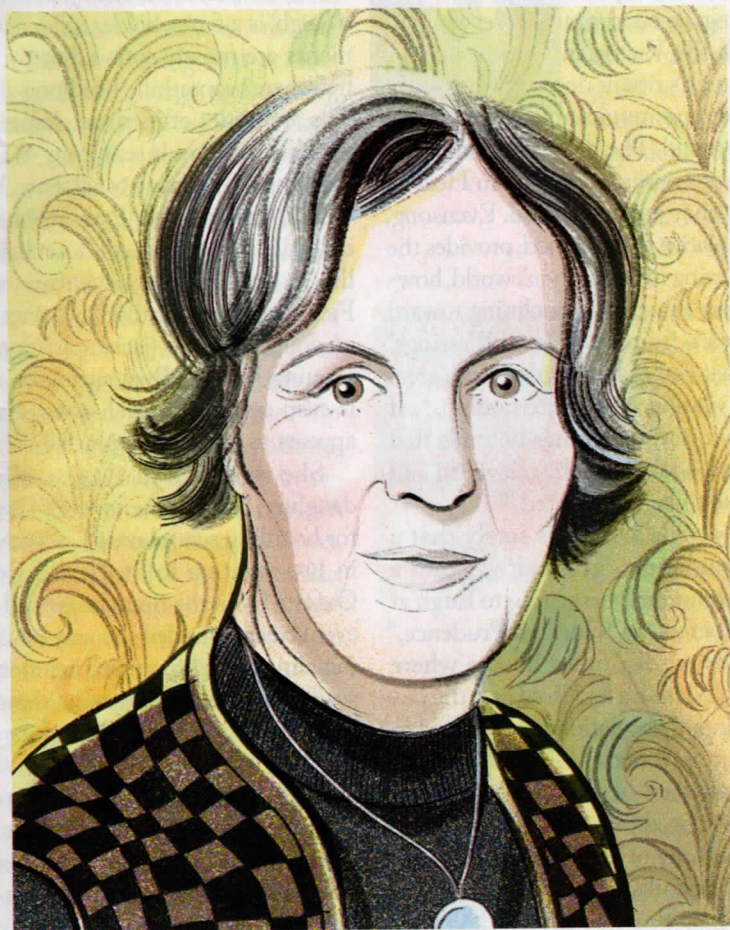


# READING THE LEAVES

*What the novelist Barbara Pym knew about tea and sympathy.*

BY THOMAS MALLON



One reaches page 388 of Paula Byrne's new biography, "The Adventures of Miss Barbara Pym" (HarperCollins), before the subject's career as a published novelist begins. It appears to end on page 482, after a single decade (1950–61) during which six witty books achieved some modest success. Two years later, the author, about to turn fifty, was dropped by her editor, and she quickly disappeared from the reading public's consciousness.

It makes a certain brutal sense that in 1963 this spinster (a term Pym embraced) would be sheared away from British culture, along with Harold Macmillan and below-the-knee hemlines. Pym's novels are filled with the arrivals

of new curates, the struggles of "decayed gentlewomen," the ditherings of clerical and academic wives. Each self-denying single woman, like the heroine of "Some Tame Gazelle," Pym's first novel, is deemed "fortunate in needing very little to make her happy," though the blunt, truth-telling housekeeper generally knows better. Life in Pym's world is spiced up by the occasional emergence of an exotic or a rogue: the Hungarian businessman in "Civil to Strangers" (written in 1936 and published posthumously), the womanizing widower of "Jane and Prudence" (1953). But there are always altars to be decorated, charitable jumble sales to be organized,

improving lectures to be attended. Anyone in 1963 who still wanted fiction set in the vicarage, publishers thought, could go back to Jane Austen, the writer to whom Pym has ceaselessly, and often wrongly, been compared. Her novels may seem to come down, like Austen's, on the side of sense, but the inner life from which they sprang was a maelstrom of sensibility, a confusion of disproportionate feelings lavished upon badly chosen men.

Pym's characters form a splendidly skilled stock company, each assuming basically the same role in one production after another. Nothing momentous occurs, but there is still "too much happening," an estimation that holds more truth than irony. Even if the results are "inevitably an anticlimax," everyone is busy, busy, busy with to-ing and fro-ing. It takes a village to keep the books in motion, whether the setting is somewhere in Pym's native Shropshire, an Oxford suburb, or one of the various neighborhoods in and around London where the author lived after the Second World War. Pym cherished Donne's poetry, and each of her rendered locales is, to use his words, "a little world made cunningly." Yet her great skill when it comes to actions and persons is not to individuate but to typify.

