

bles in eloquence and passion) was the playwright of the 1950s, is undoubtedly David Hare. In *Plenty*, which was later made into a memorable film, he focussed on the inertia of English social life, with its stuffy institutions and commonplace ambitions; but by the time of *The Secret Rapture*, he was anxious to retrieve certain traditional values from the vulgar amorality of the Thatcherite present. As his career develops, it seems that the source of Hare's radical criticism of contemporary life lies in part in a powerful nostalgia for such traditional values.

Poetry of the decade

The output of poetry during the decade has been prolific and the best new poets—Craig Raine, Andrew Motion, James Fenton and Blake Morrison—have been remarkably successful in creating a large audience for their work. The most important work, however, has been produced by poets reaching their maturity—Geoffrey Hill, the last great poet in the conservative and Christian tradition of Modernism associated with T.S. Eliot, Seamus Heaney (who is regarded by many as the finest and most important poet now writing in English, a fact recognised by his recent election to the Professorship of Poetry at Oxford) and Tony Harrison. Hill has remained a rigorous and a somewhat unyielding stylist, but in Heaney and Harrison the radical interrogation of the lyric form (which has introduced postmodernist preoccupations into English verse) has latterly been accompanied by a richness, compassion and warmth achieved in the course of middle age.

Although Heaney is now an Irish citizen, he was born in Northern Ireland. His work from the beginning has explored the ambiguous relationship which he feels, as a writer born into an Irish Catholic family, to the forms of the English lyric which he must use. His major work has been concerned with the equivocal nature of legacy and inheritance, with the conflicts between rootedness and exploration, but in *Station Island* and *The Haw Lantern*, a new intimacy has entered his work as he writes of memory, of his personal past, of the presence and prospect of death. We see a similar pattern in the work of the Scots poet Douglas Dunn, from an angry sense of cultural dis-possession in his early work to a maturer sense of self-possession in his most recent work. His poised and poignant volume *Elegies*, on the illness and death of his wife, is by any measure a major achievement.

Tony Harrison's work grows likewise out of the conflict he feels between his working-class origins and his middle-class accomplishments as poet and classical translator. More than any other English poet of his generation, he expresses anger at the divisions of class and traces the perpetuation of those divisions to the class-based opera-

tions of language itself. His major poem *V* contrasts the confident working-class culture of the past with the impoverished working-class culture of the present and through a range of idioms and discourses, dramatises the effects of linguistic power and powerlessness. Yet in his most recent verse, Harrison, like Heaney, has written of individual as well as communal loss and emphasises the importance of personal as well as collective memory.

The last decade is too close for any firm judgements to be made. What can be said is that it has been an extraordinarily productive one in which major works have been written. Certainly, the anxieties with which the decade opened have been to a large degree dispelled.

An Interview with Margaret Drabble

With the publication of her early novels in the sixties, Margaret Drabble added a new subject to English fiction: the confused attempts of young, middle-class, professional women to question and to break away from their inherited roles as daughters, wives and mothers, and their efforts to find their own individual identity. Through the seventies and eighties she has established herself as a leading English novelist, and the scope of her work has widened to include an increased social and political consciousness. Her 'panorama' or 'state of the nation' novels (*The Radiant Way* is probably the best example) involve themselves directly and critically with contemporary Britain, culminating in the (already much-quoted) description of England in her most recent novel *A Natural Curiosity*: "England's not a bad country. It's just a mean, cold, ugly, divided, tired, clapped-out post-imperial post-industrial slag-heap covered in polystyrene hamburger cartons. It's not a bad country at all. I love it."

But *A Natural Curiosity*, which is a sequel to *The Radiant Way*, also suggests an extension of Drabble's creative concerns beyond the social and political reality of Britain today. It deals with a darker, deeper and more complex reality in its search for the roots of violence and barbarism.

At the moment, Margaret Drabble is working on a new novel in which she intends to continue the story of one of the characters in *The Radiant Way* and *A Natural Curiosity* in a more international context.

Ulf Dantanus met her at her house in Hampstead in London.

Q. How did your career as a writer start? Did you have any aspirations to become a writer?

A. Not really, no. I think I wanted to be an actress when I first left university, and indeed I was an actress. But writing books was a way of filling the time. Actresses are notoriously underemployed and even though I did get a job at Stratford in my second year I had a lot of time hanging around, and I found that very boring. So I started writing by default, really, and gradually, after a book or two, I began to see myself as a writer.

