

Barbara Pym's life story recounted in her fiction

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When Letty Crowe (of *Quartet in autumn*) fails to find what she seeks in her public library, Barbara Pym explains:

She had always been an unashamed reader of novels, but if she hoped to find one which reflected her own life she had come to realise that the position of an unmarried, unattached, ageing woman is of no interest whatever to the writer of modern fiction.

(echoing the thought in Pym's diary in June 1972: 'The position of the unmarried woman - unless, of course, she is somebody's mistress, is of no interest whatever to the readers of modern fiction') (B. Pym 1994).

Letty's biography matches Pym's: she was born and brought up in a West Country town; her 'mother had died at the end of the war, then her father had married again' (B. Pym 1994). Letty never married; her working life was spent in a London office. Assuredly, the two ladies would also share their tastes in literature, Pym likewise delighting in novels but finding a lack reflecting her own life. Writer as well as reader, she contrived to fill this gap in the fiction market, writing deliberately for Letty and her (their) kind.

In 'Finding a voice', the talk Pym gave on BBC radio in 1978, she endorsed Ivy Compton Burnett's declaration:

Most of the pleasure of making a book would go if it held nothing to be shared by other people. I would write for a dozen people ... but I would not write for no one. (B. Pym 1987a)

Pym concurs, 'It is those dozen people that spur me on. So I try to write what pleases and amuses *me* in the hope that a few others will like it too.' Having identified her readership as comprising women like herself (not only in her later years – she appreciated the empathy of her readers at all stages) she tailored her work to fit the requirements of these, the women without hectic romantic or marital lives.

Pym writes the opposite of escapist/romantic fiction: no desert sheikhs or handsome dukes sweep in to sweep beautiful heroines off their feet, nor do happy mothers made preside over thriving families. Hers are stories set in the real lives of mild women, offering ironic recognition and reconciliation for restricted horizons. She promotes the small consolations, quiet pleasures, a philosophy of acceptance, eking out the last surviving roses with a few green leaves (as Miss Grundy does in the novel of that title), finding drudgery divine like George Herbert's servant ('The Elixer'). Warned 'not to expect too much' Mildred Lathbury 'forebore to remark that women like me really expected very little - nothing at all, almost' (B. Pym 1980a). 'Very little' can make Pym heroines very happy, as when Belinda Bede:

experienced one of those sudden moments of joy that sometimes come to us in the middle of an ordinary day ... all because Agatha didn't keep as good a table as she did and Miss Prior had forgiven her for the caterpillar, and the afternoon sun streaming through the window over it all. (B. Pym 1981c)

Catherine Oliphant reflects:

Oh, what joy to get a real calf's foot from the butcher, and not to have to cheat by putting in gelatine. The small things in life were often so much bigger than the great things ... the trivial pleasures like cooking, one's home, little poems, solitary walks, funny things seen and overheard' (B Pym 1980b).

Knowing what her resemblant readers want, Pym restricts herself, like her much-admired Jane Austen, to writing only of the world she (and they) know – her own life, its events, settings and circles. She closely observes all around her: professionally trained, indeed, to do so, as she worked in an anthropological research institute; but with her personal research results utilized not for anthropology but for fiction. Dulcie Mainwaring suggests, 'Perhaps the time will come when one may be permitted to do research into the lives of ordinary people'; it is on just such research and observation that Pym's books are based (B. Pym 1981b). (Not that their appeal is restricted to this band – it extends far beyond that fittest and fewest audience.)

Pym draws deliberately on the life she sees around her to write about. We can trace her sources, being privileged to read a selection of her diaries and letters in *A very private eye* (B. Pym 1984). Her colleague and literary executor, Hazel Holt, tells us in the preface to this volume, 'Here in this book are the original lengths of material from which she fashioned her novels'. Going through Pym's works of



fiction in their order of composition, relating them to her life as recorded at each stage, can show how she transmuted the events and scenes she lived and saw into her fiction.

