

# The Resurrection of Barbara Pym

*Cited in 1977 as one of the most underrated authors of the twentieth century, this quiet British author has been rescued from obscurity.*

BY ANNA SHAPIRO

ANDREW WHITTUCK



Barbara Pym.

The most conspicuous quality of Barbara Pym's career has been its near invisibility. If you look for her in *Contemporary Authors* for 1963 you will find a blank between Pyne and Pryor, though Pym appears in the "Permanent" edition of that reference work, with her "avocational interests" listed as "reading, domestic life, and cats." That year, at age 50, she had six novels out, all well received and popular in their British library editions. Her seventh was universally rejected. Unlike the currently popular short story writer Breece D'J Pancake and John Kennedy Toole, the posthumously published author of *A Confederacy of Dunces*, Barbara Pym did not take her own life in her despair at being rejected. She did stop writing.

Today something like Pym-mania has struck the literary world, justifying her classification as "permanent." When *The New York Times* polled writers last December, Eudora Welty, Anne Tyler, and Mary Gordon named her as a favorite. "The novelist most touted by one's most literate friends," a cover quote announces. The revival of her reputation began in 1977 when two distinguished British authors, Philip Larkin and Lord David Cecil, cited Pym in a *London Times* survey as one of the most underrated twentieth-century authors. As a direct result, *Quartet in Autumn*, a new novel she had finally dared write, was published, and the rejected manuscript of *An Unsuitable Attachment*, as if

rehabilitated by its fourteen-year imprisonment, was accepted.

Pym seems almost to have courted rejection and obscurity. They are, at least, her subjects, often disguised by a more conventional kind of courtship involving vicars and spinsters or an occasional anthropologist. One of the "excellent women" in the novel

ing a self-fulfilling prophecy, she had begun *Gazelle* in 1934, when she was 21. It was published in 1950; it had taken her sixteen years to convert her stunning rejection into comedy.

Nothing can engender a sense of being ridiculous more than not being loved by someone who you think loves you. In her novels Pym pro-

*Her letters and diaries reveal a person far more worldly than her characters, one attractively bitchy and given to heights and depths of feeling that she keeps out of her fictional world. That world is an ideal version of the life she may have wanted, content with "reading, domestic life, and cats."*

of that name states the case plainly: she is "for being unmarried . . . and by that I mean a positive rather than a negative state." The Anglican clergymen who populate these books are attracted equally by marriage and celibacy; it struck me that Pym's women are priests in drag. Barbara Pym never married, and her major preoccupation, not listed as an "avocation," was the church.

"Some tame gazelle, or some gentle dove: / Something to love, oh, something to love!" runs the epigraph to her first novel, sounding the theme for all that was to follow. Her spinsters are content to love their "gazelle"—a married archdeacon and a much-too-young curate, respectively—from afar. The point is to have something to love. Pym said she "would have liked to write a Margaret Drabble sort of novel" but, not having had marriage or babies, lacked the experience. Like the heroine of *Some Tame Gazelle*, Pym had expected to marry. That heroine is in her fifties and has loved her archdeacon since college days when, with no warning of a change in his affections, he married someone else. Pym likewise was in love when she was at Oxford, and her intended surprised everyone by marrying another. What is truly startling is that Pym wrote this tale of middle-aged spinsters before she became one: as if inscrib-

ceeded to turn this ridicule on everything she did. She became editor of an anthropological magazine, and ridiculous anthropologists became abundant in her work. The jumble sales, parish meetings, and even the incense of church become sources of high silliness. Cooking is not scanted: the recipients of a good cook's efforts are ridiculously unworthy, or the cook is ridiculously incompetent or ridiculously fussy. Food and church combine at harvest-sale benefits or in harvest decorations for the altar, and the vegetable that always gets singled out is the marrow. What is this everlasting marrow, I wondered. The Oxford dictionary says "a kind of gourd," but the second, non-vegetable meaning takes on extra significance: "A companion, partner, mate. . . . A thing which makes a pair with another." Not for another sixteen years did Pym allow ridicule to give way to sadness in her work, and even then she didn't allow the more violent emotions.

