



Letter to my Teachers

Amanda Mitchison

MY DEAR TEACHERS, I wonder what it was about working in a girls' private school that brought out the very worst in so many of you. Mrs T, you just couldn't resist sarcasm. Miss R, you really didn't have to shake with rage when a pupil couldn't remember the French for 'string'. As for you, Mrs F, what bad fairy had burped on your cradle? You used to single girls out for humiliation and make them stand in front of the class while you dissected their weaknesses. I remember one poor victim urinating during the ordeal.

So, all in your different ways, you taught me what not to do when I teach. You mustn't judge, you don't weigh up the merits of your students and, above all, you do not instil fear. Instead you give. You enthuse your students and make them feel they can do the task in front of them. Being taught must, above all, be a pleasurable experience.

Many years later I met you, Shosh Copley, my one great and most giving teacher. We came together after a terrible calamity. At the outset, I didn't know you well. We both belonged to a small reading group, but I hadn't been with the group for that long.

Then, suddenly and unexpectedly, your beloved son died.

I went to visit you. You were still utterly enveloped in shock and grief yet you were so *funny* and described all the comic elements of the funeral.



While we talked – and I can't remember exactly how this came about – I asked if you would help me with the novel I was writing. I knew from the reading group that you were a most perceptive critic. You had also published three novels yourself before age and ill health had got in the way.

It seemed ungracious to ask you to read a manuscript — at this point how could you possibly concentrate on written words? So instead I suggested that I come and read aloud to you. For me this would be a great boon — I would hear the rhythms of my writing. And for you, my presence would at least provide some companionship and you would have something to distract you.

Of course, I got by far the better end of the deal. Shosh, you proved to be a fantastic teacher. Often you didn't need to say anything. I would read out some horribly clunky sentence and I'd look up and you, with your glasses at half-mast, would just be looking at me and grinning. Sometimes I'd finish a slightly dull passage and discover that you were fast asleep. I didn't need to be told that bit had to be cut.

Sometimes I wouldn't be aware of what was wrong. But you'd once been a stage manager, and your husband had been an actor. As I read you visualised and heard the scenes and had an innate feel for when things rang false or lagged. 'You've lost the tension' you'd say and the analogy you always made was with a thread that had to remain taut. You were also – like any good stage manager – a demon for continuity. You'd say, 'Nobody has eaten all day' or 'In the last chapter he was wearing a black jumper, where is it now?'

Together we worked on four novels over about seven years. After each book we'd have a little holiday together to celebrate—we went to Italy and to Scotland. After the last two books, when you were increasingly frail and walking was so hard, we went to Devon and down to Sidmouth on the south coast where I pushed your wheelchair along a rainswept



promenade and we stayed in a hotel where you enjoyed pointing out that I was the youngest guest by thirty years.

Now you're no longer with us and I miss you terribly. But I'll try and remember to feed my characters and keep their jumpers on.