

Isolation Chamber Vacation

- Cover & inside cover**
Kirsty Buchanan, *Night (Edna O'Brien)*, 2016, annotated book
- 4 Introduction and Inspiration**
Sarah Kathryn Cleaver
- 8 Nicola Frimpong's Violent Visions**
interview by Sarah Kathryn Cleaver
- 10 The Triangular Hour**
Susie Hamilton
- 12 Recommended Viewing**
Sarah Kathryn Cleaver
- 14 The World of Juno Calypso**
interview by Sarah Kathryn Cleaver
- 18 Reading & Thinking & Drawing**
Kirsty Buchanan
- 22 The Museum of Cathy**
Anna Stothard with illustrations by Annabel Dover
- 24 The Linguistic Cross Dresser**
Katerina Jebb
- 26 Screen Widows**
Cathy Lomax
- 29 Ends**
Hannah Ford
- 30 Emoji / Bed / Consent / Landlord?**
Paul Kindersley
- 31 Solitude in Public**
Nina Fowler
- Back Cover**
Alli Sharma, *P.T.E.*, 2016, acrylic on paper

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A publication by Cathy Lomax.
Guest editor: Sarah Kathryn Cleaver
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Death and Liberation

Cathy Lomax assesses the appeals of the on-screen widow

A friend of mine recently admitted that she fantasised about becoming a widow because it meant she could be on her own without having been dumped. Fantasies aside, the reality of widowhood must be distressing - the end of a partnership, the loss of a companion, a cruel end to what once was a sizzling romance. But this end is also the

experience and maybe most importantly they might just be independently wealthy. In films, a widow provides the writer with the opportunity to give a no-longer-young woman an interesting story away from the boring restrictions of marriage (akin to the way that fictional children are often orphans to allow them to sidestep the restrictions that parents would surely place upon them).

Widows might be good for stories but in mid-century Hollywood if a widow dares to strive for independence she is almost inevitably punished. In the hands of the best directors this can highlight the way older women are treated by society, critiquing rather than suggesting that this is how it should be. Society decrees that a good widow



beginning of a new period of life with a Pandora's box of potential possibilities. So could it be that the death of the restrictive bond of coupledom might just be redemptive, a period of discovery and taking control, a time to do whatever the hell you like? My grandmother was excited after my grandfather died because it meant she would be able to cook the vegetarian food that she loved but he would not tolerate.

Widows have an aura of mystery because they have 'a past'. 'The poor unfortunates left behind when their spouse passes on' notes the film review site www.movieretriever.com, 'formerly looked down upon by a puritanical populace (are) now viewed as some sort of sex symbol.' Widows are intriguing, the shackles of marriage have been cast off and a new world of responsibility or no responsibilities lies ahead. They may be vulnerable, they most definitely have sexual

should dress in black, stay at home and knit. If she strays from this then trouble will almost certainly ensue but maybe, just maybe, trouble is better than entombment.

In Ernst Lubitsch's 1934 film *Trouble in Paradise*, Madame Mariette Colet is a beautiful, young, carelessly wealthy widow in between-the-wars, decadent France. The film, made pre-Hays code, is heavy with sexual innuendo and irony and was considered so racy during the code era that it wasn't seen again until its rediscovery in the late 1960s. Kay Francis, who specialised in wearing beautiful clothes on-screen and living a sex and drugs life off-screen, plays Mme Colet. She is uninterested in her dull suitors and instead falls for Gaston, a charming conman. 'I came here to rob you but unfortunately I fell in love with you' he says as he leaves before the police catch up with him. 'You wanted 100,000 francs and I thought that you wanted me,' says

Mme Colet as he apologetically takes a set of her pearls home to his con woman wife. As the film ends she appears to shrug off the bad experience and hopefully continues to have fun and ignore her dull suitors.

Vivien Leigh in the 1961 film *The Roman Spring of Mrs Stone* plays a very different kind of widow. Karen Stone is a famous actress with a devoted husband who retires suddenly when the critics deride her for playing much younger women on stage. On the get away flight, her husband dies and she ends up alone in Rome. She decides to stay and, as she drifts around the city, she finds that she still desires the desire that she thought, while with her ageing husband, had gone forever. Encouraged by a

charity of her down-at-heel sister in San Francisco.

In order to maintain her selfhood Jasmine lives a kind of fantasy life – she just cannot accept the drudgery of everydayness. The one man who does meet her high standards is repelled when he finds out she has lied about her past. It is only then, when she is truly on her own, that Jasmine is forced to confront reality and reconstruct herself, by herself, as a real person in her own right.

