



BEHAVE

ANDROMEDA ROMANO-LAX

A NOVEL

By the author of
The Spanish Bow,
a *New York Times*
Editors' Choice

A B O U T T H E B O O K



A novel of passion and ambition based on the life of one of the most controversial scientists—and mothers—of the 20th century

In 1920, when she graduated from Vassar College with a degree in psychology, Rosalie Rayner took a coveted position at the Johns Hopkins research lab to assist charismatic John B. Watson, the man who pioneered behaviorist psychology. Together, Watson and Rayner conducted experiments on hundreds of babies to prove behaviorist principles of nurture over nature. One such experiment was the incredibly controversial “Little Albert” study, in which they fear-conditioned an infant. Watson and Rayner also embarked on a scandalous affair that cost them both their jobs. The Watsons’ parenting book, *Psychological Care of Infant and Child*, which emphasized emotional detachment, was a bestseller, and affected the upbringings of generations of American children—but Rosalie, now a mother herself, had to confront its tenets personally.

With *Behave*, Andromeda Romano-Lax offers a fictional biography of Rosalie Rayner Watson, a woman whose lab work is now widely repudiated but who in her time was at the cutting edge of parenting psychology. Both moving and horrifying, *Behave* is a thought-provoking and compelling novel about the meaning of motherhood.

Behave: A Novel

Andromeda Romano-Lax

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A B O U T T H E A U T H O R



Born in 1970 in Chicago, Andromeda Romano-Lax worked as a freelance journalist and travel writer before turning to fiction. Her first novel, *The Spanish Bow*, was translated into eleven languages and was chosen as a *New York Times* Editors' Choice, a BookSense pick, and one of *Library Journal's* Best Books of the Year. Among her nonfiction works are a dozen travel and natural history guidebooks to the public lands of Alaska, as well as

a travel narrative, *Searching for Steinbeck's Sea of Cortez: A Make-shift Expedition Along Baja's Desert Coast*, which was an Audubon Editor's Choice. As a freelance writer, she has been published in a wide range of magazines and newspapers, from *Seventeen* to *Steinbeck Studies*. She is a recipient of awards and fellowships from the Alaska Council on the Arts, the Marine Biological Laboratory, and the Rasmuson Foundation, which named her an Artist Fellow in 2009. Andromeda and her family travel frequently and were based for many years in Anchorage, Alaska, where she co-founded a non-profit organization, the 49 Alaska Writing Center. More recently, she has lived in rural Taiwan and Mexico. She also teaches fiction in the University of Alaska Anchorage low-residency MFA program and is a freelance book coach. Off the page, Andromeda loves running, sea kayaking, classical cello, studying foreign languages, travel, and cooking.

A B O U T B E H A V I O R I S M



Behaviorism is the school of psychological thought based on the belief that behaviors can be observed and controlled. It was founded by John B. Watson in 1913, when he published “Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It.” It was one of the most popular psychological paradigms from 1920 to 1950.

Behaviorists assert the importance of nurture over nature; they hold that all behaviors are the result of conditioning. They assert that there are no innate qualities in the mind: the mind is a blank slate at birth, and the development of behaviors comes from stimulus-response relationships. Consequently, they do not believe they have to concern themselves with internal psychological processes like emotions or thoughts. Since behaviorists believe that all behaviors are conditioned, the Watsons experimented with forced conditioning of certain behaviors, including the famous “Little Albert” study, in which a baby was conditioned to be afraid of a rabbit.



John B. Watson and an assistant perform an experiment in which they demonstrate a newborn infant's ability to dangle by its own grip from a pole.



"Little Albert," the baby in the famous and controversial 1920 Little Albert experiment, who was fear-conditioned to be afraid of furry animals and objects.

In 1928, John B. Watson and his wife, Rosalie Rayner Watson, published an influential behaviorist parenting manual called *Psychological Care of Infant and Child*. The book exhorts parents to treat their children as young adults, and to avoid showing a child too much love and affection. In the behaviorist viewpoint, love—like everything else—is conditioned. The book states that “all of the

weaknesses, reserves, fears, cautions, and inferiorities of our parents are stamped into us with sledge hammer blows”—the goal of the parenting manual was to discourage passing along one’s own conditioned weaknesses to one’s child. Although parenting philosophy is now largely very critical of emotionally detached parenting, from the 1920s through 1950s millions of American children were raised according to these behaviorist principles.

