

ALSo...

The Journal of the Alliance of Literary Societies

Volume 12 – 2018

UNRELIABLE NARRATORS





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Volume 12, 2018

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Editor: Linda J Curry

If you wish to contribute an article to the 2019 edition of this journal, please contact Linda Curry by email to ljc1049@gmail.com or by post to 59 Bryony Road, Selly Oak, Birmingham B29 4BY, by 1 March 2019.

The theme for 2018 will be 'When Writers Attack: Authors in the Public Sphere'. Some examples of the sort of thing this might cover are:

- Rants about changes in law (e.g. John Clare and the Enclosures Act)
- Attacks on social mores, women's rights, etc. (Austen, Wolstencraft, Dickens, etc.)
- Fighting censorship, law suits, etc.

As always, the theme is broad – open to many forms of interpretation and the above are just some ideas.

Would someone from your society be willing to contribute a piece for the journal – of around 1,000 to 1,500 words? If so, I would be delighted to hear from you. Remember – it's good advertising for your society!

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Editorial

Firstly, I would like to point out (if you haven't noticed!) that we have a new cover. This has been designed to bring the journal 'look' into line with publicity material (brochures and bookmarks). I hope you like it.

The theme 'Unreliable Narrators' came about when we were searching for a title for a team we put together for the BBC quiz programme Eggheads last year. Many of you will have seen our valiant effort, both in the original run and the reshooting they did this year.

I hope you will enjoy reading these articles as much as I have. I think that Cally's piece sets the tone perfectly and by the time you get to the end of the journal you will never entirely trust anything you read again!

The reader is part of the unfolding story. A writer may (or may not) intend 'a meaning' but, as with all art, the piece is only 'whole' when it has been read/viewed. The writer might distort the story with an unreliable narrator, but the story may be further distorted by the interpretation put upon it by the 'unreliable' reader. Perhaps that is what makes reading such an enjoyable activity!

As always, my thanks to the contributors, without whom there would be no journal. So, happy reading!

Linda J Curry

Unreliable Narrators I Have Read (and Written)

Cally Phillips

A young J. M. Barrie wrote an anonymous serial in 1889 for 'Young Man' Magazine entitled *Young Men I Have Met*. So I thought I would steal and paraphrase his title. It seemed a somewhat appropriate act of homage for a piece on unreliable narrators.

I am a sucker for quotes - and for reading meaning into words. When I try (and fail) to explain my views on 'great' fiction, I find myself toiling to explain that the words as written on the page are really only one dimension of the deal. In music, people talk of the significance of the space between the sounds. For me, it's the ideas lurking in another dimension beyond the written marks on paper that are the joy and power of writing. I often resort to the following quote from that fine novella - made into an equally fine film (and that's rare, isn't it?) - *A River Runs Through It* when I try to explain my own relationship to books:

'Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world's great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs. I am haunted by waters.'

Apart from the obvious shades of The Bible *'in the beginning was the word'* (and how reliable are the narrators in that work?) mostly I love the quote because I think it comes as close as I can to explaining how I feel words work on the mind of the reader.

At the core of it all is an uncertainty. This uncertainty I find tantalising in fiction in general, and almost irresistible in works with unreliable narrators.

It's not always a clear-cut argument, of course. Would you, for example, count Nick Caraway in *The Great Gatsby* as an unreliable narrator? There are two camps and which you fall in with will determine your interpretation of the meaning of the novel. I have read critiques which question his honesty, his intelligence and his emotional stability - and others which offer completely the opposite 'reading.' The line *'Gatsby turned out all right in the end'* is key to whichever view you end up taking.

And then there is the perennial Brontë exam question *'Heathcliff, hero or villain?'* My point is that, with the suggestion of unreliability, narratives are opened up to much wider reader interpretation - which has, I think, to be a good thing. To give an unreliable misquote; *'We read, as we live, alone.'*

Whilst we can share what we read, I love nothing better than talking about writing and writers (and I suspect that, as fellow literary society members, you will be of a similar mind-set). We do still experience the words firstly alone and, unless we read aloud, in the privacy of our own mind.

Books become part of our identity, I'm sure of it. And surely, since we fundamentally experience them through our individual experiences, they are actually part of our personal identity before (if ever) they become part of our social identity. Anyway, these are the things I think about when I read and write unreliable narrators.

Unreliable narrators course through my veins. I have lived and breathed and bled them since I first encountered two in one novel – in *Wuthering Heights*. That book changed the way I saw the world and set me on the path to becoming a writer myself. Nelly Dean and Mr Lockwood are undoubtedly my favourites, their narratives are woven so skilfully into the perceptive depths of this most incredible of novels that if I could only read one book for the rest of my life, *Wuthering Heights* would be it – and I wouldn't feel cheated.

The phrase 'Unreliable Narrator' was coined by Wayne C. Booth in his 1961 work *The Rhetoric of Fiction* - a book I still turn to when writing my own fiction. I like to focus on narrative structure and, of course, unreliable narrators (as well as implied authors) in my own fictional work, which tends to focus (underneath the plot and the words) on issues of reality, identity, memory and time.

The fact that readers will argue over the reliability of a narrator is, I think, significant. From Satan in *Paradise Lost* onwards, it is possible to discuss and argue over the intentions of character (and author) with regard to unreliability across a wide spectrum of books. In defence (should it be needed) of the use of unreliable narrators, I would say: People aren't reliable. Truth isn't reliable. So why expect characters and/or narrators to be?

I read a lot, but my particular favourite is 19th c. fiction, especially late 19th c. Scottish writers. And here I have found two Scots masters of the art of unreliable narration. In J. M. Barrie's *Sentimental Tommy*, and its sequel *Tommy and Grizel*, we have perhaps the most perfect example of an unreliable narrator – the very novels seem to be about the concept of unreliable narrators – and Barrie, as author, is a master in playing (and playing with) wielding his pen as a fisherman plays his rod. Barrie was often referred to as a 'genius' in his day, and I suspect that many who know no more of him than *Peter Pan* would imagine this to be hyperbole. No. He really is a genius of a writer. Trust me.

Then there is S. R. Crockett, who employs the unreliable narrator in a particularly interesting way. He sets up his protagonists so that they might see themselves as romantic heroes, and then, by clearly revealing to us, the readers, their shortcomings, via a hefty dollop of Scots humour, he cuts them off at the knees. Often, they are unreliable narrators of their own youthful lives. The layers of narration in Crockett's work take it from popular fiction to something deeper – if you are prepared, or interested, to look.

An issue that attracts me greatly in fiction is the exploration of the relationship between memory and identity. Whether the unreliable narrator as device is primarily designed to explore this issue I am not sure, but it is what I often read into such works. Each to his own. I am sure there are all kinds of other novels with all kinds of unreliable narrators.

Lots of people like thrillers or crime/mystery novels. I believe the appeal is often to do with solving clues rather than an obsession with 'evil'. I am not drawn to such works but I find the moment when one discovers that the person telling you the story is not who you thought they were, to be the highest pleasure I can get in reading (and perhaps in writing). My own conduit to that pleasure tends to be the unreliable narrator. In my own two Cuba novels *Another World is Possible* and *The One that Got Away* the twists in the plot that serve as 'suspense' come from unreliable narration. On reflection, all my novels feature unreliable narrators in one way or another. Perhaps it is a unifying theme between works of quite different styles and stories.

