

## WG's late-era, non-Poldark novels

*The Green Flash* took longer to write than any other WG novel. On 8 January 1982 he disclosed in a letter to Denys Val Baker that he started the book after *The Merciless Ladies* (1979) but set it aside after getting "stuck", upon which his "ideas returned to the old Cornish scene", which resulted in the eighth, ninth and tenth Poldark novels *The Stranger From The Sea* (1981), *The Miller's Dance* (1982) and *The Loving Cup* (1984). He then returned to his "obstinate" modern novel which, despite reservations, he "had to get out of (his) system" – and, following further vicissitudes (see *Memoirs*, 2.11) it was eventually published by Collins in November of 1986. WG then took on a more straightforward project – the recasting of a novel (*My Turn Next*) first published back in 1942 (the fourth and last such re-tread – see also *Night Journey* (1966), *Woman In The Mirror* (1975) and 1979's *The Merciless Ladies*). He notes in *Memoirs* that he was given "invaluable" advice in this by his then-editor and friend Marjory Chapman. In spite, or perhaps because of that, the resultant revamp – *Cameo* (1988) – was a lacklustre, unpersuasive affair. Another Poldark novel – *The Twisted Sword*, much the best of the last five – appeared in August 1990, after which WG wrote three non-Poldarks – *Stephanie*, *Tremor* and *The Ugly Sister* – which we will now consider in turn.<sup>1</sup>

### **(1) *Stephanie* (Chapmans, 7 August 1992)**

Set in the spring and summer of 1984, *Stephanie* tells of the life and death of a twenty-one-year-old girl and her crippled<sup>2</sup> war hero father's efforts to avenge her loss and restore her sullied reputation. The book's action moves between Goa, Bombay, London, Oxford, Hampshire, Reading, Buckinghamshire, Birmingham, Corfu and Cardiff, with flashbacks into occupied France and Borneo thrown in for good measure. In a *Spectator* review of the novel published on 21 August 1992, Julie Burchill wrote:

*Having enjoyed The Tumbled House, Marnie and Angell, Pearl and Little God as a teenager, I was reminded soon after starting this book of the singular lack of feel for time and place*

*Graham has ... This ... gives [his] books a refreshingly Martian feel.*

*But you can, of course, have too much of a good thing ... This is good, plain writing ... [but] good, plain writing, like good, plain cooking, is far better in theory than in practice.*

As these observations suggest, *Stephanie*, though a moderately effective novel, is not without its problems. First of all, WG's prose (from the pen of a man now well into his eighties and probably drained near dry by the supreme effort of *The Twisted Sword*) is atypically tired and cliché-ridden: "I'll be the son of a gun," says Errol, and, later: "You'll rot in prison for what you've done tonight!"; the revelation that Shyam lent borrowed money came to Nari as "a bit of a thunderbolt"; Nari's wife's aunt has "eaten (him) out of house and home"; Anne Vincent "would come like a rocket"; these days, we are told, "everyone had affairs at the drop of a hat"; the minute *Stephanie* put her head on a pillow, she was "out like a light"; a few chapters on, ten minutes after swallowing a laced drink, a doctor's wife too would be "out like a light"; a drugs ring leader is named "The Boss", and so on.

Burchill goes on:

*In Stephanie, Graham's wooden ear hits new heights of risibility. Talking about the tricky problem of drugs to her father, [Stephanie] comments: "This is the new scene for my generation, isn't it?" Actually, no.*

Though in the wider context of the entirety of WG's canon I'd take issue with that "wooden ear" jibe, too much of *Stephanie's* dialogue does indeed ring, like the example quoted, uncharacteristically false:

She (after a yawn from him): "Sleepy?"

He: "Not more than is physiologically normal."

"He's a nut on photography."

*"I'm not the hot gospeller type."*

*"Smashing snaps. They really are. Errol's a kingpin, isn't he?"*

*"Is it true what I hear ... that students today have moved away generally from ... drugs back to drink as part of the social scene?"*

WG also makes some odd or infelicitous observations: Rio is "a brittle city"; Errol has "eccentric Jack Nicholson eyebrows"; after the war, James took "two extensive semi-diplomatic jobs"; the killing of two businessmen was "a very expert job"; a table wine was "specially excellent".