Besides John B. Watson, other key figures in behaviorism include Ivan Pavlov, B. F. Skinner, Clark Hull, and Edward Thorndike.

THE NONFICTION STORY BEHIND THE NOVEL

About John Broadus Watson and Rosalie Rayner



John B. Watson, the American psychologist who established the school of Behaviorism.

John Broadus Watson was born on January 9, 1878, in Travelers Rest, South Carolina, to Emma and Pickens Watson. His early life was punctuated by poverty and familial strife. Despite a checkered career in high school, Watson began studying at Furman University in Greenville, South Carolina, and graduated five years later with a master's degree, then completed a PhD in psychology at the University of Chicago. During his time at the university, Watson became involved with Mary Ickes, a fellow student. They married and had two children. In 1908, Watson began teaching psychology at Johns Hopkins University. In 1913 he gave his influential lecture "Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It" at Columbia University, in which he laid out the behaviorist position.

Rosalie Rayner was born on September 25, 1898, in Baltimore, Maryland. She was born to a well-established family, and her uncle, Isidor Rayner, served as a senator. Rayner attended Vassar College and graduated with a degree in psychology in 1919. She then began graduate work at Johns Hopkins University, where she became Watson's



Rosalie Rayner, in one of the rare surviving photos of her, pictured here during her time at Vassar, when she was in her late teens.

research assistant. Among their collaborations was the famous “Little Albert” experiment.



“Mysterious blue-eyed Rosalie,” as the *Washington Times* called her, was a “beautiful Baltimore society woman” as well as a lab scientist.

The two scientists also began a tumultuous love affair. In October 1920, Watson and Rayner left the university after the scandal came to light. Watson’s resulting divorce trial was followed closely by Baltimore newspapers, but when it was finalized the pair married. They had two sons, William and James, both of whom were raised according to behaviorist principles. Because of the scandal, Watson was unable to find further work in academia, and Rosalie gave up her career to stay home and attend to the children.

After leaving Johns Hopkins, John Watson began a career in advertising. The Watsons collaborated on two popular psychology books, *Studies in Infant Psychology* and *Psychological Care of Infant and Child*, which ended up being the most successful child-rearing manual of its era. Rosalie Rayner Watson died on June 18, 1935 of dysentery, after which Watson lived a largely reclusive life on their farm in Connecticut. Watson received the American Psychological Association’s Gold Medal for his contributions to psychology in 1957. In 1958 he burned many of his unpublished papers and letters, and on September 25 he passed away at the age of 80.



The Henry Phipps Psychiatric Clinic at Johns Hopkins, which was the first of its kind in the United States.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1. On page 53, Rosalie’s father asserts (in reference to eugenics) that “scientists are misusing what they don’t understand to divide humanity up all over again.” Does John’s scientific work go against this trend, or in a way does it also “divide humanity up”?
2. A number of times John claims that you have to avoid being “softhearted” or “sentimental” to be a scientist. What scenarios does *Behave* present to support and challenge this notion? Does it suggest that detachment actually is necessary for effective scientific research? To what extent?
3. Based on Rosalie’s descriptions of John and her explanations of his motives and behavior, did the events of his life encourage his behaviorist ideology? Why or why not?
4. On page 133, Annie comments that “Sometimes . . . I think the only way things change is on a whim.” Does *Behave* support this notion, or does it favor Rosalie and John’s idea of change coming from “logical, measured, reasoned decision”?
5. In what ways are Mary Watson and Rosalie depicted as similar in *Behave*? In what ways are they depicted as opposites? What might Romano-Lax be suggesting through the connections between these characters?
6. Describe the role of female friendship in the novel. How does it affect the way Rosalie is portrayed?
7. What role does class play in *Behave*? How do John’s and Rosalie’s differing financial backgrounds affect their relationship?