Unreliable narrators unlock the key to something profound for me as reader and writer. They remind us that the lines between fact and fiction (in life, as in art) are immeasurably, irretrievably and perhaps inevitably blurred. They open up possibilities and challenge the reader. Is Heathcliff a hero or villain? Did Gatsby end up all right in the end? Is Roisin Che Guevara's love child? What exactly is a happy ending? Never mind issues of judging books by their covers – the question is: who can you trust in fiction? The answer is for each and every reader to discover for themselves. This, I conclude is a good, if not the best, thing about the joy and wonder of reading.

- ooOoo -

The Effect of a Bang on the Head - The Unreliable Narrator in *Traitor's Purse* by Margery Allingham

Jennifer Palmer

Unreliable narrators have been a feature of recently successful psychological crime fiction - *The Girl on a Train* and *Gone Girl* come to mind immediately. Has this approach featured in Golden Age Crime Fiction (from the end of WW1 to the end of WW2)? The stories of Conan Doyle were still being published in the 1920s and they continued the use of Dr. Watson as a reliable narrator of Sherlock's cases. The writers who came to the fore in the 1920s normally had a great detective but often gave him a more contemporary feel. Agatha Christie's Poirot and Miss Marple, Dorothy L. Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey and Margery Allingham's Albert Campion are as successful as Holmes, but have different approaches.

These writers do experiment with the field of crime fiction and can use unreliable narrators. Sometimes, the problems come with the inaccurate memories of assorted witnesses, but there are two particular examples of unreliability in the narration from Christie and Allingham. Agatha Christie has *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* narrated by an inherently unreliable narrator, as we discover at the end of the book, and Margery Allingham uses her usual detective to narrate in *Traitor's Purse* but makes him a doubtful purveyor of information. Let's concentrate on that book and the figure of Albert Campion.

The book is set during the Phoney War of 1939 - 40 and reflects beautifully the uncertainties of that era. The story begins with a man awakening in a hospital bed and hearing voices apparently discussing him as a criminal. Gradually, he realises that he does not know who he is: a narrator unreliable even to himself!

He lies there trying to build up a picture of himself. A primitive instinct drives him to escape from the hospital. He finds a difficult world outside. He is picked up by a car but on roads denuded of signs or lighting in an area with which he is unfamiliar. The Wartime removal of street signs was to prevent any Germans who landed being able to find their way around. The lack of lights was protection against the revelation of information to German bombers. Neither of these eventualities had yet occurred (except possibly the landing of German spies).

There are two layers of reading in this book, relating to the reader's knowledge of the previous works of Margery Allingham. Those readers with such knowledge are instantly aware that this is her detective Albert Campion and this colours their interpretation of events. For a reader who is unfamiliar with Allingham's oeuvre, the realisation of his identity is signalled as events develop.

His name is established fairly quickly but his relationship to the young woman, Amanda, is still problematic. He wonders if she is his wife (she isn't) and he fumbles an introduction of her by calling her Miss (she is actually Lady Amanda Fitton). The fog in Campion's mind lifts occasionally, as fog is wont to do, and he remembers a lot of things about himself and his mission. The burning sense of urgency is sustained from the very beginning and worsened by his inability to remember and, therefore, his inability to signal to readers what he is trying to do.

Another factor sustained throughout is the confusion in people's minds in the Phoney War period. The insidious development of the domination of war over ordinary life by 1941, when this book was published, can be seen by the various limitations, as mentioned earlier with the blackout taking great attention. People are worried about a Fifth Column and quislings in Britain. The way the secret work of a government department into weaponry is guarded in a

fairly desultory way shows that wartime controls have a long way to go. Later in the book, Albert Campion is able to abstract a weapon from the facility with no difficulty.

Albert's unreliability as a witness is compounded when he is hit on the head again and awakens to remember what had happened immediately before the initial blow on the head but ignorant of happenings between that point and his current situation. He remembers who he was with when he was injured and

“longs for a newspaper. He hadn't seen the news from the Front for 17 hours. Anything might have happened. There was this business too. The whole thing might have suddenly broken and what had been left of the ordered world be in chaos while he was sitting here.”

He thinks of Amanda in an hallucination that is so vivid that he thinks he is ill. He also realises that he is locked in a police cell and cannot persuade the turnkey to release him since he injured several police in his frenzy before he was struck for the second time. He is totally shocked and struck by his own unreliability when he realises that he is wearing a suit that should have been in his wardrobe and was not the one he had worn at the point that he remembers. Furthermore, the suit was dirty and crumpled so he had given it hard wear for some time. He must have been in the cell for some time he thinks. Then Amanda arrives outside the cell door and suddenly the picture of the last 36 hours becomes clear and he can put together all his memories.

The dénouement develops as he manages to get himself released. This is organised by Superintendent Hutch to whom Campion can now tell the full information on his mission (previously forgotten). Albert is horrified to discover that a lack of spoken response from Hutch is because Albert had cracked his jaw in the last fight! Another result of his unreliability when he had lost his memory.

The US title for this book was *The Sabotage Murder Mystery*, referring to the central issue of the thriller, now revealed by a no longer unreliable narrator. There was a plan to distribute counterfeit currency provided by the Germans. Margery's idea was that quislings were planning to de-stabilise Great Britain by flooding it with forged money which was apparently issued by the Government to poor people. Some reviewers thought this to be too far-fetched, but Himmler's SS were indeed planning such a thing. They had used concentration camp prisoners to make false British currency. Examples of this were found in a lake in the 1960s. The villain is not a Nazi or even a Nazi sympathiser but a deluded homegrown megalomaniac (though this does refer to Hitler in a way). The verdict on this man, Lee Aubrey, is delivered more in sorrow than in anger as “This is not even the stuff that dictators are made of,” which does bring us back to the position of Britain facing Hitler.

Margery Allingham commented at the time that she was “always hoping that the end of one thriller would not overtake me before I had finished the other” (quoted in Julia Jones's Biography *The Adventures of Margery Allingham*). Julia Jones also comments that *Traitor's Purse* was written as Britain got news of the Nazi invasion of Norway, the surrender of Belgium, the defeat of Holland and the evacuation of British Expeditionary Force. “It was completed in the week of the fall of France. Collaboration and treachery were in the air.”

The unreliable narrator certainly reflects the Phoney War period though, perhaps, his recovery and successful defeat of the plot against Britain show a feeling of optimism that recovery is possible.

- ooOoo -

A Bridge into Nothingness: Metaphor and Metafiction in Karin Fossum's *Broken*

John Lingard

Karin Fossum is best known as the author of the mystery series featuring Norwegian Inspector Konrad Sejer.

Unlike Jo Nesbø's alcoholic and violent detective Harry Hole, Sejer is calm and self-disciplined. In her first Sejer novel *Evas øye* [Eva's eye] (1996), Fossum describes her detective as "*reservert*" [reserved] (10). He is content with one cigarette and a glass of whisky in the evening. His investigative technique is marked by a "*behov for system*" [need for systems] (43), a quality that will be important in *Brudd* [Broken] (2007).

In keeping with her professionally successful, if reserved, detective, Fossum sets her novels in small towns and country districts near Drammen, a city 43 k. southwest of Oslo. Nesbø's novels are relatively long and driven by a considerable degree of sex and violence. In strong contrast, Fossum's novels are compact, and her milieu and characters are realistic and *ordinary*. Murder in Fossum's world is rarely committed by evil or psychopathic killers. Violence occurs when, to borrow one of her titles, *Djevelen holder lyset* (1999) [The devil holds the candle (2004)] to middle-class people who have hitherto led respectable lives.

Broken marks a departure for Fossum in that it is not, strictly speaking, crime fiction. An unnamed detective who is clearly, from his description, Konrad Sejer, does make two brief appearances (243, 246-50), but the novel is primarily a subtle exercise in psychology and metafiction. The narrative alternates between the female narrator's first-person voice in the present tense, and a past perfect third person narrative centred on a single male character.

