



MY DINNER WITH JEAN

Encounter in Paris with a screen idol

By Cedric Pulford

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In 1959, then-student editor CEDRIC PULFORD invited the young American actress Jean Seberg to write an article for *Oxford Opinion*. This led to a memorable encounter in Paris, and a lifelong fascination with the star

MY path crossed with Jean's towards the start of her life in Paris, when I encountered not Jean the actress but Jean the writer. So as my tribute to a fine star and a fine person I'd like to suggest that with another turn of fate's wheel she might also have become a fine writer.

The story begins at Oxford University in 1959, when I was editing a student magazine called *Oxford Opinion*. In Max Beerbohm's novel *Zuleika Dobson*, the entire male student body of the university fell in love with the beautiful Zuleika. I won't say that Jean had quite that high a profile, but she was pretty big in Oxford at that time after the huge publicity surrounding Saint Joan!

And so I had the idea of making a big splash for *Oxford Opinion* by inviting this beautiful but unlikely movie star, this girl from a little place in the middle of nowhere (quote, unquote!) who bobs up in Paris speaking what a newspaper at the time described as 'fluent but ungrammatical French', to write an article.

I sent a letter via Columbia Pictures in London without any great expectations. But I underestimated both Columbia and Jean. Soon I had a reply: yes, she'd be delighted.

The article that Jean wrote for *Oxford Opinion* was produced without any fuss or complications. There was no press officer intervening in the process. We spoke comfortably on the phone. No fee was mentioned by either side, which was just as well because the magazine had no money. The manuscript when it arrived was clearly genuine: no professional ghost writer would work on a beat-up old typewriter!

In her article, Jean sensitively and maturely for one so young describes the pros and cons of acting. The article also provides several pointers to her interest in writing. She gives 'inability to express oneself in one's own words' as one of the several reasons for wanting to be an

actress. She complains that while a writer has a manuscript rejected for reasons to do with the book, an actor loses a part because of himself.

Jean shows a journalist's awareness of a strong ending when she concludes the article: 'There is always, even in the crowd artists, the bit players, the character actors, that secret hope that when the sheriff gallops up to ask which way he went, the answer will be "He went that-a-way", pointing right on up.' As someone who has taught journalism all over the world, I'd be happy to commend that ending to my students.

And I'm happy to report that the circulation for that issue of *Oxford Opinion* increased in a bound.

My invitation to write the article evidently played directly to Jean's literary ambitions. Garry McGee's 2007 biography of Jean makes clear that she wanted to be a writer. Furthermore, she was in love with one of France's biggest literary lions, Romain Gary, whose fame must have seemed the real deal. Who knows what might have been without the distractions of her later life; who knows what we've missed with the disappearance of her literary papers after she died.

Cue fifty years on, and I'm astonished to find that the *Oxford Opinion* article is quoted in Garry's biography. It's in David Richards' 1981 biography, too (which I somehow missed at the time). Old articles never die, it seems. How this one got into these books shows the after-life that pieces even in the obscurest publications can enjoy.

Garry and his research associate, Michael Coates-Smith, were aware of it from Richards and set about finding the article for themselves. Michael drew a blank at Oxford itself – but found a copy of the magazine on file in Cambridge. One up for Cambridge in the rivalry between these historic varsities!

David Richards, a drama critic at the time, told me he's forgotten where he got the article from, although the answer lies locked in his brother's barn in Massachusetts. It appears that Jean or someone else must have sent it to him. That makes me proud. David wrote in his book: 'When the article appeared, [Jean] told friends it was one of her proudest accomplishments.' That makes me proud, too.

At Jean's invitation I visited her in Paris a year or so later. On a cold night in December 1960 we met at an apartment – presumably the one where Jean and Romain were living. Jean answered the door herself. I was thrown. I didn't think film stars did that.

One of her first remarks to me was not 'Have you seen any of my films?' but 'Have you read any of Romain's books?' As I remember it (and I could be wrong), she pronounced his name as in the English 'main force', rather than with the second syllable through the nose in the French way and unsounded at the end. To a French person it would be the woman's version of the name.