Q. Were you aware of any influences from other writers, especially other women writers?

A. I wasn't influenced by women writers at all at that stage, except perhaps 19th century women writers. I studied English literature at Cambridge and I didn't really know who my contemporaries were, in fact there weren't any women writers that I could see. I was influenced, I think, by Saul Bellow more than anybody when I started writing—he seemed to me to be a viable model of a living writer. I also read Mary McCarthy, both Americans, which I suppose is interesting. Later I became aware of Doris Lessing's work, but not until I had published three or four books.

Q. What particular characteristics are important in a writer? What advice would you give an aspiring writer?

A. Go off and do something else at the same time. I think sitting down to be a writer is a bad idea, really. It's very important to have some occupation, something to write about, in other words. I think it's perfectly possible to become a full-time writer, but I think it's very unusual to start off as a full-time writer — it's something that comes one's way.

Q. In your work as a writer, do you follow a certain regime, writing certain hours every day, for instance?

A. I try to, but I find it terribly hard. I think it is one of the problems of being a writer that working at home one is constantly being interrupted, and it's very hard to say what is work. I used to go off to a room in town where I would work, and I now have a place where I go in Somerset in the West Country, and I try to do a block of work there. But there are always things happening. Last week I was down there and the electricity went off. I aim to have blocks of working time and do a good day's work, but it's hard to keep office hours.

Q. Do you write on a typewriter?

A. I write mainly on a typewriter, but I write some stuff on a word processor — I use both. But I don't write fiction on a word processor. With fiction you don't need a clean copy because you know you're going to be working on it for a long time. And I prefer the physical activity of using a typewriter.

Q. It was *The Millstone*, your third novel, which established you as a writer. Do you feel that, as a result of that, you have a special relationship with that novel?

A. I suppose so. I think it tends to have been the most popular, particularly with young people. But I think I really just saw it as one book after another at that stage.

Q. But there must be some qualities in the novel that appeal to young readers. It's a book that appears on many reading lists for schools and colleges.

A. I think that's for various rather odd reasons in that it's a short novel. It has a much simpler vocabulary than any of the others—even than the earlier ones. It has a very simple story and a very basic plot. I think that's why it appeals to young people, though I think some young people probably find the sexual morality in it rather outmoded — but I suppose it might all come back in again with AIDS.

Q. The early novels are all about young middle-class women who go through a difficult time trying to find their own individual identity. There is a lot of insecurity, pain and confusion there. Is there a cure for this?

A. I think that probably people aren't as confused now — of course young people tend to be confused — but I think that I was writing about a particular kind of confusion. I was very much on a turning point between two generations, and I think that a lot of the confusion came from that. I think that some of the questions I dealt with have been answered. Women now feel a very much clearer sense of their own rights and identity, and the path ahead.

Q. Very few things escape criticism: parents get a pretty rough deal; husbands aren't very successful; sex is very difficult.

A. Yes, but all that's traditional in a way. People always blame the older generation, for instance. And that's what fiction is about: difficulties, not about things being easy.

Q. Motherhood comes to represent something rather special for these young women. It becomes a good story in the early novels.

A. That's right. It was something that hadn't been written about very much, a new subject in a way. And I suppose I was surprised that I hadn't come across it before. It's really a question of expectations—one expected marriage and sex to be wonderful because everybody was telling you they would be—and you expected babies to be a bit of a bore because no one ever mentioned them. And it was almost the reverse: that children were very exciting and motherhood was a big adventure that nobody had told you about, whereas marriage was full of problems that people kept very quiet about — and sex was certainly full of problems which people *did* tell you about. And there was an awful lot written about it, so it wasn't an unknown land like motherhood.

Q. Is there still a conflict between having a career and being a mother for women today?

A. I don't think it's anything as bad as it used to be. It *is* still a conflict, but I think that it's socially more acceptable and practically more possible to do both now. I think it's perfectly possible to run small children and a career at the same time—it's extremely difficult, but it's possible. The image of the mother who just gave up her career for ever doesn't exist now.

Q. The themes of your later novels change and come to deal more directly with social and political factors. Was this a deliberate attempt to paint a wider canvas?

A. I don't know about 'deliberate'. I think I felt that I had acquired the knowledge and the interest to try to do it. I wanted to do something bigger, but then as one gets older one does find oneself interested in more things—my problem now is that I'm interested in so many things I don't know which to do next.

