

Finding A Voice

A Radio Talk

This talk was recorded on 8th February 1978 for a BBC series and transmitted on BBC Radio 3 on 4th April. The transcript was published in Civil to Strangers and Other Writings by Macmillan (1987) and Dutton (1988), and Barbara's original notes are in the Bodleian archives. The text is posted here with the kind permission of the BBC and the Estate of Barbara Pym, Hazel Holt, Literary Executor.

I've sometimes wondered whether novelists like to be remembered for what they've said or because they've said it in their own particular way—in their own distinctive voice. But how do you acquire your own voice or indeed any kind of voice? Does it come about as inevitably as your height or the colour of your eyes or do you develop it deliberately, perhaps in imitation of a writer you admire?

I've been trying to write novels, with many ups and downs, over more than forty years. I started as a schoolgirl, when I used to contribute to the school magazine—mostly parodies, conscious even then of other people's styles. Then in 1929, when I was sixteen, I discovered Aldous Huxley's novel *Crome Yellow*. I came across this sophisticated masterpiece in the wilds of Shropshire, through that marvellous institution Boots' Library, now, alas, as much of a period memory as the seven and sixpenny hardback novel. I was a keen reader of all kinds of modern fiction, and more than anything else I read at that time *Crome Yellow* made me want to be a novelist myself. I don't suppose for a moment that I appreciated the book's finer satirical points, but it seemed to me funnier than anything I had read before, and the idea of writing about a group of people in a certain situation—in this case upper-class intellectuals in a country house—immediately attracted me, so I decided that I wanted to write a novel like *Crome Yellow*.

And so my first novel—unpublished, of course—was started in that same year, 1929. It was called *Young Men in Fancy Dress* and was about a group of "Bohemians"—I must put that word in quotes—who were, in my view, young men living in Chelsea, a district of which I knew nothing at that time. The hero wanted to be a novelist and, as one of the characters put it, "If you want to be a proper novelist, you must get to like town and develop a passion for Chelsea."

Reading the manuscript again, I detect almost nothing in it of my mature style of writing, except that the Bohemian young men aren't taken entirely seriously, and that there's a lot of detail—clothes, makes of cars, golf, and drinks (especially descriptions of cocktails—which I'd certainly never tasted). I've always liked detail—in fact my love of triviality has been criticised—so perhaps that was something I developed early. And obviously at that time I read a lot—if a bit indiscriminately. In this early novel all the "best" or at least the most fashionable names are dropped, from Swinburne and Rupert Brooke to D. H. Lawrence and Beverley Nichols.

When I was eighteen, I went up to Oxford to read English. Most aspiring novelists write at the University, but I didn't, though I *did* start to write something in my third year, a description of a man who meant a lot to me. I tore it up, but this person did appear later in a very different guise as one of my best comic male characters. There was nothing comic to me about him at the time, but memory is a great transformer of pain into amusement. And at Oxford, as well as English Literature, I went on reading modern novelists.

I particularly enjoyed the works of "Elizabeth", the author of *Elizabeth and Her German Garden*. Such novels as *The Enchanted April* and *The Pastor's Wife* were a revelation in their wit and delicate irony, and the dry, unsentimental treatment of the relationship between men and women which touched some echoing

chord in me at that time. I was learning; these novels seemed more appropriate to use as models than *Crome Yellow*—perhaps even the kind of thing I might try to write myself.

It must also have been about this time—still in the 1930S—that I was introduced to the poems of John Betjeman. His glorifying of ordinary things and buildings and his subtle appreciation of different kinds of churches and churchmanship made an immediate appeal to me. Another author I came across at this time was Ivy Compton-Burnett—I think *More Women than Men*, her novel about a girls' school, was the first I read; then *A House and Its Head*, one of her more typical family chronicles. Of course I couldn't help being influenced by her dialogue, that precise, formal conversation which seemed so stilted when I first read it—though when I got used to it, a friend and I took to writing to each other entirely in that style. Another book we imitated was Stevie Smith's *Novel on Yellow Paper*, a fantasy, written with all the humour and pathos of her poems.