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8. How does *Behave* portray the generational shift of the Jazz Age? In what ways do the changes portrayed resemble more recent ones?
 9. What does the novel suggest about the professional and personal roles and issues of women in Jazz Age American society? Do any of the comments continue to resonate today?
 10. What do you make of the section of chapter 23 (pages 260–262) that details John and Rosalie’s routine for their children and the ways in which various nurses violated this routine? What does this say about John, Rosalie, and them as a couple? What else might it suggest?
 11. How does their experience with Little Albert continue to affect John and Rosalie once the experiment is done?
 12. Are John’s attitudes regarding gender roles (for examples, his claim on page 336 that “You’re my wife. That’s your career. That’s any worthwhile woman’s career”) consistent with his behaviorism? How do you account for his attitudes toward women?
 13. Why do you think John chose “an abnormal baby for his most famous experiment” (377)? Do you think it undermines the results of his experiment? Do you think it undermines the rest of his work?
 14. Why might, as Romano-Lax puts it, Rosalie Rayner Watson’s life have been “deemed not worth recording or not worth protecting from erasure by others” (385)? What are qualities that make a life more “noteworthy,” and why might this be the case? Have there been any recent changes in which lives are considered noteworthy?
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ANDROMEDA ROMANO-LAX

Interviewed by her editor, Juliet Grames



Q: Rosalie Rayner's life story, as you present it in *Behave*, is such a fascinating one, but it seems to me like one that has almost been lost in the annals of time. How did you first encounter her story, and what made you decide to write about her?

Andromeda Romano-Lax: I was at a party with an old friend, getting pleasantly worked up about recent ethical debates involving everything from truth in literary journalism and memoir to the ethics of scientific experimentation. My friend, a long-time psychology textbook editor, mentioned John Watson and a new controversy involving the true identity of Little Albert, the infant subject of Watson's most notorious 1919–1920 experiment. I'm not sure if Rosalie was discussed, but as soon as I got home that night, I went online and started reading, and it became immediately apparent that a young female graduate student was involved and that her life was forever changed by her association with Watson.

I wanted to know how a woman felt about these experiments with babies, which to our modern minds seem harsh, and I wanted to know why Rosalie—the woman behind the man—was such a little-known figure in the history of psychology. I was also struck by the odd combination of progressive and reactionary attitudes in Watson's lab. How could a woman like Rosalie work and quickly fall in love with a man who believed mothers inevitably ruin their children? How did Rosalie's and John's own self-serving behaviors (if that's what they were) prove or disprove, validate or invalidate their scientific and philosophical beliefs? What was it

like to be at the forefront of social engineering, which in this time period seemed to hold so many answers—and which, in the end, has taken even well-intentioned scientists and leaders in dangerous directions?

One question led to many more, and the Jazz Age—also the early age of Empirical Psychology—beckoned. I started writing the novel within days of that first serendipitous conversation and within two months, I had traveled to Baltimore and Poughkeepsie, visited Rosalie’s house (thanks to a chance encounter), soaked up the timeless atmosphere of Vassar College, and combed through materials at Johns Hopkins, where Watson and Rayner worked together.

Q: How much information about her own life did Rosalie actually leave behind? How much of her story as you’ve depicted it here is fictionalized?

Andromeda Romano-Lax: John Watson reportedly destroyed most of his wife’s private papers. But even before she married John, Rosalie traveled lightly through life, leaving few traces. In many ways, she is a cipher. As a Vassar student, she managed to avoid appearing in many photos or documents. She was not much of a joiner, and as a Jewish woman, perhaps she felt like an outsider. In the two personal essays she published, she comes off in a self-mocking, self-contradicting fashion. She aspired to a serious profession and was curious and driven long after her own career ended; she was also a party girl, a flirt, and a woman willing to sacrifice nearly everything in support of her husband. Where facts were available, I followed them closely, but to create scenes and find meaning, I had to invent dialogue and imagine Rosalie’s interior life, staying as true as possible to how a woman of her background, in her situation, in her time, might have spoken, thought, and felt.

Q: After all the research you've done, do you find Rosalie's life story disturbing, frustrating, inspiring—or some combination of all three?

Andromeda Romano-Lax: All three. Disturbing because her love and parenting choices, informed by Behaviorism, had such damaging effects on her family and especially on the lives of her two sons. Frustrating because she clearly had ambitions that she did not achieve, though she had strong role models and vibrant, accomplished women surrounding her, like pioneering psychologist Mary Cover Jones, who managed to juggle long-term scientific work with being a dedicated wife and mother. Inspiring because she was married to an opinionated and strong-willed man, and yet Rosalie still managed to be spirited and irreverent, especially near the end of her short life.

Rosalie is like that girlfriend you love, who has big dreams and tons of potential, but who keeps stumbling. You let her crash with you, and you stay up all night, sharing tears and laughs, drinking a few too many cocktails, speaking the unspeakable, and you think she is on the verge of making a big change, like leaving her husband or moving across the country or restarting her career. Then you wake up to the sound of her sneaking out the door, and you see the apologetic expression on her face that says: "I can't. Not yet."

