

GREEN LEAVES

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THE NORTH AMERICAN CONFERENCE 2002



Ellen Miller opening the North American conference

The fourth annual meeting of the Barbara Pym Society in North America was held on the weekend of March 23 and 24. The evening before the conference began, a group of at least twenty of those attending, including speakers, met for dinner at Chang Sho restaurant, near Harvard Law School. Lively discussions got under way almost immediately, and the staff wisely put us in a corner where we could continue without disturbing other patrons with our enthusiastic “book talk.”

Saturday could not arrive soon enough, and we converged on Austin Hall for a substantial morning coffee that even Harriet Bede would have found adequate. Balancing cups and plates, we managed to greet old friends and welcome new ones. Surely Barbara Pym would have found the setting suitable, with its high ceilings and enormous windows looking out on the Harvard campus and its noble buildings. As always, Ellen Miller managed to herd us into the lecture hall, where she opened the meeting by reading notes from Frauke Lenckos and Eleonore Biber, who were unable to attend. She also sent greetings from Hilary Walton, Hazel Holt, and Father Gabriel Meyers. To set the mood for the meeting, Ellen read a few lines that Robert

Smith wrote, touching on “the safe and comfortable world that Barbara Pym has left us” with her exquisite miniatures, her wit, and sense of the ridiculous. Though September 11 was not mentioned, I think many of us were remembering the comfort that Pym had provided – whether we managed to reread her novels during those very bad days or just mentally put ourselves into her world.

The Novelist at Work

The first speaker was **Janice Rossen**, author of *The World of Barbara Pym* and a senior research fellow at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin, who chose as her topic: “Barbara Pym: The Novelist at Work.” She noted that two things are particularly interesting about the way Pym’s literary career unfolded after she wrote *Some Tame Gazelle*.

First, Pym had limited experience to draw upon compared with many writers, having neither traveled extensively nor worked as a journalist or reviewer. Instead, she and her sister led quiet lives in the 1950s that largely revolved around office work in the day, and, for Barbara, writing her novels in the evening. This pattern did not create many exotic experiences. Nevertheless, Pym was very aware of her powers of observation and her role as a novelist, filling her notebooks full of odd bits and random thoughts in her wanderings through London.

Second, a lot of what Pym wrote did not work. She had to wait a long time to find her voice and her publisher. During the period when she could not find a publisher, her “vicars and spinsters and librarians and tortoiseshell cats were forced to give way to the daring radicalism of the so-called Sexual Revolution.” Rossen believes this dealt a blow to Pym’s creative powers from which she never fully recovered.

While Pym’s friend Philip Larkin dealt with the unexpected cultural shift of the 1960s with a certain amount of envy, rage, and wit, Pym could not. She wasn’t angry about the deprivation that angered Larkin, and feminism as a cause did not interest her. Instead, she remained a writer of brilliant social comedies in and of the 1950s, keeping her focus on the England she observed at the time, with its 19th century roots intact.

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