Q. Are you more politically aware now, and would that be another reason why you would want to write about Britain today in more political terms?

A. I'm less committed politically than I was—that might mean that I'm more aware.

Q. But it may seem to some people that you have become more involved in political debate in the eighties, and your name was associated recently with the establishment of the June 20th group [a group of well-known writers, who came to be seen as an anti-Thatcher think-tank]. What was the purpose of this group, and is it still going on?

A. It's still going on, yes. I think there was a feeling of dissatisfaction with the way things were, and a group of like-minded people wanted to get together and just explore where we stood and what vehicle we saw as being politically useful. But we're not a political group, we're a discussion group. I think our aim was to educate ourselves, and it still is.

Q. Did you have any form of more practical action in mind?

A. I certainly didn't, no. Of course we do feel that we ought to speak up on things like the Salman Rushdie issue—he is a member of the group—and we had something quite strong to say about that, like so many other people.

Q. But you also wrote a pamphlet for the Fabian Society [*The Case for Equality*, 1988] which might suggest a rather active involvement.

A. Not at all. I'm grateful for an opportunity to explain that. What happened was that, and it's all a very disappointing story, I was bullied into giving a talk to something called the Progressive Society by a neighbour of mine. The Fabian Society got to hear about it and asked if they could print it. I was very doubtful about whether it was suitable to be a Fabian pamphlet—they told me it was—I would never have dreamt of volunteering it. So you see, again, I didn't set out to change the world.

Q. Don't you think that writers should do that?

A. Yes, I think they can. But I don't think that I'm very good at it, and I don't feel very comfortable in the role—I don't think it's my metier—and it doesn't suit me or my style.

Q. Last year you were one of many writers who signed a World Statement in support of Salman Rushdie. The present conflict is about a paperback edition of *The Satanic Verses*. Do you feel it should be published?

A. Absolutely. I'm entirely in favour of its being published. I find it ludicrous to have a row about what kind of cover a book has got. The sooner it's published in paperback the better. When that's done there's a possibility that there will be a plain settlement. That's my hope.

Q. 1989 was in many ways an extraordinary year for writers and writing in the way they became front page news all over the world; apart from the Rushdie affair, Vaclav Havel became President of Czechoslovakia, and then there's Mario Vargas Llosa in South America. Do you think that there are any lessons to be learnt from this?

A. One lesson to be learnt is that writing is still very important. We've tended to say that it isn't. But Rushdie and Havel are in two very different situations. Rushdie didn't write a political creed; he wrote a very imaginative novel, which is what got it into the trouble it got into—people couldn't tell fact from fiction, or realism from magic realism. Havel has served his time, he's done a very long apprenticeship in prison fighting the regime, and I think he's behaved with remarkable balance, good humour and restraint. Let's hope that he can continue to do so. I think it's a very cheering prospect but not all writers are like that.

Q. In the sixties and seventies you published roughly a novel every other year. After *The Middle Ground* in 1980 there was gap of seven years before *The Radiant Way*. Was this due only to the work you did on *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*?

A. Yes. I said it would take five years and it took five years, and then it took two years to write *The Radiant Way*. But it's also true that I said I'd do *The Companion* because I felt like a change, and I'd been writing fiction for a long time. I was at that stage in my life when I was physically able to take up this job, which I wouldn't have been able to when the children were younger.

Q. Did you find the work rewarding?

A. It was fascinating. There was a lot of reading and there was also a lot of collaborating with other people, which as a novelist I don't have to do, and I found that quite interesting, sort of bullying other people instead of being bullied myself.

Q. Apart from *The Companion* you have also done critical work on William Wordsworth, Thomas Hardy, Arnold Bennett and Virginia

Woolf. Do you think that the two activities of creative writer and critic have anything to do with each other?

A. I think they are pretty separate, actually. I think politics is nearer to writing than criticism is to writing. When writing criticism it's a very different part of your brain that you're using—it's almost as though you've got two chambers, and you use one for one and one for the other.

Q. You don't think they help each other?

A. Sometimes they hinder one another, because one's critical brain is saying: don't do that; so and so tried that and it didn't work; so and so tried that and it did work but you'd better not copy it. So there's sometimes a sort of positive hindrance when you have in a way to forget everything that you've read when you start writing.

