

# Walk-ons and Noises Off: Peripheral Characters in Barbara Pym's World

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“Saw today a woman with bright purple hair, her expression under it all understandably surprised; two well-dressed upper-class women, chinless....” Barbara Pym jotted down these observations in her notebook on August 20, 1955. In *A Glass of Blessings*, published three years later, Wilmet Forsyth, the novel's heroine, at a social evening in the parish hall notices “two well-dressed middle-aged women with a young girl...All three were chinless, with large aristocratic noses. Near them stood a thin woman with purple hair and a surprised expression, as if she had not expected that it would turn out to be quite that colour.” The chinless ladies are later identified, but the lady with purple hair remains nameless, never to be seen again, and yet she is a great comic creation, especially since Barbara now offers a reason for her surprised expression.

The four women who make up this little tableau are like spear-carriers in an opera, or walk-ons in a stage play – actors who take on small roles with few or no lines. Barbara Pym created innumerable characters of this kind. Some do not even appear, but are merely talked about; they remain behind the scenes as “noises off” – sounds created offstage to be heard during a play's performance. Pym gives her readers fleeting glimpses into the lives of a vast array of people spanning all segments of society. Their appearance is not simply gratuitous; they are woven into the fabric of the novels and serve several different purposes. First and foremost, they fill in the background of a scene. As T.S. Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock said of himself: “No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be; / Am an attendant lord, one that will do / To swell a progress, start a scene or two...” Whether walk-ons or noises off, the peripheral characters add credibility to the fictional world. The parish event described in *A Glass of Blessings* is made more vivid by Wilmet's observation of this strange-looking group. They are not simply individuals in a vacuum, but part of a world that is full of interesting people. Pym's notes on the original outline of *A Glass of Blessings*, then entitled *The Lime Tree Bower*, contain the comment: “Oh, I like a crowded canvas!” She was adept at creating brief character sketches which offer tantalizing glimpses into other lives. The peripheral characters add humor, poignancy and mystery, and often reflect the moods or throw light on the personalities of the main characters. Sometimes the reader has the additional pleasure of encountering old friends when major or minor characters, the principal and supporting players from earlier novels, reappear as walk-ons or noises off.

How did Pym come to adopt this stratagem of employing bit players? In *A Lot to Ask*, her biography of Barbara Pym, her close friend and colleague Hazel Holt notes that Barbara inherited her passion for observing and speculating about people from her mother Irena Pym. ““See what you can find out without *asking*,’ Irena used to say, thereby bestowing upon Barbara a whole attitude to life.” In *A Very Private Eye*, Hilary Pym recalls how Barbara amused her school friends with her observations and fantasies about various members of the clergy. She kept diaries from 1931 to 1948, and thereafter, for the rest of her life, she wrote her observations in little spiral-bound notebooks, eighty-two in all, which served as raw material for her novels. She took note of strange-looking people, writing in her diary on February 26, 1938: “When I got to Balliol three blond Etonians like teddy bears were there.” Perhaps the sight of the Etonians prompted her to describe the newly arrived students observed by Anthea Cleveland in *Crampton Hodnet*, in their uniform of suede shoes and teddy-bear coats. She delighted in eccentricity, as seen in a diary entry of May 1939: “Whitsuntide weekend – an old lady with a curious Bakelite

apparat – perhaps an ear trumpet – talking about spiritualism in a restaurant.” Not all these notes found their way into the novels, but what ample material they provided – as Jane Cleveland would say, such richness! While working at the International African Institute from 1946 to 1974, Barbara continued to fill the notebooks with what Hazel describes as “all the trivia that she enjoyed so much – the odd overheard remark,...any small incongruity or eccentricity of behaviour.” She worked like an anthropologist, using her field notes to enrich her work.

Barbara Pym’s favorite heroines were Wilmet and Prudence, but according to Hazel Holt the characters most nearly like Barbara are Mildred and Dulcie. Mildred Lathbury, the heroine of *Excellent Women*, is told by William Caldicote that she has a “talent for observation.” He is quite right. Through Mildred, Pym stocks various scenes with a variety of walk-ons. Attending a meeting of the Learned Society, Mildred notes the “girls with flowing hair and scarlet nails and youths with hair almost as flowing and corduroy trousers,” a few serious-looking Americans with rimless glasses and open notebooks, and Africans, speaking a strange language. Then there are the more eccentric attendees: an old man in a purple muffler who asks an irrelevant question about the “ceremonial devouring of human flesh,” an old woman working on a piece of multi-colored knitting who falls asleep during the presentation, and a woman “carrying a string-bag, containing a newspaper-wrapped bundle from which a fish’s tail protruded,” pushing her way out from the middle of the row of chairs. The incongruous details of the purple muffler, the multi-colored knitting and especially the fish’s tail all help make the description come alive. Mildred’s powers of observation and her wry commentary clearly echo those of the author.

Dulcie Mainwaring, heroine of *No Fond Return of Love*, who enjoys researching the lives of ordinary people, is the observer par excellence. In the bus in Taviscombe, Dulcie observes “three elderly ladies in well-cut tweed suits and severe felt hats, one of whom, when she turned around, was seen to be startlingly bearded.” Just a minute detail, but comic in its incongruity, emphasized by the adverb “startlingly.” Dulcie is a little puzzled by her own obsession. Observing a woman walking her dog, she notices her transparent pink nylon gloves and two library books carried “in a contraption of rubber straps,” and wonders what is the use of noticing such details, since she is neither a novelist nor a private detective. Pym obviously projected her own powers of observation onto Mildred and Dulcie, and to some extent onto her other heroines. After all, it was Wilmet who commented on the woman with purple hair, and Catherine Oliphant in *Less Than Angels* sounds remarkably like her creator when she muses that the trivial pleasures of life include “funny things seen and overheard.”

