

MARGARET DRABBLE

Robert Targett

I asked to do Margaret Drabble's biography. Then I discovered she has never written one. Silly me. I took on the task, because my wife May arrived at Cambridge, in Britain, to study economics. She had a degree from Smith College, and later worked in an accounting job with a Cleveland manufacturer Celvite where she realized she wanted to continue the study of economic theory, but not to attend business school. Her father was an anglophil, prosperous, and had contacts. When May discovered a British academic in his circle could, perhaps, get her into Cambridge, she went for it. Since then Margaret Thatcher has rattled the two Oxbridge universities into fresh self reliance in financial activity, and alumni get American-style newsletters, invitation, and appeal letters.

Several girls of interest were at May's college at this time. Sylvia Plath was one, who arrived in 1955. She had already been published in The New Yorker. In 1955, too, Margaret Drabble's sister, A.S. Drabble arrived at Newnham. May arrived in 1956. Margaret Drabble arrived in 1957, with her Sheffield, Yorks., school's golden opinions preceding her. Margaret Drabble was 18. The Drabbles were daughters of a judge, and a teacher of English. Both parents were Fabians, or as President Trump might say, Socialists. Margaret Drabble and May were both members of Cambridge Amateur Dramatic Club, seedbed for the Footlights Review, which famously reveals successful new stage talent. May was wardrobe mistress.

Margaret Drabble was an aspiring actress, sharing the stage with Clive Swift, making a his theatrical name in Cambridge. They became linked romantically and attended a garden party May gave in the grounds of Newnham, May says. Margaret married Swift on graduation in 1960 and achieved a double-starred first, the equivalent of summa cum laude. She then went into the Royal Shakespeare Company. At one time she was understudy to Vanessa Redgrave in a West End show. We met at a wedding of mutual Cambridge friends. But I had to go off alone to Africa as a foreign correspondent very soon. May and I married 18 months later in June, 1960, in Cambridge.

Drabble third shot page 2

As recorded in "Margaret Drabble - Symbolic Moralist" a study by Nora Foster Stovel, Margaret Drabble must have switched from the theater fairly quickly. She presented Clive Swift with the first of three children, starting in 1961, soon after leaving Cambridge, and two years before getting a publisher for her first novel, "A Summer Bird-Cage". Their marriage lasted 15 years until 1975. Swift acted in Shakespeare and in Doctor Who. I plugged an early Drabble novel to the Novel Club when a former OSS spymaster - Cairo, Istanbul - was influential in the Club, and he despised the novel calling the author Drabble in his swaggering way. I appreciated it for giving me a picture of normal feminine life. I had been in Africa as a foreign correspondent and couldn't really take those days as typical.

What Drabble's "Bird-Cage" depicted was later described as "the first English woman to give voice to the delusive promise of college life, followed by the cold douche of matrimony and child bearing". This is a quote from "The Fiction of Sex: Themes and Functions of Sex Difference in the Modern Novel", a book by Rosalind Miles (1974).

Margaret Drabble pursued her writing, producing 20 novels, and some short stories, plus biographies. Several of her novels have been awarded honors. She has worked with the BBC, and decades after her marriage to Clive Swift, which broke up in 1975 she remarried, this time to another writer: Biographer Sir Michael Holroyd. That is his day job name, picked from the sonorous Sir Michael deCourcy Fraser Holroyd, followed by various honors. Holroyd won his knighthood in 2007. Margaret got her strictly equivalent title of Dame a year later. Dame has been such a cliché in Hollywood movies, that it is hard for Americans to honor it, but it is a real title, the equivalent of knight. I speculate it is rare for an eminent couple to each achieve such recognition from the committees who make these awards in the name of the Queen. Drabble discusses Holroyd in terms of caregiving, more than romance.

A sort of side show has been the Drabble/A.S Byatt relationship. May favored Margaret Drabble's temperament over her sister's. Byatt, then Tony, now Susan, is cited in Wikipedia as "as one of the great postmodern novelists". The sisters are not close: Byatt challenges Drabble's published view of their mother: described as fiction, but perhaps too recognizable. Almost unbelievably, Holroyd wrote about thinly disguised family conflict. It may have been this plethora of Holroyd/Drabble stresses that has made Drabble avoid publicity in a way few authors do. Just to muddle us further, Byatt is also a Dame.

