

Foreword

From the start of this subtle, complex and compassionate novel we know the sad and macabre outcome. It is set forth in the unembellished *Guardian* newspaper report from March 1983 telling an all-too-frequent story: the death of a reclusive old person in a locked, dilapidated house, found when police, alerted by neighbours, break in. Except that in this case there are two bodies and one of them is a skeleton. And there is a survivor. I remember reading the account at the time, and my own commonplace reaction – how dreadful, how bizarre, it's unimaginable, how could it have happened? Then I allowed my mind to slide away from the dreadful facts, because they are dreadful, embodying as they do our deepest fears, of sickness, old age, helplessness, loneliness, of the process of dying and of dying unloved. But Stephen Benatar did not let his mind slide away from uncomfortable facts. He imagines the unimaginable for us and shows us complex truths about human nature, our universal longings and regrets, our hopes and fears, our gradual customisation to our circumstances which confine but do not entirely define us.

The shocking ending revealed in Chapter 1 might lead us to expect grim desperation. Instead what we get for much of the time is sparkling social comedy – the best sort where social conventionality, hypocrisy and conversational manoeuvring part hide and part reveal underlying emotions and moral attitudes. The comparisons that come to mind are Ayckbourn's plays and Austen's minor characters. Like those writers Benatar can make us want to shut our eyes and stop our ears, not because his characters perpetrate horrors or are monsters of depravity but because they make us squirm with embarrassment. They do this in particular when they are most conscious of acting a part, when the role required by circumstances isn't quite in line with inner feelings, sometimes because there is no "inner". Inexperienced, "not

interested in anything” Marsha, recently married, makes both reader and her husband cringe as she plays the role of coquettish doting wife – in public too. Daisy, the monstrous central character, is constantly presenting herself as Joan of Arc, or Greta Garbo or Sarah Siddons or, as she puts it, she “plays the giddy goat”. Both women have a distressing propensity to burst into song. They share this with tragic, embarrassing Rachel in Benatar’s brilliant novel of encroaching madness *Wish Her Safe at Home*. Songs articulate both fantasy to escape to and familiarity to cling to. And they help to place the characters in their historical context.

Both novels map a territory Stephen Benatar has made his own: the weird hinterland of ordinary life where eccentricity shades into the bizarre, battiness into delusion and dementia. He explores the disjunction between the inner self with all its vulnerabilities and insecurities, with its craving for admiration and affection, and the public self, clinging either to conventionality or to eccentricity as a defence from the inner void. His tragedy is the tragedy of the mundane. His lonely, hapless characters are often instinctively manipulative in their need to think well of themselves in the face of the knowledge of their own inadequacies. They fear scorn and rejection. They long to shine and to find their rightful place in the world. As in real life their place is largely defined by their physical surroundings: the thin walls of Marsha and Andrew’s first house which play their part in a disastrous dinner party, Erica’s wallpaper, so scorned by Daisy, Daisy’s “flat” which Andrew when in Galahad/Romeo mode discovers is really a bedsit. Only Dan, the charitable owner of the house the police break into in *When I Was Otherwise* seems not to be discontented with his lot until malnutrition and household squalor make him angry. His delusions are benign, consisting of nostalgia for the time he now thinks of as “the good old days” however imperfect they actually were – except when poignantly contrasted with his widowed present.

In *Wish Her Safe at Home* Stephen Benatar had focused with painful intensity on the increasingly delusional world of a single,

