

# **A WRITER'S DOZEN**

**First, Last and Only**

**By Cedric Pulford**

## THE AUTHORS

*In order of appearance*

JOHN BRAINE

ALAN SILLITOE

STAN BARSTOW

FRANCOISE SAGAN

LAURENCE STERNE

EMILY BRONTE

HARPER LEE

J.D. SALINGER

OSCAR WILDE

MARY WESLEY

THOMAS HARDY

P.G. WODEHOUSE

JAMES LOVELOCK

***BAKER'S DOZEN: Back in the days when scales had weights on one pan and the goods on the other pan, bakers traditionally threw in an extra item to make good any accidental short measure. Hence this dozen of writers actually numbers thirteen.***

## **Chapter one: Breaking the mould**

Picture a typical, successful literary career. Our would-be author pitches an idea (almost always these days through a literary agent) to a publisher, starting at the top and working down until someone takes the bait. This results in a book that sells only moderately but is promising enough for the publisher to want more.

Successful authors develop their careers to become a name that shifts books. They do promotional tours, book fairs and literary festivals. They sign autographs. A spot of television presenting is highly lucrative. It is also more enjoyable than spending lonely hours at a desk.

Then comes the winding-down phase. The television work falls away. The author runs out of ideas, or energy, or desire, or all three. Now seems to be the time to enjoy one's final years. Or perhaps none of these. The industry gives up the author, not the other way round. The last significant book usually appears years before the author's death. We are surprised when we see the obituaries because we thought our writer was already dead.

This then is how it is for many authors; yet any number of famous names have broken the mould. In the chapters that follow, we look at famous writers whose first book was the most successful; who produced only one book; who kept writing until they died in advanced old age. A writer's career simply can't be predicted unlike that of talent in most other professions.

Pity the writers whose first book is the biggest hit of their careers! It must be hugely frustrating never to match the achievement, at least

in popular fame (and sales). How do you deal with it? Do you keep going, telling yourself that the next book even if it's your tenth will be even bigger, more famous? Maybe you convince yourself that later books have been mismarketed, misunderstood etc etc. Perhaps you know that later books are better although the world regrettably declines to agree. If of a philosophical turn of mind, you'll tell yourself 'better one than none'; then simply enjoy your fame and your royalties.

Another group of writers publish just one book, and that one makes them famous. Unless death intervenes, what drives them not to try again? Or to resist the blandishments of publishers who want to monetise that success? Rare surely are the writers who tell themselves 'I've said what I have to say. Now I'll shut up and get a life'. There always seems to be something more to say, even if the English language suffers from too many books published. Rarer still is the successful writer who continues to write but not to publish. After his death it emerged that J.D. Salinger (see chapter three), with only one true novel to his name, wrote assiduously for decades, building up a huge store of unpublished material.

Some successful writers continue to publish in their upper eighties or nineties; even one hundred and more is not unknown. Writing, as any professional writer will tell you, is hard work. It is solitary and, while it may be impious to say so, the brain-dead exhaustion at the end of the shift is worse than the honest bone-weariness of physical labour. So why do these ancients keep writing? Is it habit? An addiction? Do they feel they still have something more to say? Is it – perish the thought – money? Old age can be an expensive business.

For Thomas Hardy (see chapter five), who went to his desk daily, writing was a routine that fended off old age, with the result that he lived until his upper eighties continuing to produce exquisite work.

All the writers in the very personal selection that follows are dead. It must be so otherwise the 'jackpot first time' authors might eventually come up with an even bigger book; the one-hit wonders might finally produce a second book; the veterans who publish at an impressively advanced age might surprise us with another at an even more impressively advanced age.

*SPOILER ALERT: Story summaries include endings so if you're about to read a title for the first time and don't want to spoil the fun – read the summary after you've read the book!*

## **Chapter two: The first and biggest**

Britain as the 1950s segued into the Sixties was throwing off the austerity of the war and the postwar years. It was the era of 'You never had it so good'. The social enfranchisement of the working classes was captured in three remarkable first novels. They are brash, earthy, authentic and Northern – far removed from the middle and upper class preoccupations of much British fiction. They are John Braine's *Room at the Top* (1957), Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958) and Stan Barstow's *A Kind of Loving* (1960). In each case, possibly to their chagrin, the authors remain best known for these first books.

*JOHN BRAINE* caught the Zeitgeist with his debut novel **Room at the Top** (1957). Through his anti-hero Joe Lampton, Braine has a close eye for good things of life – the best houses, best furnishings, best networks and best women.

Joe Lampton is a self-aware bastard. His occasional bouts of conscience don't stand in his way for long. He is a young local government accountant with prospects, but a thousand a year will never be enough. Spurred by envy, he wants life at t'Top, which in the fictional Yorkshire town of Warley is both metaphorical and geographical. The Warley Thespians are his way in. There he meets

the older and married Alice and the teenage Susan, daughter of a leading businessmen. He sets his cap at Susan from the start but also loves Alice intensely. He impregnates Susan. His reward is marriage and a big job in her father's company. Joe has reached the top, whereupon he dumps Alice. Distraught, she gets blind drunk and kills herself in a car smash. Joe, while conscience-stricken, finds that no one blames him for what happened.

*Room at the Top*, unlike some other books of the period, has not aged well. Joe's chat-up lines are cheesy:

'If I'd known I'd have brought you some flowers,' I said.

... 'If you'd known what?'

'If I'd known you'd be so beautiful.'

Susan, who is a child-woman, is a stereotype rather than a character. It is impossible to believe in a father whose daughter has been made pregnant by a swordsman several grades below her rewarding her seducer with a cheery lunch at the Con Club and a job in the firm.

Nevertheless, the book, with its first-person narration by Joe, reads fast and well. It was promptly made into an Oscar-nominated film (1959) – where the ugly impregnation scene is softened. In the book Lampton rapes a virgin; in the film Susan is willing, only asking 'Joe, be gentle with me'.

Joe in short has got away with it, or so it seems. In the sequel, **Life at the Top** (1962), set ten years later, Joe is a self-loathing prisoner of the lifestyle he coveted. In his own words, he has taken what he wanted (Susan) and is now paying the price. He works for his father-in-law where he is at Abe Brown's beck and call. He and his wife no longer have much to say to each other, or much that is nice. He is a member of the Conservative Club and the local council. He is overweight and bloated.

The awfulness of Joe's life is relieved only by his love for his daughter, Barbara. He is taken with a local journalist, Norah, and produces his customary cheesy compliment. Reminded that he voted in council for a controversial compulsory purchase order, he says:

"I suppose I must have done. It was so damned hot in there I could hardly keep awake ..." Norah's hand was on the window-sill. I put mine over it. "Except when I looked at you," I said to her.'

But Joe lacks even the energy to have an affair until late in the book, when he takes off to London with Norah. There he is rocked to discover that neither Norah nor a grubby flat in Earls Court can make him happy – and that Barbara is not his daughter. He returns to Susan. He accepts that Barbara is his in the only sense that matters.

This sequel is in many ways a better book than *Room at the Top*. Joe is now a rounded character not a pantomime villain. Both he and the writing, however, lack the brio of Braine's first outing.

John Braine, originally a librarian, died in 1986 aged sixty-four. He wrote twelve other novels, but none achieved the acclaim of his first.

*ALAN SILLITOE* was born in Nottingham into the most modest circumstances with an illiterate father whose succession of jobs usually didn't last long. Sillitoe worked in factories from the age of fourteen and lied about his age to join the RAF in the last stages of the Second World War. Educating himself through wide reading, he produced more than fifty books with a remarkable range of novels, short stories, poetry, plays and children's stories until his death in 2010 aged eighty-two. Only his collection of short stories, **The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner** (1959), comes close in fame to his first book, **Saturday Night and Sunday Morning** (1958).

The novel is set in Nottingham where Arthur Seaton works as a lathe operator. He is skilful and quick, earning good money on piece-rates – fourteen pounds a week less tax and three pounds for his board at home – leaving him with plenty to spend on women and drink.

Arthur is bedding Brenda, the wife of his friend Jack. She becomes pregnant. It must be Arthur's: 'It's yourn right enough. I haven't done owt like that wi' Jack for a couple o' months or more.' Brenda successfully aborts the pregnancy with gin and a scalding hot bath (described in detail). Arthur also beds Brenda's married sister Winnie and well as taking up with the unmarried Doreen. He gets badly beaten up in revenge for Winnie, not Brenda. Arthur and Doreen plan to get married.

The last scene of the book finds Arthur on a riverbank on his own fishing. As a fish takes the bait, he philosophises that for human beings all life is about taking a bait of one sort or another:

Everyone in the world was caught, somehow, one way or another, and those that weren't were always on the way to it. As soon as you were born you were captured by fresh air that you screamed against the minute you came out. Then you were roped in by a factory, had a machine slung around your neck, and then you were hooked up by the arse with a wife. Mostly you were like a fish: you swam about with freedom, thinking how good it was to be left alone, doing anything you wanted to do and caring about no one, when suddenly: SPLUTCH! – the big hook clapped itself into your mouth and you were caught.

