



Sue Townsend

– republican revelries

Zoë Fairbairns discusses Sue Townsend's latest monarchic – or, more accurately, anarchic – novel with the author

I first met Sue Townsend back in the 1980s, at a party hosted by Methuen who were then her publishers, and mine. Methuen had just been taken over, and the new owners wanted to de-recognise the staff union. The whiff of industrial struggle was in the air and, in solidarity with our editors, Sue and I and other Methuen authors wore union badges and argued the case for union recognition with senior executives. It was all reasonably polite, but you could see them eyeing her nervously; as creator of the hugely successful *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13³/₄*, and *The Growing Pains of Adrian Mole*, she was their bestselling author.

More than 20 years later, we reminisce about this episode as she welcomes me into her spacious, 100-year-old house in Leicester. She is in her early sixties, blonde-haired, wearing slinky velvet pants and a black and white stripy top. En route to her sitting room, my eye is caught by a painted wooden rocking horse in the hall, and a framed photograph of Antony Gormley's *Angel of the North*. The sitting room itself is dominated by a pair of wooden giraffes – not life-size, but large. 'I love giraffes, so my husband gave them to me for Christmas,' Sue explains, before calmly adding that one of the creatures recently toppled over on to a visitor. She assures me that no injuries were caused, but when she asks me where I would like to sit, I select a chair on the far side of the room.

Beatnik

Sue Townsend was born in Leicester in 1946, and left school at the age of 14, despite her English teacher pleading with her parents that she be allowed to stay on. 'It wasn't in our family's experience to have anyone go on to further

education,' she explains. 'My parents and my aunts and uncles all passed what was called the scholarship, but none of them went on to grammar school because they couldn't afford the uniform. And that was the same reason that was given as to why I didn't go on. The family tradition was that you left school at the earliest legal opportunity, and you went to earn money.' She became a petrol pump attendant. The duffel coat she wore with its BP logo had a pocket large enough to contain a paperback book, so in between running out to the pumps, she sat in her kiosk on the forecourt and read – Russian novelists, American bestsellers, anything.

Off-duty, she lived the life of a '60s beatnik – one of about ten, she reckons, in Leicester at the time. 'We used to meet up in this coffee bar and talk about jazz and folk and French culture, no doubt sounding completely pretentious. Leicester's only coffee bar was kept by a Jewish guy called Joe. And he read *The Guardian*, the *Manchester Guardian* then. After reading it, he would pass it around the coffee bar, and I used to think, oh my God, one day I'll read this and understand it.'

Writing

She started writing secretly. 'I used to write semi-autobiographical stuff. And because of the explosive, I thought, nature of it, I got into the habit of hiding it.' She hid it for 20 years, during which time she married (at the age of 18, wearing a navy blue suit by Norman Hartnell) and had three children. Then she met Colin Broadway, who was to become her second husband. He showed her an advertisement in the *Leicester Mercury* for a writers' group that was meeting at the Phoenix

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theatre. 'I went there for six weeks without opening my mouth. I hadn't realised it was a play-writing group, and I had nothing to show. After six weeks, the director said to me, "it would be good if you could bring us something of yours", because by then everyone had brought something. So I wrote my first play in two weeks. It was called *Womberang*. It was a kind of wish-fulfilment play, because I'd spent a lot of time in gynaecological waiting rooms, and I wrote about what I wished would happen.' *Womberang* was performed at London's Soho Poly in 1979.

Three years later, in 1982, *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13³/₄* was published – her first book. Besides being a huge bestseller, a triumph on radio, a begetter of several sequels and a TV series, it earned for Townsend the distinction shared by only a handful of authors (such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Ian Fleming, and more recently Helen Fielding) of having created a character whose name has entered the English language.

Mole's account of life as a 1980s' comprehensive school student is matter-of-fact, low key, self-absorbed. Everything is about him. His frequent unawareness of the wider significance of what he writes, makes it all the more significant to the reader. In *The Growing*

Pains of Adrian Mole, he notes casually that 'my mother has gone with her women's group to have a picnic on Greenham Common'. In the more recent *Adrian Mole and the Weapons of Mass Destruction*, Mole, now in his late 30s, cancels his holiday in Cyprus for fear that the WMDs might put him at risk. Later he writes to Tony Blair demanding evidence that the weapons (a) exist, and (b) could reach Cyprus; without this his travel agent will not refund his £57.10 deposit. Anyone who has ever responded to an international disaster by wondering, 'How will this affect me?' can find points of identification with Adrian, as can anyone who has unfulfilled ambitions or unrealised ideals, or who has ever loved and lost. Since this covers just about all of us, it accounts for the books' popularity.

As well as seven Adrian Mole books, Townsend has written two other novels, and three political satires, firing broadsides against New Labour and the royal family. The latest of these, *Queen Camilla*, was published in paperback on October 5.

