

Under the Spell of Barbara Pym

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It is both a pleasure and a privilege to be here on this special day – although last September, when Ellen Miller honored me with an invitation to speak, I accepted with some trepidation. What could I possibly say about Barbara Pym that hadn't already been more eloquently said by others? As a day became a week became a month, and as Ellen patiently waited for the title of my talk, I began to feel much as I had felt thirty-five years ago as a graduate student: I was certain I could never read enough or work hard enough or know enough to have any original insights into a subject about which I cared so much.

And so I crave your indulgence, for I have decided to let both the author and some of her readers do my speaking for me, for they can describe in great detail and from many perspectives an experience we all share, and which I'd like to explore with you now: what it means to fall under the spell of Barbara Pym.

When we begin reading a novel we are invited to enter the mind of another, to allow our own world to be subsumed by the author's created one. In doing so, at times we are touched within by some sort of awe or joy or delight. We feel lifted. We feel more fully and pleurably alive.

Philosophers call these "aha" moments – as in *Now I see, Now I know, Now I understand*. The Church calls them "epiphanies" – from the Greek *epiphaneia*, meaning "a manifestation." Virginia Woolf called them "moments of being" and Wordsworth called them "spots of time."

Whatever name we apply, once they occur and we have considered them afterward in calm reflection, we also see that our understanding has fundamentally changed: The world is put into clearer perspective; we feel ourselves in touch with the rhythm of life in a fresh way; we begin to move in a direction different from anything we'd ever imagined, a direction that we know is right for us.

That describes precisely how many of us respond to the novels of Barbara Pym. Why? What is it about this particular author's temperament and work that casts such a powerful spell, that draws us in and will not let us go? Why is it that for so many of her devoted readers the novels serve such a deeply personal purpose? Why are we so certain it was no hyperbole when Philip Larkin said of her books, "No man can read them and be quite the same again"?

I'd like to begin my talk this morning by recounting the reading experiences I have gathered from a few of our Society's members when they first encountered and then revisited Barbara Pym and her work. Then I will reconstruct for you the web of circumstances that led to my publishing, in 1987, a collection of essays devoted to this author, and share with you what both the writer and the process taught me. To conclude my remarks, I'll consider why Barbara and her work have remained so vital and relevant throughout these twenty-five years after her death. I hope that my thoughts here will not only prepare ground for a lively, perhaps even Pymish, discussion to follow, but also shed a little light on the intricate, powerful, and wondrous kind of magic only Barbara Pym could create.

I am sure that most of us remember where we were and what we were doing when we fell under the spell of Barbara Pym. Perhaps, too, most of us have considered at times how different our lives would have been if we had not, on such and such a day and at such and such a time, opened one of her books – and begun reading.

Kathy Ackley, for example, has a very clear memory of sitting in a lawn chair in her backyard and reading with fascination Rosemary Dinnage's review of *A Very Private Eye* in the August 16, 1984 issue of the *New York Review of Books*. Later, when she went to A Room of One's Own bookstore in Madison, Wisconsin, she found a shelf full of the novels. Unsure of where to start, she decided to read the first lines

of all of them, and the following words caught her attention: “There are various ways of mending a broken heart, but perhaps going to a learned conference is one of the more unusual.” Kathy devoured *No Fond Return of Love*, fell for its author, and bought and read all her other books immediately. “I can still remember what a joy it was each time I opened a new Pym novel,” she says. “I loved the author’s take on the world and was delighted by her wry, indulgent, and bemused treatment of her characters.”

Similarly, Beverly Bell was inspired by Edmund Fuller’s review of *A Very Private Eye* in the *Wall Street Journal* for July 3, 1984 – in which he referred to “tales of unsuccessful love, wryly wise and never, never dreary.” Beverly went right to her local library and checked out all of the novels. Her joy was compounded when she discovered the Barbara Pym Society in 1999 as well as a discussion group on the Internet, but the greatest surprise came to her when she learned that someone else in New York City named Frances McMeen also loved Pym, and that they were co-workers at the same firm.

Or consider Scott Herrick, whose interest came by way of the *New York Review of Books* which in 1977 ran a review-essay quoting Philip Larkin and Lord David Cecil – both of whom had acclaimed her the most underrated novelist of the postwar years. Scott made a mental note of Barbara Pym, and a bit later, he dropped by the local library branch while waiting to pick up his daughter from her piano lesson, tried out *No Fond Return of Love*, and went on to read the others. “I have to confess I started enjoying them before I started appreciating them,” he says. Since then, he has been through the set several times, in order of their being written, and has discovered that, as is the case with most art, each time they are better. “I find them funnier,” he says; “actual laugh-out loud funnier. I have to be careful where I am when I read them.”