Pymland is less a realm of hope and glory than one of modesty and mild deprivation. The "boiled chicken smothered in white sauce" that's served to the new curate provides the same nutritional mortification as the powdered eggs on offer from a London restaurant after the war, or the tinned beans preferred by a working spinster decades after rationing has ended. There is always Ovaltine before bed. Some of Pym's heroines may have a taste for stylish clothes, but what a reader remembers is the minginess of things; any attention-seeking display smacks of shortsightedness and presumption. In "Crampton Hodnet"—an early novel that remained unpublished until after Pym's death—a North Oxford clothing store knows better than to offer customers any items in tune with their briefly raised spirits on an early spring day. Instead, "out would come the old fawn, mud, navy, dark brown, slate and clerical greys, all the colours they always had before and without which they

*Pymland is less a realm of hope and glory than of modesty and mild deprivation.*



would hardly have felt like themselves."

Above all, the novels display everyone's preoccupation with everyone else. "Jane and Prudence," Pym's third novel, concerns, in part, the condescension that married people display toward single ones. Wed or unwed, however, characters are usually thinking—with curiosity and suspicion—about someone who threatens to breach their thin membrane of privacy, or who seems to be inviting a breach of her own. Prudence, single and approaching thirty, is a sentimental misanthrope: "Disliking humanity in general, she was one of those excessively tender-hearted people who are greatly moved by the troubles of complete strangers, in which she sometimes imagined herself playing a noble part." One incipient fantasy, arising at lunchtime in a restaurant, is smothered by the sight of a young male colleague. The paragraph in which Prudence takes note of him exhibits Pym's brilliant, almost overactive precision when it comes to how we whip up tempests in our own teapots:

He was eating—perhaps "tucking into" would describe it better—the steamed pudding which Prudence had avoided as being too fattening. She had never seen him eating before and now she averted her eyes quickly, for there was something indecent about it, as if a mantle had fallen and revealed more of him than she ought to see. Of course the women in the office had known that he lunched somewhere—indeed, they had even speculated on where he went; perhaps the vastness of the Corner House swallowed him up or the manly security of a public-house lapped him round. Prudence hurried out of the restaurant feeling disturbed and irritated. Had he ever been there before, she wondered? She hoped he wasn't going to make a habit of frequenting the places she went to. It would be annoying if she had to change her own routine.

Pym's novels rarely identify an exact year; they are more heavily textured with place than with time. Broad references to postwar "austerity" or the "welfare state" do most of the work of creating a period. "A Few Green Leaves," set in the nineteen-seventies (and published in 1980, the year of Pym's death), doesn't feel terribly different from stories she set in the thirties and fifties. Seasonal cycles persist in importance over the clanging progression of historical eras; the daily trumps the dramatic. In "No Fond Return of Love," from 1961—the last of Pym's novels before her banishment from publication—Dulcie, who

works as an indexer from her home in suburban London, notes, "People blame one for dwelling on trivialities, but life is made up of them. And if we've had one great sorrow or one great love, then who shall blame us if we only want the trivial things?"

Religion, not faith, is central to Pym's Britain, and it feels both essential and irrelevant. The parish is perpetually shrinking, its congregants forever aging beneath the Victorian Gothic steeple. The church's rituals don't set souls aloft; they keep communicants tethered to the earthly round. The bodies buried in the churchyard never seem gone to Heaven or Hell; they just seem dead. Evensong, contemplative and resigned, provides the real recurring music of Pym's world, however fewer ears may be inclining toward it. We learn from "A Glass of Blessings" (1958) that Father Bode now "does a great deal of visiting in the afternoons. . . . If he does it in the evenings he finds that people are looking at the television and don't like to be interrupted."