Another turn-off is WG's skin-crawlingly unsuccessful attempt to render passion on the page. In the *Daily Express* of 18 November 1995, after an interview with the author, Victoria Hinton reported:

*Graham has no doubts about [the Poldark] books' appeal. "They were romantic, which is a four-letter word in the ears of the critics." Yet, although passions may lurk, you won't get creaking bedsprings in his work. "I just think it is more effective when it is not all spelled out," [he said.]*

Possibly he was speaking from bitter experience, having temporarily been led astray, perhaps, by Marjory Chapman's "invaluable" advice (see above). For 1988's *Cameo* was marred by a jarringly awkward description of a bedroom encounter and so too here: in *Stephanie's* second paragraph we're introduced to an unnamed man and woman "making love", then, five pages on, after a little desultory post-coital chit-chat, comes this:

*... eyes kindled, he pinned her back upon the bed and pulled the bathrobe vigorously off her, so that she was wriggling naked in his arms. He kissed her, and with fierce gestures grasped her flesh, pressing it, kneading it, smoothing it, inciting it. When she lay back for a moment defeated and breathless he stood*

*up, tore off his own clothes and came back upon her and took her again with an avid relish that left the afternoon's love-making well away.*

But, if "more effective" when not "spelled out", then *why?*<sup>3</sup>

On the positive side, WG's *Poldark* habit of enhancing his fictional world with a liberal infusion of reality is reprised here: thus the Goa hotel described in the book's opening chapter and again in Stephanie's last letter to her father is real: built, as WG states, in 1974 and extended with the addition of bungalows, as he states, to host the retreat phase of the November 1983 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in New Delhi. WG visited Goa in 1976 and must have gone back before tackling this book to garner authentic local detail, of which the reader is served a liberal sprinkling. He notes in *Memoirs* that he visited Corfu six times with his wife Jean between 1967 and 1992, and an intimate familiarity with the geography and topography of that island is also evident in his manuscript. Whilst flying from Corfu to Paris, James Locke reads a *Times* and the stories WG plants therein are all real, although not, interestingly, exactly contemporaneous: the first test of 1984 between England and the West Indies, in which England are reported as "heading for defeat", took place between 14 and 18 June; the *Marques* foundered off Bermuda on 5 June; the explosion in a Lancashire water treatment plant occurred on 23 May; the G7 Summit in London, at which President Reagan is arriving "tomorrow", took place on 7-9 June etc. Still his canny composite effectively recalls the era.

What motivated WG to start the book? In *Memoirs* he wrote:

*For a good many years I have known two men, both now elderly, who while vastly different in most ways, have one thing in common: they were 'war heroes'. One of them had been parachuted into France, blew up bridges, fought with the Maquis, was captured and tortured, and later was involved in action in North Africa and the Far East. Yet for all the time I had known him, he was the gentlest of men. The other was in the*

*Parachute Regiment, fought with great bravery and the utmost recklessness all through the war and – it is said – ran himself into further debt every leave because he did not expect to survive. He is not now such a gentle man as the first but is quiet, courteous and shy.*

*It seemed to me that both these men illustrated a peculiar paradox: that for a short time a human being can become a trained killer, and then when that short term is over, can return to the fold, sober, law abiding, reliable, as if nothing had happened. (These are not ordinary soldiers, where the change is not so extreme, but the real killers.) And I put to myself the question: if in later life a situation should arise when violence was again justifiable – not in another war but in their own lives – would they briefly revert to what they had been in their youth?*

This question WG answers to his own – perhaps also the reader's – satisfaction. He goes on:

*For some years also I have had a club friend who is the chief police surgeon at Heathrow and deals exclusively with the smuggling of drugs ... I began to study the drug question, interviewed people, trying to see all around it. On one of my frequent visits to India I happened to meet a drug dealer in Bombay. So it all began.*

In the book's front flyleaves, WG thanks two doctors: one, David Jackson, was presumably the "chief police surgeon" mentioned above, but the other, "Denis Hocking, my friend for so many years", is more interesting. As far back as 1954, when Dr Hocking was a pathologist at Truro's Royal Cornwall Infirmary, WG drew on his professional expertise<sup>4</sup> to elicit detailed descriptions of the processes of *post mortem* decay which would find their way into his 1956 novel *The Sleeping Partner*. *Stephanie* features an unusual method of murder involving familiarity with a certain amount of medical technique,

concerning which WG would undoubtedly have consulted Hocking again – but not immediately prior to the book's publication, for the method is one recycled in every particular from WG's 1979 stage play *Circumstantial Evidence*. This incidence of the re-use by Graham of a lost or obscure but useful plot-point is not unique.<sup>5</sup>

From time to time throughout the manuscript the author's own voice and life experience sound clear:

- James grouches: *"I'm old enough to find it irritating to be addressed by my Christian name by every Tom, Dick and Harry who happens to have a nodding acquaintance."*

In a letter to *The Times* dated 13 November 1991 (which is just when *Stephanie* would have been in train) WG complained about (among other things) the tendency of young nurses to address the very old "by their Christian names at first meeting".