Q. Some people would claim that creative writers make better critics.

A. I wouldn't. I think critics make better critics. I think creative writers can write wonderfully about literature, but I also think that some critics have perceptions that creative writers are almost incapable of. I don't read much criticism, I find it slightly worrying, but people like Frank Kermode and Christopher Ricks have a kind of brain which is essentially not a creative brain, but it's a creative form of criticism because it's creating new models. And people like David Lodge are very rare, who do both things brilliantly. I think he's very unusual.

Q. Do you plan any more critical works?

A. I might try and do a non-fiction thing after the next novel, as a sort of change, because I find going from one to the other sort of rejuvenates a bit of yourself by using these different chambers I was talking about.

Q. Back again to your own novels. Do you have a favourite among them?

A. I find it very hard to say. I'm rather fond of *The Needle's Eye*, because it was quite a long book and quite difficult—and like the child that's caused you a lot of trouble you have a soft spot for it. I don't look at the early ones now. I think I find them a bit girlish, and I sort of feel embarrassed—I was very young when I wrote them. I tend to prefer the later ones. I think *The Needle's Eye* was the book I grew up with—I became an adult when I wrote that.

Q. We've said that *The Radiant Way* was characterized by its direct involvement with contemporary Britain. *A Natural Curiosity* may seem at first to continue in the same direction. But then it takes another turn.

A. Yes, I wasn't intending to go along that path. *A Natural Curiosity* is asking much more metaphysical questions. It's more about the nature of violence than about the nature of Britain, and it's not meant to be a sociological panorama, which I suppose the earlier novel was.

The Radiant Way was intended as a series of questions specifically about five years in Britain. *A Natural Curiosity* has a much longer time span and asks questions about Roman Britain, barbarism and the nature of civilization.

Q. In a note to *A Natural Curiosity* you mention a third novel to continue the previous two, picking up the life of one the characters and following him to Cambodia.

A. That's the novel I'm working on at the moment. It's about a small country in the West and its relationship with a more international subject. It's about power relationships in an international context, and it's partly to do with the changing nature of time and perception as the globe speeds up and we speed up with it.

Q. The critic and novelist Malcolm Bradbury suggested recently that the novel in the nineties will be characterized by increased internationalism. It seems that you're already introducing this into your next novel.

A. If I can finish it. I'm having some problems with it at the moment. It's partly a technical problem. I've sent my character off to Cambodia. I've been there twice and I'm going again soon. I just feel I need to go there to see the landscape. Otherwise I can't write it. I can imagine things, and I wrote about Africa in *The Realms of Gold* without seeing it. I made it up, but I wasn't satisfied. I want to see with my own eyes.

Q. What's the new novel about?

A. I'm fascinated by the whole aid welfare thing. There's a feeling of wanting to move towards a United Nations world, you know the sort of joy we feel when Eastern Europe is opened up, when Nelson Mandela was released. But what's it got to do with us? It's because we're all part of the global village and yet we know that a lot of the aid goes wrong, a lot of the aid is positively corrupting. I find that very interesting. There are all these well-intentioned and high-minded people in the West sending out money and aid, working for Oxfam, The International Red Cross and these things, and a lot of it is making things worse rather than better. I find that a fascinating conundrum, and I'd like to write a bit about that, and about what our relationship to that could or should be. Maybe there's no answer—the book is turning into a black comedy—I didn't mean it to, but there's no other way of treating it. The people you meet and the experiences they've had out there are black comedy, those who've lived to tell the tale, and some of them don't. I suppose I'm quite interested in this tone of black comedy—we've had quite a lot of it over Eastern Europe and the Ceausescus. In a way the more horrible things are the more you know there's a sort of black comedy there. It's very difficult to hit the right note—it's very challenging—I don't know if I can do it. But I'm going to have a try.



Margaret Drabble's novels: *A Summer Bird-Cage* (1962), *The Garrick Year* (1964), *The Millstone* (1965), *Jerusalem the Golden* (1967), *The Waterfall* (1969), *The Needle's Eye* (1972), *The Realms of Gold* (1975), *The Ice Age* (1977), *The Middle Ground* (1980), *The Radiant Way* (1987), *A Natural Curiosity* (1989). All are published in Penguin paperbacks.

Literary criticism: *Wordsworth* (1966), *Virginia Woolf: A Personal Debt* (1973), *Arnold Bennett: A Biography* (1974), *A Writer's Britain: Landscape in Literature* (1979), Editor *The Genius of Thomas Hardy* (1976), Editor *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (1985).

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