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An awfully big adventure: revisiting the life of Beryl Bainbridge

Brendan King's new biography of the much-loved novelist cuts through the myth – and gets to the true sensation.

By Erica Wagner



(Photo By ADRIAN DENNIS/REX)

When Humphrey Carpenter reviewed Beryl Bainbridge's 1984 novel *Watson's Apology*, he was warmly enthusiastic: it was, he wrote, "that old cliché, 'a small masterpiece'". It was the second of her works – the first was *Young Adolf*, which appeared in 1978 – to move outside her own experience, the girlhood and young womanhood she had refashioned for her fiction in books such as *The Dressmaker* and *The Bottle Factory Outing*. *Watson's Apology* draws on the story of an Anglican clergyman convicted of murdering his wife and sentenced to death in 1872. Carpenter particularly noted the presentation of Watson's relationship with his wife, Anne. "The marriage was in many ways a failure from the start," he wrote. "Neither partner was capable of achieving love, though both wanted affection. What the book succeeds in showing is the element of failure in all relationships."

That final sentence could apply to what Brendan King's biography succeeds in doing with regard to the many tangled and difficult relationships Bainbridge similarly embarked on, abandoned or struggled to maintain. Her worst fear about her partners – her husband, the painter Austin Davies, and the lovers she took throughout her life, including Colin Haycraft, who was for many years her publisher at Duckworth – was a perceived lack of commitment. When one of her lovers, Mick Green, told her that he needed a sense of freedom to love her, she despaired. "By hurting my stupid pride and making me feel so unloved he's shrunken my love for him," she confided to her diary in 1959. "Its [sic] so sad. You can't be truthful or you lose the love. And I've lost mine ..."

What she never lost, however, was her remarkable creative determination. That she was "the Booker bridesmaid" (her novels were shortlisted for the prize five times without ever winning) is just about as much of a cliché as Carpenter's line about a small masterpiece. After her death in 2010, she was awarded the somewhat creepy honour of a one-off Man Booker "Best of Beryl": the public voted on which of her shortlisted novels should be given the accolade, and *Master Georgie* (1998) took the palm. From the mid-1980s until her health failed in her last years (her heavy drinking and Stakhanovite smoking habit being contributory factors), she was a fixture on the literary scene, the Man Booker's easygoing use of her first name indicative of the sense of cosy familiarity her presence fostered. Yet her frank, perceptive and sometimes brutal novels were never comfortable at all.

Bainbridge's beginnings were not the kind to guarantee her future, by any means. Her father was a Liverpudlian who came from "a respectable working-class family", as King has it; he had been a shipping agent who was declared bankrupt and suffered further dramatic reversals of fortune during his daughter's lifetime. But her mother, Winnie, saw prospects for her daughter on the stage: Beryl was enrolled in the Ainsdale School of Dancing at the age of four. In 1948, when she was not yet 16, she was sent off to Tring, the small town in Hertfordshire to which the Arts Educational School had recently moved. Julie Andrews had been a pupil at the old school a few years earlier.

Even as Bainbridge began to make her way in the theatre, she was writing; in 1946 she had written a short novel (*The Medvale Bombshell* – proof that her talent for titles arrived fully formed) in one of her school exercise books during half-term. Fiction was not the only direction she could have taken; she was a striking visual artist, though it is hard to get a feel of her work from this biography's black-and-white plates (mostly photographs of Bainbridge and her friends, family, lovers and children). Interested readers may wish to turn to Psiche Hughes's handsome little book *Beryl Bainbridge: Artist, Writer, Friend* for a better sense of just how accomplished she was.

This is not, however, a literary or an artistic biography, though it is conscientious and detailed and tries to be fair and kind. It is at pains to correct some of the stories Bainbridge told about herself and those around her during her life. She was an inveterate myth-maker (as so many writers of fiction are) and often those myths were damaging to others. For instance, she repeatedly asserted that Haycraft never printed more than 3,000 copies of her novels and never paid her more than £2,000 for a book, neither of which was true. King, who worked with Bainbridge as an amanuensis for more than 20 years, notes how certain stories and characters from her life were threaded into her novels; but it is difficult to gain a sense of her writing process from this book.

It is her broken heart that comes across most clearly. "How author Beryl Bainbridge was raped at 19, had a string of nameless lovers and carried out affairs with BOTH partners of the woman who made her a literary lioness", ran the headline in the *Mail on Sunday* which accompanied the paper's serialisation of this biography. Sensational, yes, but (much as it pains me to type this) fair play to them: those elements of the author's life nearly overshadow her extraordinary achievement, which puts her in the front rank of 20th-century British novelists.

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Having read King's assiduous book, I will now return to *The Birthday Boys*, *Every Man for Himself* and all the others, and consider that my tribute to Dame Beryl.

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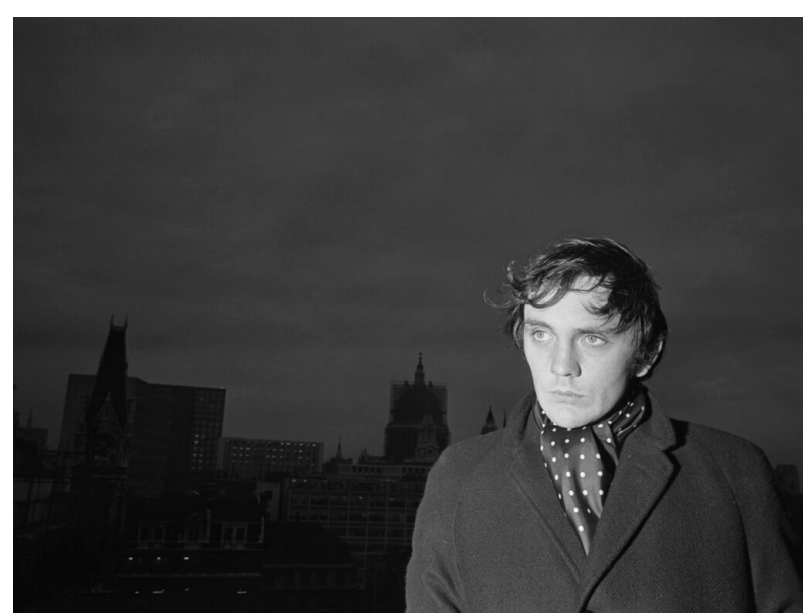


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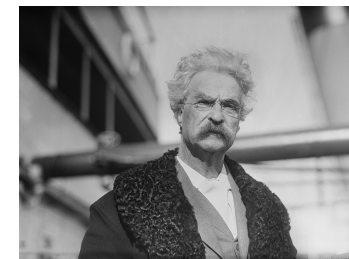
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