MORE

Drabble third shot page 3

When Drabble edited The Oxford Companion to English Literature, she was driven to a publisher's blurb on the jacket, but would not give herself an editorial entry. The Cambridge Companion to English Lit. did give her an editorial entry. In 2009 Drabble was reported by The Daily Telegraph, London, that she was afraid : "That the older I get the more I find myself repeating things. So I have resolved to write no more novels." After that, tonight's novel, "The Dark Flood Rises" came out in 2016.

I am driven to talk about a few Drabble's ~~10~~ novels, because I can't get much more autobiography from Margaret Drabble's sealed lips. Drabble produced for the BBC, and in 1969 brought her "The Waterfall" to bookstores, practically the same time she produced "Bird of Paradise" at the National Theatre

Perhaps the neatest verdict on her mindset comes from The Encyclopedia Britannica, via Wikipedia. "The central characters of her novels, though widely different in character and circumstances, are shown in situations that are the necessary conditions for their **moral** growth. Drabble is concerned with the individual's attempts to define the self, but she is also interested in **Social Change** in the tradition of George Eliot, Henry James and Arnold Bennett. Drabble's early novels include "A Summer Bird-Cage" about a woman unsure of her life's direction, after dropping out of graduate school, and "The Millstone" (1965), the story of a woman who eventually sees her illegitimate child as both a burden and a blessing.

I would add Drabble seems to me much chattier than Eliot, James and Bennett, and silent on a big event of her young feminine life - the development of the birth control pill, which - with the Beatles — theoretically aroused the passionless Brits. My favorite Drabble, and I haven't read them, all, is "The Ice Age."

Following Jack Conomy's effort to decode Kipling's character, I dove into a few of Drabble's books for clues to her character. A likely entry to her long-term feminism was her biography of Arnold Bennett, who swore his support for female characters who went out to struggle in the world in a small business - a really rare role in his era 1867-1931. I guess she saw such independence as true feminism - I found no press pictures revealing her marching for the cause in rent-a-crowd manner. She pioneered the woman character divided between personal and professional ambitions.

MORE

Drabble third shot page 4

Drabble described "The Waterfall", published 1969, as "The last novel that I wrote while I was still trapped in a life with very small children." She has called this "Wicked" because it suggests one can be saved from fairly pathological conditions by loving a man."

Drabble's breakout volume seems to have been "The Millstone," in which the heroine has a scarlet letter "A" on her bosom. It is not for Adultery, but for Abstinence. The heroine is isolated by schizophrenia or agoraphobia. Drabble describes her as fairly pathological. Her male lover breaks her out of these confines, and makes her complete, but undergoes fatal injuries in a car crash, causing the survivor to think the affair "has been more artificial than fiction." Drabble was 30 when "The Waterfall," was published and this may be the moment to point out there is sometimes an age link between the heroine in a Drabble book, and the author's own age.

Let's take another look at "The Ice Age." Here an Oxford graduate, son of an Anglican couple whose charming eighteenth century home abuts onto an Episcopal Cathedral (it goes with the father's job), fits the boy for the common room. His parents listen to good music, and make fun of errors they detect in Latin. Taking history for his college subject, he is ill-fitted for the competition he faces in the Britain in 1977, with Margaret Thatcher about to take power. He flounders around in TV, always behind the scenes, never earning camera time, or much money. But he can write passable songs, and is swept up by an affluent friend, who introduces him to a promising-looking song contest in Chicago. Then another money man falls in with him, a property-developer, at a hot spot in the London property boom, and his philandering wife and increasing brood force him into the wealth economy, where money talks.

Fran, in tonight's "The Dark Flood Rises", is about the author's current age. As for Drabble's real subject," writes Stovel of Drabble's novels,"it is not just society, but morality."

Taking "The Dark Flood Rises", thus when Fran drops out of her fine ground floor flat in Highgate, one of London's most attractive areas, choosing subsidized austerity instead, she used lofty words for her new place: "Atonement, absolution, amnesty" to her second husband. Contrast that with Drabble's rather condescending description of Fran's first husband. His life style in the Canaries combines a mild climate with a comfortable cat. So I have to assume Drabble feels superior to the comfort-seeking affluent retiree. Over to discussing tonight's novel.

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