The bait of marriage, he acknowledges, may not be so bad; may be the beginning of something 'you could never have thought possible'.

*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* is a series of sketches linked by Arthur's adventures, rich in imagery of countryside, factory and home. In an introduction to a later edition, Sillitoe explained how this came about. He confessed that no one 'was more surprised by its success than I was'. He expected to make £200 at most (approaching £5,000 today, a sum that would allow him to live and write in Majorca for another year. *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning's*

construction was described thus: some scenes had been written as short stories – Sillitoe charmingly admitted that a few were sent to magazines and rejected – while others were originally poems. The novel was rejected by four publishers.

*STAN BARSTOW*, like Braine a Yorkshire novelist, also scored with his first book, **A Kind of Loving** (1960). His father was a miner, and Barstow worked as a draughtsman – both occupations imported into the novel for the father and the son.

*A Kind of Loving* is set in a Yorkshire mining town. Victor Brown is besotted with a pretty typist, Ingrid Rothwell, in the engineering works where both work, but he is soon repelled by her shallowness. Victor is nothing like the stereotype of the sexually incontinent working class male. At twenty he has never ‘done it’. He struggles to understand his emotions towards Ingrid as he is drawn back to her again and again. They drift along like this for months, never going ‘all the way’ until one day in the park ‘it happens’. From this single sexual encounter Ingrid becomes pregnant. By now Vic knows he doesn’t love her, but he does the honourable thing and marries her. After falling out with her mother, he leaves Ingrid; then is persuaded to return. At a time when marriage for most people meant forever, Victor hopes that he and Ingrid ‘might find a kind of loving to carry us through’ the next forty or so years.

The story, set in what was the present day when the book was published in 1960 and with much of the dialogue in dialect, gives a vivid sense of life among the respectable working class and attitudes towards sex and marriage in those pre-Pill (and pre-legal abortion) days. From today’s standpoint *A Kind of Loving* could be describing a different era not merely a few decades back. If a girl got ‘in the family way’ (or had ‘a bun in the oven’) before marriage, the boyfriend either married her or bolted. Living together was left to decadent bohemian types. Abortion as well as being illegal was out of reach for most people, although adoption was common because of the

perceived shame of being a single mother. Divorce was something respectable families didn't do. Because of the fear of pregnancy virginity before marriage was widespread in both sexes. Victor ends up marrying a girl he scarcely knows sexually and knows too well in other ways, the price for both being half-lives shackled together for decades.

It's easy to see why *A Kind of Loving* was a success. The writing bounces along, using first person and present tense narration:

'It'll be all right, Vic, won't it?' she says in a whisper.

'What? Course it will.' How the hell should I know? I'm thinking. It had better be, that's all.

The book uses enough Yorkshire dialect to convince but not enough to make it heavy going.

*A Kind of Loving* allowed Barstow to become a full-time writer. In a prolific career of more than thirty years he produced sixteen other books (including two sequels to *A Kind of Loving*) as well as film and TV scripts – but none matched the fame of his first one. His last novel, **Next of Kin**, appeared in 1991, twenty years before his death aged eighty-three.

*FRANCOISE SAGAN* published a score of novels, as well as plays, short stories and poems, but none has equalled the renown of her first, **Bonjour tristesse** (1954). It is one of the few cases where the French title was retained for an English translation – sensibly because 'hello sadness' does not have the same ring! The French title was also kept for the notably faithful film adaptation (1958) by Arthur Laurents, starring David Niven, Deborah Kerr, Jean Seberg and Mylene Demongeot.

Sagan's novella, typically running to barely more than a hundred printed pages (30,000 words), was written when she was eighteen. It was an overnight success; a *succes de scandale* with its amoral tone

involving sex, gambling and cold-blooded revenge played out in the summer haze of the French Riviera. The story is more than melodrama: it is witty and full of insights about human relations such that some thought it was written by a mature writer using the teenage author as a publicity stunt. But they were wrong, as Sagan showed in the books that soon followed.

*Bonjour tristesse* begins as seventeen-year-old Cecile and her playboy father, Raymond, are enjoying a golden summer at a villa on the French Riviera. Cecile and Raymond are close – co-conspirators in a hedonistic Paris lifestyle. With them is Elsa, Raymond's current mistress, a beautiful but not very intelligent woman nearer to Cecile's age than Raymond's. Cecile loses her virginity to Cyril, a fellow holidaymaker, and they begin a summer romance. Into this four-way idyll comes Anne, a family friend. She is an organised, traditionally minded businesswoman. When Raymond and Anne unexpectedly decide to marry, Cecile recognises a threat to her lifestyle. She sees Anne as 'a beautiful serpent':

She is reserved, whereas we are very merry. Only we two are truly alive and she is going to insinuate herself between us with her impassiveness. She is going to warm herself by gradually drawing from us our lovely, carefree warmth. She is going to rob us of everything, like a beautiful serpent.

Cecile hatches a plot to drive Anne away. Elsa and Cyril pretend to be in love so that Raymond, being vain, will show he can win Elsa back. Cecile's concern is for herself. She sees no moral issue in her plot; she gives little thought for Raymond's happiness, none at all for Anne's. Her father, she knows, is 'very vain, or not very sure of himself' so she can be confident her plot will succeed.

The plot miscarries, however, when Anne comes upon Raymond and Elsa kissing. She drives away from the villa distraught, crashes her car and is killed. Cecile is tortured by the thought that Anne may have killed herself because of her actions. But the mood passes. Back in Paris Cecile and Raymond resume their old life with no consequences for Cecile beyond a certain sadness (*tristesse*).

Morality, or rather the lack of it, is the heart of Sagan's story. Not merely the sexual – Cecile and Cyril, Raymond and Elsa, Raymond and Anne – although when Sagan was writing in the Fifties this remained an issue. Cyril asks Cecile whether she is not afraid of conceiving a child. She replies that she 'was relying on him'. In any case, she 'found it difficult to imagine myself pregnant, given my slim, firm body'. But Cyril's question indicates he was not taking precautions.

Years later Sagan considered the uproar that greeted *Bonjour tristesse* was because France was then still a predominantly Roman Catholic country. She said: 'It was unacceptable ... that a young girl should have the right to use her body as she will and derive pleasure from it without incurring a penalty.'

The fecklessness of Raymond's lifestyle (resumed at the end of the story), his treatment of Elsa, and Cecile's plot against Anne have moral dimensions. Whether Anne commits suicide or not is beside the point: Cecile has engineered the situation and, as previously mentioned, suffers no consequences worth the name.

Cecile and the protagonist of Sagan's second novel, **Un certain sourire** (English title, *A Certain Smile*), are not immoral people. They are amoral: questions of morality do not arise. We are a long way from conventional narratives of crime and punishment. It is an astonishingly clear-eyed understanding of human nature by the teenage author.

The mood of amorality is even deeper in *Un certain sourire*, which appeared in 1956, when Sagan was twenty-one. The English translation was published in the same year.

Dominique, a bored and rootless student, has an affair with the older and married Luc despite having been befriended and helped by Luc's wife, Françoise. Even after she knows she has deeply wounded the older woman, who is only too aware of losing her allure, Dominique

is willing to continue the affair. Luc is equally a moral void, hitting on a young girl while announcing in advance and repeatedly that they will never fall in love. But of course Dominique does ... In today's language, Luc has groomed her. Even the saintly Françoise had been unbothered by infidelity until Dominique emerged to threaten her, telling the girl that 'infidelity on the physical level isn't really anything serious'.

The ambiguous ending of *Un certain sourire* allows us to imagine that it will be business as usual for Dominique and Luc, with only Françoise suffering the consequences.

The story was filmed as *A Certain Smile* (1958), starring Rossano Brazzi, Joan Fontaine and Christine Carere.

As the money poured in, Sagan – the pen-name of Françoise Quoirez – found her life going off the rails and literally off the road when she crashed her Aston Martin. There was drink, drugs and gambling, somehow interspersed with two marriages (with one son) and more books including **Aimez-vous Brahms?** (1959). Her writing continued almost until she died in 2004 of a pulmonary embolism, aged sixty-nine.

Sagan claimed to have no regrets about what her bourgeois critics would describe as a rackets life. She wrote as her own obituary: 'Appeared in 1954 with a slender novel, *Bonjour tristesse*, which created a scandal worldwide. Her death, after a life and a body of work that were equally pleasant and botched, was a scandal only for herself.'