In the first section (there are no numbered chapters), we meet the narrator who is looking down on a long line of characters visible in her front yard light. In a startling phrase, we learn that they "*venter å bli fortalt*" [are waiting to be told] (7). Many readers will at once connect the scene with Luigi Pirandello's famous *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. We will soon learn, however, that there is an important difference between that play and Fossum's novel. Whereas Pirandello's characters already have a complete life history that they, most notably the Father and the Stepdaughter, hope an author, or as it turns out a theatre company, will turn from sordid melodrama into high tragedy. Fossum's characters have no lives at all. They are simply characters without a past or even names. At most, they have gender, age, and to judge from their clothes, a social level.

The first two characters outside the narrator's door are a woman holding a dead baby and behind her a man in his early forties. Feeling too tired to start a new story, the narrator fetches her cat, delightfully named Gandalf, from the porch, climbs to her combined bedroom and study on the second floor, and settles down for a night's sleep. She is, however, disturbed by the sound of someone entering her house, climbing the stairs, and settling in her bedside chair. It is the second character who has jumped the queue (11).

When the startled narrator asks him what he wants he replies: "*Jeg venter på å bli fortalt*" [I am waiting to be told (3)]. After a period of considerable resistance, the narrator agrees and gives the man a name: *Alvar Eide*.

This first encounter between author and character establishes what could be called the conflict-structure of the story: a struggle for control. When the man insists on being given a name, he remarks that the author needs to have control over everything that happens in her stories (11). She, on her part, has already complained that, by jumping the queue, Alvar has disturbed her system which she needs: “otherwise she loses control” (14). She “wins” the question of a name — he wishes to be called Torstein which she, not without malice, says is right for a strong man, whereas Alvar is “a little weak” (17). However, he insists that she begin to give him a life the next morning, a phenomenon that has never occurred in her professional experience (18).

The narrator is not alone in being bewildered by this opening scene. Fossum has made it clear that the narrator is ... Karin Fossum. The narrator is 51, almost exactly the age Fossum would have been when she began the novel which was first published in 2006, its author having been born in 1954. Moreover, Alvar knows that the narrator writes crime fiction novels. Towards the end of the novel, events will bring a detective to his door, who by description is clearly Konrad Sejer (243). This merging of novelist and fictional narrator, not to mention the fictional Alvar Eide, creates a *mise en abîme* more puzzling than such well-known examples of metafiction as Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* (1962) and John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969).

The longer sections of the novel are devoted to Alvar’s story. He lives alone a short distance from Drammen where he works as an assistant for Ole Krantz, the owner of an art gallery. In what for convenience I will call Alvar’s real life, he is moderately content. However, during his “sessions” with the narrator, he at first wants his life to become more exciting. Taking him at his word, and somewhat further, she complicates his existence in two ways.

The first is a large Swedish oil painting that Krantz has bought for the gallery and values at 70,000.00 kroner, exactly equal to Alvar’s current savings. Alvar is overwhelmed by the painting. It is “wonderfully dark and strong”. It represents a bridge that curves up from one side of a deep ravine and almost disappears in a “misty darkness”. Nonetheless, the viewer realises that the bridge has been either broken by a ship, or simply abandoned halfway across the ravine. So, the bridge led out into nothingness] (86). The painting speaks to Alvar in “all its somber stillness” (87); he thinks: “it is for me”: an image of his soul in which something “had been torn away” (89).

The narrator pushes him beyond anxiety into fear. A sixteen-year old girl wholly dependent on drugs enters the store in the cold of winter. She is half-punk, half-beggar, and he knows he should show her the door. However, out of pity and lack of will power, he gives her a coffee, beginning a disastrous relationship that will empty his savings account and end with her death from a cerebral haemorrhage in his apartment (259). Fearing that he has caused her death by giving her money for drugs, Alvar wraps her body in a rug, drives out into the forest, and leaves her on a path.

As the narrator knows, he is gay and there is no question of a sexual relationship between a middle-aged man and a girl who is little more than a child. While this dark history takes its course, Alvar repeatedly returns to the narrator to plead for a way out; but she tells him she must finish the story in *her* way not *his* (232).

The police are, of course, swift to arrest Alvar. He is let off lightly with only a six months sentence (260), thanks to a calm and sympathetic defence lawyer with whom he will enter a lifelong friendship. Ole Krantz gives him back his job, and he returns to thank the narrator for giving him a frightening but ultimately beneficial experience.

As metafiction, *Broken* both satisfies the reader with its literary excellence but leaves them with unanswered questions. I have had considerable experience as a professional actor and university theatre instructor, and I know that acting involves a double consciousness. You can be “deep into a role” yet, at the same time, you are always aware that you are acting, that there is an audience, that you have forgotten a prop, in my case a lighter for a cigar; and so it goes. Is Alvar, in his real life, aware that he a character? At what point does he “break off,” so to speak, and decide to revisit the narrator? Is the narrator aware that she is a fictional version of Karin Fossum? Finally, what exactly does the painting of a bridge into nothingness represent? My guess — and it is a guess — is that Fossum wants us to know that fiction, even at its best is like a broken bridge: it can take us so far. It is up to us to be always building and rebuilding our fractured lives.

Translations from the Norwegian are my own.

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John Betjeman – The Unreliable Narrator

Lance Pierson

John Betjeman is in large measure a narrative poet. He said himself that he could not write abstract poems on abstract themes. What inspired him was things he saw or heard or did; he re-told them neat, or his imagination turned them into fuller-blown stories.

His magnum opus is the verse autobiography of his first 23 years: *Summoned by Bells*. His model was Wordsworth's early-life story, *The Prelude*. But, many of his shorter poems are narratives too.

Among the most famous are the historical 'The Arrest of Oscar Wilde' and the fictitious 'A Subaltern's Love Song' (the one about Joan Hunter Dunn, a made-up story about a nonetheless real person). Even when he does not set out to tell a story exactly, the poem often takes on a narrative shape. 'Diary of a Church Mouse' quickly moves from the rodent's everyday existence to take us through the welcome and less welcome goings on during Harvest Festival. Even a lightweight literary exercise like 'How to Get On in Society', listing all the non-U 'social error' phrases condemned in Nancy Mitford's books, turns into a narrative monologue. It starts "Phone for the fish-knives, Norman", leading to "do use the couch for your feet; I know what I wanted to ask you ...". Betjeman was a born narrator.

And, many of the stories he told in his poems were about himself. He is probably the most autobiographical of our poets. I am not thinking only of *Summoned by Bells*. He worked up towards it with a draft he called 'The Epic'. Parts of it that he did not use in *Summoned* appeared in the published poem 'North Coast Recollections' (the north coast in question being that of Cornwall). And there are other poems about his early life, written around the same time, which show that his mind was reflecting on his memories. Some, such as 'Sunday Afternoon Service in St. Enodoc Church, Cornwall' and 'Beside the Seaside', are in the same discursive blank verse as most of *Summoned*. Others are more tersely told in rhyme: 'Norfolk', 'False Security' and 'N.W.5 & N.6' are clear examples.

But, the autobiographical bent of his mind shaped his poems throughout his life. Nowhere is this more blatant than in his 'A Ballad of the Investiture 1969', about Prince Charles being made Prince of Wales. The poem has seven verses. The first two recount the dinner party at which Charles commissioned it; the next two, Betjeman's own train journey to Caernarvon; and the last three finally reach the ceremony - but all told from Betjeman's eyewitness viewpoint. Somehow, this makes the closing couplet's full focus on the Prince all the more devastatingly powerful and poignant: "You knelt a boy, you rose a man. / And thus your lonelier life began."

