

Q. & A.

# REBECCA SOLNIT ON THE POLITICS OF PLEASURE

*The author discusses her new book, “Orwell’s Roses,” and the role of art and beauty as forms of resistance.*



**By Helen Rosner**

November 5, 2021

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Rebecca Solnit is a dizzyingly prolific writer. Her two dozen or so books and innumerable essays, published throughout a career now in its fourth decade, tunnel variously into history, science, cultural criticism, politics, and the interiors of her own life. She was already a considerably influential literary figure by the time her 2008 essay “Men Explain Things to Me” catapulted her to a new level of cultural stardom, as a guiding voice of feminist exasperation. (The essay opens with a now famous anecdote: in 2003, Solnit was cornered at a party by her host, a man who insisted that

she really ought to read a tremendously important book, recently published, about the early photographer Eadweard Muybridge. Solnit, of course, was its author.) After the 2016 election of Donald Trump, her political writing—progressive, epigrammatic, genteelly furious—published in the *Guardian* and elsewhere, brought her a still greater audience, to the point that she was named “the voice of the resistance” by the *Times* and now presides over a Facebook community page with some 189,000 members, though the intensity of its discourse has tapered with the advent of a new Presidential Administration.

Solnit’s most recent book, “Orwell’s Roses,” is, depending on how the light hits, a natural history of gardening, a dissection of the rose as capitalist metaphor, or a defense of art and beauty as a bulwark against the annihilating forces of totalitarianism. At its core, it is an intimate recounting of the life and politics of George Orwell, who planted the roses of Solnit’s title in the spring of 1936, when he was living at a cottage in Wallington, Hertfordshire, about thirty miles north of London. That year, between reporting on labor conditions in Manchester coal mines and travelling to the Continent to fight in the Spanish Civil War, Orwell found time to get his hands in the soil, and over the following years he took great pleasure in cultivation. When Solnit visited his cottage in person, in 2017, she found that the fruit trees he had planted were decades gone, but two tremendous rosebushes—likely Orwell’s own—were in bloom. I recently spoke to Solnit by phone; in our conversation, which has been edited for



*“Roses can just be themselves, or they can have all the burden of meaning packed onto them,” Solnit says. Source photograph by Kelly Sullivan / Getty*

length and clarity, we discussed pleasure as a form of resistance, the horrors of modern commercial rose farms, and why she doesn't consider "Orwell's Roses" a biography.

**Is it out of character for Orwell—somebody who is so antifascist and so politically strident—to also care about flowers?**

I don't think it is at all. We're all complex that way. But I do think that there's a kind of left-wing sense that, if you care about something smaller, charming, or personal, you don't care about the great public issues of the day. Somehow, caring about anti-racism or human rights or climate change means you can't enjoy yourself or spend time on things that are not furthering the revolution, and that's not true of any of us.

Sometimes the people who try to only care about the great noble goal make themselves miserable, and then go on to make everyone else miserable, and don't really accomplish a great deal, necessarily. There are lots of other figures where you could look at their hobbies, their pastimes, their pleasures, and people would go, "Oh, but they weren't really serious." But nobody's going to say that about Orwell: he's so white and male and heterosexual and stern and committed. If you can make the case with him that these things always belong together, you can make it for all of us.

**Is it actually the case that cultivating a rose garden can be an act of resistance, or is it just a line that we tell ourselves to stave off despair?**

There are a lot of ways in which the destructive forces around us want us to be consumers, want us to be malleable and gullible. Anything that makes us something else—somebody with a robust sense of self, somebody with a sense of pleasure, somebody with independence of thought—is not the revolution itself, but it might help reinforce the character who can resist. This touches on something else that was really important to me in the book: we often have a sense that the only stuff that makes us people who can resist is, you know, the propaganda telling us that bad people are doing bad things, and it's bad, and we should stop it. But there's also a question of who is capable of independent thought, who resists the lies, the propaganda, the

totalitarianism, who has the courage to stand up—and what might instill that in you?

Various people—including, I think, Orwell—argue that this is often a much more complex and subtle process. Rereading “1984” in the course of writing this, I was surprised to find a book that felt very different than it had all the other times I’d read it over the forty or so previous years. Winston Smith, in rebelling against Big Brother—his very first act is to pull out a beautiful blank book he’s bought, and Orwell describes the sensuousness of the paper, the act of writing with pen and ink. He’s not only cultivating an independence of thought but he’s appreciating the sensuality of the materials and the act. He goes on from there to listen to birds singing, to have a love affair, to eat forbidden chocolate, to acquire a paperweight with a bit of coral that becomes a symbol for this private world he’s created with his love affair, to admire the washerwoman hanging up diapers and singing in a beautiful contralto voice out the window. This itself becomes his reclaiming of all the things he’s not supposed to have and see and be and enjoy. When I understood that, the book took a really different shape: it’s not just about the need to destroy or resist Big Brother, but to do it in these very indirect ways, by being who they don’t want you to be.