The novels' humor is so sly that a reader sometimes gets halfway into a new sentence before starting to laugh at the one before. In "Jane and Prudence," Prudence recalls "other houses where Jane and Nicholas had lived and the peculiar kind of desolation they seemed to create around them." Given the smallness of the action, there is something mock-heroic about the comedy. (The main character of "Some Tame Gazelle" is called Belinda, perhaps for the heroine of "The Rape of the Lock.") The cutting is gentle, but it cuts. In "No Fond Return of Love," Mrs. Beltane is described as "an elegant, blue-haired, stiffly-moving woman of about sixty, who imagined herself to have seen better days." Such wit depends more on telling than on showing, and Pym was one of the twentieth century's great practitioners of the distant third-person voice. Some of the observations we hear are wistful—Miss Vereker, the aging former governess of "A Few Green Leaves," has "nothing to complain of in her present life, except that it was not the past"—but the most devastating are comical, as when Miss Jessie Morrow, of "Crampton Hodnet," reflects upon unrequited love "that lingers on through many years, dying sometimes and then coming back like a twinge of rheumatism in the win-

ter, so that you feel it in your knee when you are nearing the top of a long flight of stairs."

More than thirty years ago, Hazel Holt, Pym's close friend and literary executor, published a biography of her. This new one by Paula Byrne, whose previous subjects have been Jane Austen, Kathleen (Kick) Kennedy, and Evelyn Waugh, is a fatter, bolder affair. Its judgments are mostly sound, but for all its heft there's something headlong about it. The arch titles of its short chapters ("In which Miss Pym is sent away to Boarding School") make no tonal sense. Whatever fantasy exercises Pym may have indulged in, it is hardly apt "to imagine her life as a picaresque adventure, with a Fieldingesque narrative," as Byrne insists on doing. The dust-jacket photograph of a young Barbara Pym sitting on a rock is even cropped in such a way that she appears to be taking a pratfall.

She was born in 1913, a solicitor's daughter. She left the town of Oswestry for boarding school near Liverpool, and in 1931 went up to St. Hilda's College, Oxford. From the time she arrived, however literary-minded she may have been, romantic pursuits occupied her more than academic ones. Photographs show Pym looking jolly and perspicacious, with charmingly crooked English teeth. Open-hearted and game for experience, she pushed herself to slightly desperate extremes, trying on various personae, including a red-nailed young woman called Sandra, whose brazen personality Pym often deployed in public and in the pages of her diary. Byrne describes a "tendency for self-punishment" and a compulsion to respond to the mild interest of young males with obsessive ardor.

Pym gave her lengthiest devotion to Henry Harvey, a handsome student of C. S. Lewis's who had, Byrne says, an "air of superciliousness and arrogance." Anyone who imagines that Pym was undersexed should consider that, on her first date with Harvey, "she leaned over and bit him hard on the cheek," pre-creating Sylvia Plath's legendary first encounter with Ted Hughes. Harvey went on to use Pym as a sexual convenience, while she typed his papers, darned his socks, and brought him flowers. He "set the pattern," according to Byrne, "for Pym's relationships with other men: the



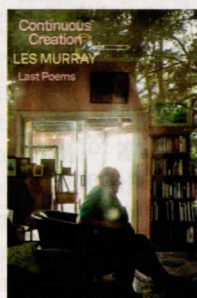
more badly they treated her, the more deeply in love she felt." Instead of reciprocal intensity, Harvey promised her, in a letter, "Respect and Esteem," in the end providing little of either.

Pym could turn even rebound romances into addictions. "Twenty hours—but perhaps twenty years of memories," she wrote in her journal about Julian Amery, a future Member of Parliament, whom she occasionally stalked in the late nineteen-thirties. During that decade, Pym also made several trips to Germany, where she became involved with Friedbert Glück, an S.S. officer who treated her better than Henry Harvey had. "Thrilled" by Nazi pageantry, Byrne writes, Pym was slow to develop skepticism toward the regime, let alone the "horror and guilt" Byrne assures us she later felt. For part of the war, Pym lived in Bristol, having secured a job with the German division of the U.K. Censorship Office. (When applying for the position, she sharpened her language skills by re-reading Glück's letters.) In short order, she became involved with Gordon Glover, the estranged husband of her housemate. Glover quickly discarded her in a charade of noble "renunciation," but for Pym the emotional aftermath outlasted the affair itself. Later in life, she felt humiliated by a lingering attraction to the much younger Richard Campbell (Skipper) Roberts, a privileged colonial son of the Bahamas. Roberts was a gay man who teased her with a nude photo of himself, and who once struck her cat in a moment of annoyance.

