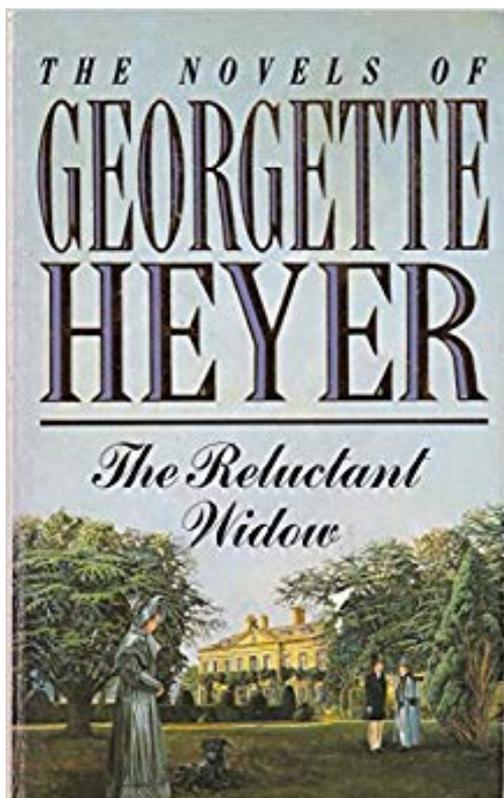


## The Reluctant Widow by Georgette. Heyer



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## Reviews of the *The Reluctant Widow* by Georgette. Heyer

Fegelv

Talk about reluctant - I've been dreading writing this review. I adore Georgette Heyer, and sincerely hope this remains the most troubled book she ever wrote, in my opinion, anyway. It certainly doesn't make you want to rush out and read her mysteries. The novel sets out to have some fun with the well-worn British Gothic novel. You know the schtick - poor but proud beautiful young governess in danger in the old dark house. In the hands of a master as deft as Heyer, it should have been a piece of cake. It does feature her usual well-drawn characters and fine dialog. But it's troubled from the start, although it's arguable that stretching credibility is part of the game here. Elinor Rochdale leaves London for her new post, arriving in the village of Billingshurst in Sussex, where, by accident, she gets into the wrong carriage and ends up being mistaken for a woman answering an ad placed by the handsome, overbearing and seemingly straightforward Lord Carlyon. He's seeking a woman, any woman, to marry his cousin Eustace Cheviot. It won't be for long, he assures her, since Eustace, a drunkard and a louse, is rapidly drinking himself to death. And the young man will not impose on

her, since he agrees with the rather convoluted reasons for the wedding. Events move forward from here at a dizzying pace, and by midnight Elinor is a widow, installed in said old dark house. She becomes entangled with Carlyon's large family, sends for her own old governess to stay with her, the comedy relief of Miss Beccles, and we're off, to secret doors, midnight visitors, gunplay, stolen government documents, French spies, and a very large dog named Bouncer, who's one of the best characters in it.

Sounds like fun, doesn't it? For awhile there, it is. So why does it fail? Hard to say, but I suppose the worst part is the flat, incredibly disappointing ending. Actually, I couldn't quite believe it. Not the Who, or the How, but the resolution itself, in a way that's difficult to explain without spilling a spoiler. I will take it on myself to warn you that no one pays for an assault on Elinor or the murder of one of the characters, which, despite the reasons feebly given, is very, very dicey. Take-off or not, a story still has to be believable.

Heyer fans know this is the only one of her books ever made into a film, which is sad. All the talk of a film version of *The Grand Sophy* seems to have faded away. Someone dug up an obscure German-language version of the charming *Arabella* from 1959 that doesn't look like much to brag about. The British film of *The Reluctant Widow* from 1950 is called *The Inheritance*, and is nearly impossible to get hold of, though someone has posted it in sections on YouTube, with Greek subtitles. Don't be too bitter - it's pretty lousy. Heyer never saw it, and her son walked out half-way through. Interestingly, both Heyer biographers give the experience of the movie very short shrift. Heyer was upset from the time she saw the promotional materials, which she said were abysmal and salacious, and made her feel like a slug was crawling over her skin. Fair enough, I guess, since she really hated being labeled an author of what we call bodice-rippers. But from what I've seen of it, the film suffers from a lousy choice of cast, a plodding script, and absolutely none of the sparkle required doing Georgette Heyer. Doubtless anyone who filmed this would want to rewrite the ending, though the reason for changing Elinor's first name escapes me. As bad as anything Hollywood might have done.

So, why did I give it four stars? Because it's Heyer, so of course there are some wonderful things in it. Solid history, great characters, great dialog, this despite the romance being a bit flat. The exquisite dandy Francis Cheviot is laugh-out-loud funny. Along with eccentrics and dogs and strong-minded women, she was a master for some reason at adolescent boys, who always shine, as does the character of Nicky in this book. Had this had a believable ending, it still would have been so-so overall, but would have rated a far higher place in the pantheon. As it is, I think it's really only for Heyer aficionados like me, who intend to read all of her books.

Between reading this book and writing this review, I polished off *Cotillion*. Incredible! When it was done, I shouted to my husband, "She's back!" Along with *Venetia*, it now shoots to the top of the favorites list. If you're looking for your dose of Regency, I'd suggest it whole-heartedly, and far above *The Reluctant Widow*.