The life and the work

Barbara Pym, born in 1913, grew up in Oswestry, Shropshire, with her sister Hilary and parents, hens and a paddock. 'Church was a natural part of our lives', her sister writes (H. Pym 1984). At the age of twelve she went to boarding school in Huyton, Liverpool. From 1931-4 she read English at St Hilda's College, Oxford, loving the life there and the literature from which she continued to quote throughout her life, enjoying a sequence of friendships and flirtations, in particular becoming devoted to fellow English student Henry Harvey. She began to write her first novel that (eventually) achieved publication, in 1934, soon after graduating, while living again in her family home.

This was *Some tame gazelle*: a literary curiosity, surely unique of its kind. *Bildungsroman* is the term for 'a novel concerned with a person's formative years and development'; in a *roman à clef* 'real people are depicted under fictitious names'; a *roman-fleuve* 'deals with a family or other group over several generations' (definitions all from *Collins English dictionary*). *Some tame gazelle* is indeed a *roman à clef*, but is also of a kind for which I know of no generic term: a projection into the future of those real people depicted under fictitious names. Pym was aged twenty-one when she started this book 'about Hilary and me as spinsters of fiftyish' (diary 1 Sept 1934) and their circle of friends: 'I have brought us all together in our later years' (May 1935).

It proved to be an astonishingly accurate foreseeing. Holt tells us, 'The domestic routine of Harriet and Belinda ... gives a foretaste of what life was to be like' in the flat and cottage shared in real life by the real sisters decades later (Holt 1984). Belinda's devotion to her Archdeacon, nostalgia for college days, love of literary quotations, all in truth likewise survived. By 1942, indeed, shades of the fulfilment are beginning to close, when Pym writes in a letter (October 1942) to Harvey, adored by her at Oxford, portrayed by her as pompous Archdeacon Hoccleve, 'perhaps Belinda and Harriet will come true after all'. More extraordinary – *Quartet in autumn*, designed for the eyes of 'unmarried, unattached, ageing women', was written 1973-6, when Pym herself was in her sixties, still brandishing the epithet of spinster, and could indeed be expected to focus on such a main character for a novel. Her first heroine, generated nearly forty years earlier, is already just such another.

We can trace much of Pym's real life in *Some tame Gazelle*. Her sister observes of their early life in their parents' home: 'Having curates to supper was a long-established tradition' – which yields the novel's opening scene (H. Pym 1984). Belinda makes wistful references to her past college days with Hoccleve, especially the reading aloud. "'Do you remember when I used to read Milton to you?" he said, his thoughts going back to the days when Belinda's frank adoration had been so flattering' (B. Pym 1981c). Art is here close to life, as Pym's diary of the university years confirms.

Two years later, still at home in Oswestry, still dwelling on the past, Pym wrote her second novel (though it was published only posthumously, in 1987): *Civil to strangers*. Its heroine, Cassandra (developed from Pym's dream-name Sandra at Oxford?) is the submissive, ironic wife to a writer of fiction and poetry, Adam, named from *Paradise lost*, another who is much given to reading aloud to his lady. The book is recognizably suppositious as to the author's possible marriage to Harvey – wishful thinking plus self-abnegation and a dose of shrewd realism. Cassandra travels to Budapest, as Pym and her sister did in 1935.

Harvey went to Finland in 1934, and married a Finnish girl in 1937; Pym wrote her 'Finnish novel', which began as letters to him there and finished in 1938 as 'Gervase and Flora'. Set in Helsingfors, this is truly a story of unreciprocated love bravely borne.

Pym spent the years between her graduation and the start of World War II in Oswestry and Oxford. She had a romantic affair with a young Balliol student, Jay, in 1937-8. In 1939 she wrote *Crampton Hodnet* (published posthumously in 1985). This is set in North Oxford, featuring the places, pleasures and romances of Oxford: the Botanical Gardens, Magdalen Bridge, punting, and private lunch in a man's college rooms (Anthea joins Christopher for lunch at Randolph, as Pym did Jay at Balliol) occur both here and in *A very private eye*.

