



The Writers Who Inspire Me

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ONE OF MY SEASONAL RITUALS, along with dusting the skirting boards, is curating my bookshelves, deciding which books to hold onto, which to relinquish to Oxfam. I'm not a literature snob; I'll read anything. But I only treasure books which speak to me as a human and as a writer. So I keep the Ladybird books and Enid Blyton, Agatha Christie and Daphne Du Maurier. Classics from my time as an English student. Booker winners and genre fiction. Margaret Atwood and Jilly Cooper.

But there is one author, Barbara Pym, whose novels are most definitely keepers. Philip Larkin described her as a 'chronicler of quiet lives', with a 'unique eye and ear for the small poignancies and comedies of everyday life' and this is precisely what I cherish. Her novels are sublime but her own story, too, is worth hearing, if only as an encouragement for writers.

Pym, like Austen, writes about a very specific world, one suspended in time. Her postwar, grimy austerity London of vicars, bedsits and spinsters, of rationing, jumble sales and bombed-out churches, might be a distant landscape but there is something universal that resonates today, worldwide. According to American writer Cassandra Neyenesch, Pym 'chronicled the non-special, the unheroic, the humble, the steady, the meek' doing so with 'the kind of British wit that steals upon you with a jab at the end of a sentence.'

In her fourth novel, *Less Than Angels* (Jonathan Cape, 1955), the protagonist, Catherine Oliphant, believes that 'the smallest things were often so much



bigger than the great things...the trivial pleasures like cooking, one's home, little poems especially sad ones, solitary walks, funny things seen and overheard.' And it is within these ordinary boundaries that Pym's excellent women play out their extraordinary stories with wit and pathos, stoicism and optimism. Pym's spinsters tell us that it's alright to be single. Indeed, we can take pleasure in it. And her own life and career reflect this.

Pym's postwar novels were popular and well-received but, in 1963, Jonathan Cape turned down her latest manuscript. And, then, nineteen other publishers followed suit. She was out of fashion, dumped into the literary wilderness, and not published again for sixteen years.

Her renaissance was sparked in 1977 in the *TLS* when both Lord Cecil and Larkin claimed her as 'the most underrated novelist of the century'. Her books were republished, reaching a new American audience and then, joy of joys, she was shortlisted for the Booker Prize for *Quartet in Autumn*. Her rejection in the intervening years had been felt deeply but she never gave up writing. Her perseverance paid off.

Sadly, Barbara Pym's success was short-lived; she died in 1980. But her legacy lives on in anti-heroes such as Adrian Mole and Bridget Jones whose creators embrace the humour and poignancy of the domestic. Sue Townsend and Helen Fielding understand that small is actually big. They will be staying on my bookshelves alongside Miss Pym.