and her husband found it difficult to share each other’s lives. They spent a lot of time apart during and after the war, when her husband worked for Prince Philip at Buckingham Palace in London. Also, Daphne disliked formal socializing and preferred a natural outdoor life.

Despite her writing success, Daphne remained humble and self-conscious about her books. She spent a large portion of her later life alone, walking the moors and cliffs tops, and sailing the Cornish seas and rivers. In thunderstorms she would disappear from home, returning windswept and drenched hours later.

In 1952 Daphne du Maurier was made a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, and in 1969 she was created a Dame of the British Empire. She lived in Cornwall until her death in 1989.

In 1937-8, when Daphne du Maurier wrote Rebecca, Europe was on the brink of war. Many contemporary writers were concerned with subjects such as poverty, psychology, war, fascism and religion. Authors like James Joyce, were exploring the ‘stream of consciousness’ technique to illustrate the human condition.

Daphne du Maurier ignored the modern trends and wrote straightforward stories that gripped the imagination of her reader. She recognized early on in her career, that it was mainly women who read her books. She fed her audience’s desire for adventure, romance, sexuality and mystery with stories that transported them into the world of their fantasies.

When she began to write Rebecca, in 1937, Daphne was living in Egypt, where her husband had been posted. Daphne would escape the heat of Egypt by imagining she was in the cool woods around Menabilly, a house she loved in Cornwall. These daydreams became the foundation for Rebecca, which has a haunting, dreamlike quality to it.
Maxim de Winter’s house, Manderley, was based on Menabilly. In the first chapter of Rebecca, the narrator dreams she is wandering through the woods of Manderley, and wakes to the hard skies of a foreign day. This element of fantasy continues throughout the novel. The new Mrs de Winter loses herself in the shadow of Rebecca. She spends her time imagining Maxim and Rebecca together, until she is so blinded by her fantasies that she sees her marriage as a failure.

Much of the character of the second Mrs de Winter is based on Daphne’s feelings at this time. Daphne felt out of place and ill at ease in Egypt. She never enjoyed formal social events, but was forced to socialize and entertain at parties. She hated these functions, feeling self-conscious, shy, out of depth and inadequate. These are the feelings she gives the character of the second Mrs de Winter, who is lost and awkward in her new life as mistress of Manderley. The second Mrs de Winter has never known the life of aristocracy and struggles with the social demands. Du Maurier emphasizes her sense of inadequacy by not even giving her a name.

Daphne wanted critics to see that Rebecca showed a relationship between a powerful man and his intimidated wife, and that it was a study of how jealousy motivates people. However, the critics did not see these themes in her novel and acclaimed Rebecca as a melodrama which ‘brilliantly creates a sense of atmosphere and suspense’.

**Communicative activities**

The following teacher-led activities cover the same sections of text as the exercises at the back of the reader, and supplement those exercises. For supplementary exercises covering shorter sections of the book, see the photocopyable Student’s Activities pages of this Factsheet. These are primarily for use with class readers but, with the exception of discussion and pair/group work questions, can also be used by students working alone in a self-access centre.

**ACTIVITIES BEFORE READING THE BOOK**

Divide students into small groups. Ask them to look at the front cover of the book and to discuss the characters pictured there. What are their relationships? What sort of life do they lead? When is the book set? What are they like as people? Each group reports what they think. Then have a whole-class discussion.

**ACTIVITIES AFTER READING A SECTION**

**Chapters 1–3**

Divide the class into small groups. Give each group an anagram of a name of one of the characters (teach the word as a vocabulary word). Students unscramble their name and then think up as many adjectives as they can to describe that person. Each group tells the rest of the class their adjectives, and the class try to work out who the character is.

**Chapters 4–6**

Divide the class into small groups. Give each group the name of a character in these chapters. Groups discuss and write a history for their character, describing the childhood, adolescence, family, jobs etc. that person may have had. Each group reports their thoughts to the whole class.

**Chapters 7–8**

Class act out the courtroom scene. Divide the class into two groups. Sit them on opposite sides of the room. One group acts the role of barristers and solicitors. The other group act the parts of the characters in the book. The ‘solicitors’ take it in turns to ask the ‘characters’ questions about Rebecca’s death. The ‘characters’ take it in turns to answer the questions, assuming the part of the character the ‘solicitors’ want to question.

**Chapters 9–10**

Divide the class into small groups. Give each group the name of one of these characters: Ben, Mrs Danvers, Jack Favell, Frank. Each group discusses the role their character plays in the novel. They say how important their character is to the book, and whether the book would be less successful if their character was not included.

**ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK**

Divide the class into small groups. Ask each group to discuss the following and decide which statement they feel is most true:

- **Rebecca** is a novel about:
  - (a) The effects of the past upon the present.
  - (b) The balance of power in marriage.
  - (c) The fantasies of a jealous, insecure woman.