An important function of walk-ons in a play, or extras in a film, is to swell crowd scenes. In describing a walk in the Parks in spring in *Crampton Hodnet*, Pym floods the stage with people. Miss Morrow imagines that she and Miss Doggett and all the other people are performing in a ballet. There are “[d]ons striding along with walking sticks, wives in Fair Isle jumpers coming low over the hips, nurses with prams, and governesses with intelligent children asking ceaseless questions, clergymen, solitary bearded ones reading books, young earnest ones like chickens just out of the egg...undergraduates too, and young women with Sweet’s *Anglo-Saxon Reader* or lecture notebooks under their arms, and lovers, clasping each other’s fingers.” What a lively description of the diverse types of people whom Barbara must have seen and watched in Oxford, here all gathered on one stage. Noël Coward created a similar scene in his 1959 ballet “London Morning,” introducing us to a cross-section of London society: sentries, businessmen, a sailor, an American girl, schoolgirls and nuns, juvenile delinquents, and a man in a bath chair all parade across the stage.

Pym’s novels contain other crowd scenes in which the people are not so clearly distinguished, resembling the stick-figure people in the paintings of L.S. Lowry. In *An Unsuitable Attachment*, the parish party lands in



L.S. Lowry, "A Village Square" (1943)

*Angels*, Catherine Oliphant looks out of the window of a cafeteria and sees "the rush-hour crowds beginning to move towards the bus-stops. Soon they began to take on a human look, to become separate individuals who might even be known to her." All three scenes fill the stage with movement, and create a background for the principal characters.

The crowd scenes are filled with types, but Pym's descriptions of individual peripheral characters are actually brief character sketches, and there is a whole gallery of them. Think of Lady Clara Boulding, who appears briefly in *Some Tame Gazelle*. She enjoys opening garden fêtes and bazaars, where she makes dull speeches in the style of her late husband's discourses in parliament. She appears to be a conventional upper-class lady and rather a bore, but at Mr. Donne's wedding reception Belinda Bede spots her "putting a small vol-au-vent whole into her mouth." Who would have thought she was so greedy? In *Excellent Women*, Mrs. Ryan is described even more briefly as a "stout Irishwoman, a Roman Catholic incidentally, who was always in the front of the queue for our sales." Just a few words sketch both the appearance and the personality of pushy Mrs. Ryan. In the same book Mildred's schoolteacher friend Dora, small, stocky, red-haired, and abrasive, announces that she is not on speaking terms with Miss Protheroe, the headmistress, because of a disagreement about the girls' wearing of hats to chapel and, later, an argument about eating whale meat during Lent. Apparently Miss Protheroe thought whales were fish until Dora enlightened her. We are told nothing more about Miss Protheroe, and she remains offstage, but we infer that she is no match for the truculent Dora, and this is quite enough to make us sympathize with her.

Another brief but revealing character sketch appears in *Less Than Angels*. The anthropology students Mark and Digby share a flat with an African student. When they come back one evening they find there is no milk left for breakfast because "Mr Ephraim Olo liked to drink Ovaltine while he composed articles of a seditious tone for his African newspaper." Pym contrasts the soothing bedtime drink Ovaltine with the riot and rebellion of Mr. Olo's writings. We may suspect that he is not really as Bolshie as his articles would lead one to suppose, a suspicion confirmed later in the book, when we learn that he is going back home to be a cabinet minister. The President of the Learned Society featured in *Excellent Women* is described in a similar way. His appearance – "tall and mild-looking...with a white wispy beard, in which some crumbly fragments of meringue had lodged

themselves” – contrasts with the activities of his youth, when “he had apparently written some rather startling pamphlets about the nature of the universe,” causing his father, a Methodist minister, to turn him out.

Pym’s brief character sketches usually poke gentle fun at the odd people described, but she is good at portraying obnoxious people too. We instinctively dislike the manageress of The Anchorage in *No Fond Return of Love*, whose rimless glasses and white nylon overall make her look like a dentist’s receptionist. In addition to this unattractive, clinical appearance, “she had a high-pitched, tinkling laugh, perhaps the ‘bright’ side of the Christian atmosphere.” In *A Glass of Blessings* Wilmet, noticing that one of the servers at St. Luke’s, a teacher at a secondary modern school, always sounds shrill and mean, supposes that his years of teaching, of constantly having to say “Now, boys!”, make him speak this way. Pym’s final novel, *A Few Green Leaves*, contains a more detailed sketch of an obnoxious person, Jason Dyer, a young man of unprepossessing appearance with long, lank hair, his spindly legs clad in jeans, and a gold earring in the shape of a crucifix. His character proves to be unpleasant too. He has a shop that sells “Deceased Effects,” and when old Miss Lickerish dies, he is seen “hovering...like some vulture...waiting hopefully to pounce on whatever ‘effects’ [she] had left.”

In addition to these fleeting glimpses that inspire laughter or distaste, Pym created entire scenes of broad comedy focused on peripheral characters. In *A Glass of Blessings* Miss Daunt, the blood donor, “a tall rather mad-looking woman in a bushy fur coat and red hat,” creates a disturbance at the door, arguing that she cannot wait in the queue: “I am Miss Daunt...My blood is Rhesus *negative*, the most valuable kind. I have a letter from the Regional Director...’This precious blood’...that is the phrase used.” This comic interlude makes Wilmet’s venture into giving blood quite unforgettable. Barbara Pym herself had been a blood donor. She wrote on May 4, 1955: “I give blood in the crypt of St. Martin in the Fields. The donors are all rather ordinary-looking people – the women burdened by shopping baskets. I can imagine (for a novel) a little, frail laden woman saying ‘Oh I have given blood’ and putting others to shame.” Miss Daunt can hardly be described as little and frail, but the note shows the genesis of the scene, and the fact that her blood is so rare might well make the others feel unworthy, or so at least she hopes.