Ellen Miller, on the other hand, has no idea why she plucked *Quartet in Autumn* from her library’s new fiction shelf in 1980. “Perhaps the poetic-sounding title spoke to me,” she says. Ellen read it in one sitting and thought it was “quietly spectacular.” She then looked for other Pym novels and was surprised to find how different were the early works. “Different,” she adds, “but also similar and immediately identifiable.” Now, twenty-five years later, as we all know and appreciate, Barbara Pym is a quintessential part of Ellen’s life.

And then there’s Hazel Holt, who tells us in *A Lot to Ask* of arriving in London as a new employee at the International African Institute where Barbara Pym also worked. Because Hazel was an English major, the fact that there was a novelist on the staff was naturally expected to be of interest to her, but the title of the book, *Some Tame Gazelle*, together with the name of the Institute, somehow gave Hazel the idea that the book was about big game-hunting in Africa, which, she says, “was very much *not* my cup of tea.” Only when someone lent her a copy did she undertake the task of reading it, and then, of course, she was “enchanted” – enchanted enough as Barbara’s devoted friend and tireless literary executor to write and speak and edit on her behalf ever since Barbara’s passing in 1980.

As with all well-crafted and fully realized literature, it’s risky to open a Pym novel. We never know what we’ll discover, in what ways it will challenge us, or where it will lead us. What interesting stories must lie behind every book written, article composed, career launched, tenure granted, sabbatical awarded, conference offered, pleasure received, friend made, and consolation found – because someone was thoughtful enough to recommend her to us, or because by seeming coincidence we discovered her work in a store or library, or because we read a review of one of her books, and then, for whatever reason, we chose to open a copy and begin reading.

Like many admirers, I wandered into this author’s magnetic sphere through the recommendation of a friend. It was a rainy weekday evening in the summer of 1980, and I was in London – caught in limbo-land between a completed project and no project, between relief and letdown from which I hoped the attractions of travel abroad would help me to emerge.

The little I knew of Barbara Pym was through the writings of others. Early reviews on both sides of the Atlantic of her posthumously published *A Few Green Leaves* praised it as “charming and funny,” “beguilingly comic,” “magical” and “one of her best.” Paul Bailey referred to the “quiet confidence of its

unhurried narrative.” These items, and others, I’d clipped and inserted into a “back-burner” folder, along with her photograph which I had found in the *Observer*. I would later write that this photo revealed the sort of gentle, intelligent face we expect to see in wise, kind teachers, reflecting an unselfishness and a patient endurance – a face, in fact, not unlike my own mother’s. And I had kept the obituaries I’d read from the previous January, notices which expanded my awareness of Barbara, at least in the abstract, and planted in my mind the thought – here is someone I should look into.

Adding to my interest was the rapt enthusiasm of a friend who that night loaned me her copy of *Excellent Women* – still my favorite Pym novel. I read it straight through, and as I did so, to my surprise many of my distractions fell away, I felt assured, and I was filled with a unique sense of peace and warmth, an impression so intense that it seemed to expand into an ineffable joy that remains with me to this day. At the time, I didn’t have the words or the understanding to explain such a strong reaction, but I did know I felt impelled to read everything by her and about her that I could find.

Sometime between that fateful summer evening of 1980 and the fall of 1984, increasingly drawn both to explore and to pay tribute, in a small way, to the ever-growing interest in her work on both sides of the Atlantic, I began to form the idea for two books – a collection of original essays on her life and work, written by those who had known her or her novels; and an annotated bibliography of secondary writings in which I would trace how the work, once it had left her hands, had been received and interpreted by scholars, critics and contemporary reviewers.

This leads me to the second point I’d like to discuss with you this morning – the genesis of the two books I’ve published about this remarkable author. In the 1998 issue of *Green Leaves* I related how I researched and compiled the reference guide, but here I would like to re-visit some of the steps by which I brought to completion a book entitled *The Life and Work of Barbara Pym*, and in the process what I learned about her, myself, and her readership.

You think you are alone, and then you look up, and you are surrounded. When I began work on the project I was struck immediately by the enthusiastic way everyone I met or wrote to welcomed everything having to do with Barbara – even when I knocked at their door without warning!