When war broke out, Pym remained at her parental home in Oswestry, and worked in a military canteen from 1939-41. During this time she wrote three war stories: 'Home Front novel', 'So very secret' and 'Goodbye Balkan capital'. These all treat of the early years of the war as experienced in the English countryside, and the involvement of English women. 'Home Front Novel' opens with a Red Cross class practising bandaging, goes on to show the women of the village coping with a batch of evacuees and the conversion of their gardens to growing vegetables. 'So Very secret' has another Cassandra heroine:

a country woman in early middle age ... My life is filled up with all the activities of a country village in wartime – Red Cross and canteen work, besides church brasses and flowers (B. Pym 1987b).

We see Cassandra doing her canteen duty before she enjoys an espionage adventure in familiar Oxford, a London hotel, a train and in remote countryside, with an escape into another Red Cross lecture. The

heroine of 'Goodbye Balkan capital' is Laura, a member of the ARP (Air Raid Precautions) Casualty Service, proud of her tin hat, her sister a pigswill-organising WVS (Women's Voluntary Service) member. Laura, listening to the radio news, learns of the dangerous position of a diplomatic body that includes a lover of hers of university days, besieged in the Balkans. This derives directly from Pym's hearing that the Belgrade Legation to which Jay belonged was missing (noted in her diary, April 1941). Laura broods over this news during an all-night session in a First Aid Post during an air raid.

From 1941-3 Pym worked in the Censorship at Bristol; in 1943 she joined the WRNS, and in 1944 was posted to Naples, returning to England in 1945. She started editorial work at the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures (IAI) in 1946, where she relished

the whole richness of academic life – the extraordinary quirks and foibles of eccentric personalities and the bizarre quality of the jargon (Holt 1984).

The first fruits of all this experience became apparent in Pym's fiction in *Excellent women*, written 1949-51. This brings us to classic Pym territory and characters, those she made her own. Its heroine, Mildred Lathbury, is a sterling good woman of the London parish, who has worked in the Censorship. Anthropologists begin their frequent appearances in Pym's work here; we also meet and hear of WRNS, subject to the charms of Flag Lieutenant Napier in Italy, looking back nostalgically to the naval parties, and their own ill-fitting white uniforms, all as detailed in *A very private eye*. Earlier experience too is represented here. Mildred and her friend Dora return to their old school for the dedication of a chapel window – as Pym had revisited Huyton and its chapel in 1932. There are pictures of girls' schools, with their hat-wearing, chapel attendance, magazines. In 'Finding a voice' Pym tells us that the description of Mildred and Dora's holiday visit to an Abbey is taken directly from her notebook recording her own visit to Buckfast Abbey in 1948.

Through the 1950s, when her next four novels were written, Pym was living in London, working at the IAI. First, in the short story, 'So, some tempestuous morn', early in the decade, she reminiscently shows us a young girl in Oxford pining for unattainable undergraduates, embarking on flirtation. The two heroines of *Jane and Prudence*, written 1950-2, feel nostalgia for Oxford university days: Jane the submerged wife, her wit and wild imagination held askance by her husband's parishioners, attempting parochial duties, and the forlornly husband-hunting office-worker Prudence. Written sixteen years after Pym's graduation, it opens with a college reunion dinner, and a sense of failed expectations: 'None of us has really fulfilled her early promise', laments Jane (B. Pym 1993).

Less than angels, 1953-4, has much more of anthropology and anthropologists, their feuds, their publications, their quest for funds and grants. In the talk Pym gave on BBC radio in 1978, she spoke of how closely this novel drew on her life:

about anthropologists working at a research centre in London, and the suburban background of Deirdre ... and her life with her mother and her aunt. There's a little church life in it too, so that it could be said to be a mixture of all the worlds I had experience of.