The dining room of The Anchorage, the hotel with the bright Christian atmosphere, is the setting for another scene of broad comedy, focusing on an odd group of people. The diners include a 15-year-old boy “who glared resentfully around the room.” “Resentfully” perfectly sums up the boy’s attitude – he obviously does not want to be sitting in this boring hotel with his parents. The scene becomes even funnier for the reader, and more unbearable for him, when his mother whispers to him, “Don’t do that, Clive.” Also present are a “fierce-looking, white-haired woman, extremely thin and surprisingly sunburnt,” and a clergyman with his mother, both with “beaky nose and thin pursed mouth.” We may wonder why the elderly woman is so sunburnt – again an effective use of an adverb, “surprisingly.” The mystery is solved when the clergyman with the uncanny resemblance to his mother breaks the “unnerving silence” with the fatuous remark that “This must be a change from Uganda, Miss Fell.” It seems that Miss Fell is a missionary, therefore quite at home in the bright Christian atmosphere.

And now Pym completely demolishes the fourth wall, by walking through it onto the scene herself. “It was at this point that somebody came to the unoccupied table, but as she was a woman of about forty, ordinary-looking and unaccompanied, nobody took much notice of her. As it happened, she was a novelist; indeed, some of the occupants of the tables had read and enjoyed her books, but it would never have occurred to them to connect her name, even had they ascertained it from the hotel register, with that of the author they admired.” In a talk she gave in Barnes in the 1950s, entitled “The Novelist’s Use of Everyday Life,” Pym quoted one of her favorite writers, Denton Welch, who wrote: “Some stranger may be near us, listening, watching, melting away to

write our words down in his little book at home.” And so we have the opportunity to observe Barbara Pym, as her own walk-on, doing just that.

Pym’s walk-on characters run the gamut from broadly comedic, as we have seen, to near-tragic, for her observation of the eccentric combines humor and pathos. So many seem to lead what Henry David Thoreau called “lives of quiet desperation.” In *Excellent Women*, Mildred describes the poignant sight of a little gray woman heating a saucepan of coffee on a Primus stove amidst the desolation of a bombed-out church. And in *Jane and Prudence* we get a glimpse of a lonely life when a young woman at the meeting of the literary society asks Jane if she dares tell the poet how much she enjoyed his talk. Jane encourages her to do so, but after she speaks to him, the poet walks away, leaving the young woman, “after a regretful glance after him,” standing “rather hopelessly at a request bus stop.” In *A Glass of Blessings*, Wilmet amuses herself by observing the odd people who take evening classes, in particular “a tall bearded young man, whose string bag revealed a loaf of bread (the wrapped, sliced kind), a tin of Nescafé and two books from a public library.” She feels sad at the thought that the humble contents of his bag reveal his whole life.

Particularly poignant are Pym’s sketches of old people in straitened circumstances, some of them probably inspired by lunches at the Lyons and Kardomah cafeterias near the International African Institute. In *An Unsuitable Attachment*, Daisy is filled with pity for the shambling, elderly woman clearing the tables in a cafeteria, for she is too old and frail for this work. Another frail old woman with aristocratic features clearing tables in a cafeteria in *The Sweet Dove Died* elicits a different reaction from Leonora Eyre, who speaks sharply to the woman when she dares put down a tray “laden with dirty dishes, food scraps and cigarette ends” on her table.

Ianthe Broome, heroine of *An Unsuitable Attachment*, feels sorry for old Miss Grimes, recently retired from the library and living alone in a bedsitter, but she learns from a woman who lives in the same rooming house that Miss Grimes has married Mr. Slaski, a Pole she met in a pub, and gone to live in Ealing. It is the former neighbor, “tall and stooping, encumbered with a heavy shopping basket and out of breath from climbing the hill,” who is to be pitied, but her face lights up when Ianthe offers her the sherry she had brought for Miss Grimes. So Miss Grimes has escaped from her lonely bedsitter, but her neighbor has nothing to look forward to but a solitary glass of sherry. The old people reading newspapers in the Dover hotel in *Crampton Hodnet* have nothing at all to look forward to, for they seem to have been abandoned, like “fossils petrified in stone.” Even sadder is a brief but striking image in *Quartet in Autumn*. While visiting a friend in the country, Letty Crowe walks past a retirement home and “noticed an old woman with a lost expression peeping through one of the surrounding hedges.” The woman seems to have been not only abandoned but imprisoned.

These fleeting glimpses into people’s lives entertain, engage our sympathy and often tantalize. The reader would like to know more about them. Who is the mysterious woman “wearing heavy silver jewellery and an orange jumper” whom Jane Cleveland spots in a vegetarian restaurant, looking “the kind of person who might have been somebody’s mistress in the nineteen-twenties”? Surely she should be the main character in a novel or short story. And we wonder with Mildred who exactly Miss Jessop is, why she never speaks and why Mrs. Bone demands an apology of her. We may wonder, too, what is wrong with the anthropologists in *Less Than Angels*: “...one pale, wretched-looking man sat in a corner, murmuring a strange language into a kind of recording machine, while another banged furiously on a typewriter...,” afterwards crumpling up the paper and hurrying away, “his hand to his brow in a stricken gesture.” There is a hint of intrigue in *A Glass of Blessings* when Wilmet observes Mrs. Spooner, the little verger in the peacock hat, talking to her crony Mrs. Greenhill. “It seemed almost as if they might be murmuring together against the clergy.” What could they be plotting? It is a

pity that Pym never developed these characters in short stories, but Hazel Holt notes that “she was never very happy with the short-story form. ‘How bad mine are,’ she wrote to Jock [her old friend Robert Liddell], ‘and how I hate doing them.’”