Her letters and diaries reveal a person far more worldly than her characters, one attractively bitchy and given to heights and depths of feeling that she keeps out of her fictional world. That world is an ideal version of the life she may have wanted, content with "reading, domestic life, and cats." When she wasn't writing, she had the church.

The church functions as community, if one chooses to participate in that part of it, and Pym did. The Church of England has been called "a social club. It's religion with the religion removed,"<sup>1</sup> and there's enough truth in this to make you smile. The church is also a perfect lover, offering no rejection slips or betrayals, but that is too cynical and too grossly functional a view. All of Pym's heroines are true embodiments of Christian humility, though I wish she could have made them as worldly as she was. Her only worldly heroine, Catherine in *Less Than Angels*, is probably her most autobiographical one. It is this unworldliness that separates a novel by Pym from "a Margaret Drabble sort of novel," not marriage and babies; the same unworldliness caused a British reviewer to call her "an anthropologist from the moon." In her final, more realistic and more worldly books, the characters—heroines none—do not choose humility so much as have it thrust upon them. That is the way of the world: imperfect, partial, and unfair.

I think it is this humility, a kind of clarity of spirit, that is attracting so many writers and readers to this author's quiet works. Modern literature, especially American literature, has come to feature immoderately the obstreperous claims of the ego; not to mention of the flesh, which Pym doesn't mention. Not that she was immune to these claims in life. Her despair when in her twenties of ever being a good writer was the cry of the notorious artistic ego. She had affairs, notably one with an "unsuitably" younger man after her lover's betrayal; she was "pleasantly sad" to leave him. Attractions to younger men crop up throughout her books, and form the subject of *An Unsuitable Attachment*, the book she had trouble publishing. In it, Ianthe Broome stays with the younger man. Maybe Pym regretted her own choice, although this seems unlikely. Ianthe's choice is unconvincing and does not improve Pym's least successful book.

This book also divides her six comedies from the final novels. There is nothing darkly latent in the comedies, which are pre-Freudian in tone if not in historical fact. In *Gazelle* a character is lulled by reading about debutantes, aristos, and "other comforting unrealities." Pym's early

novels are prized for their similar effect; reading them, you want to drink cups of tea, eat buttered toast, and settle with a cat on your lap. The later ones are not about unrealities, and they are not comforting.

Pym's shift toward realism can be traced in the way she writes about food, which enters into everything. Time in the first six books is like Winnie the Pooh's clock set perpetually at 11: when it isn't time for "elevenses" it is teatime; luncheons may be "a cutlet" or "a joint," with "a sweet" to follow. With breakfasts of eggs and meat, and suppers following cake at tea, one wonders why all these people aren't immensely fat. In the later books there is a realistic relationship between the food eaten and body shape. You could say that food actually is the subject of *Quartet in Autumn*. While Letty worries about her weight, Marcia squirrels away a stock of canned goods that could take her through World War II were it to happen again—and starves herself to death. But food is a metaphor. What Marcia is trying to hoard, and what she is starving for, is love.

The theme is the same, though the metaphors are less stark, in the early novels. These novels must be what people think of when they compare Pym to Jane Austen, as they incessantly do. What female author with a hint of wit is not compared to Austen these days? It is true that both authors start their novels with a mix-and-match set of romantic possibilities, and their characters are preoccupied with propriety. But Austen uses the newly romanticized marriage-market of her day as a means of scoring or underscoring moral points, and her characters' concern with propriety is preeminently a moral concern. Pym characters are not in danger of committing moral or romantic enormities; exemplary of the ordinary, their concern for propriety is social and domestic. It would be easy to dismiss them as superficial, and Pym along with them. Again, religion comes in: "God makes himself known and is known in the ordinary routines of life," writes an Anglican priest.<sup>2</sup> Pym's work is an embodiment of this article of faith.

