



Sleeping Beauty

Ross Macdonald

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In **Sleeping Beauty**, Lew Archer finds himself the confidant of a wealthy, violent family with a load of trouble on their hands--including an oil spill, a missing girl, a lethal dose of Nembutal, a six-figure ransom, and a stranger afloat, face down, off a private beach. Here is Ross Macdonald's masterful tale of buried memories, the consequences of arrogance, and the anguished relations between parents and their children. Riveting, gritty, tautly written, **Sleeping Beauty** is crime fiction at its best.

If any writer can be said to have inherited the mantle of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, it is Ross Macdonald. Between the late 1940s and his death in 1983, he gave the American crime novel a psychological depth and moral complexity that his pre-decessors had only hinted at. And in the character of Lew Archer, Macdonald redefined the private eye as a roving conscience who walks the treacherous frontier between criminal guilt and human sin.

Sleeping Beauty Details

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From Reader Review Sleeping Beauty for online ebook

F.R. says

Those old Archer – I’m sorry, ‘Harper’ – movies are a curious pair. The first is your standard, shiny Sixties thriller with lots of good looking people involved in a vastly complicated plot, whilst the other is very much grungy Seventies and actually quite dull. In both, Paul Newman does little more than a schoolboy detective impression. The reason I bring them up is that ‘Sleeping Beauty’ – this volume of Archer’s adventures – has a tremendously visual opening, where our cipher-like detective flies over and then visits one of his favourite beauty spots, which is now being spoilt by a huge oil leak. The contrast of golden beaches, threatened by this pumping black menace coming out of the once clear blue sea, is incredibly well done. It (and the complex case which follows it) deserves to be realised on film, and I’m amazed that it didn’t occur to any eco-minded film producer as The Gulf of Mexico disaster took place last year.

Lew Archer once again travels through deceptions and age-old family secrets, as a young woman’s disappearance gradually becomes a kidnapping, before turning into a couple of murders. MacDonald writes scenes which have a real crackle, there’s a great rhythm to his interrogations and a nice eye for detail that stops them becoming repetitive. The case in question is twisty as hell (one of the writers it actually brought to mind was Christie, in the way that *everyone* is given a motivation to have done it, or at least be part of it), but the denouement manages to be satisfyingly surprising.

So come on then Hollywood money-men: any actor portraying a Phillip Marlowe these days would have to face the near impossible touch of matching Humphrey Bogart; while anyone playing Lew Archer only has to beat Paul Newman pretending to be Humphrey Bogart – and surely that’s possible.

Evgeny says

The story of Sleeping Beauty comes all the way from this guy:

was retold by these guys:

and was used by practically everybody and their brother since then. Welcome to noir version of the tale.

The inspiration for the background of the story came from Santa Barbara oil spill of 1969. I wonder what sort of inspiration Ross Macdonald would get from the recent Mexican Gulf spill... but I digress. Anyhow there is an oil spill near California coast which threatened marine life and brought a lot of protesters that are about to turn violent; people became much more desensitized to such events since early seventies due to their frequent occurrences.

Lew Archer happened to be one of the spectators on the damaged coast. He noticed a young woman who tried to save an oil-covered grebe. He began following her and ended up giving her a ride to the city. She used a phone in Archer’s apartment and left to unknown location with the circumstances leading Archer to believe she is about to commit suicide. His effort to find her before she does uncovered a lot of dead bodies both in past and present, a lot of dark secrets of a lot of different families, and a lot of destroyed lives as a

result of said secrets.

At this point I have to stoop really low and resort to plagiarism. My only excuse: I am going to plagiarize myself. *Money does not buy happiness, but it is much better to cry in a personal limo than in a crowded bus.* I swear the only therapy some people need is change of their lifestyle to the one where you live from paycheck to paycheck. This cures **a lot** of problems - without any kind of professional help.