Some walk-on characters are merely seen through windows. Visiting Prudence in London, Jane rides on the top of a bus, looking into the houses. “Once they stopped outside a high, dark house, and Jane found herself looking through the uncurtained window into an upper room, dimly lit, where a group of men and women were sitting round a large table covered by a dark green cloth.” Could this be a séance, or is it simply a committee meeting? It is reminiscent of Edward Hopper’s 1932 painting “Room in New York,” which frames a man and a woman in a window. He is sitting at the table reading a newspaper, and she sits off at the side with one finger on a piano key. They are strangely disconnected, so that we can only conjecture what their relationship is, what has happened previously and what is about to happen. A similarly graphic scene, though less mysterious, is observed by Anthea in *Crampton Hodnet*. Wandering around Belgravia, depressed because Simon has not written, she “found it soothing to count the houses and stare into the windows...once she looked down into a basement kitchen and saw a prim-looking maid smoking a cigarette and a manservant in shirtsleeves reading a paper.”



Edward Hopper, “Room in New York” (1932)

At times the curiosity that makes people look into windows seems intrusive, almost voyeuristic, as when Dulcie peers through the dining-room window of a big hotel in Taviscombe, where a middle-aged couple are being served with fish, “[i]ts white flesh...exposed before them. How near to the heart of things it seemed!” The view from William Caldicote’s office window reveals a microcosm of office life, the rooms in another building “exposed as if in a doll’s house. Grey men sat at desks, their hands moving among files; some sipped tea, one read a newspaper, another manipulated a typewriter with the uncertain touch of two fingers. A girl leaned from a window, another combed her hair, a third typed with expert speed. A young man embraced a girl in a rough playful way and she pulled his hair...” Barbara Pym herself would look unashamedly into windows. While serving with the Women’s Royal Naval Service, or Wrens, in Italy, she enjoyed driving through the suburbs of Naples in the evening “to look inside a lighted restaurant,...to peer inside a flat...” On September 4, 1964 she wrote in her notebook: “Walking with Skipper in Hampstead: Talk and wander about peering into people’s uncurtained windows and even their letter boxes.” In her talk on “The Novelist’s Use of Every-Day Life,” Pym said that “reading novels is like looking through a window.”

Peripheral characters can influence events, reflect mood, or throw light on the personalities of the main characters. In *Civil to Strangers*, Adam Marsh-Gibbon would not have decided to travel to Budapest to find his wife Cassandra, had it not been for a chance encounter in the Bodleian Library with an old man with sparse greenish-gray hair and a suit that looks green with age. He tells Adam he is writing a thesis on the subject of people who have died in the Bodleian, or as a result of working there. Since the death of his wife he has thought

much of death, for “[w]e may be taken at any time.” This is sufficient incentive to make passive, self-centered Adam decide to follow his wife to Hungary. And after the redoubtable Esther Clovis, in *Less Than Angels*, comes across an offprint given her years ago by Dr. Hermann Obst, she recalls a little incident in her youth that makes her feel an “unaccustomed tenderness” toward the students applying for grants, for such is the influence of Dr. Obst’s offstage presence. One evening after dinner long ago he had taken hold of her in a most suggestive way: “Not to put too fine a point on it, he had made a pass at her.” Such a thing had never occurred since, and Miss Clovis wonders now if she should have slapped his face “with quite such outraged dignity.” James in *The Sweet Dove Died* feels foolish but also flattered when he notices a “tall man with a slightly raffish air” staring at him. Later the same man comes into the shop, asks the price of a paperweight and makes “a suggestion which brought a not unbecoming blush to James’s cheek, though it was not the first time such a proposition was put to him.” These briefly-described incidents not only hint at James’s sexual ambivalence but foreshadow his relationship with Ned.

Some peripheral characters are passive presences observed by the main players, whose moods they reflect. Others are interesting in their own right, with their appearance and personalities briefly but vividly sketched. In *Crampton Hodnet* Mrs. Cleveland, disturbed by rumors that her husband is having an affair with his student Barbara Bird, goes to London for a few days. At lunch in a restaurant she looks around disconsolately at the other women, wondering if they have trouble with their husbands too. “You, in your smart silly hat and silver-fox furs, you in your sensible navy felt and too-hot flannel costume, you with your calm face and dangling pince-nez...do *your* husbands have lapses...?” Caroline Grimstone, the discontented wife of a university lecturer in *An Academic Question*, has a similar experience. She has just run into her first love, the “Byronic-looking” David, and wonders why she ever married her husband Alan. In the Tube to Paddington Station, she observes a “woman in a Burberry, reading *The Economist*, good leather handbag; another, middle-aged, pretty, hair going grey, that untouched virginal look, had never, perhaps – probably too late now; a man, youngish, correctly but uninterestingly dressed, with new square, status-symbol-type briefcase...”