So far, so clear. But often the autobiography is disguised. One of Betjeman's shortest, but most popular, poems is 'In a Bath Teashop', dating from 1944, when his war work with the Ministry of Information seconded him to the Admiralty in Bath. He pictures a couple "for a moment, little lower than the angels / In the teashop's ingle-nook", so uplifting was their love. And yet, he confides, she was "such a very ordinary little woman"; he "such a thumping crook". *Crook?* Our curiosity is instantly hooked: surely there must be more of a story to tell. And, indeed, there is. Thirty-five years later, near the end of his life, Betjeman admitted that the poem was about him: he was having a fling with Alice Jennings while away from his wife

and home. No wonder he feels a thumping crook; he is playing around with one woman whilst betraying another.

This discovery that the poem is autobiographical immediately throws doubt on the narrator and his motives. All autobiography is self-serving, even if unconsciously. It selects and relates the events subjectively and seeks to justify the author's behaviour. In this case, what are we now to make of elevating the lovers "little lower than the angels"? Is Betjeman trying to compensate himself for his sense of guilt? Or, knowing him, is it ironic with tongue ruefully in cheek?

So, all his autobiographical poems, and even prose, are, if not fake news, at least unreliable. We have to take them with a measure of caution, and see if there is other evidence to help evaluate them.

One example that misled even his definitive biographer Bevis Hillier comes in one of his very best poems, 'St. Saviour's, Aberdeen Park, Highbury, London, N.' In the poem, he calls St Saviour's the "Great red church of my parents". Of the surrounding parish, he says, "These were the streets my parents knew when they loved and won" and underlines it by repeating, "These were the streets they knew". It was perfectly reasonable for Bevis to conclude that Betjeman's parents were married there, especially when the poem insists, "Over these same encaustics they and their parents trod". But, it is not true. I have a copy of their marriage certificate which shows they were married, not in Highbury, but at Christ Church, Brondesbury, a quite different North-West London suburb; both were living in neighbouring streets, his mother seemingly with her parents. So, what was their poet son, our John Betjeman, playing at?

He had a romantic imagination. He liked to reinvent his life mentally to how he would prefer it to have been. He disliked much of his time at his public school, Marlborough College. It was music to his ears when a friend at University rewrote the past for him: "Spiritually, John, we were all at Eton." Later, when he wrote his poem 'Harrow-on-the-Hill' for the Harrow School magazine, he told a family gathering, "I was at Harrow in all but fact." So to with Aberdeen Park: these were the streets he liked to imagine his parents in; it is where they *should* have lived; the church they really belonged to in spirit. What a nightmare for any poor biographer!

Even when relating events that certainly happened, Betjeman introduces discrepancies.

When he was aged 8 or so, he was a victim of schoolboy bullying that made such an impression that he wrote about it twice in poems and once in prose. Hillier judiciously suggests that the prose account, being the earliest of the three and the least embellished, is probably the most reliable.

It was in a BBC radio talk of July 1950, where he told how two fellow-pupils lured him down the road on the way home, punched and winded him. A year later he wrote a stand-alone poem about the incident, called 'Original Sin on the Sussex Coast'. (That title is another problem, as the abuse took place in North London, not Sussex. Betjeman *wrote* the poem in Sussex, and seems to be saying that the diabolical cruelty of children to each other is just as prevalent there, indeed anywhere; it is not limited to his experience.)

He had evidently brooded on the memory, because it has grown in the telling. As well as the winding punch in the tummy John receives a painful, ritual kick on the backside; and there is

now a third boy involved. Had memory brought extra details into focus? Was he conflating two events? Or, I think most likely, was creative imagination 'improving' the story?

It is the besetting sin of any raconteur. We tell the story over and over, polishing it each time. We smooth out a complication here; add a detail there that gets a laugh; leave out the boring bit halfway through. The more we tell it, the more our memory believes that this distorted version is how it happened. And so, the memory is itself unreliable. It has become a great story; but it is a narrative you cannot altogether trust.

I have one last example where, it seems, the demands of the narrative *in verse* have forced Betjeman into misleading his readers.

In the opening section of *Summoned by Bells* he refers to "the family next door" to his childhood home: "it was the mother there who first / Made me aware of insecurity / When war was near: 'Your name is German, John'". When he published it, his erstwhile neighbour read it and wrote in alarm to contradict him.

One of my colleagues in the Betjeman Society now has the original, unpublished correspondence. Betjeman replied:

"Oh dear me no. It was not you I was thinking of on the German name subject. It was the Dimmocks. Do you remember them? Poor Mrs Dimmock had two sons Norman and Bolton at the war and I think was a bit unhinged at the time – though of course I did not realise this. Should not have said 'next door' in the line but 'four houses away' would not have scanned! And 'nearby' was too unspecific and weak as well as not so good for scansion."

Hmm! So, poets are likely to be the most unreliable narrators of all. Take heed.

- ooOoo -

Triskaidekaphilia – Re-dating a Letter

J. D. Murphy

Christopher Sclater Millard (aka Stuart Mason 1872 - 1927), on page 214 of his Bibliography of Oscar Wilde, records "At a dinner of the Thirteen Club held at Holborn Restaurant on 13 January 1894, the Chairman (Mr. Harry Furniss) announced that the following letter had been received from Mr. Oscar Wilde:

"I have to thank the members of your club for their kind invitation ... But I love superstitions. ... Common sense is the enemy of romance. The aim of your society seems to be dreadful. Leave us some unreality. Do not make us too offensively sane."

Rupert Hart-Davis, in his 1962 *Letters*, dates Wilde's letter as January 1894 and takes the text from *Today* of 13 January [1894]. The 2000 made-over *Complete Letters* with Merlin Holland repeats the entry with the same footnote. Mason takes his version from *The Times* 15 January 1894 which "appears the most accurate" but, crucially, he doesn't date the actual letter.

The *St. James's Gazette* 1890 May 14 and *London Local Government Gazette* 15 May 1890 both quote the letter with the phrase "Do not make us too offensively same." It is picked up by American papers: *The Pittsburg Dispatch* 9 June 1890 and *The Morning Call* (San Francisco, California) 23 June 1890, both having "offensively same". Surely, Wilde, if he hadn't written "sane", would have written "*the same*" – maybe he did?

So, the letter was written before 13 May 1890.

The meeting of 13 May 1890 is recorded as "The first annual dinner of the London Thirteen Club ... held at Anderton's Hotel, the present headquarters of the club." Henry Lynn presides. Obviously, this is the meeting to which Wilde declines the invitation. James Fayn, Henry Irving, and Rider Haggard also declined invitations. There is no recorded mention of a connection with Lady Wilde and the NY club's motto "*Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate*" (Abandon all hope, you who enter here).

Calling it the London Thirteen Club might be interpreted as an acknowledgement of the American version which held its first meeting on 13 January 1881 at the Knickerbocker Cottage, No. 454 Sixth Avenue, New York. This was founded by Captain William Fowler (1827 - 1897) and the dinner involved walking under a ladder, sitting thirteen to a table, and other popular bad luck activities which they sought to repudiate. Fowler was able to point to many dates and incidents in his life where the number thirteen featured. He could probably have picked any number and made similar claims.

At the meeting of 13 January 1894, held at the Holborn Restaurant, Harry Furniss (1854 - 1925) read Wilde's letter. It looks like he decided to add a bit of sparkle to his speech by resurrecting a good example of wit from the master, presumably neglecting to mention it was more than three and a half years old.

It would be hard to convince me that the club, having been rejected once, would issue another invitation and that Oscar would recycle an old letter verbatim.

