

On Jean Arthur  
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This week, I read a biography of the old-time movie actress (she did some stage work after her movie career ended) Jean Arthur (1900-1990) that has stuck with me. The book: John Oller, *Jean Arthur: The Actress Nobody Knew* (Limelight Editions, 1997). It's available at Amazon in both paperback and Kindle editions. I got my copy at the library.

To save me time and energy, I'll quote from the book jacket blurbs:

Jean Arthur starred in some of the brightest screwball and social comedies of the 1930s and '40s: "Mr Deeds Goes to Town," "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington," "You Can't Take It With You," "The More the Merrier," and "The Devil and Miss Jones." Yet, Arthur was something of a mystery woman. She shunned interviews, hated the trappings of Hollywood, and wanted simply to do her work and be left alone. This sensitive and admiring book unfolds a strange, somewhat sad, yet fascinating life.

The enigmatic performer, who was purposely vague about her origins, including the place and date of her birth, must have posed quite a challenge to her biographer. What emerges is an intriguing tale of a small-town girl who, though shy and suffering from feelings of inferiority, found the strength to endure nearly fifteen years of obscurity as an actress to eventually emerge as one of the screen's brightest stars. Friends offer their positive takes on her seemingly anti-social behavior. All in all, it's a biography that neither blinks nor blurs in its examination of a very colorful and eventful life.

I endorse that last sentence: this biography neither blinks nor blurs. John Oller is to be commended for this book, and he isn't a professional biographer; he's an attorney that writes biographies on the side.

Jean Arthur was an exceedingly intelligent, highly sensitive, loner type. In her last years, she was a virtually total recluse. She lived alone, tended her garden, doted on her cats and one dog, and read her books. I took note that a number of her intellectual interests paralleled mine. One example, the ideas of George Bernard Shaw. In her very last years, following a debilitating stroke, she employed a live-in caretaker.

What particularly struck me about Jean Arthur's life is it brought home to me that there isn't just one good way to live. I'm in the last stage of life. The work has ended. My energy is draining. I live alone. I'll not speak to another human being the rest of today, and I didn't speak to anyone yesterday, or the day before that or the day before that. I get the word, that this kind of existence won't do and here's what I have to do: Break the isolation. Go out and meet people. Join some clubs. Get a health club membership. Do some volunteer work—that'll get you out of the house and give you a sense of purpose. Travel. Meet somebody special, get some companionship and love in your life. And calm down for gosh sakes, you're too jumpy: try doing some meditation.

All that sounds good in the abstract. The problem is I don't have the impulse to do any of it, and more fundamentally, none of it sounds like me, and Jean Arthur's life example has helped me understand why: I'm more like Jean Arthur than I am like the people telling me to do all that stuff.

From the first page to the last in the biography on Jean, I related to what was going on with her. "Yes, that's like my situation" and, "Yes, she's like me." I ended up with the feeling that it's OK to be who I am and do what I feel the urge to do until the inevitable extinction, which is coming right up. I can live like Jean Arthur did if I want to. I don't have to do old age the way other people do old age, or match up with some concept or ideal. I don't even have to be happy and content in my final years; maybe I'm just not a happy, contented sort or person. Really, I don't have to chase after anybody or anything if I don't want to. At long last, I can just be who I am today, Friday, February 22nd, 2019.

Yesterday, someone I've never met who lives in my town and who has read some of my books and articles emailed me asking to meet up with me. I answered him:

I lead the league in reclusiveness, so I'm not available to chat, with you, with anyone. I'm talked out. At the moment, I'm sitting here reading the letters of the British poet Philip Larkin.

Jean Arthur's existence helped give me the clarity and assuredness to express that to him. I didn't leave it at that: I told him I appreciated that he took the time to write and wanted to meet up, and I offered suggestions of things of mine and other writers to read. But still, I made it clear—and this has not been my pattern up to now—that I'm not up for getting together with him.

Today, after writing this, and I'm just about finished, I'm going to read some Philip Larkin poems—I'm into Larkin at the moment--and do a physical workout at home, and stream the 1940 film "They Drive By Night" (the Jean Arthur biography was part of a current interest in films from that era). I'll eat well. Will I be at peace today? Sort of, but not really, though probably more than I usually am. Sitting here writing this, I'm more settled than has been my pattern. And anyway, I'm finding that I don't *have* to be any particular way, including at peace. One thing I'm not going to do to is deal with my chronic, life-long, jangly personal state by medicating it with alcohol as unfortunately Jean Arthur did. No substances for me.

Recluse is feeling like a good fit for me these days given who I am and my circumstance. If something changes that, I'll respond accordingly; I'm not locked in to anything. But for now anyway, I'm not feeling compelled to force myself to be different than what I currently am, which has been the case for as long as I can remember. Without really thinking about it, my life has been about trying to be like you, and trying to get you to be OK with me. I'm finally feeling comfortable being like me and letting you be OK with

that or not. Jean Arthur's life story has helped with me get to that place.

One exception to the reclusiveness: There's a fourteen-year-old named Dee who lives a long way away from me. I'll always look out for her, and I'll always be here for her. As long as I live.