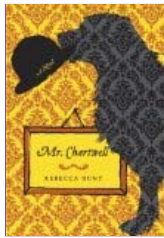




**BookBrowse**  
Your guide to exceptional books.

[Frequently Asked Questions](#)

## An unlikely alliance between Winston Churchill and a young widow, both engaged in a fight against depression - Hardcover



### [Mr. Chartwell](#)

A Novel

by [Rebecca Hunt](#)

Hardcover (Feb 2011), 256 pages.

Publisher: Dial Books

ISBN-13: 9781400069408



*Debut Author*

BookBrowse Rating:

Critics' Consensus:

[Write your own Review](#)



**PRINT THIS PAGE**

### From the book jacket

From a bold, brilliant young writer comes the story of an unlikely alliance between Winston Churchill and a young widow, both engaged in a fight against the most terrible of foes: depression.

July 1964. Chartwell, Kent. On the eve of his retirement from Parliament, Sir Winston Churchill has just woken up. There's someone in the room with him, someone he's known for a long time, but it's not a friend. A dark, mute presence is watching him with rapt concentration. Soon after, in London, Esther Hammerhans, a young widowed government secretary, goes to answer the door to her new lodger. Through the windowpane she sees a vast, dark silhouette. Both the eminent statesman and the humble office worker have just been visited by Black Pat, "the black dog" of depression. For the man who saved Western Civilization he's a familiar presence; for Esther he's a stranger just come to rent a room. Or is he here to stay? In this beguiling, inspiring, and completely original debut, Rebecca Hunt illuminates the strange point of connection between two very different people and shows how the strength to persevere can pull a person from darkness to light.

### Review

The conceit at the heart of *Mr. Chartwell* - the re-envisioning of Winston Churchill's famous bouts of depression as actual visits from a huge, slobbery black dog - is not cutesy or trite, as the book jacket blurb might lead one to fear, but clever and disarming. Rebecca Hunt engages the topic of depression in an inventive way, and the result is not a grim dose of hard truth but a playful

### Churchill's Black Dog

Winston Churchill (1874-1965), the famous British prime minister who told Hitler "we shall never surrender" during World War II, was not the first to describe depression as a "black dog." The Oxford English Dictionary cites earlier uses of the phrase in literature and in nursery lore; for example, a sullen child was said to "have the black dog on his back." But Churchill was the most famous, and the expression is now indelibly linked to him.

Most of what we know about Churchill's black dog comes from a memoir his personal physician, Lord Charles Moran, published after his death. "In his early days," Lord Moran writes, "he was afflicted by fits of depression that might last for months. He called them the 'black dog.' He dreaded these bouts and instinctively kept away from anything that seemed to bring them on." Churchill told Moran in 1944, "I don't like standing near the edge of a platform when an express train is passing through...I don't like to stand by the side of a ship and look down into the water. A second's action would end everything. A few drops of desperation."

The image is a powerful one - envisioning

meditation on the human condition. This is a novel about depression that even a depressed person can enjoy - indeed, a depressed person might find it radically cheering.

Black Pat's emergence on the scene is broad comedy. Even though he is standing on his hind legs when Esther first opens the door ("a mammoth muscular dog about six foot seven high") and speaking like a gentleman, he soon regresses into dog-like behavior. Hunt's descriptions are exquisite, as the strange gentleman raises his eyebrows ("They weren't eyebrows so much as thumbprint-sized buds above his eyes, but they were expressive in the same way") or digs into the cheese and crackers ("They both listened to him chew. Not just a sickening noise, it was a vigorous one. The shape of his face didn't permit quiet eating, or subtle eating with a closed mouth. Loud and visible, the cheese mashed into a pulp"). In fact Black Pat's modus operandi is to hang around his "client" acting like a dog - chewing rocks, scratching, digging up smelly objects. He climbs up on the bed and snores. He distracts the victim from whatever else is going on. Discovering the way the dog interacts with the characters is one of the main pleasures of the novel, so I don't want to give too much away - but I will say that the surreal and absurd conjunction of moping thoughts and an ill-mannered animal is fertile and funny at every meeting.