So *all* the writers I've mentioned played some part in forming my own literary style. But of course I'd also been reading the classics, especially Jane Austen and Trollope. Critics discussing my work sometimes tentatively mention these great names, mainly, I think, because I tend to write about the same kind of people and society as they did, although, of course, the ones I write about live in the twentieth century. But what novelist of today would *dare* to claim that she was influenced by such masters of our craft? Certainly all who read and love Jane Austen may *try* to write with the same economy of language, even *try* to look at their characters with her kind of detachment, but that is as far as any “influence” could go.

The concept of “detachment” reminds me of the methods of the anthropologist, who studies societies in this way. The joke definition of anthropology as “the study of man embracing woman” might therefore seem peculiarly applicable to the novelist. After the war, I got a job at the International African Institute in London. I was mostly engaged in editorial work, smoothing out the written results of other people's researches, but I learned more than that in the process. I learned how it was possible and even essential to cultivate an attitude of detachment towards life and people, and how the novelist could even do “field-work” as the anthropologist did. And I also met a great many people of a type I hadn't met before. The result of all this was a novel called *Less Than Angels*, which is about anthropologists working at a research centre in London, and also the suburban background of Deirdre, one of the heroines, and her life with her mother and aunt. There's a little church life in it too, so that it could be said to be a mixture of all the worlds I had experience of. I felt in this novel that I was breaking new ground by venturing into the academic scene, although in many ways that isn't unlike the worlds of the village and parish I'd written about up to then.

I admire those people who can produce a new book regularly every year. I've found it more difficult as time goes on. I suppose it's easy for anyone to produce their first novel—it's all there inside you and only needs to be written down. Also a second and third may be just under the surface and comparatively easy to dig out. After that it becomes more difficult, unless you're prepared to go on writing exactly the same book with only slight variations, over and over again. And people are always very ready to tell you anecdotes from their own experience—which, in their opinion, would be just the thing for one of your novels. Readers who *don't* like your kind of story sometimes suggest plots or subjects for you in the hope that you may write something different. And sometimes, especially when things aren't going well, it's tempting to give it a try.

In the early 1960s I sent my seventh novel to my publishers. And to my horror they wrote back saying they didn't feel they wanted it. I offered it to several others but the manuscript still came thudding back through the letterbox. One publisher said, “We think it's very well written but there's an old-fashioned air

about it.” Another thought that it wasn’t the kind of book to which people were turning—I wasn’t quite sure what he meant by that—while a third said curtly that their fiction list was full up for the next two years. I had never made my living as a writer so I still had my job, but my books had been published regularly and now it seemed that nobody wanted them. It was an awful and humiliating sensation to be totally rejected after all those years, and I didn’t know what to do about it. I did seriously consider trying to write something different—perhaps a thriller or a historical novel—but I never got very far with the idea.

Maybe it was too late to change my voice. I wrote two more novels in my own style and sent them round, but they still came back, with the same kind of comments. Then, when I was on the verge of retiring from my job at the African Institute, the idea for my last novel, *Quartet in Autumn*, came to me. And again, I started writing it with no real hope of getting it published. It’s about four people in their early sixties—two men and two women—working in a London office. During the course of the story, the women retire and one of them dies. I wanted to write about the problems and difficulties of this stage in one’s life and also to show its comedy and irony—in fact I’d rather put it the other way round: my main concern was with the comedy and irony, the problems and difficulties having been dealt with almost excessively, one might say, elsewhere. I think some readers have been disappointed in this novel because it seems less light-hearted than some of my earlier ones, yet I enjoyed the writing of it almost more than any of the others, perhaps because I felt that I was writing for my own pleasure with no certain hope of publication at that time.

But then, at the beginning of 1977, both Philip Larkin and Lord David Cecil wrote of me as “an underrated writer” in *The Times Literary Supplement*. As a result of this, *Quartet in Autumn* was accepted for publication, and two of my earlier books were re-issued. It was marvellously encouraging to be brought back from the wilderness. But it was disquieting too. I wonder how many other novelists have suddenly been told their work is not fashionable or saleable any more, and never been lucky enough to have the generous praise I had from the right people in the right place.