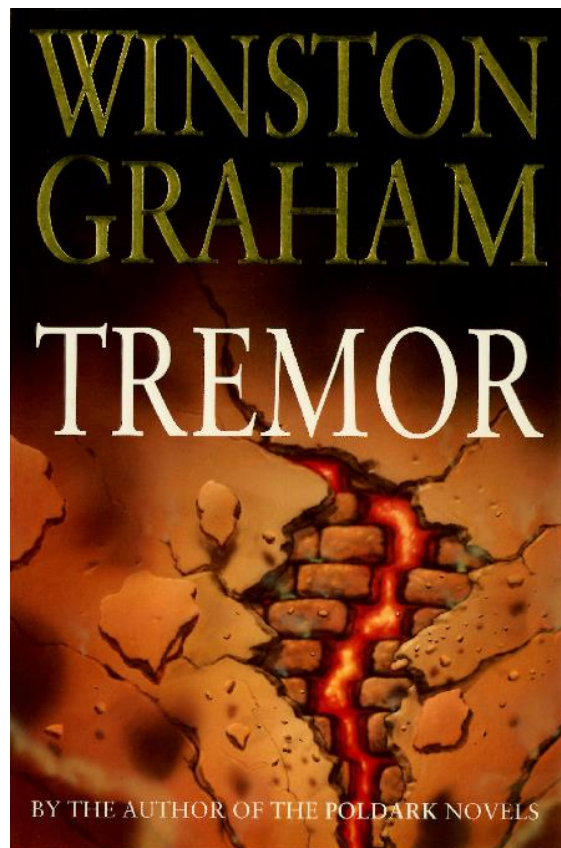
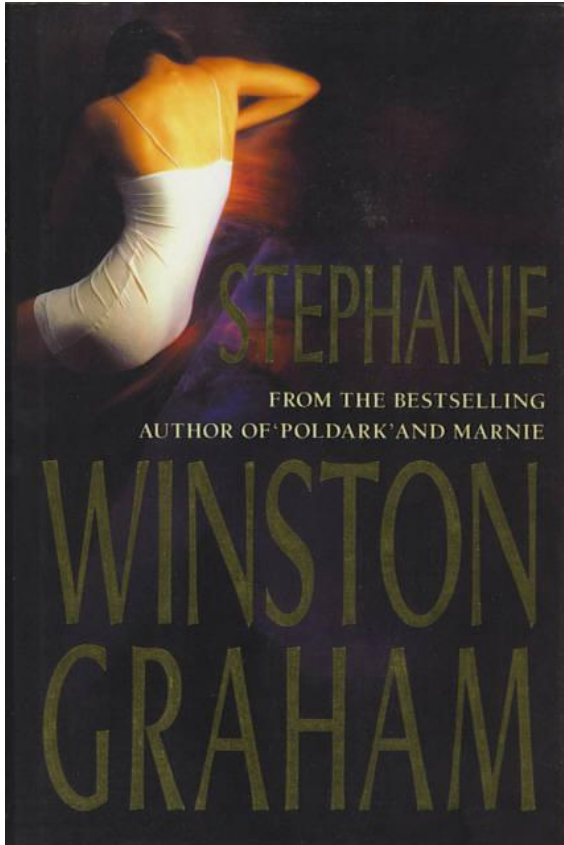
- *Oxford was crowded as usual. Every time [James] came into the city he winced at the horrors of the new architecture ... What had happened here was utter desecration.*

WG expressed very similar views about Truro to TSW reporter Mike Whitmarsh on 5 August 1983.

- James's recollection of a holiday with his two children at Cap Ferrat mirrors an account given by WG in *Memoirs*, 1.8 of time spent there with his family.
- Henry drives "a big grey Alvis"– a make of car for which WG had a special affection (*Memoirs*, 2.9).
- James went to Charterhouse – as did WG's son Andrew.