A glass of blessings, written 1955-6, deals with London churches and their clergy, office workers, life in London, particularly eating out, and more WRNS reminiscences.

Pym attended a writers' conference in Swanwick in 1957. *No fond return of love*, written 1957-60, opens with a learned conference of editorial workers and goes on to feature freelance indexers and their romances. This book includes the anecdote of Dulcie's protesting on finding the washbasin in a learned institution's ladies cloakroom full of flowers, and being reproached by the woman who had placed them there, 'I'm taking them to an invalid' – just as happened to Pym on 3 May 1943, recorded in her diary.

In 1961 Pym visited Rome for an IAI meeting; in 1963-4 she had an affair with a young Bahamean, Richard Roberts. Both experiences are incorporated into *An unsuitable attachment*, written 1960-5, which includes a group visit to Italy, reminiscing of Naples and its lemon groves, so prominent in *A very private eye*. Three of its characters work in a library; Pym's letters to Philip Larkin have much on the running of the IAI library and its problems, in particular 'a rather peculiar young man joining the staff' in September 1964, as well as of Larkin's library of the University of Hull.

The sweet dove died, written 1963-9, again recounts affairs of 'unmarried, unattached, ageing women' (both Leonora and Meg) with much younger men – as it might be, Roberts or Jay. This novel features antique shops and auctions, as does the diary of the period, in which Pym records bidding for Sharpe's *Birds of Paradise* at Christie's and attending a sale at Sotheby's, as well as enjoying a creamy cake at a Buttery after visiting the dentist (26 Sept. 1965), just as Leonora attempts to do; and, in Bond Street, seeing a young man sitting alone in a grand antique shop' and reflecting, 'A woman admirer might be a great nuisance always coming to see him'.

An academic question was written 1970-2, set in a provincial university and 'inspired by an academic wrangle in the journal *Africa*' (Holt 1984). It has more work in an institutional library, and includes a mother and son from the Caribbean, surely derived from Richard Roberts, and a student protest demonstration: Pym had written to Larkin about the sit-in at Hull University that she read of and watched on television in 1963.

Life dealt Pym a succession of blows after the early '60s; the 16-year period of publishers' rejection of her novels; a mastectomy in 1971; a stroke in 1974, followed by retirement. London was undergoing upheaval and change that Pym found distressing: Gamage's department store 'and so much in Fetter Lane, including St Dunstan's Chambers where we worked for close on 20 years' were all demolished by 1973, 'a whole period of civilization gone!' as Pym put it in a letter to Robert Smith (March 1972). Even the church where Pym and her sister regularly worshipped, St Lawrence the Martyr, was declared redundant and closed.

Quartet in autumn, written for, about, and vicariously by Letty in 1973-6, faithfully reflects all of this. Marcia has suffered a mastectomy, and in the course of the novel makes visits to the hospital outpatients department ('a rather dire place, but luckily I manage to get some amusement and "material" out of hospital visits', Pym wrote to Smith, 1979). Both women have to cope with retirement, the sense of bewilderment and emptiness that it may bring, and with solitude, being husbandless and childless. Edwin's church has been closed as redundant and, as Pym writes of herself in a letter to Larkin of 1971, he 'can go around from church to church with no particular attachment'. Letty 'walked past the building in Bloomsbury where she had worked in the thirties ... and found herself facing a concrete structure', as Pym told Larkin of herself in Fetter Lane (letter, March 1977); Marcia is shocked to find her Sainsbury's has been 'almost razed to the ground'. In a classic scene of alienation and dispossession, Letty crouches in her room, wondering:

How had it come about that she, an English woman born in Malvern in 1949 of middle-class English parents, should find herself in this room in London surrounded by enthusiastic shouting, hymn-singing Nigerians? (B. Pym 1994)

In 1972 Pym retired to live in Finstock village, Oxfordshire. 'The Christmas visit', written in 1977, deals with Christmas observances in the English countryside. *A few green leaves*, written 1977-9, shows Emma, an unmarried anthropologist, coming to live in an English village, attending coffee mornings and jumble sales, walking in woods, arranging flowers in church, taking an interest in local history and neighbourly affairs. The local doctor in his morning surgery has to 'tell an elderly woman patient that her days were numbered' (B. Pym 1981a); Pym records visiting her doctor in January 1979 when the symptoms of her secondary cancer became manifest.