And this leads me on to the question of why we write at all. Is it enough just to write for ourselves if nobody else is going to read it? As Ivy Compton-Burnett said in a conversation with her friend Margaret Jourdain, “Most of the pleasure of making a book would go if it held nothing to be shared by other people. I would write for a dozen people ... but I would not write for no one.” This is what I feel myself—it is those dozen people that spur me on, even when it seems that I’m writing for myself alone. So I try to write what pleases and amuses *me* in the hope that a few others will like it too.

So I did go on writing, even in the face of discouragement. For the last thirty years or so I have kept a series of notebooks, like a kind of diary, in which I also write down all sorts of other things—possible scenes or turns of plot for novels, quotations that appeal to me, occasional overheard scraps of conversation, anything, in fact. Doing this is often more of a pleasure than the actual writing. To jot down an idea for a scene and then to imagine it filled out is immensely satisfying, but, as everyone knows, the final result invariably falls far short of the original conception.

I’m fascinated by the notebooks of great writers—Hardy, for example. Let me quote this entry for Sunday, February 1st 1874: “To Trinity Church, Dorchester. The rector in his sermon delivered himself of mean images in a sublime voice, and the effect is that of a glowing landscape in which clothes are hung up to dry.” Or another entry, for October 25th 1867, more likely to have inspired a poem: “Martha R, an old maid whose lover died, has his love letters to her bound, and keeps them on the parlour table.”

To descend from these heights, here’s an example from my own notebooks. In September 1948 I described a visit to Buckfast Abbey:

... much commercialised, teas, car park etc. shop full of Catholic junk as well as books. Abbey very clean and new looking, inside bright and light, tiled effect; incense smells almost hygienic. Not thus would one be sentimentally converted to Rome, though perhaps rationally. Very young priests in the parties of sightseers, mostly in pairs like little beetles, from the seminary in Paignton. The herds of people—the monk showing us round says: “I don’t suppose any of you are Catholics” and explains about Our Lady—makes one feel inferior.

This passage seems to have found its way, very little changed, into my novel *Excellent Women*. At about the same time I noted down something seen from the top of a bus—“A woman and a clergyman sitting on chairs (hard) in the Green Park and talking with animation”—and this gave me the idea for an important twist in the plot of that same novel.

Sometimes, on the other hand, the novelist will seek his material more deliberately. Robert Liddell, in his book *A Treatise on the Novel*, describes the experience of Flaubert who went to a funeral. “Perhaps I shall get something for my *Bovary*,” he wrote to a friend before he went. But when he got there, all he met with was a bore, who asked him foolish questions about the public libraries of Egypt, a country which he had lately visited. Whatever Flaubert had hoped to gain from experiencing the funeral was quite put in the background. So in this way we may not always get what we expect or hope for from an experience, but we shall probably get something, though I don’t know whether Flaubert ever made use of that bore. Ivy Compton-Burnett, on the other hand, claimed not to have the notebook habit, but admitted that some sort of starting-point is useful and that she got it “almost anywhere”. This starting off, the point where to plunge in, as it were, is often more difficult than might be imagined from the finished work. I usually think of several beginnings and try them out before the right one emerges. I find it’s sometimes necessary to go further back in the story or to look at things from a different standpoint.

Perhaps I’ve been influenced by something I was once told about Proust—that he was said to go over all his characters and make them worse. Regrettably, I think, and I daresay others would agree with me, it’s more interesting to write about people’s less admirable qualities than to chronicle their virtues.

After having published seven novels and written a great many more, I suppose I can be said to have found a voice of sorts. I hope so, anyway. But whether it’s a distinctive voice must be left to others to judge.

One of my favourite quiz games on television some years ago was that one in which panellists were asked to guess the authorship of certain passages which were read out to them, and then to discuss various features of the author in question. There were no prizes for guessing, no moving belt of desirable objects passing before their eyes, just the pleasure and satisfaction of recognising the unmistakable voice of Henry James or Henry Greene, or whoever it might be. I think that’s the kind of immortality most authors would want—to feel that their work would be immediately recognisable as having been written by them and by nobody else. But of course, it’s a lot to ask for.