If Pym is no Jane Austen, is she as good as people are saying she is? In England she is now thought to be overrated. One British critic says that

Pym's books are like Agatha Christie novels without the mystery—that they could use a murder or two. John Updike is repelled by the chilliness of Pym's solitaires. "To be sane is, to a great extent, to be sociable" is his aphoristic verdict. But Pym characters are not unsociable, they're just single. Perhaps their obsession

Barbara Pym's books, in chronological order:

*Some Tame Gazelle*  
*Excellent Women*  
*Jane and Prudence*  
*Less Than Angels*  
*A Glass of Blessings*  
*No Fond Return of Love*  
*An Unsuitable Attachment*  
*Quartet in Autumn*  
*The Sweet Dove Died*  
*A Few Green Leaves*

All published in America by E.P. Dutton. Paper: Harper & Row Perennial Library. Forthcoming is *A Very Private Eye*, selections made from her diaries and letters by Hilary Walton, a sister with whom she lived, and Hazel Holt, her friend, literary adviser, and executor. Her unpublished works and juvenilia are in the Bodleian Library, Oxford University.

with what is "suitable"—the word occurs every twenty or so pages in *Jane and Prudence*—is partly a way of holding on to social connection. The one character who fails to consider "suitability," the starving Marcia of Pym's best book, is indeed crazy.

Pym was always doubting her work, and it meant a great deal to her when people liked it. Up until 1950 her diary makes a sad record of unpublished work and loves lost; not until 1978 does the entry "success" appear. She did not get to see *Jane and Prudence* on the *Village Voice* best seller list—she died in 1980, of cancer—but she did enjoy the appreciation of the novelist Shirley Hazard, who wrote, "Her books will last." One can only agree, and the new editions of her work will help bring that about. This month *Some Tame Gazelle* will be published in America for the first time. It is ironic that her first novel should be her last published here. But appropriate, too: Barbara Pym's life exemplifies the maxim that the last shall be first and the first shall be last. ■

Anna Shapiro is an SR contributing editor.

<sup>1</sup>Graham Cleese of Monty Python, in *The New York Times*, April 15, 1983.


<sup>2</sup>Urban T. Holmes III, *What Is Anglicanism?*, Morehouse-Barlow Co. Inc., Connecticut, 1982.



"Says here they had a big subway fire in New York during the rush hour. No Lapps were reported to have been injured."



9 mg. "tar", 0.6 mg. nicotine av. per cigarette, FTC Report MAR. '83;  
100's: 9 mg. "tar", 0.7 mg. nicotine av. per cigarette by FTC method.



Warning: The Surgeon General Has Determined  
That Cigarette Smoking Is Dangerous to Your Health.

# Winning effort.

Like a lot of people, you started by blasting the cover off a golf ball at a driving range. But you soon discovered that it was less a battle with the ball than with yourself. So now, when you manage an especially good round, you feel great. Because you've won in more ways than one.

You're tasting success and it sure tastes good.

*VANTAGE.  
THE TASTE OF SUCCESS.*



## A Worshipful Observation

**J**ohn Constable vies with J.M.W. Turner for the title of England's greatest painter. Further, his landscapes have had a respectful international audience ever since the 1820s, when Eugène Delacroix saw Constable's work on view in Paris. Astounded by the vibrancy of the Englishman's palette, Delacroix gave his own colors more variety and a higher key. Four decades later, these developments helped the Impressionists toward their innovations. Thus, Constable has an oblique connection to Claude Monet. Painters like Constable reassure us with this kind of secure art-historical position, yet the comfort and familiarity we

feel in looking at the works of this particular exemplar of greatness can be misleading. If we're not careful, we may overlook the fact that Constable owes some of his strength to the fact that he is, on occasion, an exceedingly odd painter.

Over the centuries the English have shown two distinct attitudes towards artists. On one hand, they have supported foreigners who represent the mainstream of European culture: figures like Hans Holbein and Anthony Van Dyck. On the other, they save their full, long-term approval of home-grown practitioners for those who possess a degree of eccentricity. Of course we're so used to thinking of

Constable and Turner as major figures that we're inclined to overlook everything strange in the beauties they offer. Has any painter, including Monet, ever been as sublimely persnickety as Constable in the act of recording sunlight and its nuances? Some of his daubs of white and shimmery yellow may be petals. Then again, they may be sudden flecks of light, careening off the dew-soaked grass. Constable's accuracy of observation is an endless source of ambiguity, and that is why one's reading of his imagery shifts and builds, like the weather in the southeastern region of England known as Constable country. His



John Constable's *The Opening of Waterloo Bridge*: the structure is soothing, and the heavily worked surface brings the painting to convincing life.