

Love In Her Own Peculiar Way: Barbara Pym, Useless Longings, and *Some Tame Gazelle*

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Like Henry James, Barbara Pym's great subject is the impossibility of love. While James wrote of an inability to love, Pym wrote of love that is not returned. Unrequited love. Useless longings.

Herself an ambivalent adept of one-sided passion—she did appreciate a good, gut-twisting love pang—Pym wrote of women who love married men (*Some Tame Gazelle* and *Jane and Prudence*), women who form intense attachments to gay men (*A Glass of Blessings*, *The Sweet Dove Died*), and women who stalk their love objects (*No Fond Return of Love*).

Pym was 22 when, to amuse her friends at Oxford—and also to get a handle on a distressing love affair—she wrote a short story about all of them called *Some Tame Gazelle*. Her friends were amused, and Pym determined to expand it into a novel. Not as easy as she'd thought! It would take her fifteen years to hammer that painful romantic episode into her pitch-perfect comic masterpiece.

1. Barbara

Barbara Pym as a college student was tall, attractive, well-dressed, shy, funny as hell, and very smart. Men liked her, and she was keenly interested in return. Perhaps a little too interested; her Oxford diary pays more attention to boys than to books. As she was shy, quiet, and facing her first only nominally-chaperoned co-educational environment, Pym invented a persona to face the opposite sex: the dashing and adventurous Sandra. The diary records Barbara/Sandra's forays into romance in a young gushing voice, at times hilarious and clever, but just as often painfully self-conscious and unintentionally revealing. Creating the character of Sandra was a way for her to pull back, to dissociate from intimidating or painful situations, but it was also a nascent, if confused fictional impulse. Pym was on her way to becoming a writer, but the drama was still much more in her life than in her work.

Her first college boyfriend, Rupert Gleadow, courted her conventionally; he took her on dates and hikes; he quoted poetry, introduced her to his parents, and pressured her for sex. She wrote about him affectionately in the diary:

After tea I returned to the Bod—tried to finish my essay—but naturally I was thinking about Rupert the whole time.... I remember putting my arms around him and loving him because he was very wet and shivering and looked at me so sweetly.

But something happened when they went to bed—nothing. Nothing happened. From Gleadow's letters, it would seem that Pym balked, and the romance never regained its footing.

After Rupert, Pym sought a different mode of attachment. Barbara/Sandra spotted the ideal male in the Bodleian library and dubbed him Lorenzo; she enlisted her friends to find out his real name, and she trailed him to find out where he lived. About a month after first seeing him, she wrote in her diary:

13 February I love Lorenzo – I mean love my own peculiar way. And I had thought I was getting over it. I don't think he cares a damn about me – but sometimes vague and marvelous doubts arise.

And two and half months later, this:

29 April Oh ever to be remembered day. Lorenzo spoke to me! I saw him in the Bod. And felt desperately thrilled about him so that I trembled and shivered and went sick.

30 April I was very happy thinking about Lorenzo and the funny way he talked and everything. I had that kind of gnawing at the vitals sick feeling if that describes it at all – that is so marvelous...

On May 10th, Harvey offered Pym a ride and they went out; they played ping pong and ate dinner. This evening would fuel her unrequited love well into the following October, which was the next time they interacted.

Love, Pym's own peculiar way, was a "gnawing at the vitals sick feeling."

Henry Harvey became the focus of Pym's Oxford days; she insinuated herself into his circle, befriendng his flat mate and close friends, who variously advised her to give Henry up or, failing that, to treat the affair lightly, which she pretended to do.

Henry Harvey liked Pym and enjoyed her company and apparently took her to bed—the diary is coy and vague where one most desires clarity, but in at least one entry, they are found naked reading Milton. But Harvey did not love her, and their intimacy made him moody, distant and rude. In fact, the intense feelings she has for him, as described in the diary, do have a strangely impersonal edge, as if he, too, is a fictional construct, one created to catch and absorb her clear emotional hunger.

Harvey's pattern of approach and avoidance and intermittent attention fed Pym's obsession for four years. She kept a cool outward demeanor, however, for some of her lifelong friends, including Rupert Gleadow and Robert Lidell, insist that the interlude with Harvey was never that serious. Her fiction and her diaries suggest otherwise. In fact, when Harvey was about to marry his Finnish girlfriend, Elsie Godenhjelm, Lidell himself wrote to Pym's sister Hilary and asked her to break the news to Barbara.

