

'How I have loved reading your book!'

Barbara Pym and Elizabeth Taylor: A Friendship in Letters

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'I hope a new era is opening up for us and that we might face it together.' So writes Elizabeth Taylor to her friend, Barbara Pym, in 1952. The two authors corresponded for at least eighteen years and seventeen of Elizabeth's letters and postcards to Barbara are in the Pym archive in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, the first dated May 1950 and the last 1968.

The archive is now in the new Weston Library and I was thrilled to find them there, along with letters from many of her friends, such as Robert Liddell and Robert Smith and of course Henry Harvey and Philip Larkin. They sprang alive for me, they and their world, and, some being mutual friends, we sometimes have a three way correspondence with themes or occasions being shared between them.

Nicola Beauman, in her accomplished and very readable book, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor*, tells us that it was in January 1950 that the two novelists were brought together by a mutual friend, Maud Geddes (at this time still Maud Eaton) over tea in Fortnum's. Born within a year of each other and passing away five years apart of the same illness, Barbara at 66 and Elizabeth at 63, they both achieved so much: each wrote a dozen novels as well as short stories. The letters throw light on three things: their work, their ideas about women's place in the world, and their lives and personalities.

Barbara's books are mostly set in London with one in Oxford, two in villages, and a handful of visits elsewhere; Elizabeth's are mostly in the Home Counties and also various seaside towns. Like Barbara's they explore love and friendship and relationships within families and like Barbara's they are full of warmth and wit, humour and irony.

The relaxed tone of Elizabeth's letters suggests a warm friendship and many personal details are revealed or alluded to, such as Barbara's first love (for the fascinating 'Lorenzo'), Elizabeth's miscarriage, and later on, how Elizabeth feels about her husband taking early retirement.

However, writing is the focus of most of the letters and PEN meetings are mentioned several times as they make arrangements to attend them together. It would seem that going to these meetings with Barbara gave the retiring Elizabeth confidence. She is very modest as a writer and when someone at a PEN meeting praises her she is nonplussed: In her letter of October 1952 she tells Barbara, 'I was dreadfully confused when that Indian woman talked about my prose. I am so sorry. I never know what to say.'

Elizabeth Jane Howard thought Elizabeth's books are written in beautiful prose and her accolade is used by Virago in their publicity: she calls Elizabeth 'One in a thousand. How deeply I envy any reader coming to her for the first time.'

Mutual friends and other novelists are referred to in the letters with comic overtones: Ivy Compton-Burnett ('I sometimes wish that Ivy...might occasionally throw us a slice of cold mutton or a few cushions'), Angus Wilson ('I am just reading *After Hemlock*, I think it so stale and boring'), and her publisher Peter Davies (who, surprisingly, hates 'authors and nearly all books').

One person who is mentioned a great deal is Robert Liddell, the writer and critic. After the Second World War, Robert left England for good to return to Cairo (where he had been brought up) and where he

was working for the British Council. Later he taught at the University of Athens, becoming Head of the English Department.

He was a good friend to both Barbara and Elizabeth and kept up a warm relationship with them through correspondence. Robert and Barbara knew each other from their Oxford days in the early 30s. They had met through his friend, Henry Harvey, a post-graduate student, while Barbara was in her first year at St. Hilda's College and Robert was working as assistant in the Department of Western Manuscripts at the Bodleian Library.

Unlike Barbara, Elizabeth did not meet Robert in England but got to know him purely by letter. She wrote to him in Cairo in 1948 after reading his Oxford novel, *The Last Enchantments*. Then followed an eleven-year correspondence before they finally met for the first time in Athens in 1959. (After that they continued to write and see each other whenever Elizabeth visited Greece.) Elizabeth often mentions Robert to Barbara, sometimes in a light vein but usually, as with Maud who was also now overseas, in terms of fears for his safety and happiness.

By July 1952 Barbara had apparently shared the deep sorrow of her life as Elizabeth remarks she is feeling 'flustered' about meeting Henry Harvey, whom Barbara had loved and pursued while at Oxford and subsequently. He, however, did not return her love, although they remained friends throughout their lives and quite late on were going away for weekends together. Their situation was rather like that of Belinda Bede and the Archdeacon, warmly portrayed in Barbara's novel *Some Tame Gazelle*:

Belinda gave a contented sigh. It had been such a lovely evening. Just one evening like that every thirty years or so. It might not seem much to other people, but it was really all one needed to be happy.

