

## THE DISTINCTIVE VOICE OF THE COMMONPLACE: BARBARA PYM'S CHALLENGE TO CRITICAL CONVENTIONS

N. Berrin Aksoy

**Abstract:** Philip Larkin and Lord David Cecil when asked by the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1977 to name the most underrated writer of the century, immediately named Barbara Pym, which started a revival in her literary career. In this study, the reasons why Barbara Pym stayed in obscurity after some relative recognition and the reasons why she was named as underrated will be discussed from the perspective of how her commonness in her novels in terms of her treatment of narrative and thematic content takes shape and becomes a distinctive and highlighting quality of her style. Barbara Pym's subtle involvement with the trivialities of everyday life which is so elegantly and uniquely embedded in her plots gained an unparalleled quality that makes her obtain a distinctive voice among her contemporary 20th century writers in English literature.

**Key words:** Barbara Pym, *Excellent Women*, *Jane and Prudence*, ordinary, commonness, distinctive voice

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Barbara Pym lived and endured a literary life of obscurity and revival came only after the poet Phillip Larkin mentioned her name as the most underrated author of the 20th c. in *The Times Literary Supplement*. Barbara Pym was born at the turn of the century, in 1913 and died of metastasised breast cancer in 1980. She read English at St. Hilda's College, Oxford and started to write her novels even before graduation. She wrote her first novel *Some Tame Gazelle* in 1935, but it was turned down by publishers criticising it for being too ordinary, unfashionable and not focusing enough on plot due to the small details of commonalities that dominate the narration, and it took nearly 15 years to get the book published (1950) after some revision. Later, the poet Phillip Larkin was going to comment on the book as Pym's *Pride and Prejudice*. Meanwhile, while struggling to get published, Pym carried on producing novellas and short stories for mainly women magazines and a radio play for BBC (See Rosefield, Schneier, Cooke, Moseley, and Patterson).

Barbara Pym wrote her second novel *Excellent Women* in 1952 which received better reviews and found its way in publication easily, whereas her third novel *Prudence and Jane* (1953) was not to be received very enthusiastically by the publishers. Her next novel *Less than Angels* (1955) did not sell well, similarly her fifth novel *A Glass of Blessings* (1958) was not to make a hit in the literary environment. Despite low sales and poor reviews, *A Glass of Blessings* portrayed unusual characters such as homosexuals in postwar English fiction which was still an element of silence and neglect, the book managed to stir a small amount of interest from some reviews such as *The Daily Telegraph* (Patterson 2015:4-5). Pym's sixth novel *No Fond Return of Love* (1961) did not stir any excitement in the reading public as well. In 1963, she received the heaviest blow from her publisher who refused to publish her seventh novel *An Unsuitable Attachment*, followed by several other publishers she tried. In each case, she was politely told, in her own words that:

And to my horror they (publishers) wrote back saying that they didn't feel wanted it. I offered it to several others but the manuscript still came thudding back through the letterbox. One publisher said "We think it is very well written

but there's an old-fashioned air about it". Another thought that it wasn't the kind of book to which people were turning- I wasn't quite sure what he meant by that- while a third said curtly that their fiction list was full up for the next two years... It was an awful and humiliating sensation to be totally rejected after all those years, and I didn't know what to do about it. I did seriously consider trying to write something different- perhaps a thriller or a historical novel- but I never got far away with the idea. (Finding A Voice: A Radio Talk)

We are indeed lucky that she didn't. She did not give up her own voice, matured it on the contrary despite the rejection and humiliation she felt for not being published after a decade of relative publicity. Admittedly, she is a master of trivialities, and details and glorification of ordinary things, moments, characters and events. "I've always liked detail-in fact my love of triviality has been criticised" (Radio Talk) she writes. Hence, in this paper, I argue that it is this emphasis on the element of commonplaces and trivialities that make Pym's voice distinctive.

Pym developed her style by means of reading the great authors of English literature, she was especially influenced by Aldous Huxley's *Crome Yellow*, the poems of John Betjeman, Ivy Compton-Burnett, Stevie Smith and classics like Jane Austen and Anthony Trollope. However, she was too keen on finding a voice of her own and worked towards it stubbornly even when she continued receiving rejections from publishers.