Unlike previous novels of the series this one failed to make me care about any of the characters - for example I could not care less whether the very special snowflake of the woman I mentioned above ended up alive or dead. Rich spoiled brats rebelling against their parents because they did not have enough personal freedom? Touch luck guys and girls, what about kids who have to bust their ass off working since practically childhood helping supporting their families? I did end up hating the main villain due to the number of lives he/she destroyed and kept destroying.

As a mystery it is still first-rate as I came to expect from Ross Macdonald, even though I felt he recycled some of his own tropes from the earlier works.

For these two reasons I rate the novel with **4 stars**, but this time this is very weak 4 star rating.

Bobby Underwood says

“I tried to move like a neutral in the no man’s land between the lawless and the law. But when the shooting started I generally knew which side I belonged on.”

Archer is on his way back from Mazatlán to Pacific Point, California, when he sees the oil spill that will play a part in this complex unraveling of old sins coming to bear on the present. Some of Macdonald’s descriptions, as seen through Archer’s eyes from the air as his plane comes in, are wonderful, capturing the terrible price paid by nature when men are careless, and care only about money:

“An offshore oil platform stood up out of its windward end like the metal handle of a dagger that had stabbed the world and made it spill black blood.”

Archer as narrator talks about Pacific Point being one of his favorite places on the California coast, because of its beauty. Then once he’s on the ground there’s this:

“From the hill above the harbor I could see the enormous slick spreading like premature night across the sea.”

Moments later, in a walk along the damaged beach, Archer happens upon the girl in the case. Laurel Russo is trying to save a bird covered in oil. Her grief and pain at the bird’s plight tells Archer that she’s in emotional trouble which goes far beyond the bird’s. He takes her back with him to his apartment, and after a phone call to her estranged husband, Tom, a pharmacist, she bolts. Archer quickly discovers she’s taken from his medicine cabinet a bottle of sleeping tablets, and is alarmed because of her fragile state.

Thus begins his desperate search for the girl. He’s seen two men at a restaurant that he notes early on, and they will come into play at a certain point. One of them will, in fact, wash ashore on the morning after

Archer has a brief liaison with Elizabeth. She is tied to the Somerville and Lennox clans, who are responsible for the black blood creeping toward shore. They may also be responsible for some real blood spilled on an escort carrier headed for Okinawa, and in a bedroom where a child remained alone for days after the murder of its mother. There is a ransom note, and a kidnapping which might be very real, or might be faked. That unknown leads Archer to be less than forthcoming with the authorities, because his main priority is Laurel.

I recalled this as my favorite among Ross Macdonald's literate Lew Archer novels. The Lew Archer novels were a means to an end for Macdonald, who used the form to spotlight broken and damaged people in peril, and in need of mending. After revisiting the narrative, I find it to be the zenith of what he tried to do with the detective form, which as he once noted, gave him all the rope he'd ever need. Just how good *Sleeping Beauty* is, and how the author felt about it, might be indicated by his dedicating the book to Eudora Welty, with whom he had a sort of 84 Charing Cross Road type of relationship. *Sleeping Beauty* is literate yet full of movement as the search for Laurel in the present begins spiraling backward toward the past. It is a labyrinth, the entanglement of one family's affairs and the damage it has strewn across both the physical landscape and the emotional one.

One of the things which strikes the reader is how unpleasant most of the people Archer encounters seem to be. Archer occasionally bites back, but has to stop short so that he can find out what he needs to know to find Laurel. There seems to be little warmth or tenderness among most of the family. When they speak, their words have an edge of nastiness or dismissal you often encounter in those who've either gotten their way for too long because of money and bluster, or have never gotten their way because they were the recipients of the bluster, but not the money. The more Archer talks to those around Laurel, the more it becomes evident that something is being hidden:

“The dim air of the place oppressed me. I felt as if I was lost in the catacombs under a city where no one could be trusted or believed.”

That mistrust includes Elizabeth, with whom Archer shares a tender moment, only to discover that's all it was:

“I couldn't tell if she was a hard woman who had moments of softness, or a soft woman who could be hard on occasion.”