Selecting the book’s contributors, for example, was a fairly nebulous process - a blend of instinct and coincidence and luck. I began by contacting those writers with whom I was personally acquainted, then reached out to others I had read or knew of. Sometimes one person led me to another – as John Halperin did for the novelist, Penelope Lively, and the critic, A.L. Rowse; as Bob and Virginia Redston did for Gilbert Phelps; and as Constance Malloy did for Janice Rossen who, I discovered, lived a mere thirty minutes drive from my home, was a reader at the Huntington Library (where I also had a desk), and was herself writing a book entitled *The World of Barbara Pym*. A chance meeting with John Bayley on the occasion of his wife Iris Murdoch’s talk at the University of California, San Diego, resulted in the wonderful opportunity to ask if he would like to contribute. “I admire and enjoy her so much,” he said. “I’d be very glad to do you an essay on her.”

At first I envisioned having twenty contributors, but expecting that some would decline for perfectly understandable reasons, I wrote to thirty-five. Indeed, even the negative responses were revealing. “Although a keen student of Pym,” said Auberon Waugh, “I do not feel I know enough about her to contribute.” Lord David Cecil wrote: “I would have been pleased to write for you, . . . but, as a matter of fact I am nearly 82 years old and already committed to as many projects as I can possibly manage in the near future; so, regretfully, I must refuse.” Philip Larkin, who allowed me to re-publish the introduction he had written for *An Unsuitable Attachment*, declined writing a new essay: “You mustn’t think of me as a scholar,” he wrote; “just a hack reviewer.” And although John Braine, also a fan of Pym’s, died three months before he could complete his promised essay, he gave a tantalizing glimpse into what he would have written when he said in an early letter: “I will give you an essay that only another novelist could write of his contemporary.”

In the end, however, nineteen of the group I'd contacted did deliver, and John Halperin's letter accompanying his piece typifies their feelings: "You have hit me in a vulnerable place: I love Barbara Pym." He also helped me to place the book with Macmillan.

Arrangement of the essays in a collection like this can be a real challenge, but in this instance the pieces, as they arrived, began to suggest three broad categories – "The Life," "The Work" and "In Retrospect." As my authors corresponded with me and submitted their work, I began to realize that my own strong response to Barbara was in no way unique. She seemed to touch, to guide, to inspire us all.

One of the highlights for me during this period was flying to New York City the first week of October 1984 to visit the office of Barbara's American publisher, E.P. Dutton. There I was allowed the immense pleasure of reading through four file drawers of reviews and other materials, with permission to copy anything I wanted to help with my projects. I also attended a commemorative tea at the Gramercy Hotel honoring Hazel Holt and Hilary Pym on the occasion of the American publication of *A Very Private Eye* and, afterwards, met with them in their hotel suite to discuss plans for my book.

I also carried away from that meeting the pleasant memory of a very Pymish moment. As I was leaving the hotel room and just pulling the door closed behind me, I heard one of my hostesses say to the other, "Such a nice young man. So unlike the *other* American we met this morning." I can only imagine what Barbara might have made of that scene.

As I reflect, it's hard to put into words the sense of excitement and good fortune I felt about working "with" Barbara during those early years. Here I was, six years out of graduate school, seven years into my teaching career, and so privileged to embark on fresh and fascinating territory. Now the early 1980's and its accompanying flood of interest all seems a distant memory. But I also realize that in ways I will perhaps never fully understand, that early work brought me closer to Barbara Pym herself.

Robert Frost described his reaction to reading one of D. H. Lawrence's poems in these words: "It was such a poem that I wanted to go right to the man that wrote it and say something." That was my thought when reading *Excellent Women* for the first time.

Unfortunately, I could not go right to Barbara and say something, for she was already gone from us. Luckily, though, I could benefit from the experiences and memories of those who had, and as they shared them with me, I began to see her more fully as a person, not just a writer.

Sometimes when we fall for an author through her works, our expectations are disappointed when we actually meet her. Not so with Barbara Pym. My correspondents confirmed how happy they were that meeting her only enhanced, and did not diminish, their regard for her as a person. "She had that wonderful combination of quiet charm and good manners that made you feel she really wanted to talk to you," wrote one. Another said: "In meeting Barbara one never felt that she had missed out on any part of life." It is this ideal that impressed another of my correspondents when she wrote of her one and only meeting with Barbara. It had occurred only a few months before she died, and it elicited this description:

"I liked Barbara so much and I am so sad for you, that you never met her. She was so easy to talk to – thoroughly nice, relaxed, not tense, with no 'side' at all, no desire to teach, or impress, or talk too much, or dominate the conversation. In fact, she was, if anything, a little quiet and shy, though not really reserved, and didn't at all mind all the questions I plied her with! . . . We chatted easily about all sorts of quite ordinary things, from gardening to books. . . . She was a 'lady' in the nicest sense of that maligned word. She had an inner glowing depth, and warmth and vitality. . . . I thought I would see her again before long and be able to ask more, but I didn't realize she was already ill, and that we would not meet again."