So I did go on writing even in the face of discouragement. For the last thirty years or so I have kept a series of notebooks, like a kind of diary, in which I also write down all sorts of other things-possible scenes or turns of plots for novels, quotations that appeal to me, occasional overheard scraps of conversation, anything, in fact. Doing this is often more of a pleasure than actual writing. (Pym 1978, Finding a Voice: Radio Talk)

In her novels, usually in a closed society the ordinary, decent English middle-class men and women, move around and do things which seem trivial affairs on the surface. The church, the vicarage, "-a churn of parish politics and petty romances-beneath the gentle surfaces of her novels is a slow-building comedy, salt wit in a saline drip" (Schneier 2017: 1) abound in her novels. These topics and subject matter may seem unimportant and even easy to write and her characters more than ordinary and unimportant with petty concerns and deeds that they deceptively look uninteresting to be authorial material that would immerse readers. However, this triviality, humour and ordinariness is so minutely crafted that once you start reading a Pym novel, you find yourself in the midst of a down-to-earth human situation where everybody finds something of him/herself in the experience of reading. This shared experience is achieved through this distinctive voice of commonness that wraps the reader in a haze of minute details and carefully and purposefully selected and enacted scenes of humour and wit of observation of the human situation as warmly represented by her characters in her novels. As Philip Larkin writes to her in one of their correspondence: "Yes, I read your books, in order, in succession, as I do from time to time, and once more found them heartening and entertaining-you know, there is never a dull page; one never feels' oh, now I've got to get through this before it becomes interesting again-it's interesting all the time" (Larkin 2013: 16)

Barbara Pym is a very keen observer of single, middle-class, educated and cultured women who are approaching to spinsterhood, not beautiful nor ugly, ordinary

in appearance but acutely sensitive to detail and observation and able to perceive the ordinary commonness of men and women alike in her society. Her incessant dedication to details in domestic and social contacts in her novels and “the painful awareness of futility” (Parks 2007: 172) make her an author of a special kind, one who portrays the commonplaceness of English life with elegance, wit and humour. The old-fashionedness actually imply much, her portrayal of plots and characters amid small and even smaller details seem to get lost in its message while at the same time, makes the reader keep expecting some sort of a fullstop or finalisation which does not come. Love is one of her favorite themes, though not the kind that one might expect to find in romances. It is usually one-sided, or dull or does not evoke much enthusiasms to the characters. It is said that the unrequited love of women for men is based on her experience especially her lifelong relationship with her youth love Henry Harvey from their Oxford years ( Frye 2013:4).

English novelist and the author of the world-famous series *The No1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, Alexander McCall Smith writes about Barbara Pym's distinctive style in his preface to Pym's *Excellent Women* novel that “the novel stands as one of the most endearingly amusing English novels of the 20th century:

James Thurber, remarking on the difference between English and American humour, said that whereas the latter consists of making the extraordinary seem ordinary, the former turns on transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary. Readers of Jane Austen will perhaps agree, as will those who enjoy EF Benson's timeless Mapp and Lucia novels. Barbara Pym belongs in this company. Indeed she more than the others illustrates Thurber's point about English humour-it delights in tiny little things; and by that standard, *Excellent Women* stands as one of the most endearingly amusing English novel of the 20th century. (McCall Smith 2008: 1)

In *Excellent Women*, the heroine Mildred Lathbury is a spinster who is a mouthpiece of Pym's attitude towards feminism. Pym's feminism is never outspokenly obvious. Excellent women, according to Pym are those who devote themselves to church affairs and charity, who at the same time gossip, observe other people's- especially married women's lives, who are not particularly devout but attend to church usually for the social contact it maintains. According to Pym, one does not necessarily have to be married in order to be excellent women, or being an excellent woman does not always entail superior qualities as opposed to ordinary, not-so-excellent women in the society. As Moseley observes in his article “A Few Words About Barbara Pym”:

Much of the activity of such books as *Excellent Women* and *Some Tame Gazzelle* and *A Few Green Leaves* revolves around the church. Nobody seems particularly devout or ardent, even the clergy... For most the church imposes certain rhythms-harvest festivals and Lent and Confirmation classes-and provide a centre,even if frequently factitious, for the lives of unmarried women...The women who, in such tasks, provide the backbone of the church,are regularly referred to as “really splendid” or “excellent women”. (Moseley 1990: 79)

Manifestly, Mildred Lathbury, who is a perfect example of such “excellence” mentions that “it was not the excellent women who got married but people like Allegra

Gray, who was no good at sewing, and Helena Napier, who left all the washing up” (Pym2010: 190)

The above comment by the character in *Excellent Women* hilariously portrays Pym’s thoughts about marriage and the responsibilities supposedly be taken over by the women in the marriage. Mildred Lathbury’s observations on marriage and married women are actually a display of Pym’s strong belief in the solid and independent place a woman can assume in the society without getting married or having a lifelong commitment with a man. No wonder Pym herself declined several marriage proposals.

