

THE NEW COUNTESS

by Fay Weldon



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*A
Reading
Group Gold
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 ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN



A Conversation with Fay Weldon

You have authored dozens of successful books. Could you tell us a little bit about your background, and when you decided that you wanted to lead a literary life?

I come from a family of professional novelists: my mother was one; my father—when he wasn't doctoring—was, too; and my uncle and my grandfather Edgar Jepson back in the '20s. So it was hardly surprising that I ended up one myself. I never set out to lead a literary life, and still don't. I started out writing TV commercials for an ad agency, then TV plays, then radio plays, and eventually novels and short stories. But I see myself as an all-purpose writer—there is so much to be said, so many ways of saying it, and so little time to do it, that I use the media that most suits my purpose. When students come to me (I teach creative writing at Bath Spa University in England) and say they want to *be* writers, I look them very sceptically and say “but *what* do you want to write?” and only if they answer that satisfactorily do I accept them. Writing is very hard work—it's not swanning around and “being someone.”

Is there a book that most influenced your life? Or inspired you to become a writer? Who are some of your favorite authors?

The King James Bible, which I read under the bedclothes as a child; Tolkien's *The Hobbit*; Samuel Smiles' *Self Help*; Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry*; Shaw's *Preface*; some H.G. Wells; anything by Aldous Huxley; Evelyn Waugh—all were influences. These days I read quite a lot of Lee Child, just for a bit of a rest. I'm quite keen on *Gone Girl*, too.

*“Writing is
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work. . .”*



***The New Countess* is part of your acclaimed *Habits of the House* series. Can you tell us a bit about the inspiration for this latest volume?**

I suppose my heart has been with Lady Isobel all the time, and through *Habits of the House* and *Long Live the King* I had become more and more absorbed with domestic detail. I longed to know how Isobel would deal with not just with a royal dinner but a royal weekend—and how her passion for modern (Edwardian) style and furnishings would suit the new age: not too well, as it turned out! Then Minnie and she were bound to clash, and Rosina was the kind always to make trouble. And can one really expect an Earl, however loving, to stay faithful?

Can you take readers into the process of writing this novel? What challenges did you face in terms of plotting and structure, for example?

I was dictated to by the structure of the two previous novels in the trilogy. A short time-frame (always good in a novel); a requirement to name time, date, and place (which means a brisk move to where something was actually happening, thus avoiding the “three months later” and “by the time winter approached” syndrome); no writer involvement (the “let-me-tell-me-tell-you-the-story-of...” syndrome); third-person voice and simple past tense established...and it’s much easier to write the third in a trilogy than having to decide all these things before you begin. Your characters can start dancing to your tune without too much deliberation—you’re not exhausted by too much decision before you begin!

*About the
Author*

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Do you have a favorite scene from *The New Countess*—a setting or incident that’s especially meaningful to you?

I like the scene where the sinister Robin tries to seduce the innocent (well, up to a point) Minnie on Halloween in a particularly raffish and haunted part of London. I like the scene when all the guests are gathered at Dilberne Court in confusion and disarray and all niceties are abandoned. Actually I like all of them. I notice my TV-drama training showing: if you move cameras, cast, and all to a new setting it’s really expensive, so there has to be a really good visual reason for it, which I do try and provide. It’s a great discipline. Stonehenge, luxury London, literary London, Halloween London, Tilbury Docks, Liverpool Docks, a shooting weekend—it is important to get out of the house but never just for the sake of it. Something has to happen.



A Note from the Author

Dear Reader,

I realized—while writing the trilogy, and being faced with questions from aspiring student novelists asking: “But how do you even begin?”—that I had better come up with a more satisfactory answer than a vague “heaven alone knows” or “it’s different every time.” I have written well over thirty novels, and by now I should be able to come up with some sort of analysis. Here I shall try.

Two factors were at work, I decided, in all of my books:

1. I like to set up the problem on the first page and spend the next 100,000 words solving it. With a trilogy it has to be enough for three books. The first book opens with a distraught young lawyer running up townhouse steps with bad news, waking the entire household. It’ll take me three whole books to work out the fall-out from that one event—I have everyone in the house to deal with, and must interweave them all in the light of the bad news. I just follow my own prescription.

2. I unabashedly use archetypes for characters—that’s to begin with. Readers understand them at once—Cinderella, the Handsome Prince, the Bad King, the Wicked Stepmother, the Witch, the Ugly Sister. But every time they turn up in the story, I make them a little more complex: they will think or feel or do something out of turn, or unexpected, and so they can end up rounded and believable and, after the book is closed, can go on living in the imagination. At least, that is my aim. I wouldn’t be surprised to meet Mr. Baum in the courtroom, or detective inspector Strachan when the FBI calls, or Isobel out shopping at Bergdorf’s.



Behind the Novel

“I hardly know
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when I begin.”

So, if at first you interpret Mr. Baum as a typical ambitious young lawyer, his Lordship as any old aristocrat, Isobel as a typical lady-who-lunches, Elsie as an overworked housemaid, Reginald as the handsome thieving footman, Mrs. Neville as the bustling housekeeper. . .that’s fine by me. These are the broad brushstrokes we know and trust, and by the time you’ve finished, I’ll have put in the fine strokes.