Aging her friends thirty years in *Some Tame Gazelle* afforded Pym some comic distance on this disappointing interlude; still, she struggled to find just the right tone and stance (and number of poetic allusions), which took more than a decade, a degree of maturation, and the development of her craft; in between revisions she worked on several unfinished novels.

2. A Village of Useless Longings

Here is how Pym set up the novel: Two unmarried sisters, Belinda and Harriet Bede, have moved to a quiet English village to live out their later years. As it happens, Belinda's old college flame, now the Archdeacon, Henry Hoccleve has been appointed the vicar there. The novel is vague about the order of these events—it seems that Harriet and Belinda had lived in the village for some time and at some point, the archdeacon and his wife Agatha moved into the vicarage very close by the sisters—easy spying distance, in fact. Belinda's proximity to the love of her life appears to be coincidental rather than contrived. When the novel opens, the Bede sisters and the Hoccleves have been neighbors long enough to establish that the friendly poppings in and out that Belinda once imagined have not come to pass, due to Henry "not quite being like other clergymen" and Agatha's standoffishness. "It was difficult to be completely informal with her, either because of her father having been a

bishop or for some more subtle reason, Belinda had never been quite sure which.” In fact, Belinda and Agatha have frequent small skirmishes in which Agatha always triumphs.

Thirty years before, one infers, Henry chose Agatha over Belinda, whose frank adoration and constancy had come to bore him while Agatha was wealthier, more stylish, more academically successful, and connected— If Henry is an archdeacon, it’s because Agatha’s had a hand in it.

Belinda has never stopped loving Henry. But hers is only one unrequited love in a village rife with them. Belinda’s boisterous, plump and stylish sister Harriet adores the wan, underfed, much younger curates who cycle through the parish. Harriet herself is the love object for Count Ricardo Bianco, who regularly proposes to her – and is just as regularly rebuffed; in between proposals he and the sisters remain good, close friends. Class-conscious Agatha would prefer that the Count marry the local gentlewoman, Lady Clara Boulding, but I think that the count relies on Harriet’s refusals, which not only provide him with piquant cycles of rising hope, disappointment, and sweet melancholy, but also give him the stamp of heteronormativity, while his deepest affections belong to his late beloved friend John Akenside.

The dead John Akenside, in turn, is the great lost love object of the mannish, no-nonsense Edith Liversidge, another parish spinster, who has taken in her dull poor relation Connie Aspinall who, in turn, longs helplessly for her last position as companion to a Lady in Belgrave Square. (It will prove significant that Connie Aspinall is the one spinster lacking a human love object.) Even Mrs. Jenner at the knitting store dotes on her “travelers.” All these unmarried citizens have found safe places to sequester pesky, persistent libidinal thoughts, and the resultant web of their attachments forms a workable status quo for the whole community: with affections so snugly directed and flowing so peaceably, these lovers can get on with their daily rounds and good works at the church.

The archdeacon and Agatha are the only successfully mated heterosexual couple in town, and while their mutual snappishness in public is not a great advertisement for matrimony, their position in the church accords them a parental, almost a royal status in the parish. But even they are not immune to useless longings.

3. Barbara Again

After Henry Harvey married his Finnish bride, Pym’s subsequent relationships continued to be short-lived, idealized, and highly adrenalized attachments to unsuitable or unavailable men, which stirred up the same mix of marvelous gnawing at the vitals sick feelings and intense, near-obsessive focus.

She had a two-year, mostly long distance affair with the young German SS officer, Friedbert Gluck. After Henry Harvey’s marriage, Pym, then 24, shifted her desire to the charming 18-year-old, upper crust Julian Amery; although she spent only a total of twenty hours with him, she would use him as a model for young male lovers in several novels, most notably *An Unsuitable Attachment*. During the war, an intellectually lively affair with Gordon Glover, the philandering estranged husband of her best friend, ended after only two months, but caused Pym deep unhappiness for nine months and spurred her to join the Wrens (Women’s Royal Navy Service) for a change of scene.

