



Winston Graham – a novelist without a background of his own, he seeks to communicate his interest in discovering the backgrounds of others.

Winston Graham – the unrepentant professional

No, he said, he had not sat in a cupboard. But now that he had missed his opportunity, the idea transparently appealed to him.

I had popped the cupboard question between mouthfuls of mushroom soup. He had replied between stabs of iced melon.

Winston Graham, a craggily gentle man, is deputy chairman of the Society of Authors and possibly Britain's nearest approach to the Instant

Novelist – a writer with no background outside his writing, a craftsman who knows no other trade.

I met him at lunchtime in Birmingham yesterday, a warm, unpretentious character, a self-confessed unrepentant professional.

He is a writer who thrives on being "unfashionable" in the eyes of the coterie of the kitchen sink; a man who reckons to produce a novel every 18 months and yet contrives to avoid regarding himself as a sort of literary sausage machine; a Lancastrian who lives in Sussex and looks on Cornwall as his spiritual home.

We got on to cupboards because his latest book, *The Walking Stick*, is told in the first person by a crippled girl whose efforts to assist in separating her employers from a vast quantity of valuables necessitate her being shut inside one for an unpleasantly extended vigil.

I asked whether Mr. Graham had himself tried an exploratory sit-in, because it struck me that this would have been a likely sort of enterprise for a man so insistent on getting his ambiances spot-on.

After all, a safe-cracking episode in the same book, to be published on Monday, was written only after he had consulted a security organisation, a retired Scotland Yard man, and the manager of a firm of safe manufacturers; and had lunch with a splendidly co-operative safe breaker who shot good solid facts out of the side of his mouth like rejected cherry stones.

"He was very communicative. More than he should have been about the Great Train Robbery, which he was unfortunately prevented from joining because he was inside at the time."

The slow smile, which lurks about Winston Graham's lips with the insistence of a schoolboy in the pantry, was with us again as he spoke.

But, no, he had not sat in any cupboards.

He believes that all authors have experiences or emotions which stick out like spikes on a sea-mine; that Shakespeare fairly bristled with them, and that Jane Austen had about four and was sensible enough not to go beyond her limits.

And one of Winston Graham's spikes is claustrophobia. An interlude in a broom cupboard, he says, would have been entirely superfluous.

The Walking Stick is his 19th novel.¹ At least, it is the 19th which he is prepared to acknowledge. He has already sold the rights for what will be the

sixth Winston Graham film, though he views his earlier entanglements with the celluloid world with the mixed feelings of a man trampled underfoot by a stretcher party.

Shattered

Take ... well, take one of the others, which shattered him with ruthless efficiency about ten years ago.²

"The rights were bought by an American, but nothing seemed to happen. He kept on renewing his option so long that I thought I was going to have a permanent small pension for life.

"Then I heard it had been made in Brasilia, with a Frenchman playing the lead and a Spaniard playing the woman. The book had been about Stevenage.³ It had been changed a little bit ...

"Fortunately, it has never been shown in England."

He sighed gently, like a breeze through a broken fence. Consternation had joined us, unheralded, for coffee.

But Winston Graham – "I am too old to be a prodigy, not old enough for people to wonder how I still manage to write" – has known his craft too long to be abashed overmuch by the backhanders it sometimes slips him.

He has been a writer since his student days finished. "This is a disadvantage in that one lacks background. But, on the other hand, it enables me, when I need a background in a book, to get into that background and, I hope, to communicate to the reader my interest in discovering it."

He lacks a background of his own because, he says, he was a miserable, ailing youth, whose mother used a small private income to support his early endeavours.

"She knew I was mad keen to write and her attitude was a tremendous asset to me. The only thing wrong was that she should have been supporting a Shelley ..."

Again, the shrug of a smile. Unrepentant professional that he is, Winston Graham declines stoutly to be distracted by delusions.

He sees himself good and whole, insists that he has a basic laziness which is hardly discouraged by increasing prosperity – that he does not stick

one of his or her books is borrowed from a public library. WG continued to be active in both helping to develop details of the scheme and lobbying (via the Society of Authors) for its implementation from the time of this interview through to the eventual passage into law twelve years later of *The Public Lending Right Act 1979*.

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