Sisters Clara Theresa (d. 1899) and Agnes Frances de Forest (d. 1897) entertained Oscar at a "Thirteen Dinner" in New York. Details are scarce but there is no connection with the foregoing. There are several contradictory references to the de Forest sisters and I would welcome amendments and additions.

Thanks to Merlin Holland and Marilyn Bisch for help in compiling the above. (Back-up clippings are available.)

- ooOoo -

Angela's Summer Palaces on Slopes

Rita Rundle

Angela Thirkell was born in January 1890. Her father was Doctor John Mackail, an academic who was professor of Poetry at Oxford, although, for much of his career, was an administrator in the Ministry of Education. Her mother was Margaret Burne-Jones, daughter of Edward Burne-Jones. Amongst her many cousins were Rudyard Kipling and Stanley Baldwin. Her godfather was James Barrie. Her grandfather (Edward Burne-Jones) adored her, and she was thoroughly spoiled by him and other relations, meeting at his home the great and the good of the artistic and literary world: George Eliot, Beatrix Potter, Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Sarah Bernhardt, John Ruskin, and William Morris among others. Angela was pretty and highly intelligent; she was artistic and musical; she spent time in Europe to perfect her French and German; she read widely all her life and appeared never to forget a word that she read.

Margaret Mackail hoped that her beautiful and accomplished daughter would make a fashionable marriage. It was not necessary for her to do anything useful with her many accomplishments. Like her parents, she disagreed with the burgeoning feminist movement and disliked 'educated' women, an attitude well illustrated in her novels, where the panacea for all feminine dissatisfaction is a happy marriage - something which she herself never achieved.

In March 1911, Angela met James McInnes. He was a well-known singer with a fine baritone voice, whom Angela found excitingly romantic; so different from the polite young men she met in her parents' refined circle. From a humble background, he was flattered by the obvious adoration of this remarkable young woman, and they were married in May. At first, the marriage went well and Angela enjoyed travelling with him to singing engagements all over Britain.

By 1917, however, the peak of James' career had passed, he was drinking heavily, having affairs with both men and women, and becoming violent. Angela returned to her parents' home and was divorced in May. At that time, divorce was rare, traumatic and disgraceful.

What should Angela do now? She had two young sons to care for and no means of support apart from depending on her parents. So, in December 1918, after another whirlwind courtship, she married again. George Thirkell was an engineer from Tasmania, who had landed with the Australian forces at Gallipoli. It was while he was recuperating from injuries received there that he and Angela met.

They left for Australia in 1920, but the marriage was doomed from the start. George was a kindly man and, at first, Angela tried to adapt to the Australian way of life, but it was too different from the rarefied academic atmosphere in which she had been brought up. She became very homesick and left Australia in 1929.

Once again; what should Angela do now? She was disgraced and impoverished, with her Thirkell son to care for, the two McInnes boys having been left in Australia as young adults.

Her parents were not happy to have her and her son living with them indefinitely. She had done a little writing in Australia for magazines and newspapers, so started writing again.

Her first book was published in 1931 and she rapidly gained a wide readership and was at the peak of her writing career in the 1930s and 1940s. By the mid 1930s, her books were firmly set in Anthony Trollope's Bassetshire with some of her characters being the mid 20th c. descendants of his. She produced at least one novel each year until 1960 and they reflected what was going on in the world at the time. For example, the book written in 1953 gave an account of what various Bassetshire villages did to celebrate the Queen's coronation.

Her novels were very popular. She was likened to Jane Austen. Siegfried Sassoon called her 'a public benefactor'. C. P. Snow said she was 'witty and shrewd' with 'an attractively wicked eye'. She was hailed in *Punch* 'as one of the great humorous writers of our time'. Elizabeth Bowen wrote that, 'if the social historian of the future does not refer to this writer's novels, he will not know his business'. But, how accurate was the view of Britain she presented in her novels? Was she an 'unreliable narrator'?

Her earliest works, written in the 1930s were bright and cheerful, observing with skill and humour the idiosyncrasies of those we might now call the chattering classes. The novels written during World War II give amusing accounts of how people on the home front coped with wartime conditions. It is in the years after the War that Angela Thirkell, her real friends and her Bassetshire friends found it very difficult to come to terms with reality. It has been said that nostalgia is the enemy of historical accuracy and this is certainly true of Angela Thirkell. Her accounts of contemporary life were profoundly affected by memories of her idyllic Edwardian childhood and nothing could be quite that good again.

Even those of us who know and admire her work recognise that she was giving the young people of the 1930s and 40s the manners and attitudes of 1910 rather than the reality of that era. Although so different from the present day, it is unlikely that a young woman in 1936 would worry that she was engaged to a young man because he had light heartedly kissed her at a party.

The tone is set by the authorial voice in *Peace Breaks Out* (published 1946)

'six years of increasing danger and discomfort, for part of which time they had stood alone against a world of deadly enemies, cautious friends and swithering neutrals, had left the peculiar English so desirous for a change of any kind ... that Mr Churchill's friends were swept away by huge majorities and the Brave and Revolting New World came into its own ... and England lurched on her way.'

Angela Thirkell and friends were convinced that, had Churchill and the Conservatives been returned to government in 1945, all would have been well and social conditions would have returned to those they knew and loved. Such people seemed oblivious to the fact that the country was bankrupt and in greater danger than during the War: not from bombs or guns, but from economic disaster. Infrastructure needed repair, people needed homes and everything that could possibly be manufactured and exported was sent overseas, and as little as possible imported in order to try and balance the national books. Characters complain bitterly in *Peace Breaks Out* about more shortages and more rationing than during the War.

'We shall have a horrid winter and probably the government will send all our coal and all our food to the Russians ... And no clothes and everyone being rude'.

It is quite true that life was grim in the first few years after the end of the World War II, and Angela Thirkell captures well the emotional temperature of the era, while being utterly prejudiced about the inevitable changes which were happening to Britain. Her characters complain about, 'a vast army of half-baked bureaucrats stifling all freedom and ease', and make comments like, 'the dark ages are upon us', 'humane learning is on her death bed', 'I suppose the next Lord Pomfret will have to ... join a trade union', and 'Now, except for the brave-new-worlders who were perfectly happy with prefabs, plastics, cinemas, wireless and several million too many people wherever one went, one had to look back to recapture some kind of content'. The Empire is disappearing.

Attempts to represent people of different points of view are usually severely adverse caricatures, as in the case of the infant school teacher who says,

'In Russiar as they tell us the under-eights are quite politically minded ... I do the best I can ... there is such a nice little song – "we'll all go down the Big Red Road, and meet Joey Stalin there". The toddlers march to it every day'.

The newly elected Labour Government is always derisively referred to as 'THEM', and they are accused of all manner of crimes and blamed for all the ills that people are suffering.

To Angela and friends (both fictional and real), it really was the end of civilisation, but the government at that time was very remarkable and some modern histories of the era claim Clement Attlee to be one of the great prime ministers of the 20th c.

Despite the difficulties and turmoil of life in the late 1940s and early '50s, a large amount of radical legislation was enacted. There was the National Health Service Act in 1946. Whatever difficulties the NHS is facing now it was a remarkable piece of legislation and provided the population with adequate health care. The Education Act enabled ordinary people to have a good secondary and tertiary education for the first time. The National Insurance Act provided sickness and unemployment benefits. The nationalisation of coal, steel and railways was also revolutionary. No wonder Angela and conservative Bassetshire were unhappy.