Some encounters with walk-ons are disturbing. Catherine Oliphant, in need of comfort, wanders into a “vast eating place where people were helping themselves to a curious variety of foods.” She shares a table with two bizarre-looking gossiping women whom she names “black-beetle” and “leopard-hat,” one of whom asks her if she is in mourning since she is wearing a black dress and jet earrings. The encounter has a nightmarish quality which emphasizes the misery that besets Catherine when she sees Tom and Deirdre holding hands in the Cypriot restaurant. Ianthe Broome has an even more unnerving experience when she walks down the escalator to the Tube, and collides “surprisingly, almost nightmarishly, with a nun.” Then it appears that the nun knows her name! She turns out to be Ianthe’s old school mate Agnes Dalby, who was in the Upper Fourth when Ianthe was head girl. After a brief exchange of words she disappears. A woman in the train with a little boy sympathizes with Ianthe, remarking, “I don’t think they ought to let them out...It gives me the creeps...” Ianthe is already feeling confused and disoriented because of her developing feelings for the unsuitable John Challow. The collision with the nun and the other woman’s reaction underline her confusion.

A nun also plays a minuscule but important role in *A Glass of Blessings* when Wilmet visits Mary Beamish at the convent. “A nun with steel-rimmed spectacles, and the pale lips and eyes that I always find so sinister, opened the door and smiled at me in a guarded remote sort of way. I felt that she could see right into my mind and knew all that I had been thinking about Piers.” The nun turns out to be pleasant and friendly, but she makes Wilmet feel guilty for thinking of having an affair with Piers.

Encounters with peripheral characters can serve as a catalyst to throw light on the personalities of the leading or supporting players, sometimes confirming our impressions, sometimes surprising us. When Jane Cleveland wanders into an upscale grocery with an “almost holy atmosphere,” we are not surprised, knowing her impulsive nature, when she asks a salesman how a clergyman’s wife can afford to buy foie gras. When the man takes her question seriously, saying politely and tactfully “I don’t care for it myself,” Jane feels as if “she had been vouchsafed a glimpse of somebody else’s life. She wondered about the man...perhaps he was a churchwarden or sidesman somewhere...” Jane is again indulging in the flights of fancy that tend to distract her from the serious business of being a good clerical wife.

Brief encounters with strangers in restaurants reveal a lot about Lady Selvedge, a minor character in *An Unsuitable Attachment*, and Letty Crowe, one of the four main characters in *Quartet in Autumn*. Having agreed to open the church bazaar, the former travels to London from the country with Sophia’s mother. Insisting, to Mrs. Grandison’s dismay, on eating at a cheap cafeteria – lunch for three and ninepence! – she mistakenly takes a young man’s steamed pudding; then, when he claims it, chides him for eating too much starch, suggesting that he eat greens instead. Embarrassed but furious, he accuses her of interfering. Amazingly, Lady Selvedge is not at all unsettled by this incident. The encounter with the young man reveals that she is not only stingy and greedy, but rude and insensitive. Barbara Pym had noted on May 12, 1959, while eating lunch at Lyons: “Young man sitting opposite me has 3 sausage rolls, a roll, baked beans and chips. Not a very well balanced meal for a hot day.” We may assume, though, that she did not rebuke the young man, having better manners than Lady Selvedge.

Letty Crowe has lunch in a similarly nondescript restaurant frequented by office people. A woman at her table “looked up, perhaps about to venture a comment on price increases, pale, bluish eyes troubled about VAT. Then, discouraged by Letty’s lack of response, she lowered her glance...The moment had passed.” Letty realizes regretfully that somebody had reached out to her, but she has failed to make contact. Unlike Lady Selvedge, Letty is too timid and indecisive to talk to strangers.

Encounters with walk-ons reveal unexpected aspects of Wilmet and Prudence. At the church tea, Wilmet’s sighting of the odd-looking women emphasizes her awkwardness at being in a new milieu – the social aspect of the Church. So confident and sophisticated on the surface, she feels slightly unnerved by new experiences. Like Wilmet, Prudence is an elegant, sophisticated young woman, but she proves to be surprisingly impressionable and soft-hearted. Determined to dislike the man who sits down at her table in a cafeteria, she changes her attitude when she hears his conversation with a woman at the next table. They are discussing a visit to a certain Madge, who is in hospital after an operation. “She won’t feel like much, but I thought I’d take her a few grapes...” he says. Prudence feels unbearably sad. “The lump in [her] throat made it difficult to speak, but she managed to offer to change places so that the man and woman could be at the same table...She was one of those excessively tender-hearted people who are greatly moved by the troubles of complete strangers.”

I have alluded to some peripheral characters who are talked about but do not actually walk onstage – Mr. Olo, Miss Protheroe and Dr. Obst all fall into the “noises-off” category. The description of sounds on the river in *Crampton Hodnet* – “Faint music could be heard in the distance and occasionally voices: townspeople, Americans, foreigners, the usual vacation inhabitants of Oxford” – is quite literally noises off. Some significant noises-off characters are used as leitmotifs appearing repeatedly throughout a book – the imaginary vicar of the imaginary village of Crampton Hodnet, the late John Akenside in *Some Tame Gazelle*, Mr. Strong the surgeon in *Quartet in Autumn*, and the Wren officers in *Excellent Women*.

The vicar of Crampton Hodnet is invented by Mr. Latimer, the curate. To avoid gossip about his walk with Jessie Morrow on Shotover, he explains his absence to Mrs. Wardell, the vicar's wife, with a long and complicated story about cycling to a remote Cotswold village, which he dubs Crampton Hodnet, to help out a friend. Miss Morrow is doubly amazed – first at hearing a clergyman telling deliberate lies, and second because it is such a “hopeless story” – surely Mrs. Wardell will see through it. However, Jessie's wry humor comes to the fore after Mrs. Wardell leaves, and she proposes a toast to the vicar of Crampton Hodnet. Later, when Mr. Latimer tells her he has bought a car she responds: “I expect you will often be popping over to see your friend the vicar of Crampton Hodnet.” And when Miss Doggett expresses certainty that Mr. Latimer will soon get his own church, Miss Morrow thinks to herself that Crampton Hodnet would be nice.