Q: Did you encounter anything in your research that you weren't able to use in the novel but which you found particularly fascinating?

Andromeda Romano-Lax: I read a lot about women's lives in the late 1910s through mid-1930s, without which I couldn't have understood the arc of Rosalie's life and seen how much the cycle of history repeats itself. During Rosalie's early adulthood, women broke down education

and professional barriers, got the right to vote, questioned received wisdom about family life and how to parent, unlaced their corsets, started to wear more makeup and shorter skirts, joined the whirlwind of Prohibition, became the target of more manipulative advertising, and were the first to lose their jobs and hunker back down into traditional roles when the economy crashed.

If the consciousness-raising 1910s were like our late 1960s and early 1970s, then the fashion-conscious, money-obsessed, let's-play-instead-of-protest 1920s were like our 1980s. The crash of the 1930s, with a resurgence of conservative attitudes and a rise of mouthy celebrity prognosticators seems oddly parallel to the 1990s or 2000s. Young women in every age, like young Rosalie, assume the battles for equality are behind them and the future is golden, but victories can be surprisingly short-lived.

Q: I personally found it harrowing to read the passages that depict Rosalie attempting to raise her infants according to behaviorist principles. You're a mother yourself—was it difficult to write these passages?

Andromeda Romano-Lax: In terms of the big picture—writing about motherhood—it was cathartic and immensely satisfying. My previous two published novels feature male protagonists and it was wonderful to get to bring my own experience as a woman to the table a bit more. I loved raising my babies, and even cherished pregnancy and childbirth, but let's be truthful—morning sickness is a misery, nursing can hurt at first, and being home alone with a crying infant for those first days (or years) can mess with one's chemistry, identity, and much more. In every age, there are bestselling books that lecture mothers

that we should be doing a better job and if something goes wrong, it's probably the fault of something we ate, did, or thought. In Rosalie's age, she was not only receiving that message, she was married to the man who was promulgating it on an unprecedented scale, via radio, lectures, articles, and finally, a bestselling parenting guide that she also helped write.

I've answered your question more generally about Rosalie's baby-raising, but not about her use of behaviorist principles, including the anti-affection, anti-attachment practices that John Watson espoused. It was much harder writing about those key moments when Rosalie ignores her intuition and generations of women's good sense, in order to try out the latest "scientific" methods that only make her and her children's lives tougher. Rosalie's influences and most of her choices (when she was "behaving" and following her husband's advice) run counter to everything I myself experienced as young mother. For me, it seemed absolutely clear and natural that what a baby needs is security, love, physical contact, and attention. But I had different generational experts to turn to—from T. Berry Brazelton (following on the more progressive attitudes of Dr. Spock, who overturned Watsonian parenting) to advice from my own mother, whose parenting principles pretty much match my own. In a different age, with different pressures, I would have mothered differently, which is a little scary, honestly.

Q: There are so many important ideas in this book—about love and life choices, feminism, careers, motherhood, personal definitions of morality, the cost of science. What is the most important thing to you personally that you hope readers will take away from reading Rosalie's story?

Andromeda Romano-Lax: What I took most from Rosalie’s life was a cautionary tale about being careful which experts you listen to. What makes them the “experts” in the first place? How much evidence is presented for the latest ideas they are preaching? My book is not a criticism of thoughtful science. Science embraces doubt and the scientific method involves checks and balances. Problems seem to arise at the popularizing and commercializing stage, when one possible new theory gets turned into an overly simplified and incontestable message, or a way to make money, disenfranchise certain groups of people, or concentrate power. An “expert” individual’s personal ambitions or foibles can complicate the issue. I would encourage others—just as I would remind myself—to think critically, read widely, broaden your sources, think beyond the latest trend, consider the long-term wisdom accumulated by people around the world, and don’t underestimate the power of your own observations.

Also: be extra careful during times of swift change, or in times of fear. In Rosalie’s own time, despair over World War I, and a loss of certainty in old institutions, made people particularly hopeful that science would lead to a better-engineered society and to human perfection. In our own time—in every time—we have desperate wants and fears that sometimes dull our own critical faculties. Ask more questions, I would whisper into Rosalie’s ear. I like to think that at her best moments and in her final hours, that’s what she was doing.