*Excellent Women* is Pym’s second published novel after *Some Tame Gazelle*. The book is not concerned with political or widespread social issues, but the previous war hangs over delicately in the book by way of small hints and implications, but never overtly mentioned, as seen in the examples below:

“One hears that so many husbands coming back from the war find that their civilian clothes have been devoured by moth, said Winifred seriously” (Pym 2010: 46).

Talk about landing on the “Normandy beaches, said Sister Blatt, some of our jumble sale crowd would make splendid Commandos” (Pym 2010: 65).

Father Greatorax, wearing a cassock and an old navy blue overcoat of the kind worn by Civil Defence workers during the war, stood uncertainly in the middle of the room (Pym2010: 64)

Most probably it is the World War II that is being referred to in the novel.

In *Excellent Women*, the environment is not one of fashion or prosperity, neither below the standard and unkept. Pym, by giving small details about the way Mildred and her friends live make it clear that the social status of the characters is decent but not well-off. In contrast, this is not an issue for any of them, even for Mildred, who enjoys finding contentment in these surroundings and the trivial details they offer her to observe and comment on kind -heartedly:“Of course there might be some embarrassment about sharing a bathroom, but I must try to conquer it” (Pym 2010: 18).

“He named the two most respectable squares in our district, where a few houses of the old type, occupied by one family or even by one person and not yet cut up into flats, were to be found. My flat was neither of these squires, but in a Street and at what I liked to think was the ‘best’ end” (Pym 2010: 13).

“I did part-time work at an organisation which helped impoverished gentlewomen, a cause very near to my own heart, as I felt that I was just the kind of person who might one day become one” (Pym 2010: 9).

Alexander McCall Smith comments on the landscape and its inhabitants in *Excellent Women* as such:

The World portrayed in *Excellent Women* is one of shortages and genteel drabness. It is not a World of real poverty-that is not Pym’s territory. The characters have all known better days in one way or another: they come from a vicarage background but are now in shared accommodation; they appreciate better fare than the tinned food they eat out; their lives might have had more light in them (McCall Smith 2013: 3)

Smith goes on to ask the question: “Is this a world that the contemporary reader can recognise?” (McCall Smith 2013: 3).

Indeed, as Smith accepts, it is still a recognisable world for the contemporary reader, when one considers the problems of cosmopolitan big cities. The modest

circumstances that Mildred and her friends modestly and quietly accept is given in small but poignant details and even in a humorous way as in the examples:

“When my parents had died, within two years of each other, I was left with a small income of my own, an assortment of furniture, but no home. It was then that I had joined forces with my old school friend Dora Caldicote...” (Pym 2010: 8-9)

“ ‘I sometimes feel rather cramped here’ ”

“ ‘And there’s the shared bathroom,’ she murmured.

“ ‘The early Christians had all things in common ‘I reminded her,’ Be thankful that we have our own kitchens’ ” (Pym 2010: 5).

Pym’s world in her novels are filled with tiny details that sparkle with acute wit and delicate implications: At a jumble sale when Winifred appreciatively shows Mildred the clothes donated by Lady Farmer and mentions that she herself would like to buy them, Mildred’s comment is:

Lady Farmer was one of the few wealthy members of our congregation, but as she was over seventy I was doubtful whether her clothes would really be suitable for Winifred who was much thinner and hadn’t her air of comfortably upholstered elegance.

I had to agree that it was lovely material, but the dress was so completely Lady Farmer that I should have hated to wear it myself and swamp whatever individuality I possess (Pym 2010: 17)

A typical Pym comment... With such an aside, Pym is able to carry over to the reader Mildred the spinster’s self-esteem as opposed to the shallowness of her friend Winifred who looks at things in a sweeping manner.

As mentioned earlier, Pym’s works are about typically English lifestyle of churches, small communities, spinsters and housewives but very much engaging for the reader with its calm, ironical and subtle style that portrays so delicately human nature and its foibles.

Mildred is a spinster who nonchalantly calls herself as such several times in the book. Nevertheless, she seems to have accepted it and even enjoys the opportunities it provides her to observe and comment on the small things that tell so much when she comfortably moves around social circles, gatherings and carry out social contact:

When the vicar’s sister Winifred asks her to rent their upstairs floor, Mildred answers: “That’s very kind of you’ I said, speaking slowly to gain time, for fond as I was of Winifred I valued my independence very dearly” (Pym 2010: 16).