- James had a lifelong interest in plants, and particularly in rhododendrons, and planned the garden of his father's new house in Sussex – WG had a lifelong interest in gardening, and particularly in rhododendrons, and, from 1962 onwards, planned the rehabilitated gardens of his own new house in Sussex.
- It is probable that the description of James's faithful housekeeper Mary Aldershot resembles *in some aspects* that of Gwen Hartfield, whose efficiency, humour, good cheer, wit, eccentricity and loyalty WG commends warmly in *Memoirs*, 2.10.
- Comments made about the rigours of an American book promotion tour by Evelyn Gaveston mirror observations on the same subject by WG in *Memoirs*, 2.9 and the account of her smuggling a hamster into the country, bought in New York and secreted in her handbag, recalls his friend Ralph Richardson (1902-1983) who allegedly (*Memoirs*, 2.11) once did the same thing.
- Details of the hierarchy, traditions and lore of Oxford college life, which feature centrally in the novel, will have been passed on to WG by his son Andrew, who was elected to a Tutorial Fellowship in Economics at Balliol College, Oxford in 1969 and maintained his association with the institution thereafter, eventually serving from 2001 to 2011 as Master.

Finally, Dr Hocking or not, some of the book's medical details seem suspect: first, a "broken larynx", whilst decidedly unpleasant, doesn't sound fatal to me and, second, I don't think anyone with a blockage in the "upper bowel"<sup>6</sup> would survive untreated for two weeks – either dehydration or peritonitis would carry them off – and nor would "a massive dose of antibiotics" be the treatment of choice, but, rather, fluid therapy and surgical intervention. Still, it's only make-believe.





## (2) *Tremor* (Macmillan, 24 November 1995)

Just before midnight on 29 February 1960, an earthquake of magnitude 5.7 but extreme intensity struck the Moroccan seaport city of Agadir. Within twenty seconds, two-thirds of it lay in ruins. Fires burned uncontrolled. Between 12,000 and 15,000 people (about a third of Agadir's population at the time) were killed, another 12,000 were injured and at least 35,000 left homeless, making it the most lethal and destructive earthquake in Moroccan history.

Onto the stage of this natural but very real disaster WG ushers a motley cast: a hagridden blagger and his bedridden father, two vengeful hoods and a randy writer, two off-duty whores and a pompous banker, a resting actress and a restless attorney, a blowzy madam and a crooked croupier, a prescient doctor and a rabid Jeremiah, each with their individual and collective, their poignant and pathetic, their virtuous and venal tales to tell and fates to meet. Stir, simmer, serve – the result, not vintage Graham, but pass-muster fare and a step up, at least, from the mediocre *Stephanie*.

On 21 December 1992, four days before Christmas, WG lost his wife Jean. The couple had been married for 53 years. In 1973 he said of her that, while not a writer herself, she was "an author's friend [who] always reads my books and is the only person I can discuss them with."<sup>7</sup> On 21 January 1993, a little over four weeks after her death and just nineteen days after her funeral, he confided to his "closest friend"<sup>8</sup> Max Reinhardt:

*... the ghastliness of the last month is gone, but I rattle around in this house like a lost pea in a pod ...*<sup>9</sup>

What would he do? What else but return to writing, his adult self's *raison d'être*. And about what should he write? Something, perhaps, to remind him of happy times with Jean?

In chapter 2.7 of *Memoirs*, WG describes at length an incident-packed trip he took with his wife across Morocco in the early 1960s. In an unreliable car with

a "battery in terminal decline", it was with "great relief" that they reached Agadir:

*Agadir is not at all like the other Moroccan towns, being a Europeanized seaside resort built around one of the finest beaches in the world. When we first saw it, it was all freshly rebuilt or still rebuilding after the momentous earthquake of 1960, when ... within a few seconds the entire town could as well have been struck by an atomic bomb.*

*Rooted there for three days while a new battery was at last procured, we had ample time to observe the scars and to hear the stories of people who had undergone the nightmare of the earthquake yet had somehow survived.*

*It was a very suitable subject for a novel, and I decided that when the novel that I was then writing was finished, I would write this.*

*When that time came, however, I was put off by a disinclination to write a novel about a number of disparate people whose separate stories come together only because of how they are affected by the earthquake – their lives terminated or their problems otherwise resolved ... I tend to write the sort of novels I like to read, and such composite stories have never greatly appealed to me. So I shelved it, and it was only some years [three decades!] later that I finally used the idea.*

A postcard to Reinhardt<sup>10</sup> tells us that in October 1993 WG returned to Morocco, presumably fact-finding for his novel-to-be; two years later *Tremor* became his first book (of four) to be published by his sixth and last publisher Macmillan.