Yes, Barbara was gone, but certainly not forgotten, and this brings me to my third and final point about the nature of her amazing spell: It has not just endured, but has in fact grown to affect more readers with every passing year.

“No reputation is more than snowfall,” says Delmore Schwartz. “It vanishes.” True for some writers, perhaps, but thankfully Barbara Pym is an exception. Her literary reputation is secure; her books continue to attract a growing audience as the years pass; and the critical interest is ever-widening with, at last count, thirty-one books, many hundreds of essays, and forty-four dissertations as well as translations into French, Italian, German, Dutch, Portuguese, Hungarian, and Russian. Here I embrace the absolutely basic definition of “criticism” that Frank Kermode gave when he called it “the medium in which past work survives.” As long as somebody is examining a piece of art, through whatever lens, it is surviving. Many of Barbara’s readers identify with the work, enjoy the work, and want to go on enjoying it. And critics continue to find new depths to mine there as well.

Certainly her appeal to the reading public lies partly in her fulfillment of the most fundamental requirements of any great writer: She is a storyteller, a teacher, but above all, an enchanter.

When we open *No Fond Return of Love*, for example, and begin to read, within minutes we feel that telltale tingle up our spine and we are drawn into the comfort and relaxation of Pym’s complete and credible world, where things ordinary suddenly become profoundly significant, where a new face is an occasion for speculation, where the pleasantness and security of everyday life dominates, and where only small crises – such as a fainting literary editor or a vicar missing during Easter services – form a counterpoint to that comfort. As one of my correspondents wrote, “I know of few other authors who are able to describe an event, a room, a thought, a person, with such tangible and finite detail. We *know* the kind of person who earns her living as an indexer. We *know* how to behave when the rector comes to tea. We *know* what a macaroni cheese signifies. We *know* what makes a good jumble sale. We *know* who goes where for tea and whether they prefer seed cakes.” “In minute, breathtaking ways,” says Lisa Schwarzbaum, “Pym sizes up the harms, the conventions, the pleasures, and the perversities of small lives and bestows upon them the rare beauty and clarity of her own genius.”

Beneath the calm surface of her novels, the events of Pym’s fictive day *do* make an imprint. When we close the book 244 pages later, we realize that nothing momentous has happened outwardly, and yet she has made us *care* for her characters and the minutiae of their lives, and that, no doubt, is one of the many reasons for her sustained appeal.

But I believe there is another reason for her staying power, and that is, through her books Barbara meets us at our point of need – not only for pleasure but for companionship, for stability, perhaps even for consolation.

I have heard of numerous instances in which people grieving the loss of a loved one (or of their own health) have found comfort in Pym’s novels during their blackest hours. I know a married couple who got through a personal tragedy by reading the novels to each other every night. Paul De Angelis, her American editor, has related how his reading of *Quartet in Autumn* “coincided with his coming to terms with his father’s death”; and John Bayley has said the novels “not only sustained but calmed and satisfied” him “as nothing else could” – as Iris Murdoch died slowly and cruelly from Alzheimer’s disease. “All honest thought is a form of prayer,” Lance Morrow has written, and Barbara Pym’s honesty can lead us to a kind of benedictus within.

I think this phenomenon occurs in part because her plots and moral clarities remind us of the importance of staying connected with others and, ultimately, with hope, with a simple faith in the durability of the human spirit. Her books, Robert Liddell wrote, “often seem to come to us like gifts of nature, like the air we breathe or the water we drink (but purer and more wholesome).” I agree that Barbara stays soothingly far away from the easy, sweeping nihilism of many twentieth century writers. She reminds us, as did Henry James more than a century ago, that every life is a special problem which is not ours but another’s. “Content yourself,” James once wrote in a letter to Grace Norton, “with the terrible algebra of your own. We all live together, and those of us who love and know, live so most.”

This is not escapist literature but “the kind of reading,” says Lance Morrow, which “one does to keep sane, to touch other intelligences, to absorb a little grace.” And we all could use a little of that at one time or another. For example, I’ll always be thankful that I had the sense to introduce my mother to *Some Tame Gazelle* when she was in her late sixties and facing some of the inevitable challenges that come with age. “It was the best thing you could have done for me,” she said years later.