Henry was now married for the second time and working for the British Council and Elizabeth was about to undertake some lecturing for him on Ivy Compton-Burnett. Robert tells Barbara in his letter of October 1952 about 'her lecture on Miss C.B. delivered under poor Henry's auspices. Very good, but I expect it annoyed him.'

It would have been wonderful to have had Elizabeth's thoughts on Henry, but she must have saved them all for a tête-a-tête with Barbara and perhaps, later on, with Robert, who in December 1952 seems surprised when he writes to Barbara that Henry hasn't said anything about meeting Elizabeth: [Henry] 'made no comment on her in his letter.' And on another occasion, 'I don't think he can have liked her at all'.

It is frustrating that we do not have Barbara's side of the correspondence, either with Robert or with Elizabeth. Robert relates in *Elizabeth and Ivy* how when he worked in the Bodleian he found hundreds of letters carefully preserved which had been marked 'burn' by their writers. Both Elizabeth and Robert seem to have decided that letters should be destroyed to protect their writers.

However, the friendship between Elizabeth and Barbara is not an epistolary one, like that between Elizabeth and Robert. Many important matters not mentioned or sketchily touched on in Elizabeth's letters to Barbara will most likely have been discussed face to face or on the phone: 'All news when I see you,' says Elizabeth cheerily in her letter of October 1952.

One of the things they surely discussed would have been their close relationships. 'Women, in the end, are always disappointed by men,' Maud once observed, and this fact is often illustrated in Elizabeth's and Barbara's novels. In 1936 Elizabeth (then 23) married John Taylor, a local businessman of the same age, whose father had been the mayor, and they lived a comfortable middle-class life with their two children, Renny and Joanna, in the Thames Valley.

On the other hand, Barbara remained single and childless all her life, although she had several love affairs and other close relationships with men. Barbara and her sister Hilary enjoyed each other's company and after the war, from the end of 1945 when Barbara was 32, they lived together for the rest of their lives, first in London and later in Finstock, Oxfordshire. They both had jobs and led happy, busy and sociable lives together.

However, both Elizabeth and Barbara had had difficult personal relationships, and dealt with this pain through detachment, regarding life in humorous and ironic ways in their writing, as did Robert Liddell. This detachment and humour was noticed by contemporaries such as Robert Smith. Smith was Liddell's friend who later became Barbara's and in his essay about Barbara and Robert Liddell, *Always Sincere, Not Always Serious*, he says that Robert helped her 'to meet her problems, especially her emotional problems, with a rueful, amused acceptance, externalizing them...' and Barbara wrote to Henry that she 'can never forget that [Robert Liddell] saved me a great deal of unhappiness by his way of looking at things, which I adopted too ... the other side of me is still there to be brought out when necessary.'

Here is one of Barbara's characters, Dulcie, from *No Fond Return of Love*, whom both Robert Smith and Hazel Holt think closely resembles Barbara herself:

It seemed...so much safer and more comfortable to live in the lives of other people – to observe their joys and sorrows with detachment as if one were watching a film or a play.

Dulcie soon qualifies this though and realizes that by not being detached she can find happiness with the man of her choice, although he is not perfect.

In *Jane and Prudence* Barbara continues the theme of women needing to love men even though they are often found wanting. When Jane meets Prudence's employer, her 'love' of the moment, she reflects:

But this insignificant-looking little man...Oh, but it was splendid the things women were doing for men all the time, thought Jane. Making them feel, perhaps sometimes by no more than a casual glance, that they were loved and admired and desired when they were worthy of none of these things.

And later, when she meets Prudence's latest 'love', she thinks him an ordinary and colourless young man and decides

That was why women were so wonderful; it was their love and imagination that transformed these unremarkable beings. For most men, when one came to think of it, were undistinguished to look at, if not positively ugly.

In Elizabeth's *A View of the Harbour*, Tory has come to live next door to her best friend Beth, who has a husband and family. Tory's husband has left her for someone else and they are now divorced. Tory is lonely, keeping her house polished and beautiful and worrying about her little boy, Edward, away at boarding school. Tory pops in and out of Beth's house frequently and we hear many conversations between them that show their close and easy relationship. Tory laments that women should want to live with men when friendships between women were so wonderful: 'If women love one another there is peace and delight, fun without effort.'