As with *Stephanie* – indeed, as perhaps with all his books – WG mines aspects of his life to spice his narrative:

- The story in Chapter One of the Maltese brassiere salesman and de Blaye's advocacy in Chapter Six of Fez as a tourist destination come straight out of *Memoirs* (2.7).
- During an interview in 1974, it was put to WG that he gathered information to inform his novels rather in the manner of Balzac, to which the author replied:

*Yes. I don't actually go into brothels, as Balzac did, but otherwise I go and meet people, certainly ...*<sup>11</sup>

Yet the number and nature of lubricious anecdotes in *Tremor* indicate if not personal familiarity with the *demi-monde* life then either more of that assiduous research for which he became famed<sup>12</sup> or, in this case, perhaps, merely an opportunity to put to good use recollected salacious club-talk.

- In 1950 WG travelled to Paris to help audition French actresses for the part of "Alix" in Rank's forthcoming screen production of his *Night Without Stars*. There he met and began a long-lasting friendship with Nadine Alari (1927-2016) who failed to land the role because, although WG preferred her, director Anthony Pelissier did not.<sup>13</sup> In *Tremor*, French actress Nadine Deschamps, clearly modelled on Mademoiselle Alari, is presented with this selfsame backstory.
- One of *Tremor's* characters is a young and moderately successful though not very committed author and WG channels his own experience as a professional writer to make comments on the life:

*To wait for inspiration (is) fatal. Inspiration ... (is) the product of work, of regular writing at regular times, and every day ...*

Jack (on learning that Matthew writes under a pseudonym): "*Why change the name?*"

Matthew: "*Habit of writers.*"  
[WG: tongue in cheek!]<sup>14</sup>

*Writing novels, whatever the ignorant might think, (is) grinding hard work.*

*There were few advantages, Matthew found, to the trade he had worked at, but it did sometimes impress people ... Booksellers and booksellers' assistants ... almost always assumed an expression of frozen contempt ... but some ordinary people took note, especially if they were Celts or French or German.*

WG's own predicament – recently bereaved after a long and happy marriage – must surely have informed the character of Lee, to whom the reader is introduced with these words:

*When Lee Burford's wife left him he felt it was almost the end of the world. They had been married for thirty-five years, and it had been an unblemished union. Completely opposite in temperament, they had yet become kindred spirits, sharing differences of opinion as if they were an excuse to come closer together, reacting to troubles and pleasures with a sort of family unity which could hardly have been greater if they had had children.*

Though Lee's wife is not dead, we know, and he knows, that she won't be coming back. He suffers the wrenching pain of an abrupt, unforeseen and terminal separation; the acute searing burn, the numb reaction, the chronic ache, the slow settling like dust of a desolating, all-pervading loneliness upon his bereft and bewildered self, a loneliness partly – though only partly – assuaged by the kindnesses of friends and social engagement. Lee and Ann had been "constant travellers" such that, he concludes, "it would be quite hard to discover some corner of the world where her shadow did not fall". "Sometimes still when he lay in bed at night," we are told, "he fancied he

could still hear her breathing". All this for the recently-widowed author must have cut very close to home. Lee's life is eventually restored to something approaching normality by his association with a neighbour who becomes first his occasional bridge companion then his housekeeper and finally more. It is instructive to note that *Tremor's* dedication reads *For Gwen, Robin and Tina*, these the housekeeper, gardener and helper (see *Memoirs*, 2.10) whose loyal service and faithful support did so much to make WG's last decade more bearable, easeful and productive than it would otherwise have been.

As with *Stephanie*, though here to a lesser degree, WG again throws in the occasional factual reference to bolster credibility:

- On the flight out to Agadir, Matthew notes a report in his paper on "the Channel Tunnel project". An undersea link between England and France was first proposed in 1802, the first bilateral agreement to build such a link was signed in 1876 and the first diggings undertaken in 1881. "A pipe dream?" muses Matthew. "They had talked about it so long." Indeed, but the topic was pertinent to WG's timeframe because the Channel Tunnel Study Group convened in 1958 and reported in March 1960. What's more, after nearly two centuries, the project was finally realised with the opening of the completed rail-link in May 1994, just when *Tremor* would have been in draft.
- *Mighty Like A Rose* (meaning "very much like a rose"), a song written in 1901 by Frank Leiby Stanton and Ethelbert Nevin, was featured by Emyln Williams in his play *Night Must Fall*, a psychological thriller first performed in 1935. As Jack alias Johnny alias Jean correctly recalls, Dan, the play's murderer, habitually whistles, hums or sings snatches of the song at key moments, which leads to his unmasking. WG saw the play in Dijon in 1955, starring none other than Nadine Alari!<sup>15</sup>
- Still with Nadine, WG has her *doppelgänger* character agree to audition for a part in Roberto Rossellini's *Era notte a Roma*. This, a real film, released in 1960 (though *not* featuring Nadine Alari) is perhaps better known now as *Escape by Night*.