**Celebrating these domestic, human-scale pleasures feels familiar to me from activist philosophies and feminism and anti-racism—the sort of reclamation of selfhood that is central to liberating the marginalized or exploited. And, as you say, Orwell was stern and white and male and heterosexual. Does that change the nature of this reclamation?**

Women, people of color, queer people all have claimed the right to well-being, to pleasure and joy, as part of the rebellion against inferior status or oppression. Although there’s plenty of austerity in all of those movements, and I’ve run into them—in anti-racism, it’s mostly from other white people telling people what to do, and God knows the feminism that I was around in the nineteen-eighties essentially said that a woman should wear Doc Martens and work clothes, and anything feminine was somehow

subjugation. But these were just the young, anarchist-y activist circles of my youth. More broadly, we still haven't fully accepted the question of how the personal and the political connect. It was a great feminist rallying cry, but we're still not done doing that work. And we're still not done thinking about what an activist life, an engaged life, can look like. We're still not done connecting the natural world to the political world. It's an ongoing project, and it felt like this book was an eclectic way to come at some of that stuff from an unfamiliar angle.

**Roses have such a rich history as a metaphorical vehicle that they're almost a cliché —Robert Burns, Gertrude Stein, Shakespeare. But in this book you take them to places that feel very new: capitalism, colonialism, climate change.**

What I love is that roses can just be themselves, or they can have all the burden of meaning packed onto them as religious symbols, tools of romance, et cetera. Or they could stand for flowering plants and the whole plant kingdom. I could think about carbon sequestrations: there's the coal that Orwell went to investigate just before he planted those roses—which itself was compressed plants of the Carboniferous period. I could look at roses as a commercial product, and go to Colombia and look at the completely horrific rose industry, and roses then became a wonderful way to think about how something that can be visually appealing, something that can seem to have high aesthetic values, can have very different ethical values. In that sense, they became a symbol for the whole contemporary world.

We live in a world of alienated commodities, where lots of things that look pretty or taste good or are fun and useful are produced in completely horrific conditions, in terms of labor and human rights and environmental impact. And, by design, we're not supposed to notice that. A lot of the work that activists do—from sweatshop activists to climate activists—is to try to make the invisible visible. The ultimate visibility of roses—which, curiously, in these situations, become *only* visual, because they no longer have much in the way of scent—became a great way to represent all of that.

**Your visit to a flower farm in South America was, for me, one of the most harrowing parts of the book. These farms are so secretive, and you managed to get access to them. How did that happen?**

My friend Nate Miller probably knows more about the Colombian rose industry than almost anyone else in the United States, except maybe former rose workers who migrated. He was a labor organizer in Colombia for years, and his work there culminated with writing a report on the rose industry as a horrific labor situation. I said, “Hey, Nate, I really want to go to Colombia with you,” so we tacked an extra week onto a trip he was going to take anyway. I wrote a letter that just said that I was writing a book about roses, which felt perfectly true. I had the impression that they thought I was going to be very impressed: it was one of the more high-end farms, with more modern production methods. But of course I was completely horrified. We went twice, the second time with cinematographers, and the Bogotá cinematographer kept saying, “I can’t believe I’m in here. Nobody gets in here.”

What you see when you get in there is, first of all, these huge, football-field-size greenhouses covered in plastic sheeting, in which the roses are grown like any other crop, in long rows. A lot of the beauty of a rose, in a garden or a park, seems to have disappeared—they’re just industrial products. Then you go to the cold rooms in which they’re processed—it’s essentially a factory floor kept at a very chilly temperature, and very damp. The workers are all wearing coveralls with very Orwellian slogans on them, and rubber boots. They’re poorly paid, they’re exposed to pesticides, they’re forced to work hundred-hour weeks in the run-up to the U.S.’s Mother’s Day and Valentine’s Day holidays, when so many roses are exchanged. It’s just really bleak. And it’s the largest employer of women in Colombia. We saw people actually producing those supermarket bouquets, which I had already known were pretty sinister, but to actually see it happen was extraordinary and, in a low-key way, horrifying.

**And then, over here on the other side of the world, buying those roses is considered**

**an act of indulgence and beauty, while the truth of their production remains hidden.**

Part of living in the contemporary world is knowing the conditions under which your iPhone, and your fossil fuel, and your plastic, and your wheat and your corn, and your meat—if you eat it—are produced. But because roses are seen as these sentimental, beautiful, aesthetic things, more so than all that other stuff, seeing their place in the world of alienated, industrialized, environmentally unsound production felt impactful in a different way.

**This seems like a wrinkle to the idea of pleasure as a revolutionary act. If I buy myself flowers as a way of introducing pleasure into a life that is otherwise defined by struggle, is that undermined if the flowers have been produced in horrific conditions?**

This is a central question for the world we live in: Do we want to continue to be disconnected from the systems on which we depend, to not know where our power comes from, where emissions are going, who's producing the things we consume? Or do we want to? I come down on the side of the latter. In my youth, I was interested in artists who were working with inherently meaningful materials, like Joseph Beuys's fat and felt works, and artists working with honey and wax and soil and blood and bodily fluids. They were suggesting that meaning is inherent in materials, if you pay attention to them, and meaning is also inherent in the process of making. That's still true for me with the stuff I own and eat and look at and consume.