**LAURENCE STERNE** became famous with his first book, **Tristram Shandy** (in nine short volumes from 1759 to 1767), and he has stayed that way. Death put paid to any hopes of developing his writing career. A second, incomplete work based on Sterne's travels in search of health – **A Sentimental Journey Through France and**

**Italy** – appeared just three weeks before its author died aged fifty-five.

*Tristram Shandy*, or to give it its full title *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, is narrated by the eponymous character of the title. Part of the joke in this comic masterpiece is that it's not much about his life and scarcely more about his opinions. Mainly the novel describes the opinions of his eccentric father, Walter, as well as the adventures of his Uncle Toby. Tristram records his father's theory that good or bad names are 'irresistibly impress'd upon our characters and conduct' and his response to a sceptic. Sterne's writing is brilliantly prolix:

I see plainly, Sir, by your looks , (or as the case happen'd), my father would say, - that you do not heartily subscribe to this opinion of mine, - which, to those, he would add, to those who have not carefully sifted it to the bottom, - I own has an air more of fancy than of solid reasoning in it; -- and yet, my dear Sir, if I may presume to know your character, I am morally assured, I should hazard little in stating a case to you, -- not as a party in the dispute, - but as a judge, and trusting my appeal upon it to your own good sense and candid disquisition in the matter – you are a person free from as many prejudices of education as most men – and, if I may presume to penetrate further into you, - of a liberality of genius above bearing down an opinion merely because it wants friends. Your son! -- your dear son, -- from whose sweet and open temper you have so much to expect. – Your BILLY, Sir! – would you, for the world, have called him JUDAS?

Mr Shandy has a particular aversion to Tristram, the name his son carries through the world. Mr Shandy had settled on the highly auspicious name Trismegistus. This was (understandably) misheard, and the boy was christened Tristram.

Tristram is one of those people to whom things happen. He is accidentally circumcised when a window pane falls on him while he is urinating out of a window; He suffers a crushed nose during his birth, another of his father's theories being that a prominent nose is important for life; his mother at the moment of conception asks his father whether he has forgotten to wind the clock, upsetting the

balance of humours according to the then-current scientific paradigm.

The clock scene forms the opening of the book. It sets the comically bawdy tone of what follows. Sterne through his characters is alive to the absurdities of sex – the passion ‘which bends down the faculties, and turns all the wisdom, contemplations, and operations of the soul backwards’. Mr Shandy wonders why we go about it in secret when carnal relations are necessary and natural:

... wherefore, when we go about to plant a man, do we put out the candle? And for what reason is it that all the parts thereof – the congre-dients – the preparations – the instruments, and whatever serves thereto, are so held as to be conveyed to a cleanly mind by no language, translation, or periphrasis whatever?

The last two volumes concern Uncle Toby and his tendresse for Widow Wadman. He counts all her perfections on his finger ends. She, meanwhile, wonders about the nature of his groin injury.

*Tristram Shandy* has been described by the critic and commentator Christopher Ricks as ‘the greatest shaggy-dog story in the language’. It is ‘somewhat bawdy, preposterously comic, brazenly exasperating and very shrewd in its understanding of human responses’. The novel is more digression than story. It is often seen as anticipating the stream of consciousness writing of the Twentieth Century.

Parson Yorick, one of the supporting characters in *Tristram Shandy* – along with Mrs Shandy, Tristram’s mother; Corporal Trim, Uncle Toby’s servant; Dr Slop the surgeon and Widow Wadman, the subject of Toby’s affections – reappears as the narrator in Sterne’s second book, *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy*. This was published in two quite substantial volumes with more intended. Yorick hadn’t reached Italy when Sterne died.

Laurence Sterne was born in Clonmel, Ireland, in 1713, the son of an army officer. After studying divinity and classics at Jesus College,

Cambridge, he was ordained as a priest in the Church of England. He married in 1741. Only one of his children, a daughter, survived infancy. He spent his life as a country parson, his lifelong ill health perhaps making him unsuited to the strains of higher office. He also had literary ambitions. Although he was in his forties when his first and only novel, *Tristram Shandy*, appeared, he had previously published two of his sermons and written a political pamphlet (which was suppressed).

*Tristram Shandy* is one of a long line of best-sellers that were initially rejected by publishers, including **Pride and Prejudice** and the first Harry Potter.

The Laurence Sterne Trust describes how the resourceful author turned successful self-publisher: Sterne's political pamphlet gave him the inspiration for a more ambitious work. He contacted the London bookseller, Robert Dodsley, with the draft of one volume of a work entitled *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*. Unable to secure a guarantee of publication, Sterne revised the work and in 1759 published the first two volumes of *Tristram Shandy* by paying for it himself. It was an immediate success. Sterne became famous virtually overnight. His portrait painted by Joshua Reynolds turned him into a celebrity.

He took up the living of Coxwold in North Yorkshire soon after the first parts of the novel appeared. He wrote the remaining volumes there at his home nicknamed 'Shandy Hall'. Aptly, 'shandy' is a dialect word for 'wild, nonsensical, merry or odd'. 'Shandy' as the name for a mixture of beer and ginger beer (or lemonade) may or may not be connected. 'Shandy' in this sense was originally 'shandygaff', whose etymology is unknown. It is probably ancient although its first recorded use was in 1853.

Shandy Hall is now run by the Laurence Sterne Trust and is generally open to the public (closed for repairs in 2023).

Sterne died in 1768. Despite his constant ill health, fifty-five was not an especially short life by the standards of the day. He would doubtless have relished the ridiculousness of being buried three times: first at St George's, Hanover Square, London; again when he was recognised after having been disinterred by body-snatchers; and finally at Coxwold, where he had been the parish priest.

### Chapter three: The one and only

*EMILY BRONTE* was the middle sister of the trio who within two years, 1847-1848, published the novels they remain famous for: **Jane Eyre** from Charlotte, **Wuthering Heights** from Emily and **The Tenant of Wildfell Hall** from Anne. The sisters had earlier published at their own costs a book of their poems. They used the pen names respectively of Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell. Sales were a disaster: two copies were sold. The urge to write was strong, however, and they soon had their novels before the public.

The only novel by Emily was poorly received on its publication in 1847, but *Wuthering Heights* has become one of the most famous in English literature. She is thought to have been working on another book when she died two years later aged thirty, months before her sister Anne. They were among the six children of Patrick Bronte, who outlived them all as well as surviving his wife.

Emily's love of the wild Yorkshire moors around the family home at Haworth is baked into *Wuthering Heights*, a melodramatic tale of thwarted love. Away from the moors she suffered acute homesickness, lasting just three months as a pupil at Miss Wooler's School, Roe Head, and six months as a teacher at Miss Patchett's School, Law Hill. She fared better in Brussels, where she and her sister Charlotte studied languages and school management. They returned home after eight months following a death in the family.

Emily is usually seen as shy and private. Much of our knowledge comes from Charlotte. She wrote:

My sister's disposition was not naturally gregarious; circumstances favoured and fostered her tendency to seclusion; except to go to church or take a walk on the hills, she rarely crossed the threshold of home. Though her feeling for the people round was benevolent, intercourse with them she never sought; nor, with very few exceptions, ever experienced. And yet she knew them: knew their ways, their language, their family histories; she could hear of them with interest, and talk of them with detail, minute, graphic, and accurate; but WITH them, she rarely exchanged a word.

Emily's shyness must have concealed a passionate nature. How else could she have written *Wuthering Heights*? The story turns on the obsessive love of the anti-hero Heathcliff for his adoptive sister Catherine. He is an orphan brought up at Wuthering Heights by Mr Earnshaw with his own children. Catherine returns Heathcliff's love but for social advancement marries Edgar Linton of Thrushcross Grange. Catherine dies after giving birth to a daughter, also Catherine. Bereft, Heathcliff begs her spirit to remain on earth. By skulduggery he has inherited Wuthering Heights. Years later he forces the younger Catherine to marry his son Linton, who then dies leaving her free for her actual love, Hareton Earnshaw, the grandson of Heathcliff's benefactor. Heathcliff, still obsessed, communes with the elder Catherine's ghost. He dies, meaning that Hareton and the younger Catherine have inherited both Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange. (Hareton and the younger Catherine are first cousins. When Emily was writing this was not known to be inadvisable.)

The novel's sexual imagery and its 'animality' shocked many of its first readers and reviewers. For us it poses the question of whether it is a work of imagination or experience. Emily had few means of straying from the prescribed path of virtue, although Brussels must have provided opportunities. Or is the sexual content so strong precisely because it's imagined by a spinster?

Neither of Emily's sisters meet the criteria of this survey. Charlotte's first published novel, *Jane Eyre*, was her biggest success, but two other novels remain famous: *Shirley* and *Villette*. Anne is known for one book, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, but it was her second. Her first was the boring **Agnes Grey**. *Wildfell Hall* was an immediate *succes de scandale* because of its feminist themes. Later it and the author were eclipsed before enjoying a restoration in recent times for the same reason.

*HARPER LEE'S* hugely successful novel **To Kill a Mockingbird** was published in 1960. For decades she declared that she wouldn't publish another. Then in 2015, when the author was in her upper eighties and virtually deaf and blind, a 'sequel' was published. No wonder **Go Set a Watchman** excited controversy.