The Hôtel Saada before and after 29 February 1960. Four factors – its shallowness, its intensity, its proximity to Agadir and the near-total absence of any seismic-resistant buildings – combined to maximise the quake's destructive force.

Again as with *Stephanie*, the hotel that features centrally in the story is quite real: when it was opened in 1953, the Hôtel Saada was the jewel in Agadir's tourist-trap crown. WG peoples it with his imaginary guests and the quake brings it (see above) and some of them down.

A second hotel – the Marhaba – mentioned later in the book is also real and, damaged less severely than the Saada, survives to this day. Unfortunately, WG misspells its name (he writes *Mahraba*), that being one of three typos in *Tremor's* text (the address of Benson and Benson's merchant bank is variously St Mary and St Mary's Gate and the Saada's manager both Taviscon and Gaviscon). *Stephanie* carries one typo (a sentence beginning with a lower case "i"). Thus do publishing standards ever slip.

WG must have concluded that in a book so freighted with tragedy, first impending then realised, some light relief was necessary. This he attempts to introduce courtesy of three Frenchwomen – a brash, graceless, aging procuress and two of her former employees, all at least temporarily retired after making a killing on a shady property deal. But his attempts to render their "comedic" capers are half-hearted, laboured and lame, presented in coarse, broad, burlesqued strokes with too little of his usual finesse to hope to succeed.

Two of the author's couples come to share a bed for the first time and once again, as in *Stephanie*, he chooses to ignore his less-is-more better instincts in favour of unnecessarily graphic exposition – but at least on both occasions here with more subtlety and style.

Another *Stephanie* issue that recurs in *Tremor* just minimally is the octogenarian author's grating unfamiliarity with the argot and idiom of those sixty years his junior such that their speech, filtered through his pen, lacks authenticity. Fortunately, with just a single ear-jarring instance in the book's final chapter, this time little damage is done.

As with *Titantic* (the 1997 film), so too with *Tremor* – the disaster to which the narrative leads and with which it engages is known to the audience before

a frame is shot or a word written – but, perhaps surprisingly, this does *not* work to the book's detriment. Rather, it laces its first 200+ pages with a keen and growing sense of anticipation, for though the reader knows what is coming, the characters do not, and act accordingly. The trite concerns and petty squabbles of everyday life are seen all the more clearly for what they are in light of what they'll surely look like to those the author allows to survive to view the ruined morrow.

*Tremor* received a mixed reception. These two excerpts from contemporary notices tell the tale:

*Graham is bidding for the Twister territory here, putting his mix of oddballs against the violence of the elements. But he tends to write in an annoying shorthand: descriptions and characters tumble out in half-sentences as if he can't wait to get on with the plot.*<sup>16</sup>

*Setting everything up with care, and offering deft description of place and mood, Graham propels the disparate strands of his story toward a tragic climax: the February 29, 1960, destruction by earthquake of the resort city of Agadir – a classic deus ex machina but pulled off here with tremendous verve. No one remains unaffected by the disaster, with Matthew Morris receiving perhaps the harshest punishment – as well as the steepest reward. Deliberate and old-fashioned storytelling – the good, patient, rewarding kind.*<sup>17</sup>

By the time *Tremor* was published, WG was eighty-seven and, on the evidence of his last two books, no longer capable of producing anything to stand beside his best work – more profound, more captivating, more accomplished – of days gone by. But, alone after the loss of his wife, what else if not write should he do? And if in that retreat or compulsive need he found solace, diversion, or stimulation, why ever not?<sup>18</sup>

But no matter the portents, or his plight – he wasn't finished yet.



### **(3) *The Ugly Sister* (Macmillan, 4 September 1998)**

In *Stephanie*, WG struggled with a group of characters acting out a story set in the present day. In *Tremor* he withdrew to firmer ground, dealing with history (albeit recent history) and an array of voices to which, for the most part, at least, his writer's ear was better attuned. Now, with *The Ugly Sister*, it was backwards again, to the embrace of his beloved Cornwall and to the remote past – something like home to him – of the pre- and early Victorian nineteenth century.