I should have seen the question coming. Jean had mentioned in a letter that she'd shown *Oxford Opinion* to Romain. But he wasn't a big name in England, and I hadn't bothered to find out who he was or what he'd written. 'I know him by repute,' I clunkily replied. End of that topic.

The others at the apartment were Romain, Aki Lehman, Jean's housemate at 55 rue de

Bellechasse (whom I knew as Aki Hersay), and a visiting jazz musician from America whose name has become uncertain after so many years. We all of us went on to the seriously top-end restaurant known as 'Chez Moustache'. This famous restaurant was one of the real Paris locations featured a few years later in the film *Woman Times Seven*, starring Shirley MacLaine.

Jean was warm and utterly charming in an unforced way, not remotely playing the movie star. She wore a simple black dress. As it has emerged in the biographies, numerous witnesses have testified to this aspect of her character. Romain was taciturn. They seemed very comfortable with each other, but their manners were impeccable in avoiding overt displays of their romance. No doubt Romain's political prominence had something to do with that, too.

My abiding memory of the dinner was that Romain looked bored throughout, disappearing several times to make phone calls. To my 22-year-old self this seemed the height of sophistication. For the next several years, I did my best to look bored at social events.

Strangely, I remember hardly a thing that was said at the dinner table. Does this mean that nothing of note was said, or the opposite: that the conversation was so brilliant that my memory crashed from overload? I know I was out of my depth; for me, the occasion was surreal.

The menu might have been written in ancient Egyptian. The only thing I recognised was Chateaubriand steak, which I ordered and then realised to my horror that it was the most expensive item on the menu of this very expensive place. Romain took my order with aplomb.

At one point I must have said something faintly interesting or amusing because Jean laid her hand on my upper arm – the effect was electric. This was the 'Zuleika Dobson effect' that others have also felt – a devastating, unstudied mix of naturalness and allure that was Jean Seberg.

Towards the end of the meal Jean, across the table, asked Romain: 'Are we going to the country tomorrow?' 'To the country' – the very expression she'd used as Cecile in *Bonjour Tristesse*. The phrase pierced me. This was an idyll in which I would have no part, stuck in my pokey, barren hotel room, and preparing to return to an England that seemed to have nothing for me.

And then it was all over. We were standing in a cold street. Jean and Romain went off in one direction, I went in another. Not for want of trying on my part, I never saw or heard from her again. The paths of a young journalist on the treadmill of newspapers and the international film star moving in the company of princes and presidents were too far apart. But I treasure these memories of Jean, and through *Oxford Opinion* I'm proud to be a footnote in her fascinating life of triumph and tragedy.

Jean Seberg's Hollywood career never really took off, but she remains a name in France. She appeared in one of the most important films of the New Wave, Jean-Luc Godard's *A bout de souffle* (English title, *Breathless*), which set a standard for realism and cinematic technique that still applies.

The idyll I imagined for Jean and Romain didn't last. After several good years, they divorced. Always a political activist, Jean became involved with the Black Panthers and was the

subject of a determined FBI smear campaign. Her final decade saw the death of her infant daughter, alcoholism, promiscuity, mental breakdowns and suicide attempts, interrupted by periods when she was her old self again. In 1979, she was found dead in a Paris street after her body had lain undiscovered for 10 days. She was 40.

The official verdict was suicide. Certainly the signs pointed to a further and successful suicide attempt. However, circumstantial evidence hinted at something darker: murder. Jean, often unwise in whom she befriended, may have become caught up in the North African underworld. Romain Gary committed suicide a year later, leaving behind a note: 'No connection with Jean Seberg,' it read in part. Not everyone agreed.

In France, interest in Jean has never died, while in America and Britain her story continues to fascinate a small but faithful band of followers. Marshalltown, her Iowa hometown, held a successful festival devoted to Jean and her films in November 2011. I was flattered to be asked to contribute my memories of her. The next year brought an invitation to attend the festival, again to be held in the 'little place in the middle of nowhere' that I'd long been curious to see.

In the meantime, I found myself face to face with Jean's former housemate Aki Hersay Lehman for the first time in 52 years. She took some discovering. She turned out to be living a few blocks away from her old rue de Bellechasse home – and next door to Jean and Romain's former apartment. It was, I learnt, a place that Jean and Romain found for her.