Certainly, *Watchman* looks like a sequel to *Mockingbird* at first sight. The story takes place twenty years later when Jean Louise ('Scout') Finch the protagonist of *Mockingbird*, returns to the fictional town of Maycomb, Alabama, seeing the place and its people through an adult's eyes. Soon, however, questions arose: *Watchman*, it was claimed, is an early draft of *Mockingbird*. Publishing figures from when *Mockingbird* was first published declared that they knew about the second manuscript at the time, would have loved to have a sequel but would not have tarnished Harper Lee's reputation with what became *Watchman* (see below).

*To Kill a Mockingbird* is narrated by Scout. Her father Atticus is a hero figure. He defends a black man, Tom Robinson, who has been accused of raping a white woman, Mayella Ewell. To the child Scout with her restricted view, Atticus is different from the other men of Maycomb:

Our father didn't do anything. He worked in an office, not in a drugstore. Atticus did not drive a dump truck for the county, he was not the sheriff, he did not farm, work in a garage, or do anything that could possibly arouse the admiration of anyone ...

He did not do the things our schoolmates' fathers did: he never went hunting, he did not play poker or fish or drink or smoke. He sat in the living-room and read.

With these attributes, however, he would not remain as inconspicuous as we wished him to: that year, the school buzzed with talk about him defending Tom Robinson, *none of which was complimentary* [italics added].

At Robinson's trial, Atticus shows that Mayella made a false claim to conceal the fact that her father assaulted her. Although he is innocent, Robinson is convicted and killed trying to escape custody. Ewell is murdered by the mysterious and reclusive 'Boo' Radley. To spare Radley and because Ewell has had his just deserts the sheriff covers up the crime.

In *Go Set a Watchman* (the title comes from Isaiah 21:6, 'For thus hath the Lord said unto me, Go, set a watchman, let him declare what he seeth'), Scout finds to her shock that Atticus is a racist who attends a segregationist meeting and has in his house a pamphlet titled *The Black Plague*. The grandson of the Finches' former black maid Calpurnia has killed a pedestrian. In an echo of *Mockingbird*, Atticus agrees to defend the young man but only, it seems, to head off the emancipationist NAACP establishing itself in town.

Scout tells her father how horrified she is. Atticus insists he is not a racist. He believes in emancipation, but the black community isn't ready for it:

Do you want Negroes by the carload in our schools and churches and theaters?  
Do you want them in our world?

... Honey, you do not seem to understand that the Negroes down here are still in their childhood as a people. You should know it, you've seen it all your life. They've made terrific progress in adapting themselves to white ways, but they're far from it yet. They were coming along fine, traveling at a rate they could absorb, more of 'em voting than ever before. Then the NAACP stepped in with its fantastic demands and shoddy ideas of government – can you blame the South for resenting being told what to do about its own people by people who have no idea of its daily problems?

Atticus has gone from hero in *Mockingbird* to villain in *Watchman*. It is hard to understand this total change of character unless *Watchman* was written first, and the author then decided to make Atticus a more sympathetic figure. Strongly suggestive that *Watchman* is an early draft of *Mockingbird* and not a sequel is that Nelle Harper Lee did not publish it for decades. The manuscript stayed in a safety deposit box until, arguably, she was too old and too ill to resist its monetisation by outside interests. She died aged eighty-nine the year after it was published, having not spoken about the background of *Go Fetch a Watchman*.

Its plot of is less clearcut than that of *Mockingbird* with its battle between good and evil and vivid narration by the child Scout. It is impossible to imagine that if *Watchman* had been the only book published by Harper Lee it would have had the same enduring, global appeal. She remains an author with one book to her name.

*J. D.* (Jerome David) *SALINGER* had one of the most unusual writing careers, publishing four book-length titles between 1951 and 1963, then nothing for the remaining forty-seven years of his life. Salinger, however, continued to write for writing's sake, apparently viewing publication as 'a damned interruption' and leaving at his death a vast store of material. Much of this will be published, his son Matt confirmed in 2019. He claimed his father wanted this done, although the fact that nothing had appeared four years later suggests issues behind the scenes.

**The Catcher in the Rye** is the rock on which J.D. Salinger's fame is based. It was his first book, by far the most famous and the only true novel among the four books. The others, including the next best known, **Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters**, are short stories or novellas bundled in with other material. Salinger is better seen as a short story writer; even *The Catcher* was put together from stories published years earlier in magazines.

The story is told by sixteen-year-old Holden Caulfield as one continuous flashback. He is expelled from his school and, rather than face his parents, he goes on the run in New York City. There he finds 'real life' through a series of encounters. He witnesses various sexual activities, which prompt him to hire a prostitute. On the second day of his adventure, Holden sneaks home and meets his sister, Phoebe. She is referred throughout the book, in the lingo of the time, as 'old Phoebe', although she is only ten. He starts that night on a teacher's couch but believing (probably correctly) that the teacher is hitting on him he retreats to Grand Central Station. On the third day, Holden prepares to head West to start a new life. Phoebe demands to go with him. Instead he takes her to the zoo where she loses herself in the joys of the carousel. The story ends here.

*The Catcher in the Rye* is bookended with references to Holden's medical treatment. At the start:

I'll just tell you about this madman stuff that happened to me around last Christmas.

At the end we learn that 'out here' is not the West but a mental institution probably a stone's throw from New York:

I could probably tell you ... how I got sick and all, and what school I'm supposed to go to next fall, after I get out of here, but I don't feel like it.

Salinger's genius is to have caught the voice of the alienated teenager, at once knowing and naïve. With the knack of the successful short story writer, he has packed Holden's adventures into

a shortish novel of around two hundred pages and a timeframe of just three days.

Holden's encounter with a prostitute in his hotel room is a hilarious and deeply felt piece of writing. He has told us he is a virgin although he 'came quite close to doing it a couple of times'. We expect he will lose his innocence in this classic manner. The prostitute seems to be as young as he is and appears nervous. She asks him to hang up her green dress, which is new:

It made me feel sort of sad when I hung it up. I thought of her going in a store and buying it, and nobody in the store knowing she was a prostitute and all. The salesman probably just thought she was a regular girl when she bought it. It made me feel sad as hell – I don't know why exactly.

Holden politely asks the girl whether she feels like talking for a while:

It was a childish thing to say, but I was feeling so damn peculiar. 'Are you in a very big hurry?' She looked at me like I was a madman. 'What the heck ya wanna talk about?' she said.

Holden gets to keep his innocence. The prostitute as it turns out is no girl-next-door manqué. Her talk becomes crude, and she demands double the agreed rate.

Born in New York City, Salinger lived for more than half a century in the small rural community of Cornish, New Hampshire. He was a recluse as far as the world was concerned but a familiar enough figure around town where locals knew not to acknowledge his fame and to treat him as 'just another resident'.

He was not above tucking into the monthly turkey dinner, which was an inter-faith venture. This would have appealed to a man who throughout his life was spiritually questing. Salinger was born to a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother who converted after marriage, which under Judaism's matrilineal principle may or may not have made Salinger Jewish. He went on to sample, often for years, Buddhism, various forms of Hinduism, Dianetics (related to

Scientology), Christian Science and other spiritual disciplines. He was drawn to Advaita Vedanta Hinduism, which enjoins celibacy as the path to enlightenment. According to his daughter Margaret, he married in 1955 after reading that Paramahansa Yoganada Hinduism does not require celibacy.

Salinger was no ascetic. He had relationships with several women apart from his two marriages. His 'pulling' technique seems to have been to write letters to the admired one of the time. His fame must have helped him to get to first base.

In 2000 his daughter Margaret published a candid – ie bitter in places – memoir, *Dream Catcher*. It caused an estrangement between her and her father and brother. It produced such a furious reaction from *Catcher in the Rye* obsessives that she had to hire a threat management firm and take security precautions.

In the book Margaret depicts her father as 'a dreamer who can barely tie his own shoelaces in the real world':

My father once told a friend that for him the act of writing was inseparable from the quest for enlightenment, that he intended devoting his life to one great work, and that the work would be his life – there would be no separation.

Are there clues here as to why Salinger felt no need to publish a second novel; why he continued writing but not publishing throughout his life (see above)?

He was an author preoccupied with his work. Margaret remembers as a child the Red House on the edge of a forest at Cornish and her father's writing cabin a quarter-mile farther into the forest:

In real life, when he chooses to make himself available, he can be funny, intensely loving, and the person you most want to be with; however, for such *maya* [illusion] as living persons to get in the way of his work, to interrupt the holy quest, is to commit sacrilege.

*Maya* or not, all writers' lives inform their fiction. Salinger's did so with what his daughter describes as frightening emotional intensity.

His ‘rage’ at the WASP [White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant] world of country clubs, Ivy League schools and the like should be seen through his experience ‘as ‘a Jew or half-Jew’ growing up in New York in the Twenties and Thirties; likewise, his Second World War experience (when Salinger became a staff sergeant) provide a context for *The Catcher in the Rye*:

I’m not saying that the reader *needs to know* [emphasis added] the background of the story to appreciate the book, I’m saying something much smaller, that I needed to understand the context and the connections to begin to make sense of the frightening, life-or-death emotional intensity evoked in both my dad and his character Holden by things that seem like minor aesthetic issues.