So, how reliable is Angela Thirkell as a recorder of her times? She captures the disillusion and weariness of post-war years and treats them with her usual brand of perceptive humour, but she is utterly prejudiced about the changes happening in Britain that were bringing opportunity and happiness to vast numbers of the population. Truth and falsehood, reliability and unreliability can co-exist, and certainly do in Angela Thirkell's work.

- ooOoo -

Ursula's [Unreliable] Narrative: Can We Trust Charlotte Yonge?

Julia Courtney

Both during and after her lifetime, Charlotte Yonge's fiction has been classified as realist domestic fiction, generally with a religious message. Contemporary critics were swift to criticise her attempts to break the stereotype. Her 1886 ghost story *Chantry House* drew accusations of cashing in on the current vogue for the supernatural, and, in 1873, the *Athenaeum* reviewer sniffed:

'Lady Hester; or Ursula's Narrative is not one of Miss Yonge's most successful efforts ... She is less at home in a tale of bigamy and murder than when she describes the ordinary life of an English family'.

In this novel, she was trespassing upon 'ground which authoresses of a different sort have already appropriated'.

What was this tale of bigamy and murder, and how do its protagonists fit the theme of unreliable narrators?

It was clearly influenced by Mrs Henry Wood's sensation novel bestseller *East Lynne*, which Charlotte Yonge described as 'very clever, a capital plot'; for *Lady Hester* not only employs multiple sensation novel themes but also makes internal allusion to *East Lynne*. Multiple, and hence unreliable, narration is a central characteristic of Victorian sensation fiction such as Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone* and *The Woman in White*, where the reader is placed in the position of having to weigh probabilities and form judgements as to what is really happening. Charlotte Yonge's sub-title states that the narrative she is presenting to us is '*Ursula's Narrative*'. The inference is that there may be others, and, indeed, Ursula Torwood sometimes needs to rely on outside informants, although their accounts are always filtered through her memory of them.

As first-person narrator, Ursula writes so that 'our strange family history ... may be properly understood.' But, already by page two, her credibility is challenged by her siblings' suggestion that she idealises their early life. In her version, the happy home of the Earl of Trevorsham's family (Fulk, Bertram, Ursula, Jaquetta and their half brother baby Alured) has been disturbed only by the death of the Earl's young wife Adela, mother of little Alured. But, like most domestic scenes in sensation novels, it masks a secret: as a young officer serving in Canada, the Earl was married briefly before being separated from his wife by war and Indian raids. Both believe the other dead and both marry again.

When the young Canadian Hester Lea discovers that she is the legitimate offspring of the Earl by this early marriage, she has to rethink not only her own identity but that of her newly born son. Forming a 'strong and fixed purpose' she spends two years saving sufficient money for a passage to England.

In a dramatic scene, Hester arrives at Trevorsham Hall with her young son Trevor, her existence making all the younger generation illegitimate except little Alured whose mother had married the Earl after the death of Hester's Canadian mother. Hester has come to claim her rights on behalf of her son. This 'resolute high spirited woman' is a model sensation novel (anti) heroine: handsome, tall, proud, dauntless and variously compared to a hawk, panther, snake, tigress and harpy. There is even a hint of the vampire about her 'teeth [which] projected a little, and ... were so very, very white, that they always seemed to me to flash like the eye.' Significantly, these threatening non-human descriptions come via her enemy Ursula.

Hester meets her match in Ursula, for this novel has not one but two strong female leads. Ursula's narrative position is undermined by her complete inability to perceive that she is Hester's double: they are half-sisters, driven by similarly powerful emotions. Both Hester and Ursula are proud, strong and determined to the point of ruthlessness, and both display a fatally excessive devotion to a son/surrogate son.

Ursula loves her half-brother Alured with a fierce passion, giving up her own prospects of marriage to care for the frail infant. In the immediate shock of discovering their illegitimacy, the second son Bertram suggests emigration, but as they would not be allowed by Chancery to take Alured with them, Ursula is violently opposed to the plan. Refusing to leave Alured, she 'rushed away again to the nursery, and sat there, devising plans of disguising myself in a close cap and blue spectacles, and coming to offer myself as Lord Trevorsham's governess.' This 'blue spectacle plan' as Ursula calls it, is an obvious reference to *East Lynne*, even though Isobel Vane's spectacles were green. Ursula clearly identifies herself with the powerful but erring heroine of Ellen Wood's sensation novel.

Indifferent to the needs of anyone but Alured, she reacts to the family loss of name, status and income by rejecting all offers of help and sympathy, and when she realises that her 'pride and harshness' have ruined the life of her rejected suitor, Mr Decies, she later admits 'that was the beginning of my hating myself, and I have hated myself more and more since I have taken to write this down, and seen how hard and foolish I was.'

For her part, and perhaps not surprisingly, Hester reacts to the enmity of her half-siblings with defiance, setting up home near the farm to which they have retreated and encouraging a friendship between her son Trevor and the spoiled brat Alured. (Ursula has coddled him since his sickly baby days.) Ursula becomes increasingly convinced that Hester wishes for Alured's death so that Trevor can inherit the Trevorsham title and property.

In a belated moment of self-knowledge, Ursula notes that 'I sometimes doubt whether my dread and distrust were not visible, and may not have put it [i.e. a plan to murder Alured] into her head.' This, the reader will never know. At times, Hester shows affection for her half-brother Alured, and Ursula may well misinterpret her genuine enquiries after his health as a ghoulish wish for his demise. An occasion when Hester seems to have led Alured into danger is discounted by elder brother Fulk: although his reliability may be compromised by the euphoria of reunion with his former sweetheart.

At some point, however, Hester's perhaps ambivalent feelings for Alured tip, or are tipped, over into collusion with a plan hatched by her second husband, a shifty lawyer.

The crisis comes on a moonlit duck shooting expedition when Hester's son Trevor is shot in mistake for Alured.

Hester's reaction is to attempt suicide: she rushes out to 'fling herself into the swollen rapid stream which winter had made full and violent ... [amongst the] black darkness of the shadows.' Pulled unconscious from the water, she is now totally in the Torwoods' power. Resenting their care, she shows no sign of repentance and even hints at a Satanic bargain: 'I feel as if Satan had offered me all this for my soul, and I had taken the bargain. Aye, and if God's providence had allowed our wicked purpose, he would have had it too'.

How far is the reader correct in suspecting that Ursula's subsequent account of Hester's long illness, the change of heart which endears her to the Torwoods, her fondness for Alured and her eventual 'good death' is both unlikely and idealised?

As the *Athenaeum* reviewer wrote, perhaps *Lady Hester; or Ursula's Narrative* was not one of Charlotte Yonge's best productions. At the same time, it stands as an example of a shrewd, intelligent and highly professional writer's determination to show that she can operate in a genre different from her usual work. *Lady Hester* is almost, but not quite, a

parody of a sensation novel, with its panther-like, Satanic heroine, its tale of bigamy, illegitimacy and loss of class status, inheritance, legal battles, murder, shifting identities and attempted suicide. Its originality lies less in these elements than in the construction of the narrator, Ursula; if Lady Hester owns the main title of the novel, the sub title proclaims that the story is actually *Ursula's Narrative* and the reader is left to decide just how reliable, or not, that narrative may be.

- ooOoo -

‘That public I am writing for’: Jerome K. Jerome’s *Weeds*

Prof. Carolyn W. de la L. Oulton

I first realised the importance of this under-read novella as I was reaching – or so I thought – the final stages of my biography on Jerome K. Jerome in 2011. I had just worked out that there was one more letter I would need to see, in a research library in the US, and duly emailed to ask if I could be sent a copy.