His ideas concerning this novel seemed to have started with thoughts of a particular house and the family within it:

*Winston Graham was in Cornwall last week ... and took time to speak about [The Ugly Sister]. "The setting has been there for a very long time and I have been aware of its existence for a long time too," he said. "Before the war I saw this strange Gothic building across the water from St. Mawes. Because it faces north, it can look quite sinister. I visited it at the time because it was empty and also went to the church. During the war the lawns were covered in Nissen huts and it took on quite a different character, but still had a mystery about it. And I thought at the time it was a wonderful position, almost an island." Three years ago he was invited to lunch after discussing the possibility of writing a novel based on Place House. The house is now owned by the Grant-Daltons, who are descendants of the Spry family, who lived there in the 1800s. "I said to the owners there were two ways of approaching the subject. "I could either do a Daphne du Maurier and call the house something different, fill it with entirely fictional characters and, like du Maurier's Menabilly, burn it down at the end if I wanted to. Or I could use the history of the house and its various inhabitants." The Grant-Daltons opted for the latter. "They said I was the only author they would allow to do this, which was rather flattering."<sup>19</sup>*

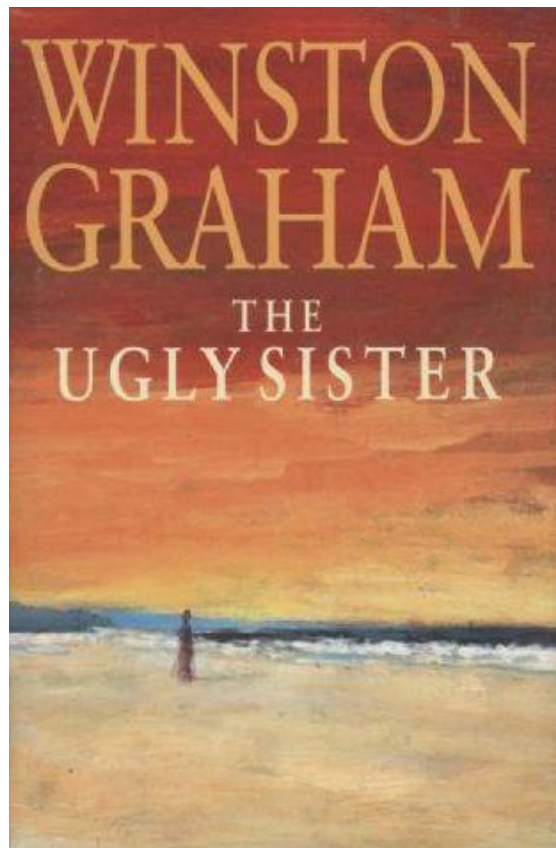
*In The Ugly Sister, the house in which the girl grows up is part of the fabric of the novel – and it's a real house. "I'd been looking at Place House at St. Mawes for 60 years. I'd seen it empty, seen it during the war – it's a gothic, slightly sinister house ... I had to choose the year in which to set it – and I'm interested in the development of steam in the 1830s, so I chose Emma's birthday as 1812."*<sup>20</sup>



Place House, St. Mawes, Cornwall

*The Ugly Sister* tells the story of Emma Spry, disfigured at birth by a "so-called midwife" whose blundering ineptitude marred her looks for life. Emma's father is dead, her mother Claudine a self-serving actress, her elder sister Tamsin a vain, shallow, scheming shrew. Sly Bram Fox worms his way into the affections (and probably beds) of all three women. At eighteen Emma leaves Place House, her childhood home, to care for Canon Robartes, a distant relative, with profound consequences for them both. She feels her future tied ineluctably to Bram's – but Slade the butler has other ideas.

*The Ugly Sister* was WG's eleventh original first person narrative – though his first for more than thirty years. Some of his most effective works – *The Merciless Ladies*, *Fortune is a Woman*, *The Sleeping Partner*, *Marnie*, *After The Act*, *The Walking Stick* – were presented this way, and here we find him slipping effortlessly back into the groove to deliver his last non-Poldark novel, his last exceptional novel and the last wholly worthy of his name (with just shaky *Bella Poldark* to come). The book was also his third (after *Marnie* and *The Walking Stick*) voiced by a woman.



He revels in the book's Cornish milieu, scattering people – Sally Fetch, Elsie Whattle, Betsy Slocombe, Effie Lane, Hollick (a servant), German the boot boy – and places – Portscatho, Feock, Penperth, Roseland, Tolverne, Marazion, St Kea, Prussia Cove, Come-to-Good (a Quaker meeting house), Brown Willy (a peak on Bodmin Moor) – and even the odd dialect phrase – "gone a bit maggoty" (meaning soft in the head) or "Ministers of Grace!" (an exclamation) – to colour his text. The narrative's deceptively easy, natural flow makes it a pleasure to read. As with the Poldark novels (from *The Black Moon*