Elizabeth goes on to make it clear she is not talking about lesbian relationships here. She is subtly asking, why is society so organized that women live with men and accept their subservient role?

[Men] implant in us, foster in us, instincts which it is to their advantage for us to have, and which, in the end, we feel shame at not possessing.

Perhaps we can catch an echo here of Elizabeth's friendship with Maud.

Maud and Elizabeth had become close friends after Elizabeth attended Maud's lecture course on Literature and Psychology for the Workers' Educational Association in High Wycombe in the winter of 1946. 'Both Elizabeth and Maud were reserved sorts of people', Barbara writes to Joy Grant (now Joy Vines), Elizabeth's first researcher, recalling their personalities in 1978. [Joy Grant has recently donated her correspondence with Barbara Pym to the Bodleian Library.]

They met often, in Elizabeth's home in Penn, where Maud stayed for a while, and in London, where they went for long walks or visited galleries. Maud married in 1947 and a few years later accompanied her husband to Borneo. Although Elizabeth was then preoccupied with her latest novel and with her family, she missed her very much. Maud, suffering from a debilitating hearing problem and depression was, sadly, to take her own life nine years later at the age of 34.

Elizabeth's novel *A Wreath of Roses* also features a close friendship between two women, Liz and Camilla; and then there are the two mothers, Lillian and Caroline, in *A Game of Hide and Seek*. Caroline is recalling their days as suffragettes:

'We went to prison together, but more than that we had our day-to-day life ... the informality; the insinuations; the ease.'

Barbara is in agreement when in *Jane and Prudence* she has Prudence (in a low moment) think, 'What would one do without the sympathy of other women?' or when she shows the importance of sympathy between women (this time between Wilmet and Rowena) after a misunderstanding in *A Glass of Blessings*:

We linked arms and went down to join the men. I reflected what a splendid and wonderful thing the friendship of really nice women was.

Perhaps the best illustration of two women friends in Barbara's oeuvre is that of the sisters, Belinda and Harriet Bede, in *Some Tame Gazelle*. Belinda turns down a bishop and Harriet a count in order to go on living with each other instead.

Both novelists are concerned with the place of women in a post-war world and they explore this in various ways. Their beliefs were very different, Elizabeth being for a long time a member of the Communist Party and Barbara a life-long member of the Church of England (they must have decided early on not to let their differences intrude on their friendship). Yet their concern for women taking their rightful place was identical. What was the proper course of study for a woman nowadays? Dulcie wonders in *No Fond Return of Love*, apropos of her young niece, Laurel:

...what answer should a girl give now when asked what had been her favourite subjects at school? Russian and nuclear physics were perhaps too far advanced, as yet, but English and History would hardly do.'

All women are 'career women' of course and Laurel's friend Marian points this out to Dulcie a little later.

In *Jane and Prudence*, Prudence talks loyally of Jane to Fabian,

'Dear Jane. She is rather wonderful, and yet in a way she's missed something. Life hasn't turned out quite as she meant it to.'

Fabian looked blank. 'She leads a useful kind of life – work in the parish and that kind of thing,' he went on vaguely.

'But she's really no good at parish work, she's wasted in that kind of life. She has great gifts, you know. She could have written books.'

'Written books? Oh, good heavens!'

In *A Wreath of Roses* the female artist is limited by men's need to see women artists conform to their expectations. The elderly Frances has begun to paint dark and fearsome pictures full of horror and angst. Morland Beddoes, with whom she has exchanged letters for years, has now come to stay with her. He would rather have Frances return to her earlier 'feminine' subjects of delicate roses of gentle hue.

Two young women, good friends Liz and Camilla, are also spending the summer with Frances, who had been Liz's governess. Frances reproves Camilla for criticizing Liz's husband, Arthur:

'You were wrong at tea-time when you said she married Arthur, not the vicar. A man's work is twisted into the roots of his existence. His conscience is involved. He can't divide himself.'

In Elizabeth's *A View of the Harbour* the young man Geoffrey, a poet, comes to read his poetry to Beth, a novelist. Geoffrey allows women their intuition but expects them not to be intellectual. In this novel we see contrasts between men's and women's work. Beth spends every minute writing:

Beth had been happy all the morning. She had taken her characters for a nice country walk ... and now, her eyes burning hotly, was hoping to have an only child dead before luncheon. [Then her real 'only child' returns home.]