Despite this proclivity for doomed, pain-inducing attachments, Pym was not pathetic or unattractive; in fact, she refused one, possibly two viable marriage proposals —viable in the sense that the men were socially and financially her equal. But emotionally, she had something else in mind, love in her own peculiar way, love on tenterhooks, love rife with the pleasurable sick-making pangs characteristic of infatuation and the first stages of courtship, the-will-he-call, should-I-call, did-I-say-something-wrong stage I call adrenalized love. Pym couldn’t

seem to progress past this stage, and in repeating this pattern of brief, intense liaisons, she was clearly working out something deeper and obscure, especially to her.

Her great friend Honor Wyatt reported that when a relationship became serious, Pym would pull back. Perhaps this was a sexual flinch, perhaps a deep ambivalence about all that intimacy would ask of her. Pym was traditional enough to know that if she married, she would subordinate being a writer to being a wife. Later in life, she claimed to regret never marrying, but it's entirely possible that had she married she would have regretted that just as much. She also wrote that "the only occasion when one really wants a husband—[is] in a pub with uncongenial company and the feeling of not belonging." This deep ambivalence about love relationships informed her life and her writing.

The psychological reasons for Pym's pattern of unrequited attachments have been addressed with admirable thoroughness and tact by Anne Wyatt-Brown in her critical biography of Pym. It seems there was a strong mother and a charming, distant father... Pym herself was not introspective or attracted to psychological analysis; she suffered in her love affairs, but she evidently never addressed why she repeatedly did what she did. Instead, she became a writer. There was a long apprenticeship lasting more than a decade after she left Oxford. By 1945, her major love affairs were behind her and in the next year or so, a cluster of significant events changed her life: her mother died, her father remarried within the year to someone she liked but couldn't relate to. She went to work at the International African Institute, and she happily set up housekeeping with her sister Hilary, who was her last bastion of family happiness. And finally, she dusted off *Some Tame Gazelle*, and embarked on its final revision. Now in her thirties, she was finally getting the drama out of her life and into her fiction.

4. The Oedipal Idyll

With few exceptions, Barbara Pym's characters have no pasts—no ancestors, no parents, no childhoods. She gives us no biographical clues as to why neither Belinda nor Harriet Bede formed lasting reciprocal love relationships. Harriet's love for curates and Belinda's for her college boyfriend seem at once willed, and also beyond their control. Their fixations serve as identifying comic tropes, and (as in all good comedy) they also trail something deeper, darker, and quintessentially human.

Because Belinda's beloved is a married man, the relationship, however chaste, is a love triangle—of which the uneasy friendship between the two women is proof. And this love triangle has a distinctly Oedipal tint. Given their role in the church, the archdeacon and Agatha are already parental figureheads; Belinda, by virtue of being a parishioner, let alone a single woman living with her sister, already has something more like a child's status. So—to make the Oedipal perhaps a little too obvious—we have the beloved, off-limits father, the adoring daughter, and the obstructing, competitive mother. Pym handles this subtext with deft levity: "Henry is having a bath," Agatha informs Belinda early in the book. "So of course you can't see him now." Agatha's tone of voice "implied that she had the privilege not allowed to Belinda of seeing an archdeacon in his bath. 'You will have to wait,'" she adds, "with a note of something like triumph in her voice."

Overly scrupulous, fearful of any impropriety, good girl Belinda compensates for her not-so-secret passion by trying to please and befriend and otherwise disarm her rival. Around Agatha, she adopts a meek, subservient, one could say childlike, stance. Belinda maintains her unimpeachable behavior with constant inner coaching—she has a very active super ego—don't interfere, don't tell Agatha how to handle her husband, don't offer to help Agatha darn that pile of the archdeacon's socks lest she recall that Belinda had once done his darning. What balances this dreary repressive vigilance is Belinda's concurrent apprehension of all subtleties and silliness. When

Agatha scolds her for wrapping marrows in the wrong kind of paper, Belinda can't wait to laugh about it later with Harriet.