John Akenside in *Some Tame Gazelle* is another important character who, while never making an appearance, plays a significant role. As a friend of all the main players, he is a pervasive presence in their lives and a unifying factor in the novel. Melancholy Count Bianco is collecting and editing the letters of his old friend, who had been killed in a riot in Prague. The count recalls how wise John was, how he understood the Balkan mind. Belinda Bede remembers his shambling gait and inky fingers, and is amused by the photo of John in central European costume, looking “faintly ridiculous, like something out of a musical comedy.” She thinks that John would understand her mirth, for she detects a twinkle in his eye. Edith Liversidge, rumored to have been the unlikely object of John's affection, is even less reverent, recalling how John “always went as red as a lobster in the sun,” and showing no patience with Count Bianco's regret that his friend's tombstone was not white marble, saying sensibly that it didn't matter to John, since he was dead. Even though we are none the wiser by the end of the book as to what John actually did, the multiple viewpoints have pieced together a composite portrait of him.

Like John Akenside, Mr. Strong the surgeon in *Quartet in Autumn* is a pervasive presence, even though he does not appear until the end of the novel. When Marcia Ivory went into hospital Mr. Strong, who had performed her operation, “entered her life and filled her thoughts.” Such is Marcia's infatuation with the surgeon that she spends a day off from work taking a bus to Dulwich to see Mr. Strong's house. She stands outside, staring at the house, imagining how the garden must look in the spring. When her doctor invokes the name of Mr. Strong in telling her to eat more, Marcia wonders what the surgeon will be having for dinner that evening. As Marcia's physical and mental health decline, she rejects all human contact – the well-meaning social worker, her kind neighbors and her former office colleagues. Only the image of Mr. Strong remains with her. When, terminally ill, her mind deranged, she goes back to hospital, Mr. Strong finally walks on with an entourage of young doctors. He speaks to her kindly and Marcia's final impression is that “Mr Strong was still wearing that green tie...He always seemed to be frowning. Had she done something wrong?...Marcia smiled and the frown left his face and he seemed to be smiling at her.” It is only fitting that Mr. Strong is the last person Marcia sees before she dies. A small detail adds poignancy to the brief character sketch of Mr. Strong. He notices with surprise that Marcia smells of lavender water, a gift from Letty. It reminds him of his grandmother and he feels like a boy of seven again.

The offstage Wren officers in *Excellent Women* represent an amusing leitmotif, as well as a cautionary message for Mildred. They are first mentioned by Helena Napier, who tells Mildred that she expects her husband, Rocky, to return any day from his military service in Italy, where he was Flag Lieutenant to an Admiral and “hasn't had to do anything but be charming to a lot of dreary Wren officers in ill-fitting white uniforms.” At first Mildred thinks Helena's attitude too flippant, for Rocky is serving his country after all. However, when she meets him and begins to fall prey to his easy charm, she understands what Helena means. Thereafter, whenever she

fears she may be falling in love with Rocky, she remembers the Wrens: “Once more I was transported to the terrace of the Admiral’s villa and took my place among the little group of Wren officers.” While stationed in Italy, Barbara had been to cocktail parties on the terrace of Admiral Morse’s villa, where she observed with amusement young Wren officers in their ill-fitting white uniforms trying to catch the eye of Rob Long, the Admiral’s “handsome, conceited flag-officer.” In 1945 she jotted down an idea for a story: “The suave elegant Flagg and the Acting Third Officer in ill-fitting white dress talking on the terrace of an exquisite villa in the moonlight.”

One Wren officer, who remains nameless, has a walk-on role. Returning to London by train after the Old Girls’ Reunion, Mildred and Dora drift into conversation with a young woman, another former pupil who had left school at the beginning of the war and served in Italy. Mildred’s interest is aroused when it appears that this ordinary-looking woman knew Rocky, “the most glamorous Flagg in the Med.,” but the young woman describes Rocky in unflattering terms as a shallow person who “used to take up people for a week or two and then drop them...Of course, he had an Italian girl friend.” When Rocky and Helena are reunited and leave London for the country, Mildred thinks for the last time of the “Wren officers huddled together in an awkward little group,” but now, immune to the perils of Rocky’s charm, she realizes that his “kindness had meant a lot to them...and perhaps some of them would never forget it as long as they lived.” Anyone who has read *A Glass of Blessings* knows that former Wren officers Wilmet and Rowena, who had each been in love with Rocky for a short time, still remember him “in a kind of rapturously reminiscent silence,” and he appears as a noise off in that book – Rowena tells Wilmet that she ran into Rocky one day in London, and learned that he is living in the country with his formidable wife, and that they now have a child.

The reappearance of characters from previous books is an endearing feature of Barbara Pym’s novels. With just a few exceptions – Miss Doggett, Miss Morrow and Esther Clovis play important roles in subsequent novels – leading players reappear later as peripheral characters, either walking briefly onstage or remaining behind the scenes, as the subject of conversation. Hazel Holt points out that Pym “had created such a complete world that it was perfectly possible for a character from one book to move about easily in another. And, of course, many of her friends and readers simply wanted to know ‘what happened next’ to their favourite characters after the book had ended.” We know, for instance, that Everard and Mildred married, since Miss Doggett reports the fact in *Jane and Prudence*. We also learn from Esther Clovis in *Less Than Angels* that Mildred has accompanied her husband to Africa, thus fulfilling the promise of the full life that Mildred imagines at the end of *Excellent Women*.

