

Graduation 2006

Acceptance Speech by Honorary Graduate Rose Tremain

Chancellor, ladies and gentleman, and Barbara Peirson, thank you very much for a very, very generous oration. I'm very moved by this honour, doubly so that, for reasons that I will go on to explain, the University of Essex has been very important to me at a significant moment in my writing life.

In 1978 I was in the process of completing my second novel, and I was given, as occasionally happens in a life these wonderful gifts arrive, in a sort of unexpected way (it seemed like that, out of blue), a one-year fellowship here, at the University of Essex in the Department of Literature. As I recall, this paid me the then quite startling sum of £7,000 for the year. It seemed a lot in 1978, hard to remember but it seemed a lot, to do absolutely nothing really, except, inhabit a very pleasant office here on the campus and attempt a bit of writing, which I did, and make several lunchtime visits to pubs in the beautiful Essex countryside. I remember the year very, very, very vividly, I lived in north Suffolk at the time and so I was driving to and fro, to and fro, and on the drives from Suffolk to here and back I decide not to waste this time (writers are very protective of time, it places such an important part in our psyche I think) and in order not to waste it, I tried to teach myself Italian on the car linguaphone tape, so I remember that I used to arrive here with my head full of Italian household words! And it does seem a sort of strangely sort of romantic endeavour, to sit down here in my lovely office on campus and try to write non-household kinds of things.

The fellowship was really a fantastic gift to me in 1978. It gave me the courage to give up my full-time job. I had a job at that time as a picture researcher, to which I also owe a debt. All beginning writers, as I used to say to my students, need the day job and at some point luck or charity or a splendid offer from a university like this, has to enable you to give up that day job, and this was what I did, and to devote myself to becoming the thing I wanted to become ever since childhood which is a full-time writer. I'm sure that everybody will hear and understand that the beginning of a writing career are very difficult indeed. The greatest of these difficulties in my belief is, is not necessarily lack of money but lack of belief. I'm not talking really about self belief which is something that I think, in a sort of mad optimistic way I always had, but the belief of others. Almost everybody around you, even those who love you, regard what you're trying to do as a kind of mad enterprise or even possibly a doomed enterprise. I remember that, when I announced that what I wanted to be was a fiction writer to my mother, she said, "Oh darling, need I worry?" This was a phrase, incidentally, which she used a great deal, and it greatly amused my beloved mentor Angus Wilson who found a way to use it in his penultimate novel, *Setting the World on Fire*, and that the context here, just to tell you briefly the way Angus used this phrase of my mother's, is that the year is 1938 and this character, Rosemary Mosson, who is the sort of grande-dame of this story, asks a dinner guest in hushed tones, "Now, this person Hitler, need I worry?"

The wonderful, wonderful ability that many writers have, and Angus had to a sort of extraordinary degree, is to pick up on something tiny and make something universal and extraordinary out of it. Anyway, as I say, what I call this absence of belief, I think leaves you in a state of isolation which feels very very lonely. And it's certainly true to say that the University here helped me. First by giving me money and therefore time but also I think by endorsing what I'd already written as something serious, something precisely not mad and not doomed. While I mention the buying of time which is the commodity that writers really need more than any other, I'd also like to touch very briefly on the question that Barbara alluded to a little bit in her oration, and it's a question I'm asked very frequently, which is why I've worked so frequently with historical time in my fiction.

My young woman protagonist Harriet Blackstone, in my novel, *The Colour*, says that she yearns for the unfamiliar and the strange. And I think, in my writing life anyway, this has been true for me too.

I seem not really to have been interested in charting my own experience, perhaps this will happen now, this will happen later on, I don't know. But until now I've definitely chosen to establish some kind of separation between myself and my central characters, most of whom have been distant from me in age, in time, in place and, quite often and perhaps most importantly, in gender. The key word for me here, or I like to believe it is the key word, is empathy. The difficult but deeply satisfying act of imagining, in a profound kind of way, what it is to be someone else. I do attach great importance to this. Another mentor of mine, late lamented, Malcolm Bradbury said, and I quote, "Serious fiction blazes the trail of human understanding" and I think what Malcolm was saying here was that empathy is absolutely prime in any civilised society. If we can imagine what the condition of the other truly is then so many things follow. Tolerance, understanding can begin. And I think fiction, at its best, gives us a very vivid entry into this world of the other.

And, if you're writing about the past, I think that even more is asked for you in this regard, than with the contemporary story, because here your very first imaginative act is to begin to understand the sensibilities and the mindset of the people whose world experience is really from birth to death, absolutely unlike ours, unlike mine. It's often been pointed out to me that we necessarily approach the past from the present, with the sensibility of a person of our own time. We can't get round that but I think what we can attempt is imaginative projection into this other time, this altered sensibility. And then, what I would call this habit of imaginative projection, very, very important to me, from which I think an understanding of life outside our own little cells is nurtured, begins to be built up and, in particular, from a study of the past.

So, what I've just said is really a kind of brief sketch of my personal defence of historical writing, against a charge which is often levelled against it, which is the charge of shallowness, that things which are safely in the past are not in some way worthy of our attention. Because, I believe, that if we can understand that a very wide panorama of experience, and it seems to me that we are in a state in which what we write can in fact transcend both past and present, and look at things, the great things, the big subjects, the things which don't change: love, betrayal, loyalty, rivalry, fear, faith, money, success, failure, friendship, death, and then perhaps what we write will be as relevant to the readership of today as any contemporary work and it may also endure. The question of durability is one, I think, that should concern writers. In our throwaway society books are forgotten, not in months but sometimes in weeks and yet every writer, and I'm sure there are some in this room, is striving to create something that is going to last. We may fail but that's what we are striving to do.

Now, on a final note, I note that one significant alumni of the University of Essex is one Rodolfo Neri Vela, Mexico's first and only astronaut. This is surely an alumni with real wow factor and I like to think, rather fancifully, that there is a mythic connection between Rodolfo Neri Vela and those of us here who inhabited different kind of astro-zone, the zone of fiction, where wonders can occasionally occur and from which the world can be viewed differently. As the late Saul Bellow said, "Life is not a sick and hasty ride, helpless through a dream into oblivion. No sir! It can be arrested by a thing or two. By art."

Thank you.