Then, about a third of the way through the book—Chapter 7 out of 21—something unprecedented happens: Agatha leaves town. She travels to Karlsbad for her health. And the Oedipal dream comes true. Mom's gone, and daughter has Dad to herself. Harriet and Belinda watch Agatha's departure from their own upstairs windows with "an almost childish excitement" wondering "would the archdeacon go to the station in the taxi" and "would he kiss Agatha goodbye before she got into the taxi, or would he already have done that in the house." These are women in their fifties!

Belinda, who "suddenly felt there was something indecent about their curiosity," tries to have generous thoughts about Agatha, but instead thinks: "how nice it would be to be able to ask Henry in to tea or supper without having to ask Agatha as well." But before she has time to ask him anything, the archdeacon comes "creeping up the drive." He gives no reason for the visit—most likely he's anxious to secure feminine backup in his wife's absence—and as he stands to go, Harriet spies a hole in his sock. Without hesitation, Belinda pulls out her work basket, and what follows is the closest thing to a sex scene in the book. She darns the archdeacon's sock while it is on his foot—and inadvertently pricks him.

This recalls the spinster's spindle prick that enchants *Sleeping Beauty* for a hundred years; or even more apt, Pope's "The Rape of the Lock," in which, at the poem's climax, the heroine, also named Belinda, draws a bodkin, a hairpin, to vanquish the lock-raping Baron. (Might we rename this scene "The Rape of the Sock?")

Pricked, the archdeacon almost loses his temper—is this sewing also too intimate for him?—but he settles back down and in the end, he praises Belinda's mending as "exquisite," adding "I must take care to be passing your house every time I have a hole in my sock." According to the Victoria Patterson theory of socks as the currency of love in *Some Tame Gazelle*, this amounts to a full-bore declaration. Belinda goes "quite pink with pleasure and confusion," and after he leaves, she walks in circles, and can't concentrate. Even after making a delicious risotto, Belinda has no appetite—doesn't this recall Pym's description of her own peculiar love: "that kind of gnawing at the vitals sick feeling...that is so marvelous..."

The next day, Belinda contrives to meet the archdeacon in town and—another thunderbolt—he invites her to tea. She turns him down, just as Pym at Oxford initially had turned down Henry Harvey's invitations to tea in his rooms, tea being a euphemism for intimacies she wasn't ready for.

During the month that Agatha's gone, Belinda subtly tries on the role of wife/mother. She scolds the archdeacon for sitting on a damp bench. She hosts a large, lavish dinner party for the archdeacon's visitors. She spends an hour alone with him listening as he reads aloud—she drowns like a child being read to sleep—after which comes something closer to a real declaration: "Yes, it is different" [when Agatha's away] the Archdeacon says, and adds, with maddening vagueness, "But there it is. We can't alter things, can we?"

In an ideal scenario, a father helping his daughter through the Oedipal thicket, might say something like, "I love you very much, but you see, I am already married—to your mother. My dearest hope is that you find someone else who cares as much about you and your happiness as I do." The archdeacon gives a tiny portion of this—exactly as much as he's capable of—it would never occur to him to direct his most devoted fan to seek out another man. But for Belinda, who has trained herself to expect nothing, this crumb of affection and the small vague reference to what might have been give her enough gratification and happiness for the next thirty years. She stays for dinner.

Harriet voices the more adult and adulterous fantasies about Belinda's evening alone with the archdeacon—They could elope! Perhaps he'll be a widower!—but Belinda can't even fantasize about the archdeacon courting her again; courting, with its inherent drift towards consummation is not where Belinda wants to end up. Darning a sock is almost more than she can take.

Pym also suggests (somewhat unconvincingly, I find) that time and reality have tempered Belinda's perception of her lover in an arc reminiscent of if not equal to a wife's maturing affections. Belinda is now well aware of his peevishness, narcissism, laziness, and terrible sermons. But her constancy remains unchanged. "Possibly," Belinda thinks, "I love him even more than Agatha does, but my feeling may be the stronger for not having married him."

And here we have a good glimpse into Pym's instinctive method for dealing with her characters' pathos: The pitiful cry of the unrequited lover—I love him more than his wife does!—is then neutralized by a hearty ironic wallop: because I never married him!