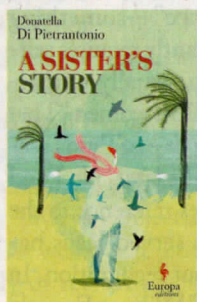
Almost all these objects of unfortunate desire eventually found unappealing versions of themselves (though maybe better than what they deserved) in Pym's novels. In "Some Tame Gazelle," Henry Harvey is refracted into the puffed-up Archdeacon Hoccleve, whose socks Belinda darns while still carrying a torch. Pym's foibles also come in for fictional drubbing. The books contain several instances of stalkerish behavior by female characters, including Dulcie's spying on a set of brothers in "No Fond Return of Love."

Many novelists allow prominent characters from one book to make a cameo in another. Archdeacon Hoccleve turns up again in "A Glass of Blessings," and we keep getting news of Mildred Lathbury long after her service as the

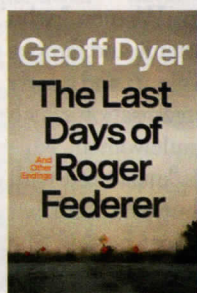
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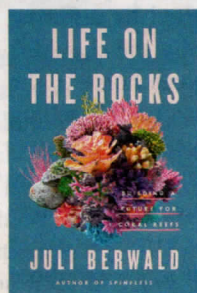
**Continuous Creation**, by Les Murray (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). This final collection by the great Australian poet, who died in 2019, encompasses archness, reserve, lament, and tenderness. Murray's reflections on political and social subjects, including Brexit, bushfires, and his country's neglect of literature, swing from the charmingly reserved to the jarringly detached. His nature poetry is more charged: there are poems about pippies, green catbirds, Australian pelicans, and a weebill caught in the grille of Murray's car. The earth's physical landscape—especially that of rural Australia, one of Murray's lifelong preoccupations—is rendered with extraordinary, often strange, beauty. Swallows in flight are "whipping over glass"; a willow tree is "jammed/with soft white pearl-shell//a cascade of faces/down tiers and staircases/becoming a shatter."



**A Sister's Story**, by Donatella Di Pietrantonio, translated from the Italian by Ann Goldstein (Europa). The sisters from the author's previous novel, "A Girl Returned"—a stoic narrator and her fiery younger sister, Adriana—reappear in this unsettling companion tale. The narrator, now a professor in France, returns to her home town, on the coast of Abruzzo, after Adriana has a mysterious accident. Her renewed immersion in the town's social rhythms, particularly in the gritty fishermen's quarter, brings back powerful memories—of the end of her marriage to a gentle yet duplicitous husband, of Adriana's harried arrival at her house with a baby. "I felt intensely the unease of being her sister," the narrator says of Adriana, as she moves fluidly between the past and the present, sifting years of unarticulated emotions.



**The Last Days of Roger Federer**, by Geoff Dyer (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). The twilight of careers underpins these kaleidoscopic musings on artistic and sporting endeavors. Dyer considers the late phase of Bob Dylan, the mythology surrounding Nietzsche's decline and death, and the drive of talented people to keep going. Andy Murray, hobbled by injury, "persisted in coming back for more even if more meant less and less"; Willem de Kooning, blind and suffering from dementia, made paintings in which "the obstacle *became* the path." An irony of endings, Dyer writes, is that "lastness is oddly self-perpetuating. For a while at least, one last thing generates and leads to another."



**Life on the Rocks**, by Juli Berwald (Riverhead). This book on the plight of coral reefs spikes the normally glum discourse about ocean conservation with a measure of capitalist techno-optimism, arguing that a combination of marine science and smart business could yet bring salvation. The heroes here are various public-private partnerships: commercial coral farms in Bali; a reef-restoration project in Sulawesi; debt swaps and "blue bonds" for ocean protection in Seychelles; even a geo-engineered "cloud brightening" plan for the Great Barrier Reef. Berwald interweaves the insights of conservationists and entrepreneurs with a parallel narrative of her daughter's struggles with O.C.D., suggesting that complex problems call for radical solutions.



heroine of "Excellent Women" (1952). Such recurrences can be a treat for a novelist's faithful readers, or a playful pleasure for the novelist herself, new trimming for the ever-growing model railroad of a fictional oeuvre. But in Pym's case the practice may suggest something more. In "Crampton Hodnet," the character closest to Pym herself is Barbara Bird, a lovely poetry student who turns Professor Cleveland's head and nearly prompts him to leave his wife. A decade and a half later, Miss Bird, rude and slightly cracked, shows up at a London literary gathering in "Jane and Prudence." We see her "pushing herself forward, knocking against a novelist of greater distinction than herself and seizing a plate of sandwiches." Salutary self-mockery, perhaps, but also a possible instance of how Pym sometimes, according to Byrne, "played her pain for laughs." At this point, in 1953, readers had never seen the dewy and appealing Barbara Bird; her more youthful incarnation was still in a drawer with the rest of "Crampton Hodnet."