My enquiry was answered by a friendly research intern, who agreed to send a .pdf of the letter I had requested and asked almost casually if I would like to see around 100 more while I was at it. They had, it appeared, been sitting in an uncatalogued box and he had found them in a spare half hour when he had nothing much to do.

I should have been thrilled. But I defy anyone who has read Jerome’s handwriting to look me in the eye and say that they would have felt that way. So, I emailed back immediately to say how thrilled I was, and a few days later I began trawling through and partially transcribing a daunting pile of manuscripts, including a series of letters from Jerome to his publisher J. W. Arrowsmith.

As I read (which sometimes felt like an achievement in itself), I realised that I was about to learn the answer to two questions that have troubled readers for decades. Why had this odd but apparently uncontroversial novella been published anonymously (its authorship only became known in the 1960s) in 1892, only three years after the huge success of *Three Men in a Boat*? And why was there only one known copy outside the copyright libraries such as the British Library?

Weeds tells the story of a young suburban couple, the city clerk Dick and his symbolically pure wife Daisy, whose marriage is destroyed by Dick’s attraction to Daisy’s beautiful young cousin Jessie. Dick is tormented by uncontrollable sexual thoughts (the symbolic weeds in his Edenic set-up), while Daisy is too trusting – or too naïve – to realise the likely outcome of having her flirtatious and clearly immature cousin to stay in their small house for weeks on end.

The climax of the story comes about when Dick kisses Jessie one night and as he raises his eyes, sees Daisy watching them in the mirror. Dick spends the night wandering round the London streets, tellingly noticing the presence of ‘fallen’ women for the first time, and, on his return home, Daisy announces that she is leaving him. Not surprisingly, modern readers have failed to be impressed by this ‘extremely dated approach to the subject matter’ (Whitby 52).

It is all too easy to forget the hugely courageous step Daisy takes in defying convention at a time when divorced women were seen as deeply suspect. Many (my MA students included) tend to view her as a bit of a drip with too much time on her hands, although few have sympathised with Jessie, let alone Dick. On first reading, the story seems to confirm everything we think we know about Victorian prudishness, in which the main characters fail to manage more than a quick fumble in the dining room as the symbolic judgement falls and exeunt omnes.

However, the letters to Arrowsmith tell a very different story. Insisting that this apparently trifling piece of fiction was the one for which he wanted to be remembered, Jerome explained sadly that, as the author of the bestselling and irresistibly comic *Three Men in a Boat*, if he put his name on the cover ‘it would never get fair treatment. They would all say I had tried to be funny and failed’ (undated letter).

Having read it, Arrowsmith saw nothing to laugh at, but clearly something made him nervous, and, in a subsequent letter, Jerome insists that he has aimed to write a work of art and 'If I weaken my resolve the object of all my labour is gone' (30 September 1892). A few lines into this same letter, the cause of the publisher's nervousness is revealed when Jerome reminds him that the reading public has changed in the last twenty years, to the point where Hardy can risk the provocative description of his heroine Tess d'Urbeville as 'a pure woman' despite her seduction. Nonetheless, he assures Arrowsmith in the same letter that 'I read it to my wife and she never guessed the drift of it'. To prove the point, he suggests that his publisher try the same experiment on Mrs Arrowsmith, and 'she will gather the idea that they are only kissing each other. The phrase "They are alone with Heaven" will only convey itself to a very limited public indeed, to that public I am writing for.'

What probably worried Arrowsmith rather more than the characters being alone with Heaven was the less than subtle moment when 'their tangled limbs entwined', a phrase the most determined reader would find hard to misunderstand. In desperation, Jerome offers in yet another letter to replace the offending lines with 'The room dissolves and fades. They are alone with nature' (undated), a change that appears in the novella as we have it today.

Precisely what happened after this editorial negotiation is hard to ascertain. Jerome looked forward with a degree of nervous apprehension to the publication of the book he hoped would make his name as a serious artist. After a suitable interval, he wrote to Arrowsmith again, asking how sales were looking and whether he should declare himself the author.

But, from the lack of extant copies, it seems almost certain that, having once established the copyright, Arrowsmith lost his nerve and never actually released *Weeds* for general sale. While the author and publisher remained friends (one rather wonders how), this disclosure can only have been an appalling blow.

Ironically, it was only a year later in 1893 that the New Woman writer Sarah Grand really gave her publisher William Heinemann something to worry about, with the harrowing account in *The Heavenly Twins* of a naive young woman's marriage to a libertine and her ultimate death from syphilis. But, it is Jerome's unpublished story of marital betrayal and illicit sexuality that reminds us how little we know of what is really going on in the carefully constructed world of the Victorian suburb.

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- ooOoo -

An Oxford *Tour de Farce*: Undergraduate and Underground Adventures

Mark Davies

On first hearing about the theme of an 'unreliable narrator', I thought immediately of one of my favourite Oxford novels: *The Adventures of Mr. Verdant Green*. OK, well I have to admit at once – not wishing to appear unreliable myself – that that is only partly true, because actually only about half of the three-part book is set in Oxford. I should also clarify that the character I had in mind is a very minor one, and a narrator *in* the novel, not *of* it. I have another admission to make too: I have a vested interest, in that the character who sprang to mind is an Oxford guide, which happens to be a role that I am also known to undertake from time to time. My hunch was that, by contrasting the misleading pronouncements of the fictional guide to my own impeccably accurate, enthralling, and amusing tours, I could perhaps smuggle a subtle advertisement past the unsuspecting editor of this journal.

So far so sneaky, but, having got no further than simply to intimate my intended focus to the Chair of the Lewis Carroll Society (of which I am the ALS representative), she interrupted, 'But shouldn't you be selecting a character from Wonderland?' It was a good point. Quite right. Indeed, I should. So, what to do? Well, as it happens, it is not unreasonable to think of the Oxford University freshman Verdant Green as exhibiting at least a semblance of Charles Dodgson's comparable experience: Edward Bradley's novel, published under the pseudonym of 'Cuthbert Bede', came out in parts between 1853 and 1857, while Dodgson's life-long residence in Oxford began as a Christ Church undergraduate in 1851.

There are other similarities too, apart from the fact that both men decided to incorporate the word 'Adventures' into the title of their books. Both Green and Dodgson had been brought up in counties which are to the north of Oxford. They were both the oldest sons of their families, and their fathers were both significant individuals in their respective parishes, as the squire and vicar respectively. That, to be fair, is probably as much of a parallel as one dare draw but one other point is that Bede's plot incorporates some genuine Oxford people and events of the time, and so does Lewis Carroll's, albeit considerably more cryptically. (Yes, he is actually a far *more* reliable narrator than you might imagine, with many a real Oxford personality, place, or event secreted within the quirkiness of Wonderland's apparent nonsense.)

But, back to Mr Verdant Green and that unreliable narration – more of an oration, in fact, really, but I hope you'll let that pass!

When the youthful innocent visits Oxford for the first time, to enrol at Brazenface College, he is accompanied by his father. Finding that they have some time in which to explore Oxford they 'soon found a guide, one of those wonderful people to which show-places give birth, and of whom Oxford can boast a very goodly average'. This man claimed to be able to 'do the alls, collidges, and principal hedifices in a nour and a naff'. That did, in fact, prove to be a reliable estimate, but, as their guide spoke 'perfectly independent of the artificial trammels of punctuation' and was 'not particular whether his hearers understood him or not', their initial grasp of the topography of the city was a decidedly confused one. The guide was unrepentant: apparently, 'that was not *his* business' or concern. Consequently, when Mr Green senior returned home to Warwickshire and 'unrolled that rich panorama before his "mind's eye", all its

component parts were strangely out of place' and it was as if 'there had been a general *pousset* movement among its public buildings'.