I hardly know my characters when I begin: they exist to serve my purposes, to fulfill the point I am trying to make. This, in the trilogy, is “in the past we see the seeds of the future.” We see an embryonic feminism in Rosina as she struggles for sexual liberty; in Minnie, as she demands the right to bring up her children in a new, kinder way; his Lordship, charming though he may be, sets a pattern for the new self-serving politics of the future. Callousness and misunderstanding pave the way for the catastrophic and unnecessary war to come. Isobel—well, she loves clothes and she loves her social position; she does what she can to hide her rather lowly origins and gets away with it. So do so many of us today, and good for us!

A novel needs to be about more than a plot. The story exists to prove the point the novelist wants to make. “What’s it about?” I ask my would-be novelist students when they come in with an outline. And if they start to tell me the plot, I shake my head and say, “I don’t mean the story—I’m asking what you’re trying to say.” By the time they’ve worked that out they’re on their way.

Anyway, that’s what I do. And the harder it is for the writer the easier it is for the reader—that’s how it should be.

—*Fay Weldon*



Recommended Reading

Let me take you through a course of reading by English writers, past and present. The language is the same, so novels are accessible yet expressive of a European sensitivity—a trifle angst-ridden, that is to say, and much aware of original sin compared to the energetic expansiveness of U.S. fiction, which assumes all problems are solvable. I'll keep to two genres, sci-fi and fantasy (as it borders on the dystopian) and historical, in which the reader evokes the mood and conditions of times past. Such genres are always redolent of the time they're written in, which I think adds to their fascination.

Science fiction and fantasy

***The Time Machine (1895)* by H.G. WELLS**

Find the human race still divided after aeons into Eloi (the hopeful, trusting, pretty people) and the hard-working cannibal Morlocks.

***Brave New World (1932)* by ALDOUS HUXLEY**

500 years from now and we're all living on doctors' happy pills in an apparently benign world—only we've lost our personal sense of identity and individuality. Don't trust the scientists, suggests Huxley, who himself came from a family of very famous ones.

***1984 (1949)* by GEORGE ORWELL**

The dead hand of an omnipresent state surveillance system crushes independent thought and personal freedom. Are we there yet?

***Frankenstein (1818)* by MARY SHELLY**

Gloriously gothic: a scientific experiment creates grotesque new life.

Reading
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Keep On
Reading

The Life and Loves of a She-Devil (1983)

by **FAY WELDON**

Since I see that women are very under-represented in this otherwise male roster I'll add my own book about a woman who needs cosmic help and plastic surgery before she can escape her biological destiny.

Historical novels

I, Claudius (1934) by **ROBERT GRAVES**

This beautifully composed fictionalized autobiography of the fourth Roman emperor Claudius was a bestseller in its time, and has lost none of its immediacy.

The Eagle of the Ninth (1954)

by **ROSEMARY SUTCLIFF**

Ostensibly a young person's adventure story but a good read at any age: beautifully written, instantly appealing, it convinces you that you're actually back in Roman Britain.

The Other Boleyn Girl by
PHILIPPA GREGORY (2001)

If you're not too much of a historical purist but love a good tale and a stirring romp, this is for you. Sibling rivalry, romance, and intrigue in bejewelled gowns—it's all there.

Bring Up the Bodies (2012) by **HILARY MANTEL**

She won the Booker Prize for this one, as she did for its predecessor *Wolf Hall*. It's a hard task making King Henry VIII's hit man Thomas Cromwell loveable, but Hilary manages it with dash, wit, and aplomb. It's already a stage play, about to be a film.



Reading Group Questions

1. How would you react if you, like Lady Isobel, were asked to meet the King's mistress—when you knew and liked the Queen? What if the mistress then showed herself to be pleasant and charming, and those around behaved as though nothing was amiss: Would this change your opinion or behavior?
2. Isobel went to great lengths to refurbish Dilberne Court in preparation for a Royal visit. Would you have done the same, supposing you, too, had unlimited funds?
3. Do you think Minnie was doing the right thing in trying to kidnap her own children? If she were to do the same thing today how would you react? Ideas of parental duties have changed greatly between Edwardian times and now—is a mother's love always more important than a father's? And would Tessa have made a better grandmother to the children than Isobel? I expect she'd have been more fun!
4. Do you think Minnie, who so shocked Nanny with her new-fangled ideas about diet and proper clothing, was more motivated by anger with Arthur when she snatched the children than with concern for them? Is Rosina more motivated by getting back at her family or by a sincere desire to educate and inform the public?
5. Molly's solution to which parent should keep Edgar and Conner is to let Arthur have custody of the older child, who was so like him, and Minnie the younger, who was so like her. Do you think in the circumstances it was a reasonable arrangement? Consider that the two children never got on particularly well!



*Keep On
Reading*

6. Would you have gone back to Arthur if you were Minnie? Do you see her ever settling down as a sedate New Countess? Or would she forever yearn for the free-thinking, free-living and free-loving world of No.3 Fleet Street and all that went with it?
7. By the end of the novel, Minnie has all the power, status and money, and Isobel suddenly has so little. What changes will this have at the house? Do you see the seeds of the future in this portrait of a European world a hundred years or so ago?