Pym's healthiest gay-male attachment was to Robert (Jock) Liddell, whom she initially exasperated with her lopsided ardor for his friend Henry Harvey. But Liddell, himself a novelist, came to offer Pym *actual* respect and esteem, as well as affection. He encouraged her through long, fitful literary striving that was marked by false starts (Pym even tried a spy novel) and derailed by personal misadventures, war work (after the censorship-office job, Pym went to Italy with the Women's Royal Naval Service), and a loss of confidence caused by rejection. Liddell knew that "Some Tame Gazelle" was distinguished, but sixteen years passed between his reading of its first version and the book's publication, in 1950, the year Pym turned thirty-seven. After the war, he de-Nazified the long-aborning manuscript (a "little swastika brooch" became a "little seed-pearl brooch"), and, in order to get the book over the finish line, he urged Pym to take "quite seriously" Jonathan Cape's advice to "make it more malicious." With added piquancy, the novel's more indefinable qualities stood in sharper relief. Upon the book's

publication, the *Guardian* pronounced it "delightfully amusing, but no more to be described than a delicious taste or smell."

Pym was on her way. She could now successfully practice her art while continuing the day job she had secured as an editor of anthropological publications produced by the International African Institute. She would toil there for nearly thirty years, and although the connection between novel-writing and anthropology was hardly lost on her—field researchers abound in her books—she herself never seems to have visited Africa.

During the nineteen-forties, Pym began discovering what Byrne regards as her principal theme, "male incompetence"—something that constantly requires self-sacrificing, usually unmarried, "excellent women." That

last phrase became the title of Pym's second novel, which, like the later "No Fond Return of Love," makes reference to the Biblical Martha, who served Jesus behind the scenes without recognition. In "A Glass of Blessings," Wilmet Forsyth, a tepidly married variant of the excellent woman, thinks there might be "some justification for [her] life after all" if she can succeed in setting two clergymen up with the right housekeeper. But it is Mildred Lathbury, of "Excellent Women," who remains Pym's most extreme and famous Martha. An active parishioner and a part-time employee at "an organisation which helped impoverished gentlewomen," Mildred admits that she is "exhausted with bearing other people's burdens." Still, her real complaints are against herself. She feels "useless" even as she's being used; can see "really nothing outstanding" in herself; speaks, in her own estimation, "fatuously." Byrne quotes Philip Larkin's observation that Mildred "is suffering but nobody can see why she shouldn't suffer, like a Victorian cab horse." (The Biblical Martha had no trouble telling Jesus off, more than once.)

Mildred understands that "practically anything may be the business of an unattached woman with no troubles of her own, who takes a kindly interest in those of her friends." Such a posture would seem to make the excellent woman an ideal narrator. And yet, for all the praise that "Excellent Women" has received,

the character of Mildred is too self-suppressive for Pym's humor and observational powers to run at full steam. She's one of only a few first-person narrators in Pym's works, the novelist no doubt having realized that her own best fictive opportunities lay in the omniscient entitlements reserved for the third person. When Pym employs those, she darts in and out of a host of perspectives, retaining control over characters' thinking and using narrative attributives ("thought Cassandra"), lest the reader make the mistake of believing it's the author who is having the faulty insight. Pym also remains free to overrule dialogue: "I do not think it is really our business," said Miss Doggett. "We will let the matter drop," she added, having no intention of doing anything of the kind."

The novels do contain occasional bursts of action—in "Less Than Angels" (1955), one character embezzles and another gets shot—but the range of human activity is mostly circumscribed and muted; adultery and marriage are avoided as well as committed. The books' real excitement lies in the sentences, with their marvellous economy and their hospital corners: "After dinner the three of us had got rather drunk in the senior common room, the lecturer because his ordeal was over, Coco from force of habit, and I weakly led by their example."