This tour constitutes Verdant Green's first experience of any kind of Oxford tuition, but their guide is by no means the only unreliable discourse to which the gullible Green is exposed. In his first term, he is easily persuaded by almost everything he is told – and sold, since Bede cannot resist the temptation to portray Oxford's shopkeepers as stereotypically grasping and insincerely obsequious as a means to exert that grasp.

His fellow scholars also take harmless advantage. On a second tour of the city, this time with Charles Larkyns, a third-year student from his home village, they come to

'a strongly castellated building, which Mr. Larkyns pointed out (and truly) as Oxford Castle or the Gaol; and he added (untrue) "if you hear Botany-Bay College spoken of, this is the place that's meant. It's a delicate way of referring to the temporary sojourn that any undergrad has been forced to make there, to say that he belongs to Botany-Bay College."' '

Yes, Larkyns was definitely speaking 'untrue'. In fact, this convict transportation reference was applied not to the prison but to Worcester College, on account of its being situated some distance from all the other colleges. But, perhaps Larkyns himself had been unreliably informed. Perhaps – who knows! – he had taken a tour with 'Old Explicator', a man who had been described a decade or so earlier as 'a specimen of that now nearly extinguished genius, an Oxford guide'.

In *Peter Priggins, the College Scout* (1841), he rattles off his proposed itinerary, which ends with 'Castle Tower – William the Conqueror – hang criminals ... city prison and Worcester College – only you can't tell which is which'. The author, Joseph Hewlett, it should perhaps be mentioned, was a Worcester College alumnus.

In his first two terms, the good-natured Verdant Green is wont to believe everything he is told, unreliable though much if it proves to be. His resultant improprieties are amusing for his peers, and also for any reader in the know, including, no doubt, Charles Dodgson, who would surely have appreciated the Oxford realities which are subtly referenced (including, I contend, the inspiration for one of his own most iconic characters).

Ah yes, that reminds me, that in the interests of maintaining harmonious relations with the Chair of the Lewis Carroll Society, I really ought now to turn my attention to Wonderland.

Alice too, of course, is subjected to many narrations (or again, I suppose, more strictly, orations) of dubious reliability. Most are perplexing in some way, but perhaps the Cheshire Cat is the most misleading of all, in that he cannot be relied upon even to remain in plain view! The Cat does, however, speak two undeniable truths, neither of any practical use whatsoever. When Alice asks which way she should go, his response is that 'it depends a good deal on where you want to get to'. A fair point, but, Alice, who was not even sure where

she actually was (a bit like Verdant Green and his father), says in desperation that she just wants to get 'somewhere', to which the Cat responds unhelpfully but infallibly that she is 'sure to do that ... if you only walk far enough'.

Lewis Carroll, meanwhile, has unwittingly misled countless thousands of readers into thinking that the Cheshire Cat was his own invention, simply because it appears – and disappears! – among the array of characters that he really did create. Likewise, Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee. And what about the Mad Hatter? For a century and a half commentators have persuaded their readers that there is such a character, yet the Hatter actually deserves that adjective no more than any other inhabitant of Wonderland. Oh dear! So, just who *can* you rely on?

Well, the White King, perhaps, whose sage advice – 'Begin at the beginning ... and go on till you come to the end. Then stop.' – I shall soon take myself by bringing my own narrative to a conclusion. The White Knight too seems a decent sort of a chap, and is the first individual – albeit it has taken almost to the end of the second book – to give Alice some genuinely helpful advice: 'You've only got a few yards to go.' (Mind you, there's good reason for the White Knight to shine in this way, since he does seem, curiously enough, to speak with a semblance of the author's own voice.)

So, in a way, Alice and Verdant Green are kindred spirits, neither finding any especially helpful advice on their respective literary journeys, and the two are united in other ways too. Green experiences at least one event, one individual, one contraption, and several locations which all have a bearing, one way or another, on events in Wonderland.

A modern equivalent of 'Old Explicator' might be able to tell you more – but do beware, should you yourself be tempted to visit this 'ancient city, and a quiet river winding near it along the plain'.

Oxford guides, in fiction and in fact, inevitably vary in their reliability, and doubtless some today still have – as was suggested in the days of Green and Dodgson – 'a sort of decayed look', are 'short and reserved in speech', and see 'with dismay the increasing habit people have of referring to books, instead of to them, for information'. (For 'book', of course, nowadays, read 'phone'.)

Doubtless too there are still some guides who are 'idle dissolute characters, having no real knowledge of the history of the city and its buildings, and who are, without exception, impudent and extortionate'. Not me, of course. My own Oxford narration is, I'll have you know (or at least believe) impeccably reliable!

Illustration:

Bede, Cuthbert M. (1909), *The Adventures of Mr Verdant Green, An Oxford Freshman*, Henry Young & Sons.

- ooOoo -

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Julia Courtney is a member of the Charlotte M. Yonge Fellowship, and co-editor of the CMYF Journal. She is now retired from the Open University where she worked in various capacities for some years. She has published on Yonge as well as other writers including Barbara Pym and Ivy Compton-Burnett

Mark Davies is an Oxford local historian, writer, self-publisher, public speaker, and guide – in case you hadn't noticed! He is the author of books on the history and literature of Oxford's waterways, its castle, Lewis Carroll's Alice, and, most recently, a biography of James Sadler, the Oxford pastry cook who was the first Englishman to fly. And now another plug: www.oxfordwaterwalks.co.uk.

John Lingard specialises in Scandinavian literature and drama. He has published articles on the Norwegian Romantic poet J. S. Welhaven, Henrik Ibsen, the Danish playwright Kjeld Abell, and crime fiction novels by Henning Mankell and Åsa Larsson. His translation of Abell's play *The Blue Pekinese* is available in *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies*, Vol. 24, 2017.

J. D. Murphy lives in Dublin, which he finds takes up most of his time. Currently engaged in compiling a chronology of Wilde's life - 180,000 entries so far - from which he tweets a daily extract #owotd (Oscar Wilde on this day by Hugh Djance). Member of The Oscar Wilde Literary Society [for the Suppression of Virtue].

Carolyn Oulton is the author of *Below the Fairy City: a Life of Jerome K. Jerome* and edited the Victorian Secrets edition of *Weeds*, probably the first published edition of this 'lost' novella. She is Professor of Victorian Literature at Canterbury Christ Church University.

Dr. Jennifer S. Palmer is the Secretary of the Margery Allingham Society. She enjoys crime fiction and has read it since her childhood, starting with the Secret Seven books of Enid Blyton. When she lived abroad she found reading a great solace and pleasure. She reviews crime fiction for Mystery People and Shots on the web, give talks to the Dorothy L. Sayers and Margery Allingham Societies and has published scholarly papers on crime fiction. As a retired historian (at least retired from full-time employment) she also lectures on topics of historical controversy.

Cally Phillips is a (reliable) member of the Brontë Society, the J. M. Barrie Literary Society, the Galloway Raiders and the Zamyatin Society.

Lance Pierson is a massive poetry fan, and performs it aloud as his job. He is Chairman of the Betjeman Society and is on the Steering Group of the [Gerard Manley] Hopkins Society.

Rita Rundle graduated from Nottingham University with a biology degree in 1960 and spent the next 35 years teaching and bringing up a family in England and Australia. After retirement, she and her husband lived on a canal boat for 5 years and travelled, mainly to Australia to visit friends and family. Throughout this time, she has always enjoyed writing articles for various organisations to which she belonged. At the moment, this is mainly for the Angela Thirkell Society, for whom she writes a newsletter and has also written a booklet entitled "Barsetshire in the 21st Century".