The missing link between Jasmine and Karen is Blanche Dubois, the widowed anti-heroine of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, played (as was Karen Stone) by Vivien Leigh in the 1951 film directed by Elia Kazan. Blanche and Karen Stone belong to a group of complexly nuanced older woman



scheming Contessa, Karen becomes a sugar mama to pretty boy Paolo, played by Warren Beatty. Despite her misgivings she falls in love and visits Elizabeth Arden for a makeover. It ends badly of course (this is a Tennessee Williams story after all) and she is dumped for a younger model despite her fashionably short hair and new Balmain clothes. In the end she foregoes all dignity to succumb to the thrill of living, even if that might mean dying.

More recent film widow, Jasmine French, is a snob who has lived a privileged life with her financier husband Hal, in Woody Allen's 2013 film *Blue Jasmine*. When she confronts Hal about his infidelity he tells her that he is leaving her for the other woman. In a fit of pique she exposes his underhand financial dealings. His reputation ruined, he commits suicide and Jasmine (played by Cate Blanchett) finds herself husbandless, penniless and dependent on the

created by Tennessee Williams, which also include Anna Magnani as the widowed Serafina in the *Rose Tattoo* (Daniel Mann, 1955). Like Jasmine, Blanche is down on her luck and relies on the charity of a sister in San Francisco. Blanche was married to a boy whom she loved very much but he also kills himself, not because of financial misdemeanours but because he can't live with the realisation that he is gay. Both Jasmine and Blanche have their eyes opened to the unpalatable truth of things when faced with death and adversity and it tips them over into mental instability. Jacqueline Bisset's character Norma McIver deals with the revelation about her dead husband's sexuality in an altogether more circumspect way in the 1968 film *The Detective*, a film that plays down the melodrama in an effort to be contemporary. When *The Detective* (played by Frank Sinatra) tells Norma that her husband has killed himself because he couldn't deal with his homosexuality, she simply

says that she should have known. Both Norma and The Detective's nymphomaniac wife (played by Lee Remick) are forms of male fantasy women – sexually available and helplessly feeling that they are to blame for the things that happen around them.

In *Pal Joey* (George Sidney, 1957) Rita Hayworth plays Vera Prentice-Simpson, an ex-stripper who has married into money. Now a society widow she stalks Frank Sinatra's Joey and tries despicably (as the film would have you believe) to buy his affections by setting him up in business. He ultimately does the honourable thing (as the film would have you believe) and chooses the younger (poor) woman (Kim Novak) over Vera, who presumably is tossed aside to follow the same desperate fate as Karen Stone. The widow once again is made to suffer for daring to try and control her own fate.

The one that got away is Cary Scott, a character played by Jane Wyman in *All That Heaven Allows*, a film directed by Douglas Sirk in 1955. Recently widowed Cary is hit on by the lascivious husbands of her friends at a party. They see her as an opportunity, a sex starved widow who won't expect a long-term relationship. She is repelled by their advances and is drawn to a simpler alternative lifestyle far away from the wife swapping mendacity of suburbia. She becomes attracted to her gardener (played by Rock Hudson), who is younger than her and cares nothing for social conventions. She hangs out in his log cabin, dances at impromptu parties and reads Thoreau. Her socially conservative children disapprove and buy her a television as a

companion for her imprisonment in her large house. But after her children show that they are not really very interested in her she learns to ignore what others think and instead does what she wants (which is Rock Hudson). Douglas Sirk's glossy Hollywood melodramas have been recognised retrospectively as a critique of American values. Beneath the sparkly surface they have a distinct anti-capitalist agenda that reflects Sirk's roots in East German theatre.

Film widows are almost always rejected. Their independence and wealth are seen as emasculating by younger men and so they must be put in their place by being reminded that, however hard they try, they can never compete with younger women. Feminine appeal is conventionally associated with youth, and films, which tend to be made by men, prop this up because men prefer to keep their fantasy women inexperienced and pliable.

The most important lesson that these representations of the widow teach us is that we should ignore social conventions and that means behaving like a man, taking control and never falling for the hearts and flowers romance of love (and don't be surprised if that handsome young man turns out to be gay). Maybe the period piece, *Love and Friendship* (Whit Stillman, 2016), adapted from a Jane Austen novella, actually has the most enlightened widow of them all – Lady Susan Vernon, played by Kate Beckinsale 'the most accomplished flirt in all England.' Lady Susan manages to control her own destiny (and everybody else's) by outsmarting and manipulating everyone around her. When her daughter worries about choosing the right husband because marriage is forever Lady Susan curtly replies 'not in my experience'. For the rest of us less self-assured mortals it is worth listening to Lauren Bacall, Humphrey Bogart's widow, who advised women in her position to hold on to their independence... 'don't sell the house... and don't sleep with Frank Sinatra.'

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