

NONFICTION

# The Complicated Life of Beryl Bainbridge

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Beryl Bainbridge in a publicity photograph, circa 1959. J. Sidney Bailie

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By **Thomas Mallon**

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## BERYL BAINBRIDGE

### Love by All Sorts of Means: A Biography

By **Brendan King**

Illustrated. 564 pp. Bloomsbury. \$40.

Beryl Bainbridge once told Don McKinlay, a great romance of her early middle years, “To be honest I have an ability to fall in love.” A reader finishing Brendan King’s new biography of the British novelist is likely to say “And how?” This is more the life story of a lover than a writer, but it probably couldn’t have been otherwise. In fact, it’s nothing short of amazing that Bainbridge’s startling and uncategorizable fiction managed to get written at all, given the chaos of her private life. The phrase “amid all this emotional upheaval” appears on Page 311 of King’s book, but it might just as well have been inserted on all the others.

Bainbridge’s work is as spare and macabre as Muriel Spark’s, but there’s a rawness to it, a lack of ontological underpinning, that can make it even more unpredictable and disturbing. Unlike Spark’s, Bainbridge’s Roman Catholicism was a desperate temporary measure, prompted in young adulthood, King says, by a “sense of unworthiness and guilt over her sexual relations with men,” something cruelly magnified when she was raped in London at the age of 19. The religion never truly took, or provided the coherent if eccentric worldview it gave Spark. What Bainbridge’s books ended up delivering were hundreds of sudden, strobe-lit observations and perceptions. And so, in her 1989 novel “An Awfully Big Adventure,” we get the single-legged pigeon “who hopped in the gutter, beak pecking at the rear mudguard of the taxi,” as well as the provincial actors looking “both sly and exhilarated, as though they were off to some party that would end in tears.”

Born in Liverpool in 1932 and raised in a village near the city, Bainbridge claimed to have suffered from what King calls the “mutual incompatibility” of respectable but sometimes hard-pressed parents. Bankruptcy followed her father’s years of modest success in the shipping business, but enough money remained to send Beryl to a boarding school in Hertfordshire, the Arts Educational School, a few years after Julie Andrews attended. She “excelled in drama” and went on to have a haphazard youthful stage career in Liverpool and London, with time out for stints in several repertory companies. Bainbridge’s earliest exposure to radio drama and films gave her a sense, King argues, of the spoken word’s superiority to the written one, which “perhaps accounts for Beryl’s later obsession with the rhythmical qualities of her prose and the way it had to sound when read aloud.” Drama also made her dramatic; she craved emotional turbulence and relentlessly indulged in exaggeration.

King was Bainbridge’s assistant for 23 years, and he undertook this book in part because of her refusal to consider an autobiography. Chances are he would have felt the need to write it anyway, since one of his principal goals is to correct Bainbridge’s self-constructed “public mythology,” the sustained heightening of her life in her published work and in interviews about that work. King often seems more exasperated than awed by his subject, and he emends with relish, cutting down to life-size Bainbridge’s version of, say, being shot by her ex-mother-in-law: “The gun wasn’t a shotgun or even a revolver, but an air pistol. It wasn’t a bullet that was fired, but a pellet. It did not bring Beryl’s ceiling down and it would not have killed her.” In the biography’s final sections, King occasionally enters the narrative in a Boswellian fashion. He lacks anything like his subject’s “impressive concision,” but he does succeed in offering a vivid and detailed — and often harrowing — story.

Doe-eyed and gorgeously cheekboned, Bainbridge could nonetheless feel physically unattractive. Her impossibly romantic view of love may, King argues, have developed in reaction to her parents’ unhappy marriage. She fiercely desired men’s love and never felt reassured that she had it. “I don’t see how you can love and not be jealous,” she once wrote in her journal, with her incorrigible spelling.

In 1954, after a tense series of breakups and reconciliations, she married the painter Austin Davies. He was in most ways a bad choice, given his stated desire to devote “all the force of my emotional life” to his art. They had two children and lived in Liverpool’s bohemian district, while Davies taught art (his students included the young John Lennon) and Bainbridge made a fitful start at writing fiction. They divorced in 1959.

Before, during and after the marriage, there were other men: the German prisoner of war; the married antiques dealer; the fat physics professor; the married American medical student; the single American urban planner. Most shambolically, during the mid-1960s, Bainbridge got involved with the Scottish writer Alan Sharp, by whom she had a daughter. “Pathologically promiscuous” (his own description), Sharp continued to romance his two wives, one current and one former, along with one of Bainbridge’s Liverpool girlfriends. For a while he also infected Bainbridge with his show-off-ish prose style, from which she had freed herself by the time she put him into a 1975 novel called “Sweet William.”

In her later years, Bainbridge turned to incidents from the British past for subject matter, including Dr. Johnson’s relationship with Mrs. Thrale and the sinking of the Titanic. But for much of her career she drew on her own experience, from her days at the Liverpool Playhouse to her part-time job in a wine warehouse. She went about such autobiographical mining with more daring than most novelists: In “Another Part of the Wood,” she allowed a 6-year-old boy modeled on her own son to overdose on another child’s medication.

By the age of 40, she had attained critical and financial success. Her books began to be nominated for prestigious awards like the Booker Prize, and a steady arrangement with her publisher, Duckworth, allowed her peculiar style to flourish on its own terms. Typically, though, business was suffused with personal drama. Her editor, Anna Haycraft, had once conceived and aborted a child with Austin Davies, and Haycraft’s husband, Colin, Duckworth’s owner, conducted a long secret affair with Bainbridge during the years his wife was editing her.

Through all the muddle and mayhem, Bainbridge exhibited not only drive but an unusual ability to stick with things. “Harriet Said” and “Filthy Lucre” were resuscitations of failed manuscripts she’d put away decades before, and she released revised versions of “A Weekend With Claude” and “Another Part of the Wood” long after their original publication. Her last novel, “The Girl in the Polka Dot Dress,” published in 2011, a year after her death, grew from journals she kept during an American road trip in the 1960s.

Bainbridge’s later years were enlivened by more regulated, less operatic love affairs with what she referred to as her “gentleman callers,” but she still suffered from loneliness; from guilt over the disruptions she’d inflicted on her children; and from far too much drinking, both in private and in public. Yet she carried on, writing columns for newspapers and magazines and making herself into a cranky “anti-P.C.” figure. She struggled with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and then cancer, from which she died, at 77. Her grotesque and glittering body of work was the product of sheer nerve and preposterous talent, and it is still less known in this country than it ought to be.

Thomas Mallon’s most recent book, “Finale: A Novel of the Reagan Years,” was recently published in paperback.

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