Sometimes news of what happened next comes from unlikely sources. In *A Glass of Blessings*, we learn from Rodney Forsyth that Prudence Bates was engaged to a Member of Parliament but broke off the engagement. So the match between Prudence and the eligible Edward Lyall, planned by Jane, did not work out because Prudence continues to prefer unhappy love affairs, including a brief dalliance with Rodney. And news of Prudence’s former suitor, Fabian Driver, comes via a death announcement in the *Daily Telegraph*, the wording of which puzzles Tom Dagnall, the vicar in *A Few Green Leaves*: “Driver, Fabian Charlesworth, he read. ‘Devoted husband of Constance and Jessie...’ an odd way of putting it. Had the man had two wives still living? Tom wondered. And had they got together after the man’s death? And where would he be buried – with the first wife or the second?” Anyone who has read *Jane and Prudence* is aware of Fabian’s infidelities while married to Constance, and would recognize the ironic tone of the announcement as typical of Jessie.

*A Glass of Blessings* contains an especially subtle reappearance behind the scenes of Catherine Oliphant from *Less Than Angels*. Reading a women's magazine at the hairdresser's, Rowena comes across a story by Catherine Oliphant entitled "Sunday Evening" which begins with a young man and girl holding hands in a Greek restaurant, watched by the man's former mistress. Wilmet wonders if this was drawn from the life of the author, which we know is true, but Rowena thinks that Catherine Oliphant is "probably an elderly spinster living in a boarding-house in Eastbourne – or she may even be a man."

It is gratifying to find out that things did look up for "mild, dumpy" Father Bode, the assistant priest in *A Glass of Blessings*. He has a "round spectacled face and slightly common voice," and lacks both Father Thames' aesthetic taste and his private means, but he is generally thought to be a good man, even though Wilmet suspects he may prefer tinned salmon to fresh. He is too modest to expect to succeed Father Thames as vicar of St. Luke's, saying humbly that "of course the Bishop could so easily find a better man." It is not until the concluding pages of *Quartet in Autumn* that we learn about his fate. Edwin, lamenting the lack of suitable lunchtime church services, recalls "the days when Father Thames, and later Father Bode, had attracted a crowd of office workers." So we may infer that the Bishop did in fact appreciate Father Bode sufficiently to promote him.

Deirdre Swan and Digby Fox, who play leading roles in *Less Than Angels*, are a couple who live happily ever after. The news that they are married and expecting a baby is imparted to Dulcie by Deirdre's aunt Rhoda Wellcome in *No Fond Return of Love*. Rhoda has a walk-on role, complete in itself, as a chatty excellent woman who frequents jumble sales, while Digby and Deirdre remain behind the scenes. In two later books Digby Fox, now a professor, delivers the eulogy at Esther Clovis' funeral, which is also attended by his wife Deirdre. Miss Clovis, with her brusque manner and hair like a dog, is first introduced in *Excellent Women*, encouraging Helena to leave Rocky and devote her life to the study of matrilineal kin-groups. Pym's unpublished novel *Young Men in Fancy Dress*, which she wrote at the age of sixteen, contains a brief sketch of a possible precursor of Miss Clovis: "There was a woman wearing breeches, an angular sort of person with grey hair like that of a horse." Miss Clovis also plays a prominent role in *Less Than Angels*, where she is involved in organizing grants for students to do field work, and a lesser one in *An Unsuitable Attachment*.

It is not until after her death that she reappears as a noises-off character in two later novels, her funeral being described in both *A Few Green Leaves* and *An Academic Question*. In the former we hear Emma Howick's impression of the funeral and in the latter Caroline Grimstone's. In both accounts, Digby recalls Miss Clovis giving advice to researchers embarking on field work, and her harsh criticism of work that failed to meet her high standards. When he falters in his speech and stammers nervously Emma, who knew Miss Clovis, feels sorry for him, for it is "as if he expected Miss Clovis to be looking over his shoulder...or to be listening somewhere up above." In death, Miss Clovis still has the power to terrify. Caro, who did not know her, nevertheless feels a little shaken after hearing about her, and thinks that "Miss Clovis had not been a very nice person."

One of Pym's most delightful reintroductions of characters from former novels is the scene in *No Fond Return of Love* when Dulcie and Viola, visiting the castle in Taviscombe, notice an interesting-looking couple – a tall woman dressed in an elegant suit with a fur stole, frivolous little hat and high heels, and a short young man in tight jeans and heavy sweater, with a medieval haircut. We immediately recognize them as Wilmet and Keith, playing walk-on roles in the present novel. Keith talks incessantly and is still obsessed with cleanliness. They are joined by Rodney and Piers. "What odd people they were! Like characters in a novel," says Viola. It is evident from this brief scene that Keith and Piers are still together, and that Keith has attached himself to Wilmet as a kind of "incubus," to use Philip Larkin's term.