Margaret recalls what she calls her last real conversation with her father – he was still alive as she wrote that – in which he told her: ‘Christ, you’re sounding just like every other woman in my life, my sister, my ex-wives. They all accuse me of neglecting them ... I can be accused of a certain detachment, that’s all. Never neglect.’

She comments:

[Y]es, he can be accused of a *certain* detachment. He is detached about *your* pain, but God knows he takes his own pain more seriously than cancer.’

Her father ‘for all his protestations and lectures and writing about detachment, is a very, very needy man’ – a quality, she decides, that resonates with his public.

After this bombardment Margaret pulls back in the final pages of her memoir:

[I]n giving up the dream of a perfect Daddy, some of my memories of happy times with my father returned. These are real, and they belong to me. I can, now, take them out and savor them whenever I want to. I don’t have to wait for his return from ethereal realms. Similarly, in giving up my pursuit of the heavenly Daddy, the nightmare of the hellish Daddy began to give up its pursuit

of me. I am able to see a talented man who, like the rest of us, is neither all good nor all bad.

Beyond the banality of the last sentence, Margaret fails to recognise the toll that creativity of the highest order takes on its practitioners, be they writers, actors, musicians, painters, sculptors, whatever. Such people can't switch off as if they're leaving a clerk's job or a factory bench and drop into the minutiae of domestic life without missing a beat. Many chant the mantra, 'The family is the most important thing in my life', but in most cases, perhaps all, it isn't true. They wouldn't be where they are if it was. Salinger, it may be, was blameworthy only of putting up less of a façade than most.

**The Picture of Dorian Gray** is *OSCAR WILDE'S* only novel. It appeared early in the decade (the 1890s) that saw his most famous plays. The homo-erotic and misogynistic tone of the novel is unmistakable. Chiefly it remains celebrated for its wit, which is well familiar from Wilde's plays. The story is a clever version of the Faust theme. Dorian Gray makes a wish that he could stay forever as young and beautiful as his picture. The wish is granted. Despite the evil deeds of his abandoned life, he remains unmarked. Meanwhile, the picture gradually changes into that of a malevolent old man. At the end of the story, as Dorian lies dead, he is that malevolent old man; the picture once more shows him in the beauty of his youth.

The book is a vehicle for Wilde's cleverness. Lord Henry Wotton, Dorian Gray's mentor and corrupter, spews out aphorisms, epigrams and paradoxes in a diarrhoetic stream. Brilliantly inventive, but it becomes tedious.

Now, the value of an idea [he declares] has nothing whatsoever to do with the sincerity of the man who expresses it. Indeed, the probabilities are that the more insincere the man is, the more purely intellectual will the idea be ...

OR

Conscience and cowardice are really the same things, Basil. Conscience is the trade-name of the firm. That is all.

AND

I quite sympathise with the rage of the English democracy against what they call the vices of the upper orders. The masses feel that drunkenness, stupidity, and immorality should be their own special property ...

Lord Henry is also deeply amoral, as when he persuades Dorian to see the death of the actress Sybil Vane as ‘an experience’ and that’s all. Sybil’s suicide is romantic art not a real-life tragedy. The only one of the three principals who reacts normally is the painter Basil Hallward, who is shaken by Sybil’s death and shocked that Dorian has gone blithely to the opera.

A moral note is sounding here as it does, more loudly, when towards the end Dorian tries to renounce his evil life. Alas, it is too late. What is Wilde telling us here? The novel was poorly received when published in 1891 for its perceived amorality, but is it actually a morality tale? After all, neither Dorian Gray nor Henry Wotton is to be envied. Dorian was doomed by his profligate life. Lord Henry is a self-obsessed man who questions whether the coarse and common people are of the same humanity as his kind – a remark surely designed to shock. He will do and say anything for an epigram.

Wilde wrote in an 1894 letter:

[*The Picture of Dorian Gray*] contains much of me in it — Basil Hallward is what I think I am; Lord Henry, what the world thinks me; Dorian is what I would like to be — in other ages, perhaps.

None of this rings true with what we now know of Wilde’s life.

Wilde throws down the ‘art for art’s sake’ gauntlet in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*:

There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.

OR

Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming. This is a fault. Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope.

AND

We can forgive a man for making a useful thing as long as he does not admire it. The only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely. All art is quite useless.

As Wilde discovered tragically in his own life, art may certainly be useless in defending the artist against the real world.

#### **Chapter four: Late bloomer**

Lots of people have published a first book in their seventies, but perhaps no novelist has gone on to build such a successful and prolific literary career as *MARY WESLEY*. Her second novel, **The Camomile Lawn**, brought her fame and fortune. She fitted in eight other novels in a fifteen-year writing career ending with **Part of the Furniture** when she was eighty-five. With this novel 'Wild Mary' showed she had lost none of her interest in sex.

Details are unsubtly anatomical: '... those dangly bits of Jonty and Francis could expand telescopically into something quite else, something which could force an entry, and hurt' ... 'You say it grows inside and moves about?' 'Yes.' 'But how does it get out?'

*Part of the Furniture* is set in Second World War London, and later in the country. Seventeen-year-old virgin, Juno, is raped by her cousins (Jonty and Francis, also virgins). She winds up on a farm run by a widower (naturally), of good family (naturally), who is three times her age. She finds she is pregnant (naturally) and gives birth to dizygotic twins. One is fair-haired and the other is dark-haired, in case we missed the point. The chances of two conceptions each from a single act of intercourse are vanishingly small, but at least they drive the plot.

The widower (Robert) falls in love with Juno (naturally). Given his age, he nobly holds back. Surprisingly, we aren't told his height, but we may assume he's tall. As if Juno's namesake goddess is at work, Jonty and Francis pay for their wickedness in using their cousin as 'a

short cut' to experience (A) by getting killed in a military training accident (Francis) and (B) by making a loveless marriage to a suitable girl (Jonty). A violent storm threatens the farm; the twins become ill; their lives are despaired of; they pull through (naturally). Robert gives Juno the news. The lovers come together at last when Juno pulls Robert into bed:

He said, 'Oh darling, this is what's called one thing leading to another', and she said, 'I thought it was called pleasure, a hugely enjoyable pleasure, what a surprise! ...

'Have we time to do it again before we get up to go to the hospital?'

He simply said, 'Yes.' (naturally)

A coda chapter set in 1965 sees Juno and Jonty meet by chance in a London restaurant (as one does). Juno is awaiting her family; Jonty is awaiting his daughter. Both are conveniently alone. Juno is happy; Jonty is sad. We reap what we sow. Robert appears. He is eighty but looks seventy (naturally). Then come the twins, Inigo and Presto, with Jonty's daughter, Victoria. She is beautiful (naturally):

Jonty came up to Juno and with his face close to hers hissed, 'If those two are fucking my daughter it's incest.'

'And Juno said, 'Yes, it is.'

The problem with Wesley's final novel is not that it's light fiction; it's that the plot is contrived and predictable, and the characters are stereotypes.

Well born and well connected, Mary Wesley – a pen name – was born in 1912 at Englefield Green, Surrey, as Mary Aline Mynors Farmar. She was the third child of Colonel Harold Mynors Farmar, who was awarded a royal CMG decoration, and his wife, Violet, the granddaughter of a knight of the realm. Mary had Ascendancy Irish in her lineage on both sides. Wesley married first Charles, Lord Swinfen. There were two sons, one of whom was probably not Swinfen's.

Later, she married Eric Siepmann, a journalist and failed writer, by whom she had a third son.

Wesley began publishing children's books shortly before Siepmann's death in 1970. She was wretchedly poor, and the trigger was to make money. After much effort and persistence her literary career finally caught fire when she was over seventy with her first adult novel, **Jumping the Queue** (1983) – a reference to suicide. A stream of best-sellers followed. After *Part of the Furniture* there was only a photographic book about the West Country, her long-time home. She told her biographer, Patrick Marnham, that she had stopped because 'if you haven't got anything to say, don't say it.' She died in 2002 at Totnes, Devon, aged ninety. The late-flowering novelist had scooped up a CBE – the same rank of award as her father's.

Not everyone admired her work. Her brother called it 'filth'. Certainly, Wesley seemed to revel in shocking her readers with sexual encounters of the rawest kind: the bereaved father having therapeutic sex while his child lies dead upstairs; a suicidal widow getting it on with a criminal on the run; the virgin gang-raped by family. Did she write so explicitly because she was revisiting her previous rackets life or merely in the knowledge that the greater the shock the greater the sales? We need not doubt that Wesley, rebelling against her genteel background, thought sex was a good thing. As a writer she was drawn to its wilder reaches.

For young people who think that sex after fifty is either disgusting or ridiculous she had this to say:

People are startled by my books because they think, how can an old woman write about sex? As though one forgets it, as though it isn't in everything you see, breathe, watch – because sex is so enjoyable and so *funny* – how could one forget it? ... What do people think 'happy ever after' means? It goes on and on; it doesn't end.