While Belinda's thirty years of undeserved loyalty to the archdeacon, her low expectations in love, and her obvious repression do point to some inner struggle that has held her back from a fuller, more adult love life, Pym isn't interested in probing. Instead of penetrating or analyzing Belinda's psychological limitation, Pym balances, neutralizes or tackles it with other aspects of Belinda's personality. So Belinda's remedial heart shares the same person with ferocious powers of observation, and a great comic, ironic wit. An unbudging, intractable heart; a flashing, penetrating, hilarious and life-saving intelligence: Belinda, like her creator, embodies both.

5. The Agatha Piece

Return Agatha must, and so she does, bringing the sheep-faced Bishop of Mbawawa in tow. Belinda, as part of the greeting committee at the station, is shocked to note that Agatha looks healthier. A month away from her husband has done her good.

If the struggle in our love triangle is Oedipal, and Belinda has already secured (to some small degree) the father's affection, she now must do battle with Agatha. And over last third of the book, Agatha's power to belittle and humiliate Belinda is incrementally dismantled.

Even in the cab from the station, Agatha lobs provocations at Belinda: The archdeacon doesn't look well, she says, as if it's Belinda's fault. Belinda, coming inside for tea, hopes that her presence isn't inconvenient. "Not at all," Agatha says. "One extra for tea is no trouble at all." The subtlety of this insult is marvelous: Belinda—who has stood on a freezing platform in to welcome Agatha home—is now "one extra," and not part of the inner circle.

But Belinda is already less susceptible to insult. There has already been one rent in Agatha's power over her. In Chapter 4, Miss Prior, the village seamstress allowed that, unlike the Bede sisters, "Mrs. Hoccleve doesn't keep a very good table." This revelation of her rival's meanness had given Belinda "one of those sudden moments of joy that sometimes come to us in the middle of an ordinary day."

Agatha's power to disturb Belinda will soon diminish dramatically. Belinda will experience at first hand a dinner party where Agatha serves stringy cabbage and that economical if uninspired meat patty called a rissole. She will learn, after 30 years, that Agatha had proposed to Henry, which takes some of the sting out of his rejection. Agatha's adored Bishop Grote will propose to Belinda, and once she gets over her shock and revulsion, she'll realize that "she had been offered and refused something that Agatha wanted." And finally, the bishop lets

slip that Agatha had knitted him a pair of socks; a pair too short in the foot. Like Cinderella's slipper, Agatha's sock did not fit.

Belinda is flooded by compassion. Agatha too has suffered from useless longing! Agatha too has known the pain of not being chosen, of having her sock not fit! "To think of Agatha as pathetic was something so new that Belinda had to sit down...quite overcome...She almost longed to see Agatha and be crushed by one of her sharp retorts, to know that she was still the same." Belinda "felt that she could almost love Agatha as a sister now."

These humanizing revelations equalize their relationship; Agatha the scolding, imperious mother becomes Agatha the cross little sister. Belinda also realizes that her own life is not lesser in value and satisfaction than Henry and Agatha's; she and Harriet have a happy well-run household, one happier and better run, in fact, than the Hoccleves'.

The shift is minor, all-too-believable. Belinda will go on loving the archdeacon—she needs a place to sequester those pesky emotions. And she'll take it lightly when Agatha provokes. "She was almost glad to be able to see Agatha as her old self again....Those socks not quite long in the foot," had made her see Agatha as pathetic and the picture was disturbing..." Now, Belinda is no longer victimized; she can choose to play their old games. Her former pathetic self is now a persona she can employ at will: so she consciously decides, "It was Belinda Bede who was the pathetic one and it was so much easier to bear the burden of one's own pathos than that of somebody else..."

Thus Belinda becomes an architect of her own happiness. The old primal story is no longer working her so hard; now, to some small degree, she's working it. Which is of course what Barbara Pym is doing as she writes from her own experience: she's taking material from her life with its imbedded hungers and occulted patterns, and making art with it. This art she can own as no wife or husband can ever own a spouse.

6. Nothing, The Sequel

In 1962, Pym came up with this idea for a story or novel:

A woman living in the country who has had a hopeless love for a man (wife still living perhaps or religious scruples), then, when he is free she finds that after all he means nothing to her—is this the reward of virtue, this nothingness?

This scenario could be the sequel to *Some Tame Gazelle*.