Marg

I am posting this audiobook review using the format that Audible recommends:

Overall: 5 stars

Performance: 5 stars

Story: 5 stars

Q. If you were to make a film of this book, what would the synopsis be?

A. In England of the Regency period, Miss Elinor Rochdale, an attractive, twenty-six-year-old, orphaned gentlewoman, reluctantly arrives on the stage at the village of Billingshurst in Sussex for

her first position as a governess since her father's death left her in poverty. She is met by a carriage she wrongly assumes has been provided by her new employer, a married lady with a young son, when the driver asks if she has come in response to an advertisement. On arriving at a dilapidated mansion after a long drive through the night, she is introduced not to her employer, but to a distinguished gentleman in his mid-thirties named Lord Carlyon. Like the woman requiring a governess, he placed an advertisement in the paper, hence the confusion. However, he advertised not for a governess, but for a woman willing to wed his cousin, Eustace Cheviot. Elinor is appalled at the suggestion that she participate in a marriage in name only with Eustace, whom Carlyon freely admits is a drunken reprobate. His motivation for this excessively odd arrangement is that Lord Carlyon is Eustace's primary heir and does not want to inherit from his cousin, whose loathing of Carlyon is fully reciprocated. Unfortunately, before Elinor can make her refusal immutably clear to him, Lord Carlyon's 18-year-old brother Nicky precipitously arrives, exclaiming that he has accidentally stabbed Cousin Eustace, who now lies dying in an inn a few miles distant. Lord Carlyon increases the strength of his matter-of-fact persuasion of Elinor to marry his cousin to such an extent that she is carried away by the force of his personality and the utter confidence in milord expressed by every person in his vicinity. Within hours she is Eustace's wife, and within hours after that, she becomes a reluctant widow.

Q. What does Cornelius Garrett bring to this story that you would not experience if you just read the book?

A. For a novel to work well as an audiobook, two factors are essential: (1) It must be exceptionally well written in order to thrive beneath the intense scrutiny of being read out loud at a fraction of the pace that a reader could read the book silently to herself. The Reluctant Widow passes that test with flying colors. (2) The narrator must be an excellent performer, able to convincingly portray every kind of character, from old to young, male or female, and different nationalities. Cornelius Garrett is one of the best narrators I've ever listened to, achieving all of these requirements magnificently. When I had previously read this book to myself silently, I thought it was mildly amusing but not one of Georgette Heyer's funniest books. Mr. Garrett does such a fabulous job of acting out each of the characters, however, I was frequently laughing out loud due to the skill of his remarkable performance.

Q. What was one of the most memorable moments of The Reluctant Widow?

A. There are endless things to love about Georgette Heyer's Regency comedies, but a particular brilliance of hers as an author are her quirky casts of subcharacters, each drawn with a wonderfully unique voice. In this particular book, my two favorite subcharacters are Nicky, Lord Carlyon's youngest brother, and his gigantic, sweet-tempered, but poorly trained dog Bouncer. The two of them are absolutely hilarious, both separately and together. Heyer creates a great deal of comedy from lovable Bouncer's well-meaning, guard-dog mistakes. The funniest scene with Bouncer for me is when he misunderstands Nicky's command to keep Elinor safe by guarding her while Nicky runs an errand. Bouncer wrongly interprets Nicky's order to mean that he must guard Elinor as if she is a dangerous individual whom he must not allow to escape. As a result, dear old Bouncer refuses to allow her to stir out of her chair for long, irritating hours until Nicky returns and calls him off. The many failed efforts of Elinor and the household staff to bribe Bouncer to let her go are hilarious.

Q. Which character--as performed by Cornelius Garrett--was your favorite?

A. It is hard to pick only one. Of particular note is Mr. Garrett's performance of Nicky's adorable, youthful enthusiasm, the country wisdom of the butler Barrow who has a thick Sussex accent, and the sweet, unworldly remarks of Elinor's middle-aged, former governess and current companion,

Miss Beccles (nicknamed Becky).

Q. Any additional comments?

A. I was delighted to discover this recording, which offers me the opportunity to enjoy one of my favorite books by one of my favorite authors in the form of an outstanding audiobook.

Cae

Lady of fashion turned governess Elinor Rochdale gets into the wrong carriage on her way to her next post. She finds herself pitched into high drama, with a fatal barroom fight, sinister housebreakers, and French spies. The story is delightfully absurd, and a lot of the humor of the book arises from the commonsense ordinariness of the characters when faced with such melodramatic events.

A number of Georgette Heyer's books feature what I would call an "angry" heroine, and usually I find those heroines rather tiresome. The knee-jerk tirades get on my nerves! But in *\*The Reluctant Widow,\** Elinor has just enough justification for her ire to make it logical. I do enjoy the mystery aspect of it, and the twist at the end; and of course the minor characters are vividly drawn, as in most Heyer novels.

I suppose my one quibble would be that I don't find the hero very romantic. I could have done with a few more hints of his growing attachment—would have liked to see his heart at war with his matter-of-fact nature. He could be less perfect at stage-managing, too, especially when his emotions got entangled with his judgment. But for me that's less important than the fun of the plot and characters.

This is one of Georgette Heyer's shorter Regency romances, and not overburdened with Regency slang—a good starting point for someone wishing to try this author for the first time. It's at the top of my second rank of Heyer faves.

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