

An Error of Judgement
Foreword

C.P. Snow, whom I read avidly as a politically ambitious student at Oxford, wrote about men involved in affairs of State, while his wife, Pamela Hansford Johnson, wrote of ordinary men and women caught up in moral and human dilemmas. Some of it may now seem mundane: in *The Humbler* a vicar has an affair, while *A Bonfire* charts the unhappy experience of a woman who marries several times. In her trilogy *An Avenue of Stone* a man struggles with his relationship with his stepmother, an unsatisfactory marriage and the loss of his greatest love. *The Honours Board* follows the fortunes of staff at a failing prep school.

The modern reaction is probably so what? Yet the author, who was writing during a period of starkly different social mores, has penned what does not easily date, however much the social context may change, namely a study of human frailty and temptation.

Pamela Hansford Johnson was much troubled by the dark side of human nature. Outstanding amongst her non-fiction is *On Iniquity*, an extended essay on the Moors Murders. In fiction it comes out in *The Holiday Friend*, which begins deceptively as the pursuit of a married man by a young girl, and ends with child murder. Nowhere does it dominate her work more forcefully than in *An Error of Judgement* where a consultant becomes convinced that his healing work is actually an obsession with pain and destruction and finally salves his conscience with a friendship which culminates in the ultimate destruction of a betrayal of trust and a man acting as the God in whom he has no particular belief.

Hansford Johnson was a Christian of active belief and the theme of judgement is never far from her work but it is not intrusive for she had no need of heavy handed explanation when she was writing for a public which understood the ten commandments, the nuances of family life based on a presumption of the permanence of marriage, middle class poverty (the bath kept under the kitchen table), disappointed women (who can forget the utter despair of the woman who sinks to the floor and claws at the carpet in the wretchedness of a failed courtship?), the role of the church, make do and mend.

It is something of a vanished world which she knew to be vanishing and the knowledge disturbed her, as a moral vacuum opened up where once certainty had stood. Psychological truth might be what she was seeking from her characters but psychology alone could never have supplied all the answers. She believed in something beyond and recounted with rueful humour the moment that her husband was recovering from a brush with death. She bent to hear what he was whispering and was rewarded with: 'there is nothing beyond'. Biblical references, easily missed by generations who grew up without the daily ration of scripture we once all got at school, abound throughout her work.

In her youth she was in love with Dylan Thomas, a man nursing his own demons as well as his talent. Was there a touch of that torment in Setter, the central character of *An Error of Judgement*? If so he turned to something vastly more destructive than Thomas's drink.

The writing is deceptively simple, the sentences often short, yet the narrative races and you want to know what happens next. What should happen next is the re-discovery of an author who has now all but disappeared from the shelves.

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