Queen Camilla

The title is a challenge: a wind-up for those who don't relish the idea of Camilla becoming queen, as well as those who are averse to queens and



kings in general. The book opens where its predecessor *The Queen and I* (first published in 1992) finished: the English monarchy has been overthrown. It is just England we are talking about, which seems odd, particularly in statements like ‘England owed the United States a hundred billion pounds’. Granted that the book is a comedy, its subject matter is a major change to the British constitution; don’t we need to know where the non-English parts of the British Isles fit in? Townsend explains that in her imagined scenario, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have become independent and gone their separate ways. She prefers not to examine this development, or even refer to it in the book, because it might distract her from her main theme, which is what has happened to the members of the formerly-royal family.

We find them living in an exclusion zone on a run-down council housing estate, tagged like criminals, watched over by surveillance satellites, washing their own dishes in plastic bowls from the Everything A Pound shop. In spite of all this, when steps are taken to restore the royals to their erstwhile palaces, power and privilege, they don’t all want to go.

So why does the staunchly left-wing and republican Sue Townsend keep writing about the royals?

‘It’s wish-fulfilment,’ she admits. ‘I’ve always liked the story about the prince and the pauper. I think that applies to so many things. The grass is always greener. I love the idea of the king looking out the window and envying the pauper’s freedom, lack of responsibility. And I like the idea of the pauper looking at the king and thinking, God, if I had his wealth and his power and those clothes. And the moral is, neither of those is right. We need each other.’ The ex-royals enjoy the neighbourliness of their new environment, the gossip and helpfulness and solidarity. Camilla risks the wrath of the police by cutting off her tag just so that she can go for a bus ride.

‘I think the royals must be so lonely,’ Sue Townsend says, ‘because nobody can act normally in front of them. My agent, the late Giles Gordon, was also Prince Charles’s agent. And he used to go in a cab to Buckingham Palace. As the cab drew nearer, he’d say to himself, “Giles, pull yourself together, man. Don’t fawn and fall to your knees in front of him again.” Because he felt that he constantly humiliated himself. He said that as his cab drew nearer to the gates of Buckingham Palace, he could feel his neck bowing. He said it was impossible not to grovel; he could feel himself turning into Uriah Heep.’ Has she ever met the royals – or wanted to? ‘No, I

wouldn’t ever meet them. I’ve been invited a few times. I wouldn’t want to. I really think it’s bad for writers to rub shoulders with politicians and royalty. I wouldn’t be able to write about them.’

Layabout

Or perhaps she might write about them differently. The distance she keeps from the real royals sets limits on how acute she can be when fictionalising them. There’s none of the intimacy or irony that come from reading Mole’s diaries: in *Queen Camilla*, where almost everyone has a point of view, none of those points of view is developed or intensified. An omniscient, uninvolved narrator offers generalised observations such as: ‘England was an unhappy land... To make themselves feel better, people spent their money on things that diverted and amused them. There was always something that they thought they must have to make them happy. But when they had bought the object of their desire, they found, to their profound disappointment, that the object was no longer desirable.’ (‘It’s God,’ Townsend explains, when I ask who is the source of this editorialising. What, the god worshipped by religious people? ‘No,’ says Townsend. ‘The god of writing.’)

Townsend’s jokes at the expense of Prince Charles’s jug ears and convoluted sentences are predictable; and although it’s funny that she portrays Prince Harry as a layabout and William as an earnest young trainee scaffolder, it’s not nearly as funny as the you-couldn’t-make-it-up reality, ie that both have joined the armed forces on the understanding that they won’t have to do anything too dangerous.

There’s a nice storyline about a love-child from Charles and Camilla’s affair in the ‘60s; and Princess Anne appears to have acquired a cheerful new husband, a bit of rough called Spiggy who marvels at his good fortune in acquiring ‘the perfect wife: she could weld with an oxyacetylene torch, pull a horse out of a ditch, intervene in a dogfight and mend a burst pipe, and she never minded if his boots were filthy.’ Camilla becomes almost sympathetic when she muses on the life she has lost: ‘With a horse between her legs and the open countryside in front of her, surrounded by friends she could trust with her life, she experienced a sort of ecstasy; and how wonderful it was to return to a warm house at twilight, to lie in a hot bath with a drink and a fag and, occasionally, Charles.’

Separate

If I had never heard of Sue Townsend, and someone presented me with her work in two

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separate packages with no indication of who the author was, I would never guess that they were by the same person.

