

## **Bookshelf, BBC Radio 4, 26 February 1987**

Susan Hill talks to [Winston Graham](#)

SH: Hello. Invite anyone to name the three most popular best-selling novelists since the war and one of them is almost certain to be Winston Graham. He became a full-time professional writer early on, after his family had gone to live in Cornwall. His mother supported him financially while he wrote his first book when he was 21. It was published at once and he never looked back. And it was just at the end of the war, in 1945, that he published the first of the saga for which he's probably best known. It was called *Ross Poldark* and it was followed over the next thirty years or so by nine more Poldark novels. As well as these historic romances of Cornwall, Winston Graham has always written in a very different style - psychological thrillers like *The Walking Stick*, *The Tumbled House* and, best known of all, the book which was made into a Hitchcock film, *Marnie*. And I was rather surprised to discover that the main character of *Marnie* was based on a girl Winston Graham had known in real life.

I observed the fact that her mother was an extremely prim and proper lady who walked with stately steps, keeping her knees close together with immense respectability, but I also knew that if any sailor happened to tap on her window at the right time on a particular night she would open the window and let him in. I also knew that she would then take her little girl out of her bed and put her in the next bed, in a cold bed, while the man was there and I also knew that that little girl eventually became a thief. But there was quite a lot more than that to it. All the grisly part was true.

[An excerpt from the soundtrack of *Marnie* is played]

In all the other psychological thrillers, the basis is, there is some twist in what seems to me perhaps a straightforward person. Something is twisted inside that interests you.

Oh yes, this is certainly what interests me all the time. One of the things that I found particularly interesting in recent years has been the telling of a story in the first person. It gave me great joy once or twice to depict the first person in such a way that she or he gradually gives away his or her character to the reader inadvertently, as it were, and that's the way I like to do it. *Marnie* was particularly a case of that sort where you think at first she's perfectly normal and then you begin to realise that she's not quite so normal.

The first book in the Poldark series. Where did Poldark start?

I got to know so many Cornish people, they were full of stories of the time when Cornwall had 44 Members of Parliament, when the tin mines were thriving, when Truro was a little centre, like a Bath of the west and had its own Assembly Rooms and things, and that centred my mind on the eighteenth century and I began to think of what would happen if a man came back from the war and found his girl married to someone else. It started there.

Did you know when you started Poldark that it was likely to turn into quite such a long series?

By the time I got to the end [of *Ross Poldark*] I could see that there was a lot of things that I wanted to say which couldn't really come into a novel, especially as they were still publishing novels in what they used to call Authorised Economy Standard - a certain number of pages. I remember a cartoon of those days in which a man is sitting one side of a desk and the editor is sitting on the other and he says "We'll publish your book if you'll reduce it to three pounds, two ounces." Well, I couldn't see *Ross Poldark* being reduced to three pounds, two ounces or whatever it was, so I then went on with *Demelza* and that more or less went on to *Jeremy Poldark* and then to *Warleggan* and that was the end of it. I finished completely, for ever, I thought.

Then why have we got others?

There was twenty years break during which I wrote a lot of pretty successful other novels and I kept on getting letters all the time from people saying "Do continue with the Poldarks" and then, 1971, I think it was, it did occur to me that I'd written two very successful modern novels and I thought, well, let's try, just for a change, if I can go back, so I started a book called *The Black Moon* and, of course, there was one slight complication. The BBC bought the film rights and started making it into a television series. They started making the first four. By that time, of course, I was fully launched into the second of this next trilogy and the BBC said to me "Can we have a second series?" and I said "Well, there's one you can read, one which is nearly finished and one that's not been written at all" and on those grounds they went ahead, which was fairly noble of them because they didn't know what was going to happen in the final book at all - in fact, I would get telephone calls from the casting director saying "Oh, I have to sign X's contract - is he going to appear in the last book or not?"

Did any of this influence you seriously or did you put all that right out of your mind?

I think I was slightly affected by the people who played the parts. George Warleggan, for instance, who was played by Ralph Bates, who wasn't my idea of Warleggan at all - he's far too gentlemanly a character - but as I watched him and as I wrote about him, the two characters came slightly more together and I think in the later books, George Warleggan's become rather more of a gentlemanly character than he would have done without Ralph Bates's influence.

Any more Poldarks?

Well, there's one more I can write but I don't think I'm going to write it yet. I do feel at the moment it's a good thing to have a change.

Which brings us to *The Green Flash*, which is certainly a change, nothing like the Poldarks.

No. I was wondering if it ought to have had a government health warning on the outside.

Where did David Abden come from?

Well, again, this all stems from many years back when a very well known Hollywood film star [Gregory Peck] came to Paris and met a pretty young reporter [Veronique Passani] who was half Russian, half Italian and they fell in love and three or four years later I met them in the south of France and with them was the young girl's mother, who was Russian - tall, elegant, very handsome, highly intelligent - and she took rather a liking to me and I didn't take that sort of a liking to her, although I think I admired her more than any other woman I ever met. It always stuck after that in my creative guts - supposing that a younger man should fall in love with an older woman, which isn't unusual, I'm sure, and supposing against the law of probabilities, with all the vicissitudes that go on between them, they still remain in love, there must come a tragic time when the woman is too old to be sexually attractive to the man, and for that man, no other woman will do.

Then what?

Exactly. And that was the sort of thing which started *The Green Flash*. The sort of impulse.

The hero, David Abden, is hell-bent on being successful ...

I don't think he's hell-bent on being successful. In some ways, he's hell-bent on being unsuccessful at times. He always seems to do the wrong thing in a curious way. He steals a car for no good purpose, and he walks out of Harrods with a large roll of cloth under his arm because nobody will attend him. He's got a curiously self-destructive streak.

Yes, now where does this come from?

I think it's an element in the personality of people who are just on the very, very faint edge of schizophrenia and, as you say, it probably derives from his unfortunate childhood. I was aware of a certain similarity in a way between *Marnie* and *The Green Flash* in the sense that both principal characters have traumatic childhoods, but I think that the developments are entirely different.

Do you still enjoy the writing?

No, I never have. It's like the lunatic banging his head against the wall. Nice when it stops.

What do you enjoy? The working it out ahead?

I enjoy having done it.

That goes for just about every writer I've ever interviewed.