

∞ READING ROUND ∞

The Classic I Would Rewrite

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SO ONCE UPON A TIME, I performed improvised comedy — that stuff where you make it up on the spot, like *Whose Line is it Anyway?* I'll wait while you Google it. Yep, they're still going.

And in our set there was one game called 'One Book in the Style of Another' which I loved. I had a headstart from spending three years reading for an English degree, which I chose because at seventeen I was head over heels for Literature, and Drama, and Universal Truths. And because all I did was read, I could improvise Jacobean tragedy, or Jane Austen, and *Neighbours* (obviously); and we'd take characters from one story and drop them in another. And it got a laugh (it was the late eighties).

Thinking of that, the book I'd rewrite is *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. I'd change it so Tess takes the money from Angel Clare and runs. In my version, she goes back to the dairy and starts an ice cream business. I'd give her a second chance and she'd grab it, along with a calm, practical way to live (not a priority for Thomas Hardy). So she'd do that instead of being literally picked up and put down by men who come with enough red flags to deck a Maypole.

But – and here's the thing – that's not Thomas Hardy: that's me. That's not the poet-novelist in love with the English countryside and the fragile, doomed beauties he creates, that's me in the 21st century with Nora Ephron's aphorism, *In the story of your life be the heroine, not the victim*, stuck above my desk.

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I realise now that the point of a classic, of any book worth its salt, is that it's specific to that author and the time and place they lived in. It shows life through *their* lens, *their* opinions. Elizabeth Gaskell, who followed her husband to Manchester, shows a city detonated by industrial revolution in *North and South*; written before *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, it feels a whole world away, which is the point — there is nowhere in Hardy's setting for Tess to escape, no source of help.

And to be a classic is to endure, to have lasting appeal; Hardy's bucolic England is so far from my life but the dilemma he describes, of a woman who survives rape and the death of her child only to be rejected for those very tragedies by the man who says he adores her: that is still sadly familiar. That I feel so strongly I want to pull Tess through time to the 20th century is testament to the vividness of Hardy's depiction. Although I do think naming the child 'Sorrow' was a little much.

But Hardy doesn't equivocate. He showed Tess (and Jude, and the rest) trapped by circumstances, by pompous men who brutally suppress any chance of fairness or forgiveness — let alone social mobility. In fact, he seems increasingly relevant; I should give Tess another read.