The men fare even worse, either unpleasant and obstinate, or deeply troubled, like Laurel's husband, Tom, who may be as messed up as his young wife. Archer walks in on him having a dream, and it confirms that some past trauma is the catalyst for what's happening now. Why Archer even cares, beyond his sense of responsibility over the bottle of sleeping pills, is explained in something Laurel has written on the back of a heartfelt letter from her husband, Tom:

“I get these terrible depressions and then I don't want to live in the world at all. Not even with you. But I'm fighting it.”

It is this letter, and Laurel's response, which creates sympathy for the couple, and Laurel especially. Macdonald wisely gives it to the reader about a quarter way into the story, so we'll care as much as Archer. Up to that point, the people are so insufferable we almost want Archer to start slapping them around. It helps draw the reader in, and explains why Archer puts up with them. He needs them, so he can keep pushing them, and get at the truth so that he can give the couple damaged by their respective families a chance.

The ending is quiet yet powerful, softly and sadly reverberating back through the narrative, as was

Macdonald's intent. *Sleeping Beauty* is a wonderful piece of writing, and I'm still of the opinion that this is his most successful novel in terms of what he was attempting to do. It would certainly explain him dedicating *Sleeping Beauty* to Eudora Welty. On a technical note, it has a couple of typos which don't affect the reading — although one of them makes a sentence confusing for a moment. Every book has them, even the great ones, so it's not a big deal.

This is a terrific, literate novel which just happens to be a mystery story featuring a detective. That's probably the best way to describe all of Macdonald's later novels, once he'd moved sideways from Chandler. I don't quite agree with Anthony Boucher, who suggested in the *New York Times* that Macdonald was a better novelist than Chandler and Hammett ever were, because it really is apples and oranges. I think Eudora Welty came much closer to pinning down the difference in styles, so I'll allow her words to punctuate my review of *Sleeping Beauty*:

“A more serious and complex writer than Chandler and Hammett ever were.”

Bob says

All of the Lew Archer mysteries by Ross Macdonald are very good, and all but two or three are excellent. This one is in the top four or five, which means it is one of the best mystery novels ever written, and beyond that, it is an excellent novel, period.

As always with Lew Archer, there is practically no violence, no gore, nothing lurid, no sensationalism. This one is quite complex, and probably not the first Lew Archer mystery to read if one is new to the series. The reader would be rewarded by keeping a note pad and jotting down the first time and place a character is mentioned, and other key points, such as who is related to whom. But beyond the mystery story aspects, no other mystery novelist that I am aware of has so many insightful observations, compelling similes, and such deep observations on the human condition.

I have read all of the Lew Archer novels at least twice over a period of thirty years. This is one of my personal favorites. Others on my list of favorites are *The Goodbye Look*, *The Wycherly Woman*, and *The Zebra-Striped Hearse*.

The year is 1970 and Archer is flying into LA from Mexico. As they approach, he sees out the window that there is an ugly oil spill from an offshore drilling platform. It's at Pacific Point, a fictional name Macdonald often uses to stand for a small peninsula. From the airport he drives down to have a look and quickly notices a striking young woman trying to rescue oiled birds. She remarks that her family is responsible. He has dinner at a restaurant overlooking the scene and happens to notice an “odd couple” of a young athletic looking man and a little old man, wizened, bald, and scarred.

As the night is coming on he takes a walk down the beach and encounters the same young woman from before, now distraught over the death of the bird. After a brief conversation she surprisingly agrees to let him drive her to West Los Angeles, where Archer lives. He is wary, but they go. She makes a phone call from his apartment, becomes more upset, asks to wash up, then quickly leaves.

Her name was Laurel Russo, wife of Tom Russo a pharmacist. It turns out that she is the daughter of Jack Lennox, a vice president of the company that owns the oil rig.

But instead of ending there, it's only the beginning: Archer soon realizes that while in his bathroom she stole a bottle of sleeping pills, enough to commit suicide, which does not seem outrageous to him given her odd mental state when she left.