Love with an obstacle has its benefits: with affections securely pinioned to an unavailable other, a woman can lead a life to her liking without the demands of a husband. The pleasures of the chase, too, can be prolonged indefinitely, and passion exquisitely delayed. The so-called impediment to happiness creates its own status quo. Or, as Adam Phillips the British psychoanalyst says, the obstacle is a way of not letting something else happen.

Remove the obstacle—remove Agatha permanently, say—and something else will happen. Belinda can't even contemplate the possibility, perhaps, as I suggested earlier, because a widowed archdeacon raises the specter of sex. But there's also the specter of rejection: he might not turn to Belinda. A third and to my mind more likely possibility is, if the archdeacon showed up single at her door, that other thing might happen. Nothing. Once on her doorstep and available at last, the archdeacon might mean nothing to Belinda after all.

Rarely does the delicious adrenalized state of yearning, with its fantasies, idealization, and marvelous love pangs transform into the kindness, security, intimacy, and good communication of reciprocated love. Belinda has had intimations of this nothingness when, after her lovely dinner party, an enormous effort, the archdeacon

rewarded her with absence—he fell asleep. She saw it again when, after 30 years, she’s alone with him for the first time, and he reads to her for an hour straight; that might have evoked a fond remembrance of things past, but it was also a wall of words. Just him talking. She’s an ear. Being an ear is not what anyone desires for the long haul.

Epilogue: Pym Meets Proust

In writing this essay, I hesitated to delve below Pym’s beautifully crafted surfaces, because she is so circumspect and private, and she herself doesn’t delve. But in fact, there is so much more I want to talk about. I want to speculate about her father issues; her father’s mysterious illegitimate birth, his charming but distant manner, and how he remarried so soon, before Barbara and Hillary had a chance to get to know who he was without their mother’s powerful personality in the equation—a loss that might (or might not) have fueled the Oedipal subtext of *Some Tame Gazelle*. But I’m running out of time, and what I really want to say is what I admire most in Pym’s writing, which is how staunchly she accepts her characters for who they are, and how staunchly she refuses to pity them.

She does not pity Belinda for her long fixation on a fairly unlovable man; she does not pity Harriet for her weird preference for curates; or the Count for his devotion to John Akenside. How we love, Pym seems to say, is how we love.

Laura Shapiro suggested yesterday that Virginia Woolf gave Pym permission to find passionate joy in the quotidian, homey details of life. While revising *Some Tame Gazelle*, Pym was reading Proust as well as Woolf, and I credit him for giving her permission to portray unrequited love in all its obsessive glory without apology, shame or pity. Although Pym and Proust write in different keys, Proust’s lovers, like Pym’s, spy and stalk, they’re tortured with yearning for indifferent others; they desperately crave love from a dry source. Pym works in a quieter register—and she’s much more comic—but she shares with Proust the same unabashed stance that unrequited love is human love. How someone loves is just a fact about him or her, like saying he has a finger or she a big toe.

It’s a testament to the power of art that someone so clearly repressed could produce a body of work so capaciously inclusive and consistently amusing. Pym holds a mirror to our odd loves and longings without calling down shame or pity, her humor never curdles into derision. For who among us has never been obsessed with someone, has never followed a love interest from a certain distance, has never called someone, then hung up when someone else answers? What woman hasn’t had a crush on a gay man? Who hasn’t harbored useless longing for someone who ignores or avoids them or pays only intermittent attention? Who hasn’t felt an exquisite pain or learned something essential about the nature of human love by loving when not loved in return? We do what we can do, for our own reasons, Pym tells us, even as those reasons remain a mystery, locked away.

Michelle Huneven is the author of four novels. *Round Rock* (1997) and *Jamesland* (2003) were both *NY Times* Notable Books and also finalists for the *LA Times* Book Award, and *Blame* (2009) was a finalist for both the *National Book Critics Circle Award* and the *LA Times* Book Award. Her fourth novel, *Off Course* (2014), was a *NY Times* Editor’s Choice. Michelle has also received a *GE Younger Writers Award* and a *Whiting Award for Fiction*. She recently has taught at the *Iowa Writers Workshop* and been a senior fiction editor at the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. She teaches creative writing to undergraduates at *UCLA*. Michelle lives in *Altadena, California* with her husband, dog, cat, and talkative *African Gray* parrot.