extremely unreliable narrator. The scope of *When I Was Otherwise* is much broader and his methods more complex. The story opens in Chapter 2 when Daisy arrives at her brother-in-law Dan's invitation to live with him and his sister Marsha in his semi-detached house in Hendon. Even before the "party" to celebrate (the first of a number of comic meals in the novel) we are taken back to earlier examples of Dan's tolerant generosity, and its attendant embarrassments. Throughout the novel Benatar cuts between the period when the three live together in the last years and months of their lives and their reminiscences of the past, some shared, some individual. The structure therefore prevents us from hurrying forward too urgently to devour the catastrophe. Rather we must think about the characters' lives as a web of family influences, social interactions and historical circumstances. It allows Benatar to make telling juxtapositions, as in the brilliant little episode in which comic frustrations around a telephone box darken in a sentence to foreshadow world events. Perspectives are constantly shifting. His episodes and characters have affinities with some of Jane Austen's. Marsha's husband Andrew, for instance, views the prospect of an unexpected weekend guest with grim dismay worthy of Mr John Knightly at the prospect of a party, and the downright rudeness of Mr Palmer in *Sense and Sensibility* in his masculine deployment of the newspaper. Whatever she thinks later on, a newly-wed Marsha describes her husband, embarrassingly, as "an absolute card" while laying her cheek against his. Like Charlotte Palmer she describes her husband's boorishness as "droll". But whereas Mr Palmer disappears when his comic potential has been exploited, Andrew has depth as well as surface. When Marsha tempts him with a specially bought peach as a peace offering for having invited Daisy for the weekend, he won't take it and eat it immediately because he would hate to be greedy. It must be eaten, decently, with knife and fork, for dessert. Benatar skewers him brilliantly when clandestinely at Doncaster races with Daisy he backs a winner. Back in London he buys Daisy

a frivolous hat; when he gets home he gives Marsha three pounds for herself and a guinea to put in the baby's Post Office savings account. We are not told what he does with the rest of the twenty pounds. But he is basically a conventional, limited, scrupulous man, and as we later learn in one of Benatar's asides, a heroic one.

We are cunningly lured by the author to make assessments of the characters, to catch them in their manoeuvres, their hypocrisies, to feel sorry for them or to scorn them. They are after all fictional characters, not alive, so fair game. But a "framed piece of woolwork which could have been Victorian" which Marsha and Dan bring back from a jumble sale for Daisy has a text as well as flowers and butterflies: "Judge not, that ye be not judged". Daisy feels sure that the woman who worked it must be dead. "Alive she would have been just another woman, not someone you could speculate on with any real degree of satisfaction." She shares our satisfaction in fictional judgment. In calling her a monster I have of course misrepresented her. True she is the most theatrical of his characters, not quite a bogey-woman, but deeply unsettling to many of those whose lives she touches. She is opinionated, combative, scornful. She is adept at wrong-footing others. She is manipulative, she preys on other people's sympathies. She cadges constantly, especially cigarettes and drink. Her chuckle could drive one mad. She can be rude and vindictive. She is boastful about her education, littering her conversation with quotations (the Bible, Shakespeare, Congreve, Kipling, Pope). Drawn into the power games we feel smug when we recognise them, miffed if we don't. This habit of Daisy's also serves to universalise the story and by implication to assert the importance of literature in enlarging and clarifying experience. But it can infuriate other characters and in the end contributes to her downfall. We can't be sure how much Daisy deludes herself. But she has shown fortitude in two world wars and twice the author speaks truth in his own voice to assert her stalwart capacity for devotion and compassion in her private life. Though she frequently talks of "taking a dose" she actually

believes that to commit suicide except in insupportable terminal suffering is the action of “an ingrate and a coward”. It is painful to see her increasingly diminished, powerless and angry in old age, still not able to curb the devilry that made her antagonise people. Like thousands of old people she wishes she could be somewhere else: “And abruptly she brought her fists down on the bed, one on either side of her, in a despairing attempt to release a little of her frustration. She suddenly felt so very much unloved and isolated and *homesick*.”

Home as a place of safety becomes an obsession for Marsha. She knows she has become a stick-in-the-mud “at first through force of circumstances, but finally through inclination” and she resents this. Initially no more than a pretty face with no inner resources, in two instances she is selfishly decisive. She dominates the final phase of the novel as she draws her brother into a reclusive existence. She effectively creates an exclusion zone around those over whom she wishes to have power and she retreats into fantasies of the past in an attempt to rectify the disappointments of her life. Nothing however can disguise the presence of the skeletal body in the bedroom. In a short, unforgettable paragraph we are made to examine it and see a kind of gruesome beauty. Here we are forced to confront the great fact of life. But the novel also allows us, as Marsha longs to do, “to laugh over the trivial, unmemorable things that make up the fabric of a life”. And laughter, according to Daisy was “the only thing which kept you sane. No, it was the only thing that kept you *alive*.” Memories make up the fabric of this novel. It is closely woven, dark and light together, and brilliantly executed. If you read this book you will be touched, entertained, appalled. The intricacy and subtlety of its design will reward you if you read it again.

Gillian Carey
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