It is the Second World War when sexual restraint was thrown out of the window that is most vividly drawn. Kathryn Hughes in an obituary tribute for the Guardian observed that Wesley's second book, *The Camomile Lawn*, established her 'reputation as a purveyor of posh smut. It gave the lie to the idea that upper-middle-class Englishwomen saw out the war, 'Mrs Miniver-style, armed only with a brave smile.' And like it or not Wesley's 'meticulous autopsies on the class-bound world of the Forties allowed her readers to wallow in the nuanced snobbery of the drawing-room'.

Wesley's sheer readability made her rich and famous.

She was descended on her mother's side from the aristocratic Wellesley family of which the Duke of Wellington was the most illustrious scion. Her pseudonym Wesley came from an ancestor who had exchanged 'Wellesley' for 'Wesley' in order to inherit a fortune. She had a bad relationship with her mother and her sister Susan; she got on better with her father but as a soldier he was away a lot. The family moved constantly across several European countries as well as England, with or without Colonel Farmar. On one occasion her restless mother left Mary, aged fifteen, alone in a French hotel for three months, her biographer Patrick Marnham reported. In view of her spiritedness and what came next, it is a wonder that she held on to her maidenhood until she was twenty-two.

Growing up, Wesley had sixteen governesses. She was poorly educated even by the standard for daughters of the gentry at that time. It hardly mattered because little was expected of the girls except polite socialising as a prelude to early marriage. Mary partly fitted that pattern, but as the Thirties rolled on she also fell in with well born Communists and developed a penchant for sleeping with Old Etonians.

Wesley didn't have to look far for material for her erotic novels. All she had to do was mine her own extraordinary life. In the Thirties

and Forties she was much at Boskenna, an idyllic Cornish estate presided over by the eccentric Colonel Camborne Paynter. His daughter Betty was as free and easy as Mary. They hunted men together. With her troubled family life, Mary valued Boskenna for the stability it offered. The grand house in the country is a constant feature in her books.

Wesley's first marriage is described by Marnham as 'semi-arranged'. Carol Swinfen's father had bought his title from Lloyd George and lived for just a week to enjoy it. His son, according to Mary, wasn't much interested in sex; nevertheless, a son, Roger, duly appeared. Highly sexed and very pretty, Wesley was soon looking elsewhere. On the conveyor belt of lovers was one who might have been a 'keeper' – Heinz Ziegler, an émigré from Bohemia. He was to serve gallantly in the wartime RAF, becoming a rear gunner when almost forty and being known to his crewmates as 'Uncle' (presumably inspired by the character in R.C. Sheriff's play **Journey's End**). Ziegler never made it to war's end. His aircraft was shot down with no survivors.

Wesley's second son, Toby, was conceived in 1940 during the Dunkirk Evacuation in circumstances where the child could be Swinfen's or Ziegler's. Mary always insisted he was Ziegler's although pre-DNA testing even she may not have been certain. Marnham explains:

She thought about Heinz, of his determination to fight, of all he had lost in Prague and of the only thing he wanted and she could give him, and waited her chance.

Many years later Wesley's admission that Ziegler was the father triggered a family feud in which Roger Swinfen tried to deny his brother Toby his inheritance on the grounds of illegitimacy. Roger's lawsuit failed but Wesley died regretting the family had been torn apart.

Despite loving Ziegler, she was not faithful to him (or he to her), let alone to Lord Swinfen. Her chief contribution to the war effort was to

be a society bike for the fighting men. She began the war as a decoder working on intercepts of German communications but declined to move to Bletchley Park – too far from the capital and its continuing social life. She seems to have retained some shadowy connection with MI5, so mysterious that even Marnham with his exhaustive research and access to the person herself could not unravel it. It wasn't enough to interfere with her hectic social and sex life.

War allowed her and others to still any doubts they had over their louche pre-war lifestyles. For many chastity was absurd when everyone, service personnel and civilians alike, could be killed at any moment. The Second World War, and in particular the sex it licensed, was the driver of Wesley's fiction. It was her own wildest period. She said that on sleepless nights she counted lovers as others counted sheep.

Some who kept to the old way of chastity came to regret it. Nancy Whelan and Martin Preston were a glamorous young couple who despite the war decided to stay chaste until marriage. Martin was killed in action. Nancy kept his picture on her dressing table for sixty-five years. She railed against the 'false morality of the times'.

Towards the end of the war Wesley tired of her promiscuous lifestyle. She said: 'Too many lovers, too much to drink ... I was on my way to becoming a very nasty person.' At this fortuitous moment she fell in love with Eric Siepmann. It was a classic case of 'faint heart ne'er won fair lady'. Seated at adjacent tables in a restaurant, Siepmann bombarded Wesley with notes passed across by waiters. These invitations were declined, and Wesley slept alone. The next morning Siepmann turned up unannounced at her hotel. By the evening they had checked in at another hotel and stayed three nights. Their union lasted a quarter-century until his death.

With Siepmann Wesley's lifestyle underwent an extraordinary change. The wartime bike became an apostle of fidelity. She wrote: 'Mental fidelity seems to me to be desperately important, and physical, because of its effect on the mental, is the same to me. I am both ...' She appears to have been faithful to Eric throughout.

The libertine who becomes a penitent is another classic about-turn. Wesley joined Eric Siepmann in becoming a Roman Catholic, to the horror of her mother, who was descended from Huguenots (French Protestants),. The seeds were perhaps sown in childhood. In Italy behind her mother's back she dipped her hands in the holy water font and crossed herself. With Heinz Ziegler she attended mass at Brompton Oratory. The appeal was the drama of the Roman rites. Both she and Siepmann were distressed when Vatican 2 swept away much of the theatricality.

After Wesley's conversion it was business as usual for sex in her books. Perhaps though her faith heightened the guilt she felt at the end of her life for her selfishness, her failings as a mother.

### **Chapter five: Winter words**

The title of this chapter has borrowed the name of *THOMAS HARDY'S* final book of poems (and final book), published posthumously in the year of his death aged eighty-seven. Hardy was at work to the end.

**Winter Words** (1928) closes with a poem written weeks before he died, *He Resolves to Say No More*. This is the last stanza of the last poem:

*And if my vision range beyond  
The blinkered sight of souls in bond,  
—By truth made free—  
I'll let all be,  
And show to no man what I see.*

These brilliant lines show Hardy's continued mastery of metre and rhyme (as well, of course, of meaning) in advanced old age.

Before *Winter Words* had come another volume of verse, **Human Shows**, published when Hardy was a mere eighty-five. His career as an active writer spanned more than half a century, from the first published novel, **Desperate Remedies** (1871).

Hardy's versatility as a master of both poetry and prose saw him nominated twice for the Nobel Prize (later won by his near-contemporary, John Galsworthy, although posterity has had no doubt who is the more major writer). Hardy was awarded one of Britain's highest honours, the Order of Merit, or OM (as was Galsworthy).

The mainly self-educated Hardy wrote novels for a living in the first phase of his career, but he saw poetry as his true vocation. He is unusual in having achieved pre-eminence in both forms. The novels include the perennially popular **Far From the Madding Crowd** (1874), **The Mayor of Casterbridge** (1886), **Tess of the d'Urbervilles** (1891) and **Jude the Obscure** (1895). Often the novels began as magazine serials, which explains their narrative pace (allied with a sometimes clunky prose style) and the cliffhanger chapter endings.

For me, the less considered **Two on a Tower** (1882) is up there with the major works. This tale of a love affair crossing age and class boundaries shows how Hardy pushed against Victorian morality.

Lady (Viviette) Constantine, married to a husband who is absent in Africa, finds that her interest in astronomy – hence the tower – turns into interest in the astronomer, the younger Swithin St Cleeve, a man of inferior social rank. When they become trapped in the tower with villagers outside, their love finds its fullest expression. The inevitable (at least in fiction) ensues. After Viviette sees an apparition of 'a golden-haired, toddling child', she finds she is pregnant:

The morning after the above-mentioned incident Lady Constantine, after meditating awhile, arose with a strange personal conviction. She realized a

condition of things that she had never anticipated, and for a moment the discovery so overwhelmed her that she thought she must die outright.

As Victorian conventions eased in the Edwardian era, Hardy could be more direct in later versions of the tale (*italics added*):

The morning after the above-mentioned incident Lady Constantine, after meditating awhile, arose with a strange personal conviction *that bore curiously on the aforesaid hallucination*. She realized a condition of things that she had never anticipated, and for a moment the discovery *of her state* so overwhelmed her that she thought she must die outright.

In a complicated sequence of events Viviette, by now widowed, marries a bishop while pregnant with Swithin's child. In an ending that seeks to satisfy the dictates of contemporary morality *and* romantic fiction, the bishop conveniently dies, Swithin returns from years abroad, the lovers are reunited – and Viviette dies of shock in his arms.