on especially), there is underpinning Emma's Ugly Duckling tale a bedrock of real properties – Place House, Killiganoon, Tregolls, Tregothnan, even Blundstone's Hotel (though it was not by Falmouth harbour where WG locates it) – and personalities – Joseph Treffry and Samuel Spry, both High Sheriffs of Cornwall, celebrated engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel, musician Joseph Emidy with a remarkable life story *et al.* – and events – the race between *Sirius* and *Great Western* be the first steamship to cross the Atlantic, the development of the West Country railway network etc – to add verisimilitude. Perhaps not surprisingly, several of the family names that crop up in the Poldark saga – Boscawan, Carlyon, Trefusis, St Aubyn, Lemon, Prideaux-Brune – feature here too (as, once, does Warleggan). The eminent surgeons that WG cites as recommended to Emma – Johann Friedrich Dieffenbach (1792-1847), Albrecht von Graefe (1828-1870), Baron Guillaume Dupuytren (1777-1835) etc – were all noted practitioners in Germany or France, although von Graefe would only have been nine at the time of her operation and Dupuytren two years dead! The novel's brace of obligatory lovemaking scenes are thankfully rendered with tasteful discretion and WG's own voice sings loud off the page just once, when Claudine writes:

*I shall be very happy in [Richmond Green] though – as always with people who have lived there – I shall long for Cornwall, and hope to return from time to time.*

The text includes one anachronism, when Slade calls the inquisitive Tamsin and Emma "Nosy Parkers" some seventy years before the epithet's first documented use. But that very minor slip detracts nothing from a lovely book whose author, when it first appeared, was a feisty ninety.

Judging by the extreme scarcity of reviews, the publication of both hardback (Macmillan, 1998) and paperback (Pan, 1999) editions of *The Ugly Sister* seem to have been widely ignored by the press, which is a shame, because such *bonnes bouches* happen by too infrequently to miss. Nonetheless, those with a mind to may find and savour it still.

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## NOTES AND SOURCES

<sup>1</sup> The letter to Denys Val Baker is held by the Cornish Records Office, Truro. Other quotes from *Memoirs of a Private Man* (Macmillan, 2003)

<sup>2</sup> James Locke's disability stemmed from breaking both ankles following a parachute drop in WWII. Bizarrely, ten years after publishing this novel, WG sustained exactly the same injury after a fall at his home.

<sup>3</sup> In 1996 (i.e. four years after the publication of *Stephanie*), Jennifer Selway asked WG: "Do you mind the way [your Poldark] novels are designated as popular fiction?" He replied: "A little. And please don't refer to them as 'bodice-rippers'. It's a term I dislike. I've always said I'll give a hundred pounds to anyone who can find any bodice-ripping in the books." Hmm – does *bathrobe-ripping* count? (Source: "Cornish Steam", *The Observer*, 22 September 1996)

<sup>4</sup> See the letter from Hocking to WG dated 13 November 1954 in the RIC, Truro Graham archive.

<sup>5</sup> See also *Night Journey* (1941) / *Top Secret: Next of Kin* (1961) and *No Exit* (1940) / *Greek Fire* (1957). In each case the later work recycles a plot-point first used in the earlier.

<sup>6</sup> He probably meant "lower bowel" – but that begs the question why the four packets, each no bigger than a grape, would be stuck there in the first place.

<sup>7</sup> *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 14 March 1973

<sup>8</sup> *Memoirs*, 2.1

<sup>9</sup> In the British Library's holding of Reinhardt Papers

<sup>10</sup> One of ten from WG archived in the British Library's Reinhardt Papers

<sup>11</sup> WG to an unknown interviewer at Trerice Manor, Newquay on 27 March 1974

<sup>12</sup> E.g. in her *Times* profile of 7 May 2002, Valerie Grove noted that WG "researches like a detective".

<sup>13</sup> *Memoirs*, 1.6

<sup>14</sup> WG published his first fifteen novels under a pseudonym before legally adopting the surname Graham in 1947, but these few lines in *Tremor* are the closest he ever came to acknowledging as much.

<sup>15</sup> *Memoirs*, 2.2

<sup>16</sup> Ian Critchley, *The Sunday Times*, 20 October 1996

<sup>17</sup> *Kirkus*, 15 December 1995

<sup>18</sup> When on *Bookshelf* (BBC Radio 4, 26 February 1987) Susan Hill asked WG whether he still enjoyed writing, his surprising answer was that he never had – although, when pressed, he did admit to enjoying "having done it".

<sup>19</sup> *Western Morning News*, 3 August 1999

<sup>20</sup> Victoria Kingston, *Sussex Life*, February 1999

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