Pym’s humor as well as the crystalline calm of her prose helped my mother to get through the ten times my father went into the hospital for surgery. During the first three of those in-again, out-again years, she busied herself with the novels and over the next five years took to heart Barbara’s solution to her own mind-numbing trials – “I just went on writing,” Barbara has said. “It was all I ever wanted to do.” Under her maiden name, Frances Bachelder, my mother wrote an essay entitled “The Importance of Connecting” for my Pym anthology and a novel, published in 2000 under the title *The Iron Gate*. One evening two years ago, after she’d spent a long and uncertain day at my father’s hospital bedside, I found my mother asleep in her chair at home, a copy of *Some Tame Gazelle* opened on her lap.

“I’ve been looking at that book again,” she said, upon awakening. “I can’t help it. It’s just so funny.”

But we need not be in our seventies or eighties to fall under Barbara’s spell, nor do we need to be suffering to appreciate what Frauke Elisabeth Lenckos has called the “infinite possibilities” of the text. Her words speak, I believe, to anyone at any age and in any state of mind that is willing to slow down and listen, because Barbara is writing of the human heart. The context may be different from our own and on the surface the characters may be quite unlike ourselves, but the human heart is not. Here, too, she meets us at our point of need.

Because we live in a world that devalues those who make time to listen to the inner self, and in a society that tends to equate the need for solitude and introspection with laziness, inactivity and non-productiveness, we should not be surprised to find that many people have lost possession of what Emily Dickinson called the “appetite for silence.” At work and at home, among friends and at play, there seem to be ever-lessening opportunities for quiet time. And as people grow older and their lives become steadily more hectic and fragmented, they find themselves caught up in a race against time, with no time to be alone – and silent. “The world is too much with us,” wrote Wordsworth; “late and soon,/ Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers; . . .”

But the world in which Barbara Pym’s characters live, whether urban or provincial, is the antithesis of this chaos. It is a quiet world, evoked in such detail as to make the reader feel that the action could not take place in any other milieu. These novels invite us to slow down, to retire within ourselves, to remove ourselves from peripheral concerns and pressures of a madly active culture, and return to the center where life is sacred – a humble mystery and miracle. It is this ideal reader, I believe, that Joseph Epstein had in mind when he wrote of those who “seek in fiction news of the inner life, who seek solace, who seek the pleasures of a superior imagination at work on the materials of everyday life.” Barbara Pym’s novels meet that need.

What, then, finally accounts for our attraction and devotion to Barbara Pym? Indeed, what makes her spell so captivating? The answer, I believe, is found in an experience I had many years ago.

As a youngster of ten or eleven, I loved to explore for an hour or so before suppertime several miles of woodland behind my boyhood home in Amherst, Massachusetts. In advance of setting out on my journey, however, I always turned on my upstairs bedroom lamp. As long as I still saw the light, I knew I could find my way back.

One day I ended up in an unfamiliar area, further than I had wandered before. All at once it seemed the forest had grown dark and convulsive with shadows. The air was thickly oppressive. Worse still, I failed to see my bedroom light. No matter how I turned, I could not find my way, as if I was lost in some dark corridor that endlessly twists and turns and doubles back on itself. My heart was thumping like fireworks.

During previous journeys I had always been disappointed to hear my mother's voice calling for me because that meant it was time to stop what I was doing and return home. But now I yearned for that sound, and when I heard my name called, faint but audible, I ran in its direction. Before long there appeared the chimney, the tiled slope of the roof, finally the main body of my brown shingle-board house with its green shutters, and shining from the second floor window, a bright light. Within minutes, and with an enormous sense of thankfulness, I had found my way safely home.

Since childhood, my mother's voice has been an undeniable presence in my head; since 1980, so has Barbara Pym's. Most of her devotees say the same. "That's how it is with Barbara," says Hazel Holt; "once you've read the novels, she is with you forever."

More than her brilliant storytelling or unforgettable, gently quirky characters, more than her gift for quotation or (in the words of Charles Burkhardt) her "impeccably intelligent" humor – to read her novels is to hear her voice – a voice that is speaking directly to us, in private, in its own distinctive, soothing, and enthralling way. Unsentimental and wise, the voice behind the characters in these novels beguiles us early and will not let go. In her company, we feel safe. And although no amount of academic study will ever explain why we love one writer's voice above another's, we do know, says John Le Carré, that "Partly it has to do with trust, partly with the good or bad manners of the narrator, partly with his authority or lack of it. And a little also with beauty, though not as much as we might like to think."

So that's what I think it means to fall under the spell of Barbara Pym, and once there, we want to return, often, to grow closer to this gentle and genteel sensibility. That's why we continue to read and re-read her. That's why we attend conferences and produce books and essays and talk about her with other devotees. And that's why Eudora Welty wrote in 1982, "Quiet, paradoxical, funny and sad, [Barbara Pym's novels] have the iron in them of permanence too."

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