'I am home from school,' said Stevie simply.

But with the dying child still on her mind Beth could not bring herself to welcome this living one.

'Then run and wash your hands,' she said.

Beth reflects at another time that her writing is considered 'an annoying habit' whereas for men writing is considered work.

Meanwhile, Eddie Flitcroft works out at sea on the trawlers at night:

Moving stiffly in his oilskins, Eddie had forgotten his brief sleep. First the otterboards came over the bulwarks, and then the wooden rollers, and, at last, the great net itself, water pouring from it as it emerged from the sea... Eddie went forward up the slimy deck among the brown and ice-white of the fish, stooping down in the cold dawn light, sorting good from trash, working hard as he always did.

Maisie (who recalls Mary and Mrs Beamish in *A Glass of Blessings*) is the girl he loves, but he can't go out with her, as she must continue to stay indoors all day and all night looking after her paralysed bed-ridden mother, Mrs Bracey. Maisie does all the housework, works in their shop and puts up with the enervating nagging and opinions of her frustrated mother, who is proud of her (in her way) when challenged: 'My Maisie knows how to wash and iron.'

A View of the Harbour is one of my favourite Elizabeth Taylors, a wonderful book, full of humour, although dealing with pain and loss as well as friendship and love, and also full of memorable images: who could forget the room full of wax figures of bygone murderers with their glittering eyes, that the lonely war-widowed Lily must rush past each night on her return home to her room above? Or the intrusive lighthouse that makes so many appearances, a character in its own right:

As [Lily] passed her hand over the wall for the light-switch the lighthouse swung its beam over the room and the eyes of the waxworks seemed to flicker into life, so that she felt as if they were all standing there waiting for her.

Although Elizabeth seems to have had a happy family life, actually things were not so straightforward for her at first. Joy Grant discovered that, far from being 'just a rather nice woman who lived a quiet life in the Home Counties with her husband and children' as critics thought, in fact Elizabeth had another man in her life who was very important to her.

She had become drawn to a friend, Ray Russell, a fellow member of the Communist Party, an apprentice furniture designer and amateur artist. They had met during the first year of her marriage when they attended Party meetings in High Wycombe and sold the *Daily Worker* together outside Woolworths. Ray was a very good-looking man of keen political intelligence and artistic sensibility, whereas Elizabeth's husband John was later described by Elizabeth Jane Howard in her autobiography, *Slipstream*, as 'a bluff, totally unintellectual man whose favourite occupation was felling trees and chopping them up.' All the same, both Nicola Beauman and Joy Grant think John was perhaps more at ease socially than Ray would have been in Elizabeth's chosen way of life.

Ray and Elizabeth were attracted to each other but it took a letter from Elizabeth confessing her feelings before they became lovers. Soon afterwards Ray spent four years in a Prisoner of War camp in Greece, where Elizabeth wrote to him three times a week. The position of women and the life and work of the artist and writer are topics that Elizabeth was able to share at last (apart from in her novels), writing him hundreds of letters, perhaps half a million words, about the nature of art and about their intense feelings for one another.

After the war he worked locally and they continued to meet, until eventually, after a relationship lasting 10 years, there was a confrontation between Elizabeth and her husband (who had also been unfaithful) and she was forced to give Ray up. Ray moved away to London where he became a graphic artist, even illustrating some of her book covers for her. She continued to write to Ray until the end of her life, although some time after their relationship ended, he married and had a son.

Elizabeth was rather a lonely person, as regards her art, with no one to discuss her writing with. She didn't live in London but in Penn, a village near High Wycombe, and was not part of the London literary scene. She was too shy to give more than a handful of interviews and she didn't review and this might be why she was not as successful as contemporary women novelists Olivia Manning, Pamela Hansford-Johnson and others. (Robert Liddell called them the 'anti-Elizabeth league' as they wrote unkind reviews of her books, which upset her very much.)

Fortunately as Ray disappeared from her horizon, she met Maud Geddes who became her close friend for a few years and then Barbara, to confide in, to go to lunch with and to PEN meetings, and she also had Robert Liddell with whom to share her ideas and gossip in letters.