'Across a crowded room', written in 1979, records an actual visit to an Oxford College for an anniversary dinner, as her real-life escort there, portrayed as 'George', in fact Edwin Ardener, told the Barbara Pym conference in Oxford in 1986.

Professional scrutiny

Committed to writing of what she knew, reflecting her real life for her empathetic readers, Pym drew deliberately on her diary for material. In June 1964 she observed, 'How full of fictional situations life is! I am now making fuller use of all this', and in February 1976, 'Could one write a book (a sort of novel) based on one's diaries over about 30 years? I certainly have enough material'.

Pym's life-path throws light on her work, the parallels between the two being so clear. But it is possible to relate specific incidents in the life and works more closely. There is another way to read her works, and that is by her own professional method.

Pym wrote for readers like herself. She was an indexer, and an enthusiastic one: Holt tells us:

She loved the mystique of certain aspects of her job ... best of all, she enjoyed the art of indexing. ... I think what she enjoyed most about indexing, apart from the pleasure of putting words into a certain order, was the peaceful, enclosed *space* an indexer inhabits. It requires a certain sort of concentration: you need to withdraw, as it were, into the world of that which is to be indexed, and this precisely suited Barbara's temperament. (Holt 1987)

An indexer is a particular type of reader.

I believe that the job of every indexer is to be the author's most sympathetic reader: to understand what the author is saying and to provide a map to his or her views so that the reader can quickly and easily find them.

wrote Laura Moss Gottlieb (Gottlieb 1998). Pym, a professional indexer, would have read in this analytic, insightful way.

Being, like Pym, an indexer/reader myself, I have compiled an index to all her published novels and stories, to provide such a map to her views. To this I have added references to topics in *A very private eye* and 'Finding a voice' that also occur in the fiction, underlined to differentiate them visibly from the entries for fiction. Comparison of the two types of reference – to fiction and to real life – and their overlap, is most enlightening as to the sources and treatment of incidents in the fiction, showing connections, making links.

References of the two types lie side by side for, among many others: abbeys; ageing; Bodleian Library; bookstalls; Botanical Gardens; canteens; cats; Corner Houses; driving examiners; evacuees; Flag Lieutenants; fleas; furniture depositories; mothers; nuns; Orvieto wine; pigeons; the Earl of

Rockester; station bookstalls; tombstones. The fictional Randolph College lies beside the factual Randolph Hotel. The entry, 'blood donor sessions' leads to Wilmet and Mary Beamish giving blood in a church crypt in *A glass of blessings*, and to Pym's doing so in St Martin's crypt in 1955; 'evening classes' to Wilmet and Sybil studying Portuguese with Piers as lecturer, Pym studying German in Southend Municipal College in 1943, vividly describing the enrolment and a college lecturer. 'Keats's house' has references to Leonora's visit there with James and Ned in *The sweet dove died*, Ned's reminiscence about it in 'Across a crowded room', and Pym's own visit in 1963; 'Nigerians in London' to Letty's boisterous fellow-tenants and to those attending Pym's church in 1963, with fervent baptismal celebrations. 'Retirement party' leads both to Marcia and Letty's from their office in *Quartet in autumn* and to Barbara's from the IAI in 1974; 'suicide, thoughts of' to Letty walking in woods, 'wondering if it could be the kind of place to lie down in and prepare for death when life became too much to be endured', and Pym in Addison's Walk, Oxford, in November 1972, reflecting, 'a good place to lie down waiting for death covered in leaves by the still streams'. 'Teashops / decor' leads to Edwin's regular place of refreshment in *Quartet in autumn* that 'changed distressingly ... so much trendy orange and olive green, and imitation stripped pine' and Pym's noting in March 1972, 'The ABC café ... the smart orange and olive green and beige and stripped pine decor'. 'Vets' leads to Daisy and Edwin Pettigrew's establishment with its 'many photographs of grateful animals and their owners which decorated the walls', and 'the round table in the middle of the room' with *The Field* and *Country Life* on ... 'A loud cry was heard coming from somewhere underneath them' (B. Pym 1982); and to Pym in the vet's waiting room in Lancaster Gate in 1960, observing 'large table with copies of *The Field* and *Country Life*. Round the walls photographs of grateful patients, some with their owners! ... Disconcerting cat's cry from the cattery'.