He contacts Tom Russo, who hires him to find Laurel. His search soon brings him into contact with the entire wealthy Lennox family, who already have a lot to worry about with the oil spill. Then a drowned body washes up on the beach. It gets even worse with a phone call claiming Laurel is kidnapped and demanding ransom money. The kidnapping is eerily reminiscent of an event fifteen years before in the life of Laurel, when she ran off with a boy named Harold Sherry. Did Sherry kidnap Laurel this time?

Recurring themes: young man hires Archer to find his wife, wealthy families, navy in WWII.

As often happens in a Lew Archer novel, some people are not what they seem, and the deep secrets of 20+ years ago come back to haunt the young people of today — in particular, four young adults who knew each other fifteen years ago: Laurel (Lennox) Russo, Tom Russo, Harold Sherry, Gloria Flaherty.

This may well be the most complex of the Lew Archer novels. But it is not excessively complex. It is like a more complicated version of *The Goodbye Look*.

Important Characters, alive and dead:

Laurel Russo, daughter of

Jack Lennox, oil man.

Marian Lennox, wife of Jack.

Tom Russo, husband of Laurel, pharmacist.

Gloria Flaherty, cousin of Tom, not his lover; has her own boyfriend.

Aunt Martie, Tom's aunt, Gloria's mother.

Joyce Hampshire, friend of Laurel.

Young man in a sweater.

Old bald man with burn scars.

Elizabeth Somerville, aunt of Laurel, brother of Jack Lennox.

Benjamin Somerville, husband of Elizabeth, runs the oil company, navy captain in WWII.

Smith, servant in house of Ben Somerville, old shipmate of Ben Somerville.

William Lenox, oil man, father of Jack and Elizabeth.

Sylvia Lennox, former wife of William, mother of Jack and Elizabeth.

Tony Lashman, secretary to Sylvia.

Connie Hapgood, current paramour of William Lennox.

Joseph Sterling, tailor, made a coat for

Ralph Mungan, who Archer found drowned. Or did he?

Martha Mungan, ex-wife of Ralph.

Allie Russo, mother of Tom, aunt of Gloria, who was murdered 25 years earlier — by whom?

Harold Sherry, a young man with big plans.

Mrs. Sherry, Harold's mother.

Leroy Ellis, public relations man for the oil company. An old shipmate of Ben Somerville.
Nelson Bagley, another old shipmate.

Lawrence Brokaw, doctor of Harold Sherry.

Example of good writing:

The buildings of the motel were made of indestructible concrete block, as if in preparation for an obscure war.

The green Falcon wasn't among the cars in the parking spaces. I parked under the neon "Vacancy" sign and went inside. A man who had been defeated in an obscure war of his own came out of the back and gave me a questioning look across the desk.

Gabriel says

Maybe the closest to telling his own story Macdonald ever got, and yet, not as satisfying as the more abstracted/less autobiographical ones.

Deserved to be better. In fact, it was better than either of the first two books, which I've probably given better ratings, but maybe only because it is also a rewriting of those first two books. He learned from his mistakes. I sense a kind of Raymond Chandler retreat here, a la *The Long Goodbye*, but without the self-conscious winks back to the first book.

Listen, don't kid yourself. Macdonald had one very good trick up his sleeve, and kept playing it, over and over again. The plots of the Archer series start to dissolve when they encounter one another on your shelf, but they can also create powerful reactions. This wasn't one for me.

Competent, extremely so, but without much surprise.

For me, Macdonald's plots are always most impressive when they are both memorable and complex. The first novels are all complex, but suffer in the telling because they get so jumbled up. Macdonald's real skill was not in building the most complex plot but in building it in a way which made (most) of its twists and turns easy to take and yet never gave you a sense of what was around the next corner. That's hard to do. Macdonald could show you that two events were related to each other by more than coincidence without letting on what the relationship really was, and something about the way he structured the novel would keep that relationship, just the fact of its existence, in the back of your mind, just as it's supposed to be in the back of Archer's mind. And then when it finally all comes out, you don't feel confused or lost, just surprised, maybe right along with Archer. That's how it's supposed to go.

