

Graduation 2006 Honorary Graduate - Oration

Oration for Honorary Graduand Rose Tremain
Orator: Barbara Peirson

Chancellor, the Senate has resolved that the degree of Doctor of the University be conferred upon ROSE TREMAIN

When I discovered it was to be my privilege to write this oration for Rose Tremain I went to my bookshelves to take down the nigh on a dozen or so books of hers that I have, in order to re-acquaint myself with them. However, when I got there, there was only one to be found. This was a puzzle. The book that was there was her most recent novel *The Colour*, and I remembered that it had been returned by a friend who I'd lent it to. But where were the others? I rummaged around in a few other places and suddenly it dawned on me - the reason I couldn't find them was because I had given them all away. One by one. And any of you here who are familiar with her work will understand that as soon as I had read one I had to pass it on. *Restoration*: "You must read this it's amazing!"; *Music and Silence*: "You've got to read this it is fantastic!"; *The Way I Found Her*: "Read this - it's wonderful!" This is Rose Tremain's success, she is a popular writer and yet she occupies the rare position of also being a literary one.

I first discovered her work over fifteen years ago now. I went into a bookshop and I picked up *Sacred Country*. It had won two awards: the Prix Femina Etranger from France and the James Tate Black Memorial Award.

I opened the first page. And I began to read.... I found myself in winter, in the grey cold of a potato field, on an isolated Suffolk farm, the snow was falling like salt. Observing the two minute silence following the death of King George in 1952 were gathered a poor farming family. Among them, a young girl, Mary, whispers "I am not Mary. I am not a girl. I am a boy."

And I was hooked. I proceeded to read everything by Rose Tremain that I could get my hands on.

It is no small canon. She has written nine novels to date, several collections of short stories, award winning radio plays, television plays, she is currently working on a screenplay, she has written academic works. She has got a glittering array of awards. She is internationally acclaimed. She has sat as a judge for the Booker Prize twice. She was interviewed by Sue Lawley on *Desert Island Discs*.

She began writing stories while she was still at school, she said, "I remember standing in the middle of a very beautiful hayfield with the sun going down and thinking I don't want just to describe how beautiful I thought that place was but I wanted write down all my feelings about it and then try and make some equation between that place and what I'd felt about it and what hopes I had for my own life...it seemed to me that my life would be a life in which this process of describing and identifying feelings would play a part."

After growing up in London, she moved to Paris to study at the Sorbonne. And her student days there provided her with a rich seam of ideas and experiences which have filtered into her work, notably in *The Swimming Pool Season* for which she won the Angel Literary Award. It's a delightful novel about a man exiled to a sleepy French village after the collapse of his swimming pool business, who embarks upon the creation of the most beautiful swimming pool of all.

Her novel, *The Way I Found Her*, is set in Paris. She describes the world there with intimate familiarity, she tells the story of an adolescent boy, Lewis, and his infatuation with a middle-aged writer of historical romances – Valentina, “The thing I want to do most in the world is lick the lipstick off Valentina’s lips” he says. The book is a thriller, but Rose Tremain can take us deeply into her own unique world of desire of sensual and sensuous pleasure. Longing and taboo permeate her work.

After Paris, Rose read English at the University of East Anglia. And then like most young graduates she took on a variety of jobs - she read film scripts, taught boys in a prep school, became a sub editor at a small publishing house and then in the early 1970s, when she started a family, she came to live in Suffolk. East Anglia has remained her home ever since.

The flat landscapes and endless skies of Suffolk and Norfolk are backdrops for many of her stories, they are a distinctive hallmark of her work. Many of her characters have sprung from the flat, furrowed fields - they yearn to leave, or they are forced to escape, or they are exiled, or they long to return.

One of the characteristics that marked Rose Tremain out from the beginning, was her interest in characters unlike herself, characters who would perhaps normally be small players in a story, characters with dark secrets. In her first novel, *Sadler’s Birthday*, she tells of an old and lonely butler taking stock of his life as he wanders the rooms of the once stately home that he has inherited from his late employer. *Letter to Sister Benedicta*, is her second novel, and it is told through a series of letters, from a middle-aged widow coming to terms with her husband’s stroke.

Her indisputable talent was spotted early and she was selected as one of Granta’s Best Young British Novelists in 1983. And in 1984 she won the Dylan Thomas Award for a collection of short stories.

In 1988, Rose became a tutor on the acclaimed MA in Creative Writing course at the University of East Anglia. Some of her students have gone on to great success themselves, amongst them, Tracy Chevalier and Andrew Millar. Her work has never been directly autobiographical and she has encouraged her own students to dispense with the adage ‘start with yourself’ recommending that they start instead with something that they don’t know about. Invention is the key. And she certainly proves that by tapping into the imagination it’s possible to unlock a chest of endless treasure but the other key she uses is research which she pursues with tireless rigour.

She is perhaps best known for her three epic novels *Restoration*, *Music and Silence* and, most recently, *The Colour*. Epic in that the characters venture out from small domestic interiors to inhabit a world stage, moving through time, across continents.

Restoration won The Angel Literary Award, The Sunday Express Book of the Year Award and was shortlisted for The Booker Prize. And it was made into an Oscar winning film. It follows the adventures of one of the most delicious characters in recent fiction, Robert Merivel, who becomes a courtier to Charles the Second. He describes himself as, “erratic, immoderate, greedy, boastful and sad.” “Look at me” he says “without my periwig I am an affront to neatness. I am not tall, but this is the age of the high heel”.

And so the book begins with Rose Tremain’s inimitable ability to make us laugh, to sigh, to bring to life a world we have never encountered. It is a novel of massive scope, of humour and elegance, it dips and dives from hilarity to pathos sometimes all in a page, sometimes all in a sentence.

Music and Silence won her the Whitbread Novel Award, and she has sold more than 200,000 copies in paperback. She explores the world of the seventeenth century Danish Court. John Julius Norridge said, “It is the greatest thing to come out of Denmark since Hamlet”. There is certainly

something rotten in the state which she interrogates and through which she weaves stories of delicate complexity, her characters wrestle with existential questions, they long for power, love, meaning.

Rose Tremain has an unerring gift as a story teller. *The Colour*, which was shortlisted for The Orange Prize for Fiction, is set during the gold rush in the nineteenth century New Zealand. It is a story of greed and sacrifice, it is a masterpiece of story telling and as *The Scotsman* described it 'a wondrous piece of gold in itself'.

She creates great arcs of plot, weaving intricate tapestries, she takes the reader right to the epicentre of the great fire of London, on a trek to the Southern Alps, and yet, as her Editor Penelope Hoare said "there is not a sentence of hers that hasn't either moved me or amused me". And with this attention to detail she always returns to the short story

Her story from the latest collection *The Darkness of Wallace Simpson* has just been nominated for the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award.

She has said, "I think I'm saying to the reader 'Look and listen. Try to apprehend the complexity of the world and what it is to be human in it.'" And this is what she does. She explores the fundamental question of what it is to be human, in all its glory, in all its shame and she does so with subtlety, with tenderness, wit, courage, rigour and grace. It is this unique voice of hers which has led to her great success.

Popular international success is something that Rose Tremain now enjoys whilst at the same time occupying a significant place as an outstanding literary figure of our times.

Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, ladies and gentlemen, the award of honorary degree is given to honour its recipient, to acknowledge their great achievements, which we do wholeheartedly here today, but moreover its acceptance also honours and graces our Department and our institution. We are honoured indeed, Rose Tremain, that you should have accepted this, we are grateful for the wonderful books you have written, and also for your presence with us today.

Chancellor, I present to you ROSE TREMAIN