There is still more to be learned from *reading* an index, which does much more than locate specific items in the text: another effect is to bring together all references to the same topic. One by-product of this is to show, from the length of the collated entries, which themes and topics the author has the most to say about. Catherine Wallace, reporting the Pym Society conference in Boston in 1999, observed the significance:

there was an index ... it is a window into Pym's world ... it cites seven references to "gentlewomen: distressed / impoverished"; twelve to "celibacy, clerical"; three to "kissing"; 29 to "anthropologists/ anthropology"; and one to "cannibalism." "Church/es," the centre of Barbara Pym's universe, have 60 references broken down into 25 categories, including "flowers, decorating" which has seven references on its own. There are 15 references to "indexes/index card/indexing". (Wallace 1999)

The largest topic entries in my Pym index are those for —

Africa, anthropology, cafés, Christmas, churches, *Church Times*, clothes, cooking, flowers, food, hymns, languages, libraries, lunches, Oxford, restaurants, Roman Catholics, tea and wine

— quite properly so, it would seem.

For such long entries in an index, covering copiously treated topics, subheadings have to be devised to differentiate references. These can prove most enlightening to read through, clearly showing the author's attitudes and interests. For example, these are the subheadings in my index under 'church/es':

attendance; Calendar; children in; cleaning; closed; collections; congregation; for consolation; country; early attendance; flowers, decorating; heating; High; London; Oxford; pews; roof; scandal; university; village; visiting; Welsh; Westcliff; *see also names of churches*; clergy; sermons; services.

Under 'cats' we have:

clergy house; at conference; Friday; gourmet; Greek; inspection; for invalid; Italian; junk; navy, Naples; nutrition; rationing; tinned; *see also* breakfast; cafés; cooking; dinner; lunches; restaurants; suppers; *and individual entries*

Under 'food':

for cats; clergy house; at conference; Friday; gourmet; Greek; inspection; for invalid; Italian; junk; navy, Naples; nutrition; rationing; tinned; *see also* breakfast; cafés; cooking; dinner; lunches; restaurants; suppers; *and individual entries*

'lunches' gives us:

austerity; in cafés; at clubs / ladies' annexes / women's; in college rooms; delicate; formal; after funeral; at home / with visitors; hotel; hunger lunch; in office; packed; ploughman's; restaurant; reunion; working.

And 'tea (meal)':

in antique shop; in café; in garden; at jumble sale; on train; for unexpected visitor

Quotations or books and writers mentioned are indexed together under the names of the authors. This brings fascinating insights as to which were Pym's most frequently quoted or cited authors. These prove to be, first, Milton, with 26 references (nine of them to *Paradise Lost*, eight to *Samson Agonistes*,

which is referred to both in novels and diary). Second comes Wordsworth with 21, then Matthew Arnold with twenty, four of them to *Dover Beach*. John Donne has 18 references; Jane Austen 16; Ivy Compton Burnett, Shakespeare, Charlotte M. Yonge and Anthony á Wood each have 15; Edward Young has 14, nine to *Night Thoughts*; Byron scores twelve, Andrew Marvell eleven; Tennyson has ten, four of them to *In Memoriam*; Charlotte Brontë, nine, (seven to *Jane Eyre*); Byron, also nine; John Cleveland, eight; Shelley, Proust and Aldous Huxley, each seven; Robert Browning, Thomas Hardy, George Herbert and John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, each six. (There may be more that I have missed.)