So here I am sitting comfortably in Aki's rambling old house tucked away behind the apartment block of 110 rue du Bac. She is the longest and strongest link with Jean's Paris life. Aki knew Jean from the earliest days until the last.

I remember Aki very well although I fail to recognise her. She doesn't seem to remember me. Half a century is too long.

Aki receives visitors in her huge bedroom, where almost every square inch is covered with furniture, pictures and memorabilia. Stacks of books and papers on the bed leave just enough room for the hostess herself to squeeze in. She wears a hat but no shoes. Her clothes appear to be more happy accidents than considered choices. None of this matters.

Somewhere in the pile of stuff is the new book that I've sent her from England, *The Films of Jean Seberg*, but for the moment Aki can't find it.

Aki's father was Japanese and her mother English. She is an original character with some offbeat, not to say off the wall, ideas that probably appealed to Jean. She says Jean had a good sense of humour, and she isn't without it herself. Her star sign is Scorpio – as was Jean's, Aki older, the women's birthdays being three days apart. Her zodiac angel is Ariel so naturally 'I wash my clothes with Ariel powder'.

She didn't expect Jean to take her own life but points out that the 'force of life' had gone out of her in the last years. She blames heavy drinking and some of the people around Jean. Romain – whom Aki highly approves of – and others were powerless to help. And yet, as Garry McGee's 2007 biography *Breathless* makes clear, there were times almost to the last when Jean was her old self again: smart and looking forward to the next picture.

Aki's most interesting depiction is of a Jean needy for love. She says: 'Jean always wanted

to be in love ... she didn't like to be alone.' That explains a lot; perhaps everything.

I hope to take Aki back to Chez Moustache, although this has now become an upmarket Chinese restaurant, Lily Wang. She seems to like the idea – but next morning she calls off, explaining that she eats very little these days and restaurants are no longer her thing. So I go myself with two local friends. We raise our glasses to Jean.

Within months Aki – very old but unexpectedly – is dead. I attend her funeral at the Pere Lachaise cemetery. We walk reverentially from the cemetery gates to the gravesite, where there are short addresses but no service. Jean lies across the city in the Montparnasse cemetery. Even after so many years, I was told, fresh flowers and all sorts of memorabilia are to be found on her grave.



Since 2012, journalist Cedric Pulford has been actively involved in supporting the annual Jean Seberg Festival of the Arts in Marshalltown, Iowa (USA), the actress's birthplace

The beautiful but tragic actress Jean Seberg, seen here in Les Grandes Personnes (1961, Zenith International). She wanted to be a writer, and contributed an article to Cedric Pulford's Oxford magazine

BIO NOTE: Jean Seberg made headlines around the world when director Otto Preminger picked her after a search of thousands to play *Saint Joan* in the film of that name (1957). Although the picture was poorly received, she went on to star in more than 30 films. A girl from a small town in the American Midwest, she settled in Paris where she married the celebrated author, Romain Gary, and became – and remains – an icon for the French.

Jean Seberg's film career was unique in embracing major pictures in French, English, Spanish and Italian. Her notable movies include *A bout de souffle* (1960), English title: *Breathless*, a seminal film of the French 'New Wave' cinema; *Lilith* (1964) a moving study in madness, and the charming, early *Bonjour Tristesse* (1958).

She came to the attention of the FBI through her support for the radical Black Panthers. The

agency issued black propaganda against her, which many have blamed for destroying her health. Jean Seberg's last decade was marked by alcoholism and nervous breakdowns. She was found dead in a Paris street in 1979, aged 40, a suspected suicide.

The actress's life is sensitively portrayed in the book *Jean Seberg: Breathless* (a reference to her most famous film), by Garry McGee (2007). Michael Coates-Smith and Garry McGee have written a comprehensive filmography of Jean Seberg's widely scattered work, *The Films of Jean Seberg* (2012)



THANKS FOR THE MEMORY:

Cedric Pulford revisits the Left Bank apartment building (2011) where he met the actress more than 50 years earlier.



NEVER FORGOTTEN:

These leaflets are among many mementoes regularly laid on Jean Seberg's grave in Paris many years after her death (Picture: Ange Tanner)