The first package would contain most of the Adrian Mole books, as well as the less well-known but quirkily appealing *Rebuilding Coventry* (first published in 1988, it tells the story of a woman who creates a new identity for herself whilst fleeing a murder charge), and the almost unbearably sad *Ghost Children*, in which one man grieves for the child he lost when his partner had an abortion, while nearby a feral young couple abuse their baby daughter. Also on Pile A would be *The Public Confessions of a Middle-Aged Woman*, a collection of Townsend's monthly columns from Sainsbury's magazine. This last may not sound very promising to people who are not aficionados of supermarket magazines, but, like the others, it is a slow burner of a book, hilarious, wise, hard-hitting and sad, frequently on the same page, sometimes in the same paragraph. The author of these books walks a tightrope between laughter and tears, and leaves you emotionally wrung out yet eager for more.

The second package would contain the political satires – *Queen Camilla*, its predecessor *The Queen and I*, and *Number Ten*, a satire on New Labour, first published in 2002. The almost slapstick tone

of this trio differs markedly from the wit, poignancy and sharp social and political criticism which characterise the first group.

It's almost as if Sue Townsend has two authorial selves – does she agree? She would not go that far, but acknowledges that 'the Queen books' are very different from *Ghost Children*. 'It almost stands on its own. It's a quite strange book. It haunts me, that book. It feels incomplete somehow. As if there are a couple of chapters that don't fit in that book, and they still nag at me now.' I don't agree; I think all the chapters belong, and if the book haunts and nags, that is its power. If I met a newcomer to Townsend's work, *Ghost Children* is the book I would recommend for them to start with. They're likely to come across Adrian Mole anyway, but *Ghost Children*, with its lower profile, would be easy to overlook.

Townsend acknowledges that she feels a certain anger against the Queen, which accounts for some of the 'low comedy' (this is her term for it) in the books about her.

At the end of *Queen Camilla*, Queen Elizabeth has abdicated, and Charles and Camilla are on the throne – but only for a few hours a week, as a living exhibit in a theme park. Is this what Sue Townsend thinks they will become?

'I think they already are,' she says. 'I think

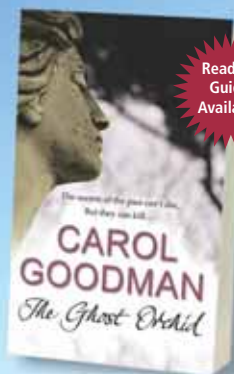
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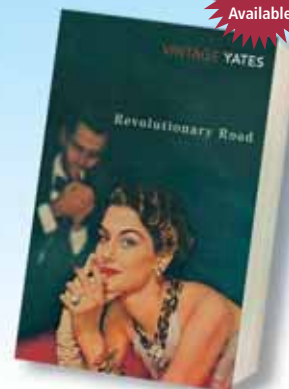
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they've been architects of their own misfortune – if they see it as misfortune. I think it would be a kindness to them to say, “Stop now. Have your horses and your dogs and your servants, and when that's gone, that's gone, and we'll all grow up in the meantime.”

Optolec

Sue suffers from diabetic retinopathy and can barely see; she writes by hand in notebooks, reading back what she has written with the help of a gadget called an Optolec which projects the pages on to a screen. This allows her to read the individual words, which are brightly lit and magnified, but not entire pages at one go, or even paragraphs or sentences. Her husband Colin reads back what she has written in the notebooks, and writes what she dictates. They usually manage around 1,000 words a day.

She is matter-of-fact about her own partial responsibility for her illness. ‘I was told that these complications are possible. But I've always been too busy to be ill properly, so I've never looked after myself, although I've had ample opportunity. It's not as if I'm not surrounded by people who care for me and want me to be well.’

The worst thing for her has been losing the ability to read. ‘I'd hate to minimise anybody's grief, but it was like a bereavement to me,

because from the age of eight, without exaggeration, I've read almost a book a day. Talking books are brilliant, but I can't stand them when they've been chopped about. I want the full thing. And I've always loved the radio. I listen to Radio Five because I like to hear what people say. Normal people. Some of the wisest people I've ever heard have been callers to a radio station, who wouldn't have thought of themselves as being clever.’

She is currently working on a new Adrian Mole book, in which Mole's son Glenn is still serving with the British army in Iraq. Sue says, ‘I'm just longing to know what happens to Adrian and his new wife. The only sadness is that you can't write a book about happy, fulfilled people. I just about got away with making him happy and fulfilled in the last couple of pages of *Adrian Mole and the Weapons of Mass Destruction*.

‘That was a book fuelled on anger and outrage. It's so hard to believe we did what we did in Iraq, that Blair did what he did. I can't quite grasp it. I could burst into tears even thinking about ‘shock and awe’ now. Thinking about the disgrace, the scandal, the outrage. How Blair could have sat there with his children and his wife, and watched as they dropped bombs on Baghdad, I find impossible to understand. I want to carry on writing about that.’ ■

Queen Camilla

by Sue

Townsend

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