This is not a meaty, wordy, plot-driven novel. Both chapters and sentences are short; the descriptions are lyrical and the dialog is epigrammatic. The characters are colorful sketches, although they do develop along a trajectory that is (quietly, poetically) suspenseful, even as we are really only given small glimpses of their lives. Rebecca Hunt trained as an artist (see her book-promotion interview on You Tube below) and it's fruitful to think of *Mr. Chartwell* as a work of art on the scale of a painting, with each scene arranged as a small composition. The visual details of each room are carefully rendered, as are the artifacts that each character keeps as reminders of the past. Churchill has historical souvenirs and gifts from heads of state; Esther has tchotchkes from old vacations and her late husband's pencil cup.

The most redemptive force at work in the novel, however, is not visual but linguistic - both Churchill and Esther are constantly reading and quoting. Esther works in a library and is trying to read *Moby Dick*; Churchill's trying to utter Shakespearean locutions. Black Pat muddies the air with as much distracting doggerel and as many meaningless puns as he can interject, but the characters keep fighting back, searching for more elevated language. Hunt has done a brilliant job putting words in Churchill's mouth - she pastes together phrases that sound like real quotations from a

depression as a black dog makes it into a physical, externalized presence. And the fact that the black mood is a dog, and not, say, a dragon, means there is the possibility that it can ultimately be brought to heel. In an era when depression was understood less as a clinical illness than as a spiritual failing, the idea that depression could be tamed with discipline must have been appealing. Churchill fought it with all manner of weapons. Even his famous hobby, [painting](#), was a means to gain control.

Rebecca Hunt, the author of *Mr. Chartwell*, is not the first to find the conjunction between the powerful Churchill and the menacing "black dog" to be a compelling one. The mental-health community in particular seems fascinated by the possibilities inherent in Churchill and his metaphor. It's empowering to think that depression, even in the face of overwhelming obstacles (Hitler, for instance), can be subdued by ornery persistence and the liberal application of stimulants (cigars and whiskey). One British mental-health advocacy group went overboard in the exploration of this concept of "functional mental illness," however. In 2006 the mental-health charity Rethink commissioned a statue of the famous prime minister [wearing a straitjacket](#). It was a fanciful vision - Churchill's "black dog" is more sulky than dangerous. The charity said it had devised the image to promote a new understanding of the face of mental illness, but in fact the sight of Churchill's recognizable jowly visage above a twisted torso restrained in a straitjacket proved to be too alarming to the public and too offensive to Churchill's relations. [The statue was taken down](#).

Interesting Link: [The Black Dog Institute](#): An information and advocacy site about depression, from an Australian mental health institute. Their logo shows Churchill's famous "V" for victory casting a shadow in the shape of a dog's head.

Reference: Lord Charles Moran,

famous man of another time, with rich, archaic vocabulary and satisfying turns of phrase. "It's exhausting," he says to his wife, "All I want to do is lie doggo until it's all over, to frowst in my bedroom." When a new character, an accomplished chatterbox, comes on the scene, it's a major event. The clever wordplay is a saving grace, a consummate human skill that no canine can match.

*Churchill: The Struggle for Survival 1940-1965* as quoted in Anthony Storr, *Churchill's Black Dog, Kafka's Mice, and Other Phenomena of the Human Mind* (New York, 1965).



[Excerpt](#)



[Read-Alikes](#)



[Write review](#)



[Reading List](#)

Reviewed by [Jennifer G Wilder](#)

### Frequently Asked Questions

- [How to increase/decrease the type size](#)
- [How do I print part of this page, not all of it?](#)
- [How can I email this ezine to myself or save a copy on my computer to read later?](#)

[HOME](#)

[MAGAZINE ARCHIVE](#)

[X|CLOSE WINDOW](#)