Thomas Hardy was born in 1840 at Higher Bockhampton, near Dorchester, the son of a stonemason. The boy clearly had academic potential, but because the family lacked resources he had to leave school at sixteen. He worked for five years in London as a trainee architect, then returned to Dorset where he set about developing a career as a writer. He built the house on the outskirts of Dorchester where he lived for the rest of his long life – Max Gate. The cottage at Higher Bockhampton and Max Gate are both owned by the National Trust and are open to the public.

Hardy's first novel, **The Poor Man and the Lady** (1867) – the title prefiguring the theme of *Two on a Tower* – did not find a publisher. After *Desperate Remedies* novels appeared in a steady stream; he was soon able to give up architectural work. The stories were mostly located in 'Wessex', the name of a Saxon kingdom revived by Hardy. Real towns and villages in Dorset and surrounding counties appear under invented names. For example, Dorchester becomes Casterbridge.

Among Hardy's final novels the enduringly popular *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* was widely criticised upon publication in 1891 for its sympathy with a 'fallen woman'. (Tess bore a child out of wedlock after having been seduced.) Four years later *Jude the Obscure* was pilloried for its treatment of religion and marriage.

After *Jude* although not necessarily because of it, Hardy published only poetry for the rest of his life (apart from republication in book form of an earlier serial story, **The Well-Beloved** [1897].) **Wessex Poems** (1898) was a collection of poems written over many years. As with the novels, more volumes of poetry followed in a steady stream. Much of the poetry is driven by Hardy's remorse over how he treated his first wife. He had married Emma Gifford in 1874. They became estranged. She died in 1912. Two years later he married his secretary, Florence Dugdale. He was seventy-four; she was thirty-five. There were no children of either marriage.

One of Hardy's chief concerns, as a writer and a person, was the destruction of the traditional rural way of life. He loved the characters, the speech, the songs and the lifestyles of this prelapsarian England. His generation felt the full force of Victorian industrialisation. At the start of his life people travelled no faster than the speed of a horse; at the end of it trains hurtled through the countryside at one hundred miles an hour, and people whisked through the sky at three or four times that speed. Claire Tomalin in *Thomas Hardy: The Time-Torn Man* relates how in the 1920s he continued to use a hip bath while the rest of the household enjoyed modern plumbing. Years before that, he was conscious of what was being lost by the changes sweeping England. One was the emergence of national rather than local markets and the beginning of industrial-scale farming because of the railways. Another was the early suburbanisation of the countryside for the same reason. In many ways the landscape that we fight to conserve today is the countryside as changed in Hardy's day.

In his last years Hardy became entranced with a beautiful amateur actress, Gertrude Bugler. He is said to have been in love with his literary creation Tess (of the d'Urbervilles); now he saw in Gertrude the incarnation of his most fondly imagined heroine.

Gertrude was a shining talent with the Hardy Players based in Dorchester. At thirteen she had appeared as Marty South in a dramatized version of **The Woodlanders** (1887). She had several more roles with the Players. In 1916, when she was in her late teens, a staging of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* in Hardy's own adaptation was planned with Gertrude in the title role. The 'fallen woman' objection emerged again, with the company's manager arguing that Dorchester audiences would not accept such a play. By 1924, however, the moral climate had changed and the play went ahead. Gertrude by then was Mrs Bugler (she married a cousin) with a baby. She hesitated about the part, but the manager told her that if she didn't do it 'the old man [TH] wouldn't let anyone else do it'.

Gertrude was so good that a London theatre manager watched the performance and wanted her to act Tess professionally in the capital. Florence Hardy, who had previously remarked to Hardy's executor that 'TH has lost his heart entirely', stepped in to destroy that chance. She claimed all Dorchester was talking; that if Gertrude went to London Hardy would follow, and that would be dangerous for his health. The bewildered young woman was persuaded to withdraw and so lost her life-changing opportunity.

Tomalin in *Thomas Hardy: the Time -Torn Man* thinks Florence Hardy's long campaign of denigrating Gertrude arose from jealousy. Florence felt she had usurped the first Mrs Hardy's name and place; she perhaps feared being usurped in her turn.

Gertrude Bugler lived long enough to give an extraordinary televised interview in 1990 to mark the one-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of Hardy's birth (republished by the Thomas Hardy Society and

available on YouTube). Articulate, still beautiful at ninety-three and with an animation that comes from within, she gave a detailed account of those events.

All arrangements had been made for her to go to London to play Tess. She was on the edge of departing when Mrs Hardy appeared at the Buglers' cottage in an 'agitated' state. She had come without her husband's knowledge, she said. 'You mustn't go to London,' she told the astonished young woman. 'You'll ruin his reputation.' This was surely an absurd suggestion in the circumstances.

Without apparent rancour or regret, Gertrude recalled long-ago events. Hardy took an interest in the Players' performances. He was often to be seen at rehearsals where he would politely offer suggestions: 'Don't you think ...' When as a child she appeared with her family in **The Mellstock Quire** (a play based on **Under the Greenwood Tree** [1872]), Hardy produced books of old rustic carols for the cast's use. When rehearsing Tess Gertrude told him she wasn't sure how to deliver a certain line. 'You'll know when the time comes' was his laconic reply.

She insisted that Hardy could smile and laugh, contrary to what many thought. 'He was not a pessimist ... he was a realist,' she said.

Sixty-five years later she still remembered Hardy with affection. His final words when he saw her for the last time were 'If anyone asks you if you knew Thomas Hardy, say, "Yes, he was my friend"'.

Tomalin records that Hardy kept going in the last years by 'the simple daily habit of picking up a pen'. What for many authors is the key to successful writing became for him the key to survival. He told a visitor, 'It's important not to wait for the right mood. If you do it will come less and less.'

He even wrote verse on the day of his death. One was a mock epitaph to G.K. Chesterton, a convert from Anglicanism and

prominent Roman Catholic proselytiser. The rationalist Hardy was bound to dislike Chesterton's views:

*The literary contortionist*

*Who prove and never turn a hair*

*That Darwin's theories were a snare ...*

*And if one with him could not see*

*He'd shout his choice word 'Blasphemy'.*

The poet's grammar and metre finally slipped but what a superb example of dying with your boots on! Hours after dictating this to Florence, Hardy had a heart attack. He had been weakening for some time. Mrs Hardy asked the doctor what the matter was. He replied: 'Old age.'

When Hardy died in 1928 his ashes were interred in Westminster Abbey, and his heart was buried with his first wife at Stinsford, near Dorchester. Gertrude Bugler was among the mourners in Stinsford churchyard.

*P.G. (Pelham Grenville) WODEHOUSE* also was at work to the end. His final, uncompleted book was published after his death in 1975 aged ninety-three. He was working on the aptly titled **Sunset at Blandings** (1977) when he went into hospital and died unexpectedly. The result is sixteen out of the projected twenty-two chapters, with an indication of how the story was to end assembled from the copious notes Wodehouse left behind (many of which are reprinted in the book).

*Sunset at Blandings* is best read as an epitaph in which behind the scenes we see a great professional writer at work. The chapters are short and the writing often laboured, with little of the familiar verbal brilliance. Some passages, though, have the familiar Wodehouse ring:

Here was plainly a niece whose soul had been passed through the wringer, a niece who had drained the bitter cup and, what is more, had found a dead mouse at the bottom of it [*used before, apparently*] ... He [Beach] then melted away as softly and gracefully as was within the power of a butler who would never see fourteen stone again ... The sun was shining as brightly as ever, the birds and bees respectively singing and buzzing .... 'We are carefree. We sing tra la la.' 'Would you go as far as that?' 'Omitting perhaps the final la!'

The editor, Richard Usborne, claims Wodehouse would have fixed the shortcomings. In his later years he developed the distressing habit of 'writing short'. In his prime he easily wrote to length, with the metaphors, similes, puns and verbal felicities pouring out. Now all this had to be put in later.

Wodehouse's penultimate book, and his last complete book, is **Aunts Aren't Gentlemen** (1974), a Jeeves and Wooster story – together with *Sunset* an appropriate ending to an extraordinary, seventy-five-year writing career. The world of Blandings Castle and Jeeves and Wooster are his enduring comic creations.

The settings, the characters and the plots have the flavour of musical comedies. This is no accident: Wodehouse was a prolific writer of musical comedies, collaborating with Jerome Kern and Guy Bolton. He was briefly – and unsuccessfully – a Hollywood scriptwriter.

For Wodehouse, who lived to write, the real world obtruded in 1940 when he was captured with his wife at their French home by the invading Germans. He was interned for a year, then released to live in a hotel. From Berlin he made a series of radio broadcasts that caused fury in beleaguered Britain. The broadcasts were merely humorous comments on the tribulations of internment, but the Nazis saw their propaganda potential clearly enough. At home Wodehouse was denounced as a traitor and a coward.

The British security authorities declared that he had been 'unwise' but decided there was no basis for further action. Although the general public mood was hostile, some felt Wodehouse had simply

been naïve. He himself admitted years later that it was ‘a loony thing to do’. Several famous names supported him including George Orwell, who wrote of Wodehouse’s ‘complete lack—so far as one can judge from his printed works—of political awareness’.

