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Beryl Bainbridge: Love By All Sorts of Means by Brendan King - review

A writer with a unique voice — and atrocious spelling, says Valerie Grove

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TIME FOR LOVE: BERYL BAINBRIDGE IN 1959

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 COMMENTS

When I first met Beryl Bainbridge in 1972 I'd just reviewed (glowingly, in the Evening Standard) her novel *Harriet Said*. Two years later we met again at a party where she regarded me with a gimlet eye and pronounced: "You have totally changed. Something's happened. You're in love." She was right: I was about to get divorced and re-marry. "I knew it," she said. A white witch!

On the day she was made a dame, in 2000, I called on her: at 65 she was barefoot, in dimity blouse and jeans. "I've been on the whisky all afternoon," she said, between rasping coughs. Of her title she said: "If you know everyone, eventually you get made a dame. All those sirs and lords get them because they know people." This book confirms that it was indeed a former lover, Michael Holroyd, who proposed her honour.

Everyone who knew her loved Beryl, party-goer and befriender of misfits. But Brendan King, her amanuensis for 23 years, got closer than most, and he has written a first-rate biography of his employer.

Letters and diaries reveal how her younger selves — such a clever little girl, who could act and paint too — erupted in her fiction: the precocious man-baiter of *Harriet Said*, the knowing young rep actress of *An Awfully Big Adventure*, the wife in *A Weekend with Claud*. Her marriage, to the artist Austin Davies, was shambolic. Her third child, the talented actress Rudi Davies, was by another lover, Alan Sharp. She dramatised incidents to prove "the comical bizarreness" of her life, presenting to the world a chatty, scatty image under her gamine Juliette Greco fringe.

King suggests a more deeply vulnerable, more sexually alluring creature. Lovers of all types were "instantly smitten". I had no idea she was one of Michael Holroyd's conquests. I certainly did not know that Colin Haycraft, her bow-tie-wearing, real tennis-playing, Oxford classical scholar publisher, was her long-term lover. Like many who sat in the Haycrafts' kitchen listening to Anna (the novelist Alice Thomas Ellis) talking with Beryl, I saw only the closest of female friendships between them; Colin, off-stage, would make superior male comments like: "Fiction is a branch of gynaecology."

Few knew that the first of Anna's pregnancies — she had seven children by Colin — had been by Beryl's future husband Austin. Or that Austin, who referred to Anna's "great cow eyes", had made Anna have an abortion before getting herself to a nunnery — from where Haycraft rescued her by making her pregnant again.

Not even the indiscreet Beryl mentioned this imbroglio, until she made a British Library tape for posterity in 2005.

But revelations are not this biography's sole selling point. After a slightly over-punctilious opening, dwelling on Bainbridge's inconsistency, inaccuracy, and fallible memory, King gets the tone absolutely right. He remains admiring even when exasperated, not flaunting the fact that it was he who completed her last novel, *The Girl in the Polka-Dot Dress*, a worthy task. Bainbridge remained unpublished until she was 40, halfway through this substantial volume, but her unique, original voice, wit and atrocious spelling are discernible in every letter and diary entry.

"I have a great many qualities deemed strange and fine," as she wrote in youth. Her desire to be loved, her insecurity (despite those cheekbones, that mouth) made her susceptible, King believes, to men's enraptured overtures. "I find it difficult not to make people feel they are the most interesting people in the world," she sweetly admitted. But she put every liaison to good use, including rape by a plausible conman. Her irrepressible curiosity alerted her to diverse themes for novels — Captain Scott, the Titanic.

She surprised us all to the end, when mourners found themselves singing *Two Little Boys* ("Did you think I would leave you dying?") as her coffin was lowered into her grave in Highgate Cemetery. Typical Beryl. She was a slave to increasingly affordable whisky and nicotine ("Anyone who witnessed Beryl's cough in later years will not forget it"), but when writing she was imprisoned, depriving herself of sleep and food.

On page 450, Brendan King gets an incoherent telephone message from her and goes round to Albert Street to check that she's all right. How many biographers could claim this, with justifiable pride?

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