



My Reading Habits

Carina Rodney

IN THE LAST THREE YEARS, my writing has taken a violent turn: marauding pirates, horror slayings, dystopian deadly cults and vindictive witches, to merely touch the sharpened tip of the iceberg. I've been drawn to high drama with spikes on it. My current reading habits do not reflect my writing and have instead followed a genteel pathway of restraint and mannered self-control. My reading is currently dominated by pre- and post-war novels by female authors who archly deal with the middle-class's frustrated inaction. At the heart of this world stands Barbara Pym.

I was introduced to Barbara Pym's work when given the novel *Excellent Women*. This witty, incisive novel led me to binge everything in print by Barbara Pym — twice, followed by Barbara Pym biographies and a dour, yet charming, Barbara Pym cookery book. I joined The Barbara Pym Society and attended their conferences in Oxford where I bought Pym swag and homemade quince jelly and unsuccessfully yearned to win a prize on the Pymbola. I took to the world of Barbara Pym with a zealot's enthusiasm.

Her novels brought me to a 1950s England of Oxford University, rented rooms in London, to down-at-heel vicarages and village life. A world so beyond my own experience as to be exotic. The stories of smart but thwarted women and their brooding passions for foreign travel, good cuts of meat and unavailable and unsuitable men. There were obscure jobs in outmoded offices punctuated by long lunch breaks spent in Lyons



tea shops and small but rigid snobberies which saw characters damned for such crimes as a preference for tinned salmon over fresh. And within these stories of spinsters and frustrated wives, repressed desires and affairs, there roamed characters so unhinged by separation they took to stalking their surgeons and starvation while hoarding tins of food and audited milk bottles. All of which is painfully, darkly funny conveyed with a wit that skilfully glances against but avoids cruelty.

Pym's characters often nurse their inner lives and fantasies rather than engage with meaningful or dramatic actual change; they push at boundaries but rarely cross them. Yet their inner lives pulse with promise, determination and a desire for action. Educated, flawed, compelling women who retain a belief in their self-worth when they are too-often overlooked.

I am reading these wonderful books for the third time and finding joy in characters who can make the most of meagre supplies and scant socialisation, who find joy in small pleasures and push back at loneliness. As the world shrinks and we are forced to retreat to our own four walls while feelings remain at large, it is a comfort to remember, that Pym-like, you can live a big life in small rooms.