**You draw a clear connection between political totalitarianism and the idea of immediate consumption, whether it's giving an order and requiring that it be followed, or Stalin demanding roses in a climate where it's impossible, or overnight delivery.**

There are a lot of ways in which totalitarianism requires people to be disconnected from their own judgment, as we've seen so clearly in the Trump era, where they've

created a forty-million-strong army of people who will believe anything they're told to believe. And now we're hearing stories of people dying of COVID while denying that they have COVID, because they're so completely alienated from what's actually happening in their own bodies, and from understanding what constitutes a reliable source of information. They're essentially dying for their beliefs without really understanding how false those beliefs are. That's Hannah Arendt's ideal subject, that person for whom the difference between truth and falsity no longer matters. Being disconnected from curiosity about the production of things, from independent thought and investigation, from understanding the systems around you—that makes you a better subject of totalitarianism. Without saying that going to the farmers' market makes you an insurgent revolutionary, I do think that reconnecting the things that have been disconnected is part of the process.

**What has it been like for you to see Orwell adopted by people on the political right? Watching the anti-vaxxers and the Trump folks call opposition to disinformation “Orwellian,” or saying we’re living in “1984.”**

There's a long history of people on the right trying to claim Orwell, since he was anti-Stalinist, and a lot of leftists in his day were Stalinist. They like to see him as therefore on their side, which he very clearly was not. One of the things I really like about him is that he was able to be deeply critical of a lot of his contemporaries on the left without abandoning the larger ideals and goals of the left, while some of his associates had a binary logic of “this side is bad, so I'll join the other side.” One of the hallmarks of the Trump era has been that Big Brotherism of “truth is lies, war is peace.” They're proceeding with that—they're saying the disease is not dangerous, but the vaccine is. They're trying to steal an election by claiming it's been stolen from them. What's been terrifying is that a significant portion of the U.S. population relies on what we could call Orwellian propaganda outlets, like Fox, and the organizations even to the right of them. These propagandists seem almost to make it their primary goal to create a gullible, malleable, and confused public who will believe whatever they're told. Seeing



them try to use Orwell for their own purposes is unsurprising, and I don't find it terribly alarming. Any framework or reference or word can be used in manipulative and deceptive ways.

**You follow many threads in “Orwell’s Roses,” but each section opens the same way, with a variation on the book’s very first sentence: “In the spring of 1936, a writer planted roses.” To me, there’s something a little fable-like about that phrasing, almost abstract. Why did you keep returning to it?**

I saw the book as a series of forays from the same starting point, and that's the sense I wanted to convey. I've been mildly annoyed that people call it a collection of essays—I've published collections of essays, which are essays written about different things, for different publications, on different occasions, that don't inherently belong together. Whereas this, I thought, was in fact very structured, though not as a linear narrative.

When I wrote my book about another eclectic Englishman—Eadweard Muybridge, the photographer who laid the groundwork for what would become motion pictures, and then arguably for Hollywood and Silicon Valley—I had thought of opening every chapter with “In the year 1872, a man photographed a horse.” It's the opening sentence of the book, and I was interested in this sense that one encounter could be fruitful enough to consider from so many angles. I feel like that's what this book does, or at least that's what I hope it does. I was not interested in writing a biography—a biography would not have huge digressions about Jamaica Kincaid and the Colombian rose industry and Tina Modotti.

**You really don't think of this as a biography?**

I think of biographies as these very comprehensive, faithful things. My Muybridge book was really fun—it's much more about the annihilation of time and space, and the growth of the technological world, the change of consciousness through the railroad, the telegraph, photography, and then Muybridge connecting to all these things. What

was really handy is that he has a very thin paper trail. He's not like Emily Dickinson, where everyone around her wrote millions of diaries and journals. That thinness allowed me to talk instead about the Indian wars, the railroad, the technological changes.

With Orwell, on the other hand, *because* there are so many biographies of him and he's well-enough known, I also could take the liberty of writing about the world around him. I felt very strongly that this is not just a book in which roses are a point of entry for thinking about Orwell; this is a book in which Orwell is a point of entry for thinking about roses. Roses as the flower themselves, as part of the world of flowering plants and the plant kingdom, and trying to almost do what Michael Pollan did with "The Botany of Desire": to recognize plants as powerful agents on earth, when they're often seen as docile, passive things that we control. I also wanted to see if I could write a book that was about climate change and totalitarianism and fascism, and a guy dying of tuberculosis, and make it a deeply pleasurable aesthetic experience. You know, Georgia O'Keeffe said that she painted her flowers big so people would look at them. There's a way that people think of politics as always eating your spinach, when often it's eating cream puffs and champagne.

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