

# An Excellent Woman? Mo

A new biography of the novelist Barbara Pym reveals the complica



Barbara Pym in 1979.

By **MATTHEW SCHNEIER**

"IF ONLY SOMEONE would have the courage to be unfashionable," Barbara Pym, the English novelist whose books form a perfect little canon of the parochial quotidian, complained to her friend Philip Larkin. Pym did. By the time of writing, she had fallen out of step with her times: Several years before, the publisher Jonathan Cape had unceremoniously dropped her, citing declining audiences, in the suddenly swinging '60s, for her tea-cozy chronicles, busy with spinsters and vicars. Resilience is a Pymian virtue, but it is not exactly rock 'n' roll. As Paula Byrne points out in her capacious biography, Pym's annus horribilis was the same 1963 Larkin satirized in his poem "Annus Mirabilis," as the year sex "began" in the U.K., bookended by "the end of the Chatterley ban" — when the courts ruled Lawrence's famous novel non-obscene and freely publishable — "And the Beatles' first LP."

By that point, Pym's reputation had moldered — with some justification, perhaps — into one of slightly dusty quaintness. She offered filigree, not fireworks. Her six early novels, charming, small-scale comedies of domestic manners published between 1950 and 1961, had always

found readers, and drawn admiring comparisons to Jane Austen. But like Mildred Lathbury, the gimlet-eyed protagonist of Pym's "Excellent Women" (1952), the author was an unmarried woman of a certain age, destined to be overlooked even as she overlooked nothing.

Pym, like Mildred, was an "excellent woman": reliable, virtuous, hard-working and considered just a bit dreary. (As Byrne illustrates, Pym so identified with her protagonists that she often used the first-person pronoun in the notebooks she used to hash out details of plot.) Cape's betrayal was not, perhaps, entirely shocking. Read-

## THE ADVENTURES OF MISS BARBARA PYM

By **Paula Byrne**

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ers who turn to Byrne's biography assuming that Pym's life was measured out in Anglican Masses and jumble sales may be surprised to find her here addressed in a letter from an early boyfriend as "Sweet-heart and most spankable one!"

Byrne is an engaging writer, whose previous books have animated the enduring Austen, the formerly enslaved Black English noblewoman Dido Elizabeth Belle and the circle of Evelyn Waugh. Despite its bulk, "The Adventures of Miss Barbara Pym" skips easily along in bite-size chapters; it aims to rollick, and rollick it does. In

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ted person behind the vicars and the jumble sales.

life and work, Byrne argues, Pym was more interesting and more spirited than men misreading (and mistreating) her assumed, and the biography thrums with a slightly forced sense of the picaresque, from the too-cutesy title to the 18th-century-style chapter headings ("In which our

**Pym was an unmarried woman of a certain age, destined to be overlooked even as she overlooked nothing.**

Heroine and her Sister take up Residence in London").

Pym's life spanned the better part of the 20th century. Born in Shropshire in 1913, Pym began writing early, but had her true intellectual awakening at Oxford, where she met companions who would become not only friends for life but models for her characters. Popular but not exactly pretty, she fell frequently and painfully in love. It's a pattern that would recur throughout Pym's life. She had a taste for the wrong men: unworthy, unavailable or gay, sometimes all of the above. She could be self-sacrificing to the point of masochism, subsisting on crumbs of affection — not only did she work as a secretary for one such fellow, paid "30 shillings a week and a few caresses," but while doing so she found a half-finished love poem he'd written to his future (first) wife, written, as Byrne tells us, "in 'bad mock-heroic.'" When he returned, he found that Pym had finished (and improved) the poem.

Pym's most satisfying love affair seems to have been her most regrettable. A passionate Germanophile (she affected a Tyrolean hat and was given to using "selbstverständlich" instead of "of course"), she visited Germany several times between 1934 and 1938, and was impressed by Nazism, and by one Nazi in particular: Friedbert Glück, who seems to have been a member of the SS. They spent weeks together, and wrote often; Glück sent her a photo of himself, which she framed for her desk, and a copy of one of Hitler's speeches. Pym ultimately seems to have renounced both Friedbert and her past affection for him. ("One feels one ought to be ashamed of ever having been fond of a German," she wrote in 1941.) But Byrne treats Pym's Nazi interests — not quite sympathies — at length and without the reticence of Pym's earlier and less impartial biographers. And she resurfaces an early draft of Pym's first published novel, 1950's "Some Tame Gazelle," which included several affectionate references to the Nazis, "rather special people."

In its willingness to present its subject's less appealing side, Byrne's improves on the previous biographies, a cottage industry of Pymiana maintained by her friends and family. And Byrne is good at filling in some of the contemporary context that in-

formed her life and work. But as with the earlier books, Byrne's main source is the Pym trove at Oxford's Bodleian Library. It is a huge resource — decades of journals, notebooks, drafts and letters — but also a hindrance: Where the author is silent, Byrne is reduced to silence, too. Seemingly important events, like the death of Pym's mother, are dispatched in a sentence. Much is read into lacunae in the record: When Pym expurgates her diaries at emotional moments, Byrne must hazard guesses at the precise reasons. About the last unhappy affair of Pym's life, her friendship-or-more with Richard "Skipper" Roberts, a wealthy gay gadabout whom she would send up in 1978's "The Sweet Dove Died" — which was dedicated to him — Byrne writes, "It is impossible to know how physical the relationship between Pym and Skipper ever became." But one way might have been to ask him. Roberts died in 2020. If Byrne reached out to him for the book, she makes no mention of it.

In keeping with contemporary tastes, the titular adventures are mostly of the heart. Much attention is paid to Pym's friendships with men, often gay, who (unusually for the time) peopled her fiction as well as her life. But the longest and most significant relationship of Pym's life, with her younger sister Hilary, gets fairly scant attention — even though the two lived together for decades. Pym's long career at the International African Institute, which gave her abundant material for her novels, is hardly discussed; and not much consideration is given to her faith.

The books, too, get curiously short shrift, with more plot summary than critical assessment. Near the end of her life, Pym enjoyed an unexpected revival. Larkin, who suffered with her through her later-career exile, was also partially responsible for reversing it; in 1977, he named her in a Times Literary Supplement poll as the most underrated author of the 20th century; as it happened, so did Lord David Cecil. Her books sailed back into print, joined by previously "unpublishable" titles. Her subsequent "Quartet in Autumn" was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. Readers wrote to her, Byrne says, "delighted to discover she was not dead."

For devotees of Pym's novels, ardent if not legion, Byrne's book will be a welcome companion. For more casual fans, its appeal may be more limited. Pym led an interesting life, but Byrne's expansive approach means it is nearly 400 pages before she publishes her first novel. And while she never wrote an autobiography, Pym infused herself — as Byrne ably shows — into her own canon, which remains the best way to meet her. Even Barbara was apt to note the slippages between life and art. Visiting a church with Skipper in 1964, she declines to light a candle, as he does. "It is a bit too much like something in a BP novel," she wrote. □