Line-by-line musicality and precision allow a reader to overlook some ramshackle aspects of the novels' construction. Characters shift affections or propose marriage with a suddenness that has more to do with the author's needs than it does with their own. The fact that Pym's stories sometimes end nowhere can be viewed as verisimilitude, but an awful lot depends on contrivance. When Pym, directing that stock company, needs a character to move things forward, she just has her drop by a house where agon awaits, or has her run into friends and foils on the street, or on a train, or in a restaurant. In "No Fond Return of Love," the narrator excuses this practice by observing, "The concentration of one's thoughts on a particular person can sometimes have the effect of making him appear in the flesh, and so it was on this occasion." The recourse also stems from Pym's real-life behavior: one of her stalking tactics was to fabricate chance meetings with her quarry.



Pym's books always practice as much fidelity to literature as to life. Poets are referenced and quoted again and again—Wordsworth, Donne, Rossetti—sometimes just to mock the quoter. Characters take behavioral cues from verses they recall. Belinda sees a dead caterpillar on a luncheon plate, and despairs: “It needed a modern poet to put this into words. Eliot, perhaps.” Fiction, too, provides a frame of reference. Novelists from Charlotte Brontë to Graham Greene, quickly mentioned, become Austin Mini metaphorical vehicles that define or clarify some incident or personality. If anything, it's life that lets literature down. Even Dulcie, the character who defends triviality in “No Fond Return of Love,” feels, when looking at her friend Viola, “as if she had created her and that she had not come up to expectations, like a character in a book who had failed to come alive.” But, if Pym's characters don't explode, it's because people usually shouldn't and, back then, generally didn't. In “Civil to Strangers,” Mr. Paladin's thoughts are “always bolder than his conversation.” The well-lived outer life consists mostly of repressing the inner one, even if for the past sixty years this has been a truth more universally denied than acknowledged.

It was the manuscript of “An Unsuitable Attachment” that Pym's publisher turned down flat. Its subsequent rejection everywhere else suggested that she was becoming obsolete. Subscription-based circulating libraries, like those run by the druggist firm Boots, had long sustained modestly successful British literary careers, and Byrne notes that their closure added to the unlikelihood that Pym would ever regain her footing. The biographer also points out that a piece on how to deal with publishers' rejections, which Pym submitted to *The Author*, was itself rejected.

But Pym continued to write, producing if not publishing books that were in some cases even better than those that had come before. Byrne wisely judges Pym's masterpiece to be not “Excellent Women,” the conventional choice, but “The Sweet Dove Died,” a fictionalization of the author's longing for Skipper Roberts. That book was turned down, too. A university caper called “An Academic Question” was mostly intended for friends. In 1974, after a mastectomy

and a stroke, Pym left London, moving with her sister to a cottage they had in the Oxfordshire village of Finstock. And she kept writing.

The real achievement of these years was “Quartet in Autumn,” a fearless novel about the bleak aging of four office workers, all single, whose jobs, shrewdly undescribed, are as empty as the retirements that lie ahead. Edwin, a widower, subsists on the delusive “freedom that loneliness brings”; Norman, “an angry little man whose teeth hurt,” takes pleasure in “the sight of a wrecked motor car, with one side all bashed in.” Marcia hoards plastic bags, while Letty seeks dignity in the maintenance of standards: “One did not drink sherry before the evening, just as one did not read a novel in the morning.” The humor is mordant and chilling, the characters denied even the thrillingly perverse whims of the God who may be taunting the geriatrics in Muriel Spark's “Memento Mori.” Not at all to Pym's surprise, “Quartet in Autumn” was rejected by Hamish Hamilton in 1976.

The following year, however, everything suddenly came right side up, with an anniversary issue of the *Times Literary Supplement* that asked contributors to name over- and underrated writers of the past seventy-five years. Pym was the only author to get two mentions in the latter category. One came from Philip Larkin, whose poetic Little England can make Pym's look flamboyant. Years earlier, Larkin had begun an epistolary friendship with a fan letter to Pym, and he relentlessly championed her work when she could no longer get it published. The *T.L.S.* boost set off a reparative juggernaut. “Quartet in Autumn” was in stores within months, quickly followed by “The Sweet Dove Died.” Her old publishing house shamelessly reprinted her earlier books; American editions began to proliferate; the BBC aired a Barbara Pym program.

Had taste improved? Had the times come back into joint? It was mostly, one feels, a sort of temporary, false nostalgia, a round of sporting applause for Vera Lynn in the time of Johnny Rotten, and a chance for those clapping to feel big and discerning. Pym, soon to be dead from cancer, at the age of sixty-six, enjoyed it thoroughly, despite knowing that she would never have given any of her books such a gaudy happy ending. ♦



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