Mrs Thirkell and Miss Pym

This index also shows how closely Pym's work resembles that of Angela Thirkell, whose works I have also indexed (Bell 1998). Both these English ladies wrote wittily and satirically of their own social class in their period, including the effects on English home life of the Second World War. Both feature the Anglican clergy, with scholars, members of the professional classes, and many ladies in their cast. Both make much use of literary quotation and allusion, not always identified. The novels of both may be taken as light social history of the 20th century, closely observing its clothes, food, behaviour and relationships. They each cast on the world around them the outsider's eye of a woman lacking the support and social status of a husband-escort. Both have been compared, for their subject range and style, to Jane Austen.

The readership of these two writers overlaps. Their similarity shows up likewise in the two indexes to their works. Church, the clergy, clothes, food, hymns, languages, libraries, London and literary quotations all loom large in the Thirkell index. Both indexes open with the entry, *abbey*, and include entries for ageing, air raid precautions, Army, Balliol, BBC, bedrooms, bicycles, books, cakes, canteens, cats, Chelsea, Civil Service, cooking, death, dressmakers, evacuees, films, flirtation, funerals, gardens, gas masks, hair, hotels, indexing, knitting, maids, makeup, marmalade making, names, parish magazines, reading aloud, restaurants, Roman Catholics, schools, sewing, sherry (copious entries in both!), shops, songs, Sunday, the *Times* and its announcements columns and crossword puzzles, torches, typewriters, vicarages, washing up, widows, wine, writers and writing, as well as for Matthew Arnold, Jane Austen, the Brontës, the Brownings, Keats, Milton, Tennyson and Charlotte M. Yonge. Twenty-seven hymns are specifically mentioned; those most referred to are 'God moves in a mysterious way' and 'Lead kindly light', five times each.

There is much to be learned from an index, rightly read. The one to Pym's works shows in particular how closely she drew on the events of her own life to create fiction to please readers resembling herself. How gratifying that the pleasure those readers derive from her books is shared so widely by so many others.

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Barbara Pym has the reputation of being a wonderful author, so I will give her a second chance! ...more. flag 10 likes · Like · see review. May 25, 2015 Josh Friedlander rated it it was amazing · review of another edition. · Pym's ability to write the quotidian rhythm of life without losing the reader is both artistic triumph and a reaction to the hegemony of the young. Away from the current of social change of 1970s England (though not unaware of it), away from the passion of youth and the caprice of narrative, *Quartet in Autumn* finds humanity and hope in quiet and unnoticed lives. · In my view, the characters are the reason to read Barbara Pym. But the story is also interesting; the writing is wonderful. This book was short-listed for the Booker Prize in 1977. Barbara Pym has been called the Jane Austen of the twentieth century. Her type of gently comic, mildly satirical novels - the English comedy of manners - have a devoted following. Her writing was appreciated by a small readership in her lifetime. Only eight of her novels were published, the other four released posthumously. · Like Austen's, her fiction is set in a narrow frame, exploring the lives of middle class spinsters and clerics or academics in the 50s and 60s. The novels are amusing by virtue of the quality of her observation of human nature as much as by the circumstances of the characters or the events that befall them. They are miniatures rather than sweeping epics or sagas, although the same characters do sometimes appear in several books. Less-besotted readers enjoyed Barbara Pym but lumped her in with Miss Read and other writers of "gentle fiction," a condescending term if there ever was one. Still others couldn't see any attraction at all in Pym's stories about women who dote on men and men who accept feminine devotion as their due. They considered her work depressing (men, she said herself, often found it so), uneventful, or simply shallow. A professor of mine said that he found her fiction (he'd read only one novel) "nothing but fluff." How, he asked, could John Updike have praised her so