Orwell’s essay *In Defence of P.G. Wodehouse* argued that the broadcasts convicted the writer only of stupidity. He was no traitor because [Wodehouse’s] ‘moral outlook has remained that of a public-school boy, and according to the public-school code, treachery in time of war is the most unforgivable of all the sins’.

The suggestion of political naivety had been made years before when he bit the Hollywood hand that fed him. Uproar followed an interview in which he railed against the industry’s inefficiency, dictatorial decision-making and waste of talent – all of which was true in the interwar period.

He never returned to Britain after the war. The sexagenarian Wodehouse still had almost thirty years to live. He spent them in the United States, writing to the end, as we have seen. Hostility in Britain evaporated slowly until it was replaced by a feeling that he had been simply naïve. In 1974 he was awarded a knighthood. A month later he died.

*JAMES LOVELOCK* published **The Revenge of Gaia** (a neat title) in 2006, his eighty-eighth year (with selected chapters reissued in 2021 as **We Belong to Gaia**). The prolific environmental scientist gave one last blast of the trumpet with **Novacene** (2019) before dying in 2022 on his one-hundred-and-third birthday.

Lovelock formulated the Gaia Hypothesis in the 1960s, proposing that Earth (Gaia) is a single, self-regulating organism. The interactions between various living and non-living parts maintain a stable ecosystem and hence the equable climate that human beings and all living creatures depend on. This homeostasis is maintained with

negative feedback loops that counteract changes to parts away from their target values.

Of course, Earth's climate is in constant change, but these changes naturally occur over aeons. Global heating caused by carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases is now occurring at threatening speed through the intrusions of humanity:

Because we are tribal animals, the tribe does not act in unison until a real and present danger is perceived. This has not yet happened; consequently, as individuals, we go our separate ways while the ineluctable forces of Gaia marshal against us ... By changing the environment we have unknowingly declared war on Gaia.

As the emerging middle classes around the world demand Western lifestyles and the consumption that goes with it, and as the West fails to moderate its consumption in significant ways, the 'war on Gaia' has stepped up.

Lovelock was a green who backed nuclear power and opposed sustainable development. Explaining his apparently contradictory views, he argued that nuclear fission is the only relatively clean technology presently able to provide energy on the scale needed. It is a stopgap until nuclear fusion, the energy that powers the Sun, is possible. Sustainable development might have been possible two hundred years ago when Earth's human population was a fraction of its present size but 'now is much too late; the damage has already been done'.

It follows that sustainable development as advocated by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and governments of the world in the Kyoto Agreement (2005 – *since replaced by the Paris Agreement, 2016*) is the wrong approach:

Many consider this noble policy morally superior to the *laissez faire* of business as usual. Unfortunately for us, these wholly different approaches, one the expression of international decency, the other of unfeeling market forces, have the same outcome: the probability of disastrous global change. *The error they*

*share is the belief that further development is possible* (italics added) ... (*The Revenge of Gaia*.)

Instead, Lovelock advocates 'sustainable retreat'. It will take extraordinary international effort if civilisation is not to be put at risk in the present century. But humanity, as mentioned above, is tribal, and when the tribe senses peril it can do remarkable things: 'In wartime we accept severe rationing of food and consumer goods; we willingly work for longer hours and face great danger, and some even eagerly face death.' Lovelock lived long enough to witness how in a time of danger people co-operated with the Covid lockdowns, but also how the economic challenges of sustainable retreat might play out with its interruptions of food supply, hospitality, motoring and flying (among other sectors).

A vision of how 'sustainable retreat' might be managed with global equity was provided in the 1990s by the Global Commons Institute with its Contraction and Convergence initiative. Here all countries, the rich and the poor, produce the same level of greenhouse gases per head so that emissions are reduced to a safe level. But for sure, only a clear and present danger will persuade the world's populations, especially in the West, to accept a *permanent* reduction in their living standards. Contraction and convergence also implies a scary extent of government control over our lives. After the experience of Covid who would bet against it?

Doomsday predictions or prescient warnings? Nothing much has changed for the better since Lovelock wrote *The Revenge of Gaia*; quite the opposite, in fact. The hot air expended in talking about climate change adds yet more atmospheric carbon.

In extreme old age James Lovelock, born when the aeroplane was a novelty and the motor car was the preserve of the rich, embraced the possibilities of Artificial Intelligence (AI). *Novacene* was co-authored with Bryan Appleyard. Lovelock speaks of being 'ninety-

nine as I write this'. On the other hand, Appleyard clearly played a large part in the final text: 'I actually had to ask him to stop thinking and start explaining, otherwise the task would never have been completed.' And what a vision of the future and the cosmos is the result!

Lovelock asserts that the Anthropocene age of human beings, which has governed Earth for three hundred years, is ending and will be replaced by the Novacene age of computer programs – that is, the next evolutionary phase will be electronic not biological. AI will take on an independent existence, with cyber-people thinking ten thousand times faster than humans. The cyber-people will regard us as we regard plants. Critically, the time will come, probably sooner than expected, when humanity won't be able to 'pull the plug'. To an extent, though, Lovelock is optimistic about our future:

Machines will need organic life to keep the planet at a habitable temperature – it will suit robots to keep us around.

The analogy with plants is inescapable. Unlike plants (presumably) humans will know we are no. 2. We don't seem equipped to deal with that.

Challenging as these ideas are, we can hold them in our hands compared with the Lovelock's musings on the cosmos (the universe). Its prime objective is to convert matter and radiation into information, which powers evolution, which in turn means conscious beings must come into existence.

The sense of a purposive cosmos is consistent with Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis where Earth (Gaia), while not conscious in a human sense, acts to maintain the planet at a suitable temperature for the life forms existing at the time.

The digital bit is the fundamental particle from which the universe is formed. Cosmologists John Barrow and Frank Tipler, extending the anthropic principle (see next), suggest that information is an innate

property of the universe. Perhaps the whole cosmos is on the way to becoming self-conscious.

The anthropic principle, on which these thoughts are based, was proposed in 1957 by Robert Dicke. It asserts that it must be the kind of cosmos that can produce thinking beings because we are here to observe it. And it even appears to be fine-tuned to produce us.

God is obviously a possible explanation. As I struggled to understand Lovelock's ideas, lines from a hymn by Arthur Campbell Ainger pulsed in my thoughts: 'God is working his purpose out as year succeeds to year ...'

Lovelock poses the inevitable question:

So can we say the purpose of the cosmos is to produce and sustain intelligent life? This is tantamount to a religious statement – not in the sense of the stories in which I don't believe but in the sense of a deep truth in which I do.

The 'new atheists and their secular fellow travellers' – Lovelock might have added most scientists – in their dislike of religion have 'thrown the baby of truth out with the bathwater of myth'.

James Ephraim Lovelock was born in London and brought up as a Quaker. He was a prolific inventor, throughout his long career working as an independent scientist. Among his many consultancies was NASA, where he developed instruments for the Mars programme. With his knowledge of gases – also a key element of the Gaia Hypothesis – he inferred that Mars could not support life, a conclusion that has been proved right many times since.

Lovelock invented the electron capture detector, which helped to reveal the damage that chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) were doing to the atmospheric ozone layer. He concluded wrongly that CFCs were no toxic threat, a misstep that may have cost him the Nobel Prize. It went to other scientists building on his initial findings.

He was showered with honours and academic awards, among them the highly prestigious Companion of Honour (CH). He was a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE). This is one level below a knighthood, which Lovelock ought to have got. The 'K' is harder to come by for those without an institutional post – a price he must have thought worth paying for a life of independence.

### **Chapter six: Endnote: a gun called AI**

The profession of letters is staring down the barrel of a gun called artificial intelligence. Humanity has always been prone to catastrophise so fears about AI may be yet another doomsday scenario that doesn't come to pass. Or it may not be.

It is hard to see the subtleties and insights of so-called literary fiction being replicated by an algorithm because they come from the writer's experience of being human. Likewise with factual books in areas like medicine and history. Here new ideas and connections need to be spotted and evaluated. But great swathes of mass-market fiction and textbooks look to be vulnerable.

Many a writer of light fiction has made a good living for years by writing the same book over and over again. The plotlines are formulaic and the characters are stereotypes. (When for instance is a hero not described as 'tall'?) This is what the various genres dictate. One feels that this material could very well be written by AI. Surely it soon will be. Maybe it already has been.

While textbooks are obviously vulnerable to AI, so too are books that reiterate known facts. Books embodying original research look to be beyond the reach of AI for the foreseeable future and perhaps forever – although note the prescient warning of James Lovelock in chapter five.

In truth, no one knows where we are going with this or how rapidly we will get there. Perhaps the professional writers of years to come

will be like the poets of today – a tiny group mainly needing a second job to make ends meet. Or, more optimistically, like today's artisanal potters. Crockery is produced by the million, but there remains a place and a market for the hand-made bowl.