Besides enabling us to learn what happened next, reappearing characters can also convey some in-jokes, since the attentive reader knows more about them than the characters in the present novel. Presumably the mourners at Esther Clovis' funeral were moved by Professor Digby Fox's eulogy, but if we have already read the earlier *Less Than Angels* we may have to suppress an inappropriate snicker or two when recalling the hilarious scene in that book, when Digby and Mark try to curry favor with Miss Clovis by inviting her and her friend Gertrude Lydgate to lunch. Since Digby and Mark are chronically short of money and wrongly believe that they will be paying, they order macaroni cheese and braised tripe and Jell-O, the cheapest items on the menu, while to their dismay the ladies enjoy a sumptuous meal of steak and chips, followed by apple pie and ice cream. But even someone who has not yet read *Less Than Angels* can enjoy the account of the funeral and appreciate both Esther Clovis and Digby Fox as interesting peripheral characters.

In my opinion the funniest in-joke of all involves the reappearance of Mildred and Everard Bone in *An Unsuitable Attachment*. Rupert Stonebird, the anthropologist, invites them to a dinner party; however, Everard calls to say his wife Mildred has the flu and will not be coming, but that his mother is with her. "Rupert had never met Everard's mother, but remembering his own mother and how comforting she had been in his childhood illnesses he was immediately reassured." Readers of *Excellent Women* will know that eccentric Mrs. Bone, with her mania about the Dominion of the Birds and her obsessions with Jesuits and woodworms, would be the very last person to provide comfort to the sick.

It should perhaps be noted somewhere in this talk that not everyone approved unconditionally of Barbara Pym's recycling her characters. In January 1961 Philip Larkin wrote that "...it was nice to meet Wilmet and Keith again," but cautioned Pym about bringing back characters from previous books: "[M]y feeling is that Angela Thirkell, for instance, vitiated her later books by mentioning everyone in every one, and I think it's a device needing very sharp control if this danger is to be avoided. I realize of course you are using a different method – coincidence rather than Barchester – but it has its pitfalls, to my mind, all the same." Pym responded in a letter dated September 23, 1961: "I'm considering what you said about bringing characters from one's earlier books into later ones and I agree that one does have to be careful. It can be a tiresome affectation. With me it's sometimes laziness – if I need a casual clergyman or anthropologist I just take one from an earlier book."

Pym's attribution of this reuse of her characters to laziness notwithstanding, we should note that their function is always organic; that is, they don't just pop up in the background like members of a TV audience waving a "Hi, Mom!" sign. In his essay on "Barbara Pym's Use of Crossover Characters," Alan Bellringer, lecturer in English at the University of Wales, makes the point that when Pym brings back characters from previous books, these scenes are "self-sufficient," while providing extra enjoyment to those who recognize them from before. Harriet Bede's brief reappearance in *An Unsuitable Attachment*, when she bursts into a café in Rome and orders hot milk for the sickly Basil Branche, is an unforgettably comic scene, but those of us familiar with *Some Tame Gazelle* will nod knowingly and remember how she always doted on curates. In *Jane and Prudence*, William Caldicote's reappearance in the restaurant where Prudence is having dinner with Geoffrey Manifold surprises and amuses them. "I do not recommend the *pâté* here to-night," he says, "but the *bouillabaisse* is excellent...I couldn't bear you to order the *pâté*." But his behavior will be all too familiar to those who have read *Excellent Women*.

As an alternative explanation to Barbara Pym's self-proclaimed laziness, one reason for her characters' reappearances could be her innate thrift. In *A Lot to Ask* Hazel Holt writes: "Living through the war meant that she was thrifty about her wardrobe and her domestic life. She altered clothes to suit the fashions and she used up

leftovers in her cooking.” Even before the war she had thrifty habits. A diary entry on Christmas Day, 1933 reads: “I am knitting a most exciting scarf-of-many-colours from all the bits of 4-ply wool I’ve had left over from jumpers etc.” And post-war, on February 9, 1946, when she was sharing a flat in Pimlico with Hilary, she wrote to Henry Harvey: “We do quite a lot of entertaining in a mild way – hardly any drink and mostly foreign dishes like moussaka and ravioli, owing to the scarcity of meat!” Later in life, during her retirement in Finstock, she carried on the wartime mantra of “make do and mend” by taking up patchwork, thriftily creating bedding from scraps of fabric. According to Hazel, she was equally thrifty with her writing, using and reusing characters. “Unlike the Brontë sisters who lived together in a tiny vicarage and wrote their novels entirely from their imaginations, Barbara was a careful collector of facts, people and behaviour. Her range of experiences was narrow but she made use of everything.”



Patchwork bedspread in Barn Cottage

Whatever the reason for Pym’s frequent reintroductions of characters from previous novels, whether in walk-on roles or sometimes simply noises off, they afford great pleasure to the reader who enjoys seeing old friends. Hazel Holt writes in *A Very Private Eye* that she and Barbara talked about her books and characters during the long afternoons in the office, including what happened after Everard and Mildred married. Jane Austen’s family also used to discuss what became of her characters after the books ended, but unlike Pym, Austen herself never reintroduced them – that was left for all the current prequels, sequels and mash-ups. Fortunately, no such cottage industry has developed around Pym’s novels, and so far, at least, Viola has not had to deal with vampires or Wilmet with werewolves.

One of Barbara Pym’s main strengths was creating quirky, wry, gently ironic vignettes. A hundred years after her birth, the characters she created, whether principal, secondary, or peripheral, remain vivid. As Hazel Holt notes in *A Very Private Eye*, her observations of others and their behavior form the core of her work, and “[i]t is now possible to describe a place, a situation or a person as ‘very Barbara Pym’. She is one of that small band of writers who have created a self-contained world, one within which her characters move freely.” It should be no surprise that her characters keep returning to her books. After all, we her readers do the same. A few years after Barbara Pym’s death, the novelist Anne Tyler commented: “Whom do people turn to when they’ve finished Barbara Pym? The answer is easy: they turn back to Barbara Pym.”