AC says

In the long run, Macdonald's reputation will rest on his late novels -- though many readers probably will

never get this far. It's a pity.

This book, Macdonald's penultimate, is flawless. For most of the novel, Archer is operating in his increasingly familiar role of 'therapist with a P.I. license'. But in the meantime, Macdonald has been weaving what ultimately turns out to be one of his best and tightest mystery plots. The writing, plotting, and character handling are all superb.

Tony says

SLEEPING BEAUTY. (1973). Ross Macdonald. ***.

Macdonald manages to keep the story line tight in this novel, and the number of characters to a minimum. It all starts out with an oil leak off the southern California coast. A young girl is found cleaning off a sea bird, trying to save its life. It later turns out that this girl is the daughter of the man who owns the off-shore rig – the source of the leak. Tempers begin to run high as the oil continues to flow, and dead bodies begin to turn up near the scene. All of the corpses are somehow related to the owner of the oil company. Lew Archer is hired on by the husband of the young girl after she disappears and a ransom note appears. The demand is for \$100,000. The money is no issue; it can be provided by the oil family. The key is getting the girl back alive. Once again, however, Archer has to delve deeply into the roots of the family history in order to make sense of what he is looking at today. The plot has a lot of forward motion and more than its share of surprises. It also has its share of confusion. Towards the end of the book, confusion reigns. What's happening? Macdonald has trouble writing endings; he just wants to drop a bomb and get rid of all loose ends.

Mike says

This is another outstanding book by Ross Macdonald. I thoroughly enjoyed how he weaves the concerns and facts of the real world into his fiction. One of the central elements of this novel is a large and uncontrolled oil spill of the California coast.

In at least one of the previous "Archer" books, the author had his detective reflecting on the destruction of the natural environment by "progress" and oil drilling. This was a rather leading attitude for the late 50s and 60s. By the time that "Sleeping Beauty" was written a true-life massive oil spill had occurred devastating consequences. But although the environmental theme appears throughout this book, it does not detract from the quality of the story instead it adds to it.

The other real-world event that is used in this book is World War II. Several of the characters were U.S. Naval officers or seamen (as was the author). This is tied into the current storyline by Macdonald's trademark multi-generational "crimes and sins".

I don't have a pithy comment or illustrative quote, but I strongly recommend this novel. Lew Archer shows us once again why he stands for everyman and everywoman.

Tad Richards says

I've read most of the Archer books, and will probably read a bunch of them again. Lew Archer is one of the fictional characters I most identify with, blessed or cursed with the gift of seeing too well into other people's souls. *Sleeping Beauty* is one of his classics, with the sins of the fathers being visited on nearly everyone, a fragile environment at the mercy of human greed, and a taut mystery.

Bill Kerwin says

I bury myself the best I can in old books, but somehow my old books keep dragging me back to the latest "breaking news". Take this one, for example, inspired by the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill. Ten days after I finished re-reading it, I turned on the TV to discover the Santa Barbara beaches once more mired in oil, its seabirds blackened and endangered. Sure, it's nice to be reminded of old books I like, but this kind of *deja vu* I don't need.

For years I recalled *Sleeping Beauty* as one of Macdonald's finest novels, principally for the way he combined the oil spill theme with the sudden disappearance of a possibly suicidal woman. Her family is in the oil business, and when detective Lew Archer first meets her, she is on the beach, trying to rescue a dying, oil-soaked grebe. "A handsome young woman," Archer describes her, "with eyes as angry as the bird's." Within the novel's first few pages, the central Macdonald themes of turbulent nature, family greed, and the haunted young are combined in one inspired metaphor.

Unfortunately, what I failed to remember is that this metaphor does not remain central to the plot, which soon becomes an extraordinarily complicated collection of protective camouflage and weary masks worn by a large cast of characters, some hiding petty, and some great crimes.

Don't get me wrong. This is an effective, well-constructed novel, written in elegant prose. It just wasn't the great novel I had held in memory, the novel I hoped it would once again be.