Meanwhile, Barbara was in a better position and had plenty of opportunity to talk about writing and about her characters. She was very lucky to be working in the same editorial office as Hazel Holt with whom she became great friends. Hazel shared her sense of humour and interest in the anthropologists that they met at the Institute of African Studies and they enjoyed many afternoons making up stories about them. The stories became so vivid to both of them that the boundaries of fiction and reality became blurred, which could have led to some embarrassing moments! (asking each other things like, does he really have an invalid wife or did we make that up?)

Irony and laughter are never far away, even in the darker books of both writers. Towards the end of her life Barbara was asked to be one of the judges in the 1974 awards for the Romantic Novelists' Association. On reading the tenth book she wrote to Philip Larkin that they all lacked humour or irony, which she missed.

Apart from the intellectual life both led, Elizabeth and Barbara were very interested in clothes and particularly in hats. A running joke is continued over several letters, even spilling over to a three-way 'conversation' as Robert gets involved. Elizabeth tells Barbara she is sorry that Barbara left out the rissole hat that she had worn to the PEN meeting with Barbara in her description of a literary meeting in Jane and

Prudence. And Robert says how he likes hats in novels but (Elizabeth tells Barbara) doesn't say if he likes them in letters.

Hats do have some importance in the novels of both writers too. In Elizabeth's *A View of the Harbour* Tory always dresses very well, like Barbara's Wilmet in *A Glass of Blessings*, and both like to wear a smart grey costume: though whereas Tory wears a grey felt hat with hers, Wilmet sports a pink toque, as is fitting with her more cheerful character. (Another time, when she goes to visit Mary in her convent, she wears 'a black suit with a pretty little spring hat and pale gloves', and at Marius's induction, she wears 'an emerald green feather cap' with her black suit.)

A mention of a particular hat in Elizabeth's novel, *Angel*, becomes a plot mover as it reveals a scurrilous fact about a major character. (I won't say any more as I am trying to be very careful not to include any spoilers!)

Elizabeth defends a feminine interest in hats (and feminine interests per se) in her novel *A Wreath of Roses* when Camilla describes her childhood among her brothers, who were always

walking up and down discussing. Any subject, so long as it came nowhere near their hearts, or emotion or reality. Their dry voices, their pale faces: a man's world ... But worst of all for me, nothing feminine ... No one talked about hats.

Hats perhaps took on an extra importance at this time as they were not on ration, unlike other clothing, and could be bought and enjoyed in a way that other clothes could not.

Clothes and appearance of course are not only for personal enjoyment but also for the purpose of finding a man! Miss Lord, Dulcie's daily, understands this and tries to make Dulcie take more interest in herself so that she will be the one going out, and not only her friend, Viola Dace:

'You could make so much *more* of yourself, Miss Mainwaring,' said Miss Lord almost on a despairing note, 'if only you would.'

'What should I do?' Dulcie smiled.

'Well, you could have your hair restyled by one of those Italian hairdressers – in the bouffant style, they call it – it would add fullness to your face, make your head look bigger.'

'Do I want my head to look bigger?' Dulcie fingered her fine, smooth hair. 'Would it be an advantage? Anyway, I don't think my hair would go like that.'

'You could have a perm – to give it *body*,' said Miss Lord eagerly. 'They use rollers to set it, you know. And you could use more eye make-up. It would make your eyes look bigger.'

Dulcie laughed. 'Goodness! Head bigger and eyes bigger – then what?'

'Then you'd be the one to get the bunches of carnations,' said Miss Lord triumphantly.

In a very amusing passage in *A View of the Harbour*, Tory spends a long time dressing Beth up to go and see her publisher in London. Beth is made to wear Tory's best white blouse and new white hat, corset and tight black skirt in which she cannot bend. When Beth eventually reveals that her publisher is a woman, Tory is dumbfounded and considers they have been wasting their time!

Matters of a more personal nature are also shared in their letters and used in novels. Elizabeth jokes to Barbara about how her latest novel, *Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont*, is only 'moving slowly' due to her fondness for her grandchildren and especially since her husband John has retired (at 58) and is at home all the time: 'For richer, or poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part – but not for lunch.'

Elizabeth is making a joke of it in her letter, but has nonetheless used this observation in *A Wreath of Roses*, when a major character comments on the restrictive influence of a husband at home: 'He is about the house so much,' Liz said restlessly. 'I had never realized how he would always be there.'