In Barbara Pym’s professional life at the International Africa Institute in London, she developed her style of dealing with the important or significant in a nonchalant and commonplace way. In *The Owl*, Carrie Frye, making reference to Holt’s Barbara Pym *Biography* quotes the following about her delicate and subtle treatment of the significant: “Not even the slightest expression of amusement or disapproval should ever be displayed at the description of the ridiculous, impossible or disgusting features in custom, cult or legend” (10).

According to Frye, Pym noted down all the activities of her life evolving in personal life or professional life, from comings and goings of people, colleagues, suitors “their appearances deftly sketched in, their habits noted” (Frye, 2013, p. 10). She even, writes Frye, carried over this curiosity about the ordinary and common to the degree of

“tracking the lives of strangers for a period, creating elaborate stories about their lives and arranging sightings” (Frye 2013: 11)

In *Jane and Prudence*, during the meeting of the Parachial Church Council, the secretary Mr Mortlake and the treasurer Mr Whiting arrive early to the meeting and have ample time to observe the place: “They took their seats at the table facing the row of chairs and looked round the room critically, appraising the furnishings, which were less costly than those of their own homes, though in better taste, which they were unable to appreciate, since they noticed only the worm-eaten leg of a table or the broken back of a Chippendale chair” (Pym 1981: 149)

Her acute sense of perception of the follies of the human character so casually and amusingly reflected, makes the passage even more distinctive than a sharp comment or criticism that we may come across in other fictional narratives.

Matthew Schneier in “In Praise of Barbara Pym” agrees with her commentators that Pym:

the midcentury English novelist, is forever being forgotten, and forever revived. Her novels sketch a circumscribed scene whose anchors were the church and the vicarage, and the busy, decent Englishmen and –women (more women) who shuffled between the two. To read her, one must have an appetite for endless jumble sales and whist drives, and interfering wisdom of dowagers and distressed women... However remote her themes may seem- a churn of parish politics and petty romances- beneath the gentle surfaces of her novels is a slow-building comedy, salt wit in a saline drip. She is a shrewd observer of a certain middle-class women, no longer young and not quite beautiful, whom the society finds it easy to overlook. And she is just as shrewd an observer of the people (fatuous romantic idols, doddering priests, love-struck bed-sitters) that these women, vigilant and perceptive, themselves observe (Schneier 2017: 1)

Especially in *Excellent Women*, Pym’s Mildred Lathbury falls in the category of these women who is keenly interested in her neighbours’ and her acquaintances’ affairs. Since she is neither pretty nor young, unmarried, with tight budget, she finds herself silently observing married women and their lives, and making comparisons between them and her own spinster kind, always commenting how she cherishes her independence and spinsterhood: “I went into my little kitchen and laid my breakfast. I usually left the house at a quarter to nine in the morning and worked for my gentlewomen until lunchtime. After that I was free, but I always seemed to find plenty to do. As I moved about the kitchen getting out china and cutlery, I thought, not for the first time, how pleasant it was to be living alone” (Pym 2010: 18)

Indeed she is helpful, caring for her community since she is a spinster and has lots of time to devote herself to charity work, yet this does not hinder her from passing silent comments on her neighbour’s affairs and even creating scenes and conclusions about their lives and imagining her positions accordingly:

Later, as I lay in bed I found myself thinking about Mrs Napier and the man I had seen with her. Was he perhaps a fellow anthropologist? I could still hear voices in the room underneath me, raised almost as if they were quarrelling. I began to wonder about Rockingham Napier, when he would come and what he would be like. Cooking, Victorian glass paperweights, charm... and then there was the naval element. He might arrive with a parrot in a cage. I supposed that,

apart from encounters on the stairs, we should probably see very little of each other. Of course there might be some embarrassment about the sharing of the bathroom, but I must try to conquer it... I might perhaps buy myself a new and more becoming dressing gown, one that I wouldn't mind being seen in, something long and warm in a rich colour... (Pym 2010: 18)

Tim Parks in his "Barbara Pym and the Untranslatable Commonplace" writes that Pym's achievement lies not just in her description of this very particular world, but in the way she shows how convention and received ideas suffocate personal initiative and smother any possible plot, while at the same time being the source of a great deal of fun and irony (2007:184).