If the students feel that none of these statements describes the book to them, they can come up with their own ideas. Have a class discussion.

**Glossary**

It will be useful for your students to know the following new words. They are practised in the ‘Before You Read’ sections of exercises at the back of the book. (Definitions are based on those in the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English.)

- **Chapters 1–3**
  - bay (n) an area of the sea that curves inwards towards the land
  - cottage (n) a small house in the country
  - disturb (v) to interrupt someone so they cannot continue what they are doing
  - misery (n) great suffering or discomfort
  - scorn (n) the feeling that someone is stupid or not as good as other people
  - weed (n) a wild plant growing where it is not wanted

- **Chapters 4–6**
  - fancy dress (n) clothes that make you look like a famous person or character from a story
  - modesty (n) being unwilling to talk proudly about your achievements

- **Chapters 7–8**
  - cliff (n) a high rock with a very steep side, usually near the sea
  - colonel (n) a high rank in the army
  - Inspector (n) a middle rank in the police

- **Chapters 9–10**
  - relief (n) a feeling of comfort when something frightening or painful has ended
  - X-ray (n) a photograph of the inside of someone’s body using a beam of radiation
Penguin Readers Factsheets

Student's activities

Photocopiable
These activities can be done alone or with one or more other students. Pair/group-only activities are marked.

Activities before reading the book

1 Read the Introduction to the book and answer these questions. Try not to look at the book.
   (a) How old was Daphne du Maurier when she died?
   (b) Where did Daphne live as a child?
   (c) In what way was Daphne connected to the theatre?
   (d) How did Daphne meet her husband?
   (e) What sort of books did Daphne write?
   (f) Who starred in the film ‘Rebecca’? Who directed it?
   (g) Where are most of Daphne’s books set?
   (h) Which is Daphne du Maurier’s best-known book?

Activities while reading the book

CHAPTER 1

1 Work in pairs. Discuss what you think has happened to Manderley.

2 These sentences have the wrong endings. Match the second half of the sentence to the right first half.
   (a) Beautiful Manderley lay ... like a dark hand across a face.
   (b) Mrs Van Hopper’s interest in other people was ... like a lake undisturbed by wind or storm.
   (c) Maxim de Winter looks ill .... because Manderley is no more.
   (d) The sea lay calm ... like a jewel in the hollow of a hand.
   (e) The girl knows she can sit silently with Maxim de Winter ... because his wife drowned in the bay near Manderley.
   (f) A cloud came over the moon ... like a disease.
   (g) They cannot talk of Manderley ... because there is no sense of awkwardness.

CHAPTER 2

1 Work in pairs or small groups. Discuss how Mrs Danvers feels towards the new Mrs de Winter. Why do you think she feels like this?

2 Answer these questions.
   (a) How long have the de Winter’s been married before they go to Manderley?
   (b) Write down three adjectives that describe how the narrator feels coming to Manderley.
   (c) What changes have been made to Manderley while Maxim de Winter was away?
   (d) Why do you think Maxim wants to use a different wing of the house?
   (e) What was the house like when the first Mrs de Winter was alive?

CHAPTER 3

1 Write in the name of the person who is speaking. Then, for each sentence write who is meant by the word in italics.
   (a) ....................... says, ‘If she doesn’t like you, she’ll tell you so to your face.’
   (b) ....................... says, ‘I can’t help feeling it’s going to be rather difficult for you here at first.’
   (c) ....................... says, ‘I shouldn’t have more to do with her than you can help.’
   (d) ....................... says, ‘She’s gone in the sea, hasn’t she? She won’t come back no more?’
   (e) ....................... says, ‘I thought he might have fallen and hurt himself.’

2 Why do you think Daphne du Maurier does not give the narrator her own name? Discuss with another student.

CHAPTER 4

1 Are these sentences true or false? If they are false correct them.
   (a) Rebecca kept her boat in the boathouse.
   (b) Rebecca’s boat was found two months after the accident.
   (c) Frank was not happy talking about Rebecca.
   (d) Rebecca often went sailing on her own late at night.
   (e) Maxim recognised Rebecca’s body that was found washed up by the tide.
   (f) Frank thought Rebecca was pretty.

2 Work in pairs. One student is Frank, the other is the narrator. Have their conversation when the narrator asks questions about Rebecca.

CHAPTER 5

1 Complete the following sentences.
   (a) Rebecca threatened to have Ben put in the madhouse because ............................................
   (b) Jack Favell is surprised to see the narrator because .................................................................
   (c) Rebecca’s bedroom is the same as it was before ...........................................................................
Activities after reading the book

Write down or discuss with another student:
Maxim says to his second wife ‘Rebecca has won.’ Do you think this is true? If so, in what way has she ‘won’.