Elizabeth shares other domestic details with Barbara, such as, ‘the house is groaning with food and it all has to be cooked!’

Although she had domestic help, Elizabeth did put the children first, laying aside her writing to be with them, so that Joanna can say that they did not particularly think of her as a novelist. This echoes what Hilary says about her sister, that Barbara was very sociable and did not hide herself away to write.

Barbara often wrote in bed in the early morning or in the evenings after work and at weekends, using a portable typewriter. Elizabeth preferred to write with a fountain pen in an exercise book on her knee while sitting in an armchair. She had to squeeze in her writing in the afternoons, after shopping in the mornings and cooking lunch for her husband who always returned at a quarter to one. She told an interviewer that she was used to marks on her MS and settling children’s disputes while writing and, as regards her plots, she thought ‘the whole thing out over the ironing.’ Beauman tells us that Elizabeth only wrote two drafts, one rough and one fair copy, and she didn’t make many changes from the originals. (Elizabeth’s MSS can be seen in the University of Tulsa library.)

The children were in boarding school in term time and this must have been when Elizabeth got a lot of her writing done. Trying to arrange to see Barbara in July 1952 she observes, ‘They are back on the 27th – so I suppose there is only next week left. (And I meant to do so much this term!)’

Later came the grandchildren in whom she delighted, but even so she often found them tiring and wrote to Elizabeth Jane Howard in 1972 that she was ‘lumbered and cumbered with grandchildren.’

Lamenting their lack of time is a recurring theme and in spite of their busy, occupied days, these two authors found time to write to each other, partly perhaps because they needed and enjoyed each other’s support and approval. ‘Like you, I seem to get so little time for novel writing,’ Elizabeth says in 1959.

Although confidences are shared, it is writing that is mentioned in nearly every letter. Sometimes it is comments on their own books and their success or lack of progress, sometimes other people’s, for example, when she tells Barbara about Robert Liddell’s *Unreal City*, which she read ‘with such excitement and enjoyment.’

Elizabeth is very complimentary: ‘How I loved your book,’ she tells Barbara in 1952, referring to *Excellent Women* and says how she will listen to it ‘on the wireless’ (BBC’s Woman’s Hour). And in 1953, ‘How I have loved reading your book! It’s all one’s own life, but made interesting, colourful and even exciting. Something to remember as one works about the house, something to keep one company.’

This is just the beginning of a long appreciative paragraph about *Jane and Prudence*, which Barbara had recently sent her. On another occasion Elizabeth tells Barbara how she ‘longs to read’ her latest book, *Less than Angels*, and in the last letter we have (1968) she says how her daughter considers Barbara Pym to be on the same level as Jane Austen. Barbara is obviously writing in a similarly admiring way to Elizabeth about her books, as Elizabeth says things like, ‘I’m glad you liked my book,’ or ‘I was so glad to get your kind letter and know that you liked my book.’ From one of Barbara’s letters to Joy Grant we learn that Elizabeth was also sending her own books to Barbara.

The difficulties of getting any writing done also appear in Elizabeth’s novels. She enjoys a little joke with the reader about writing and the production of a book, for instance Cressy’s father Joe in *The Wedding Group* is trying to write a book (getting his information from other books) and he says the publishers ‘would have to cough up a great deal, or he would want to know the reason why. After all, the book had taken years to write.’

And she enjoys another little joke about writing, this time a common attitude to fiction, through Mrs Bracey in *A View of the Harbour*: ‘I like a nice true book, something you can get your teeth into. If there’s any make-belief to be done, I can do it myself out of my own head.’

Barbara’s Letty (from *Quartet In Autumn*) agrees – ‘novels weren’t as nice as they used to be, so it had to be biography. That was alright.’ Which recalls Wilmet’s remark to Rowena about fiction (Barbara’s joke with us about her former character from *Less Than Angels*), as they sit under the hairdryers, skimming through magazines in *A Glass of Blessings*:

‘*Sunday Evening* by Catherine Oliphant,’ she read out. ‘It begins rather well with a young man and girl holding hands in a Greek restaurant., watched by the man’s former mistress – unknown to them of course.’