As is obvious in the above excerpt from *Excellent Women*, Mildred is slightly romantically fancying Rockingham Napier whom she has yet to meet, yet out of decorum and convention, she thinks contact with him might not be possible. On the other hand, although not mentioned openly, in the excerpt the slight mentioning of Cooking, Victorian glass paperweights, charm and other knickknacks are the belongings of Mr Napier that Mildred watched when he moved into the flat above her. These are the quaint minutiae and culture – specific items that reflect how the romantic storyline breaks into insignificant scenes while simultaneously Pym's point of view differs itself from conventional pretensions and moves toward the private and sadder picture of a spinster.

Pym's novels take its shape mostly from the church and the Anglican suburbs of England, stretching to London. Yet, the novels do not speak only to the religious; they cover a whole range of humanity by way of treating her plots and characters in a nominally religious way extending to "innocent irony" as Phillip Larkin calls (Schneider 2017: 2).

In *Civil to Strangers* (1936) Pym's second novel after the first version of *Some Tame Gazelle*, the young curate, Mr Paladin is fancied by a Miss Gray who is nearing to spinsterhood and in desperate hurry to marry. Unfortunately, Mr Paladin is too timid and uninterested to her formidable advances. The following excerpt is hilarious in its minute details and seemingly slight and insignificant commonplace voice of the narrator who manages to pack so many hints in a paragraph:

Mr Paladin was writing home to his mother. He sat in his lodgings, crouching over the electric fire, for although he had just said in his letter that the weather was becoming warmer everyday, the evenings were still chilly enough to make him realise that the heating of his room was inadequate. He hardly liked to go upstairs to fetch his rug, although it would have been comfortable to sit with it wrapped round his knees. If he did this his landlady might be offended, and it would look so odd if the rector called. Or if anyone else called. Mr Paladin shivered and drew nearer to the glowing bar in the Wall which was his fire. Suppose Miss Gray were to call this evening? She had hinted at it after the Choral Society practice on Monday, and the worst of it was that she had an excuse. It was now more than a month since she had borrowed *Paradise Lost*, and she would surely bring it back this evening he had the misfortune to be in. He turned once more to his letter. 'I am preaching a course of sermon's on God's Presence' he wrote, and then gave a short account of the first one ....' I am also continuing my studies in Hebrew, and am finding time to read a little Plato and Homer in the evenings. I was glad of the thicker pyjamas, although I am hoping that the nights will soon be warmer. Now that the cricket season is beginning I

expect to be busier than I was in winter, as the rector is so keen about it and will be playing whenever he can....He produced such a formidable list of activities that when his mother read the letter she was quite alarmed and wrote off to her son at once, giving him strict instructions to have milk or Horlicks before he went to bed (Pym 1987: 52)

These two paragraphs may be considered as one of the most humorous and touching examples of Pym's juxtapositioning of convention, the commonplace and her distinctive and witty voice that packs so much about the ordinariness of English parish life, the humorous vulnerabilities of her characters, and the commonplaceness of feelings and thoughts together with a hint of "futility in the richness of her details which operate together in a reciprocally tensing relationship" (Parks 2007: 184). Nevertheless, these are what make Pym so charmingly distinctive in her traditional, even conventional style of writing which causes her to be called as "unfashionable" by her publisher, and as Tim Parks calls "the language and detail stay absolutely with the everyday and the ordinary" (Parks 2007: 187) Her treatment of being human, who live through a string of everyday details that often get forgotten or ignored embellish her distinctive style.

In a BBC adaptation of Pym's life, Barbara as played by the famous English actor Patricia Routledge, is attending to a church gathering where the rector in his sermon talks about a piece of embroidery. The rector mentions the richness and beauty of the embroidery, made up of small, colourful and rich and careful stitches. He resembles life to a piece of embroidery. If its stitches are put with enough labour and attention, and correctly and lovingly filled in, then it is a thing of beauty forever. The rector resembles life to a piece of embroidery, if enough stitches are put in, then it becomes rich and full, he goes on to say. This metaphor of embroidery affects Pym's writing and in a way, describes it too. The "stitches" though seem trivial, are put in her novels so carefully and delicately that it becomes a joy to read her. This is how her distinctive voice is heard. Indeed, as Pym later suggests, this is also how she finds her own "voice of sorts". She mentions that "I think that's the kind of immortality most authors would want-to feel that their work would be immediately recognisable as having been written by them and by nobody else. But of course, it's a lot to ask for" (Pym 1978, *Finding A Voice: A Radio Talk*). Not so in her case. What she does with her little world is what makes Pym rewarding and distinctive: her special voice delicate, subtle, carefully designed and even comical, illuminating the pleasures of ordinariness yet their subtle poignant futility, and man's capability to pleasantly deal with and accept these as ordinary facts of life leave the reader with a taste of Pym's distinctive voice.

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