John says

A good read. Mysteriously angsty characters and family secrets set in a fairly realistic LA, where the wealthy and working class cross paths. Macdonald's style is slightly more natural, less affected in this novel.

Mike Jensen says

I stopped reading Ross MacDonald because his metaphors and similes were forced and unnecessary, I was tired of reading about Jerry Springer-level screwed up families, and because so many of his characters are tiresomely (not realistically) rude. After many happy years without MacDonald, I was talked into giving him another chance with this book touted as his best. It is excrement.

The metaphors and similes are forced and unnecessary, there is another Jerry Springer-level screwed up family, and too many of the characters are tiresomely (not realistically) rude. Note a pattern here? The big dramatic pratfall of most private eye novels is that the protagonist has nothing at stake in solving the case and great literature is about people with something at stake. In the best PI novels, the author really gives the protagonist a vital interest in the outcome. In the also-rans, the author creates a few personal motives, but nothing that will really change his hero's life if it all goes wrong. It is to MacDonald's credit that he made the effort, but not to his credit that nothing in the story would change the protagonist's life one way or the other. This is yet another bad book by Ross MacDonald.

L.P. Ring says

Lew Archer is flying into Los Angeles when he sees an oil spill from his window. Curious to discover the what and the how, he saunters onto a badly affected beach where he meets a young woman desperately trying to clean the oil off a bird. Why does she feel such a responsibility over a nearby oil spill? And what happens when she steals something that belongs to him? Soon Archer's back in the world of corrupt rich families with hidden secrets.

To be honest this didn't start off well for me. I just couldn't reconcile the Archer character with someone deeply interested in environmental issues, and it really seemed a reach that this would lead somewhere tangible. However, what self-respecting detective doesn't attract trouble like a magnet and soon the P.I. is knocking on doors, being threatened with guns, and rescuing damsels in distress.

Archer has always struck me as a less cynical, more sympathetic detective than Chandler's Marlowe - more like Dashiell Hammett's Continental Operative in 'The Dain Curse', and here he is driven by the need to see right by a woman he barely knows and who has stolen from him. It's a fast tale played out over barely two days with the usual brew of corruption in upper class society, its effect on those in the lower orders and how the police, although often well-meaning, are often nearly powerless to find the real answers. Archer's place in this - as a precursor to Hieronymus Bosch or even Jack Reacher - is as a man who won't be swayed by money or privilege, but will only search for what is right. There is a morality in his fiction that looks for the truth but will always hope that the weak in society - be they rich damsels in distress or poor... people in general - are not undeservedly damaged in the process.

One thing I really love about MacDonald's books is some of the prose and descriptions. People are described briefly but powerfully - wedding bands are like deep scars, nature talks back to the world of men, fluorescent lighting gives drugstores the atmosphere of space stations. MacDonald (real name Kenneth Millar) was a University of Michigan honors graduate who was well known for bringing a more literary sophistication to the crime genre.

Jim says

Another splendid Lew Archer tale by Ross Macdonald, rife with dark family secrets, the visitation of the sins of the fathers on the younger generation, all the themes Macdonald explored over and over in his books, always seeming to create fresh angles from which to view the human foibles on display. The mystery this

time revolves around a young woman who may or may not have been kidnapped, the wealthy oil family from which she springs, and a nearly three-decade old murder. Macdonald remains one of the great private eye novelists of all time, and *SLEEPING BEAUTY* stands high among his many books.

Anthony Vacca says

A massive oil spill that brings the bodies of the recently murdered to shore, a possibly suicidal wife who goes missing with a bottle of sleeping pills, a rundown motel ran by a rundown woman, the memory of a mysterious fire which sunk a WW2 battleship and left its survivors both physically and psychologically scarred, a young thug with a gun and a get-rich scheme, a gold digger with a horsewhip, a maze of failed and phony marriages, and hundreds of tasty similes to tie the whole mystery together—all in a day's work for Lew Archer, the roving moral consciousness who navigates each of Ross Macdonald's superior private eye mysteries.