‘But what a far-fetched situation!’ I protested. ‘As if it would happen like that! Still, it must be dreadful to have to write fiction. Do you suppose Catherine Oliphant drew it from her own experience of life?’

Rowena laughed. ‘I should hardly think so. She’s probably an elderly spinster living in a boarding house in Eastbourne. Or she may even be a man.’

Elizabeth seems to feel compelled to write, and tells Ray Russell that if she had the choice, she would rather NOT write, but perhaps she is speaking through Beth, the writer in her novel *A View of the Harbour*, when she says:

Even if she wished to be released from it, as she sometimes did wish, she knew that she could not. The imaginary people would go on knocking at her forehead until she died.

In her letter to Ray, Elizabeth says she could never be free from ‘this bloody need to write.’ Barbara also seems to feel the same when she writes to Bob Smith [May 1963]: How much better it would be (and so peaceful) never to have to write another word, but to do practical good.’

‘I get slower and slower,’ Elizabeth complains to Barbara in one letter during 1951, and again with more reason and heart-breaking lack of confidence in 1959: ‘I plod on slowly, but feel it’s all a great mistake.’ This was after she had spent several months at her son’s bedside following a serious accident. She had looked forward to getting back to work after his recovery, ‘But the dead thing I was confronted with was frightful – gone stale and all the characters frozen in hideous attitudes.’

This was to be her novel *In a Summer Season*, a novel I enjoyed a great deal, where Kate, a widow, marries Dermott, who is ten years her junior and he comes to live with her in the beautiful house with the view of Windsor Castle. The trouble is, she’s already established there with her children and aunt, cook and gardener, running into her former husband’s friends at the local pub. Dermott somehow has to fit himself into this scene and it’s not surprising the relationship has problems. As well as being perhaps her most ‘sexy’ book it is also a very funny book, as we see the hopeless cultural divide between Dermott and Kate: for example, he is so bored listening to classical music with Kate and friends at their home one evening that he is reduced to counting petals on flowers in the vase. He prefers the cowboy films on the television: ‘Like hares before a serpent, Tom and Dermott sat rigid and in silence. From time to time their hands groped on the floor for their glasses of light ale, their cigarettes burnt to their fingers.’

This reminds us of Tom’s uncle in *Less than Angels*. sitting in the stuffy television room watching programmes about cookery rather than go out to the garden fete with his family.

The whole situation, speaking of cultural divides, is reminiscent of Wilmet’s wonderings about Keith and Piers’ relationship in *A Glass of Blessings* and what they talk about:

‘This having things in common,’ said Piers impatiently, ‘how overrated it is! Long dreary intellectual conversations, capping each other’s obscure quotations – it’s so exhausting. It’s

much more agreeable to come home to some different remarks from the ones one's been hearing all day.'

and Tom and Catherine's parting conversation from *Less Than Angels* (Tom begins):

'You said I'd never really understood you.'

'Oh, that doesn't really matter—people make a lot too much of it. Who understands anybody, if it comes to that?'

'We haven't many interests in common.'

Catherine laughed. 'No, I suppose we didn't sit by the fire in the evenings doing fretwork or poring over our collections of butterflies.'

Both novelists are exploring what makes a relationship. But for Dermott and Kate from *In A Summer Season* perhaps they were too different. I see no sign of the characters being frozen as Elizabeth feared, and not only did she go on to finish *In a Summer Season* but perhaps used her recent experiences in some way as she plotted a horrific car accident.

It is interesting that in her letter to Barbara of 7 February 1959, mentioning her son's accident of the previous summer, Elizabeth's emphasis is on the effect it had on her writing; there seems to have been no emotional unburdening from Elizabeth to Barbara. It is also apparent that they haven't met or corresponded for several months, as the accident had occurred in August 1958. In the last line of Elizabeth's letter we hear a note of regret about this, and her loneliness since the suicide of her close friend, Maud: 'So long since I saw you – not since dear Maud died, I believe,' which had been three years before. Elizabeth writes to Robert, 'I think loneliness is a theme running through many of my novels and short stories, the different ways in which individuals can be isolated from others.'

Although she preferred her days and weeks to pass with little change, Elizabeth did take holidays: with John and the children in France, and from the mid-1950s they travelled regularly to Greece. The country meant a great deal to her: in 1961 she wrote to Katharine White, 'I have got to the stage where I don't want to go anywhere else and I leave it in tears.'

