STAFF PICK: Bette Davis at the Schlesinger

**In Dark Victory** (1939), Bette Davis plays a feckless young socialite who learns she’s terminally ill. That’s no spoiler. The diagnosis comes early, and the true drama springs from her reaction; it reveals how such news can transform who we are and how we love. (Especially if the physician is smart, attentive, and played by Irish-born actor George Brent.) Studio fears that dying was too depressing a topic turned out to be ill-founded: a *New York Times* critic called the film “One of the most sensitive and haunting pictures of the season.” Not a dry eye in the house, yet the sentiment stops shy of schmaltz. Davis’s willful character matures and ultimately finds dignity even as her body breaks down, notes Schlesinger Library archivist Susan Earle. That’s one reason the film committee included *Dark Victory* in the Schlesinger Library Movie Night’s “Gender and Bodies” series. Earle also points out that the diagnosis is initially hidden from the patient (not unusual at the time), further complicating the relationship. “Is the doctor a professional caregiver or a husband/lover?” she asks. “Women of a certain period in the movies frequently seem to end up with doctors: they take care of the women in more ways than one.” (To be fair, in the film Davis also consorts with an affable drunk, Ronald Reagan, and her fiery horse trainer, Humphrey Bogart.) This spring’s Schlesinger series also offers *Things We Don’t Talk About*, a documentary that chronicles The Red Tent movement inspired by Anita Diamant’s eponymous novel, on March 5; and *Cherry 2000*, a sci-fi adventure starring Melanie Griffith as a postapocalyptic bounty hunter, on May 7.

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