After her first visit in 1956 (on which she chose not to meet Robert Liddell) she wrote the short story *The Letter Writers*, which explored the dangers of meeting someone with whom you already have a close epistolary relationship. By 1959 she was brave enough to travel alone to Greece and visit Robert, and in real life the meeting was a great success, as described in Robert's *Elizabeth and Ivy*.

They made many expeditions together, but over the years Elizabeth also went on several solitary excursions, as when she visited Hydra in 1959: 'Being on my own will be a relief,' she told Robert. Two years later she visited Paros alone, from where she sent Barbara a postcard expressing her sympathy for the donkey that had carried her up the mountain. Barbara and Hilary also visited Greece several times and at one point Barbara and Elizabeth are at the same party in Athens at Robert's flat.

Elizabeth and Robert, having survived the pitfalls of meeting at last, continued to enjoy their correspondence and Elizabeth continued to visit Greece or cruise nearby and also made other trips, to Corsica and North Africa, Cyprus and Malta, last seeing Robert in 1974, a year before she died.

Robert obviously cares deeply about Elizabeth and from the beginning he enquires of Barbara in many letters how Elizabeth is. To take just two examples, in October 1952 he urges Barbara to go and see Elizabeth: 'do try and see her when she gets back from lecturing,' and in June 1959 he suggests she should go and see Elizabeth as she is grieving over Maud and 'She wouldn't know many people who knew her.'

It is possible that Elizabeth felt she had let Maud down and perhaps it was out of her feelings of love and guilt that *Blaming* was written, in which a character rather like Maud also commits suicide. Elizabeth,

reflecting later, felt that she hadn't done enough to try and see her. In *Blaming*, which she wrote during her last illness, Elizabeth was able to express her deep feelings in the way she knew best and this may have eased her heart. Equally it probably did Joanna good after Elizabeth's death to talk to Barbara as a writer and friend of her mother's, as Molly White remarks in a letter to Barbara.

Elizabeth's letters to Barbara are gentle and controlled with humorous touches, not outpourings of emotion but calm, with an informative, entertaining intent.

Barbara remembered Elizabeth with admiration and when Elizabeth died in 1975 Barbara was surprised that not more notice had been taken of her. Barbara followed Elizabeth only five years later when her cancer returned.

During the few years' respite she had enjoyed, Barbara had retired to live with Hilary, in their cottage in Finstock, Oxfordshire, and had been delighted by her 'rediscovery'. She had seen the republishing of her novels and the putting forward of her new book *Quartet in Autumn* for the Booker Prize.

By the time Elizabeth died she had seen the publication of 11 of her 12 novels and had long been one of the foremost women writers of her generation. Both authors are currently published in Virago and we have Elizabeth's letters as testimony to a friendship important to both.

There are so many things they shared in their novels that there hasn't been time to touch on, like their humorous and sympathetic observation of servants, and of old age, the many quotes and discussions of literature in both novelists' work and of course, their love of cats. I would like to leave you with these thoughts on cats, which show the two writers' equal affection. Here are Prudence's Persian cats, Guillaume and Yvette, from *A View of the Harbour*:

The cats lay against her shoulder, their gentian eyes wide, their silken nostrils quivering a little at the hated outdoor air, the wind blowing their fur into little divisions. They yearned to get back indoors, to lie on the radiator in the surgery or at the bottom of the linen-cupboard. As Prudence carried them back to the house they looked over her shoulder at the sea contemptuously.

And Faustina, Sophia's unforgettable cat from *An Unsuitable Attachment*, as Sophia thinks about her while on holiday in Rome. Faustina is a faithful portrait of Barbara's and Hilary's own much loved tortoiseshell cat, Tatiana:

[Sophia] decided to meditate on Faustina, to try to picture what she would be doing at this moment. Various little scenes came into her mind – Faustina at her dish, her head on one side, vigorously chewing a piece of meat; sitting upright and thumping her tail, demanding for the door to be opened; reposing on a bed, curled up in a circle; sharpening her claws on the leg of an armchair – so many of these pictures brought the cat before her, so that she could almost smell her fresh furry smell and her warm sweet breath.

In speaking about Barbara Pym and Elizabeth Taylor to the Barbara Pym Society, it seems appropriate to let Barbara, in the person of Faustina, have the very last word.