

Open Book, BBC Radio 4, 9 June 2002

Charlie Lee-Potter talks to [Winston Graham](#)

CL-P: This man's got all the status he could need:

CLIP: 25 seconds of audio from *Poldark* (BBC, 1975) featuring dialogue between Ross (Robin Ellis) and Margaret (Diana Berriman).

That was Ross Poldark in 1970s television form - but he's still a dashing rogue, Demelza still has red hair, even though she secretly uses hair dye now, and Cornwall is as wild and dangerous as ever. At the age of ninety-one, the creator of the Poldark novels, Winston Graham, admits to being surprised that he ever got to write the twelfth in the saga. The series began in 1945 with the novel *Ross Poldark*, followed by *Demelza* in 1946 - but there's been a twelve year gap between the publication of number eleven, *The Twisted Sword*, and number twelve, *Bella Poldark*. In this, Bella, the daughter of Ross and Demelza, and Valentine, the putative son of Ross, are the main characters. Bella's beautiful singing voice takes her to London and Paris. Don't panic - there's plenty enough Cornwall to keep you happy, but make it last, because this really is positively the final Poldark novel that will ever be written.

[This is the third time](#) [after *Warleggan* in 1953 and *The Twisted Sword* in 1990] [it has been positively the last Poldark](#). Well, [this is positively the last because I shalln't live to write another one, and I just think starting it was an enormous effort because I was aware of the amount of work and, ah, research that would have to go into it if I undertook it.](#)

You are renowned for your research. I must say I was checking on you all of the time as I was reading it to see whether or not you were at any stage saying to me, "Look how much I know. I'm going to put in this extra half-sentence just to show that I know that fact" and I don't think I spotted you doing that once and that seems to be a feat in itself.

[Jolly good](#). Well, [I think it's been a discipline all my life, in a way](#). I mean, I never particularly enjoy a book in which somebody goes to the extent of showing ... [telling you how to make an atomic bomb or something](#). All you need to say is about three words, not go into all the detail, except that he himself has been to all the trouble and would like the reader to know.

How conscious were you in the writing of this twelfth and final chapter that in fact you start this novel exactly as you started the very first one in the Poldark saga? The opening chapter of this twelfth one evokes the weather and the clouds and the shining moon and the opening paragraph of the very first one, which you wrote in round about 1945, is not dissimilar. You say: "It was windy. The pale [afternoon] sky was shredded with clouds, the road, grown dustier and more uneven in the last hour, was scattered with blown and rustling leaves ..."

Totally instinctive. Long before I ever had any intention of writing a twelfth Poldark, I had this feeling in my mind of a windswept beach, midsummer but cold, with clouds scudding across the sky - night sky - and a man climbing a cliff.

READER: The evening was loud and wild. Black clumsy clouds were driving up from the north, lit at their edges by light from a sliver of moon. A few hazy stars speckled the patches of sky. But it was not dark. Even when the moon was quite gone there would be some luminescence from the restless sea because the longest day was still only a month past. Yet it did not seem like late summer. The sea drift was cold, the air was cold and noisy, the waves melancholy as if waiting for autumn.

A man was climbing down the cliffs half a mile east of Wheal Leisure. He was long-legged, and firm-footed like a cat. It was not an easy climb, for though the rocks were of granite and would never break away, they were greasy in places from the morning's rain. He was bare-headed, and wore some sort of tight black jerkin, rough barragan trousers and light canvas shoes. He carried a bundle tied to his back.

It's fascinating looking at your male characters because they're often pretty imperfect, aren't they? I mean, Ross is very dashing, but certainly in this twelfth volume he's ... Well, I think one reviewer talked about him having ... He was suffering from the menopause, really, because he keeps having outbreaks of terrible flirtation, really, just to remind himself that he's as good-looking as he always was, and Valentine clearly is a highly flawed character, and yet they're always attractive, they're always appealing, these men, despite their faults.

Well, I don't know whether I've ever suffered from a menopause. I've not been aware of it and I wasn't putting ... giving Ross any particularly meno-

pausal feelings. I feel he's always been a rover, a little bit of a renegade, and the life he's leading in this book is just slightly too pacific and too sort of normal quite to suit him, and he would like on occasion to kick over the traces, but he doesn't.

Well, he does a tiny bit, but ever so mildly; but rather appealingly, I think.

Yes, I think so.

Do you really, though, in your heart, fully understand the passion that readers have for your series of novels, because it's a complete love affair, isn't it, the people have with these books? Do you really know what it is?

I don't. I don't know at all. I think I have had a longstanding love affair with quite a lot of characters in these books, particularly, of course, Ross and Demelza, but Dwight and Caroline and some of the working class characters. I have a sort of empathy, I suppose, for them and they have existed in my mind in the twelve years since I wrote ... since I finished *The Twisted Sword* in which they continue to some extent to have a separate existence.

But that doesn't really fully explain, I suppose, why it is that *readers* love them so much. I mean, you clearly do - it seems an almost paternal relationship that you have with them, that you do love them all, but readers have an absolute affinity with these books, they claim them as their own, and it's intriguing to me to know why.

Well, I find it enormously encouraging and warming to have some lady come and sit next to me and say, "Your books helped me through some terrible trauma in my life." It happened in one case to be an operation, another case the break-up of a marriage or something. So many people have said this to me so that I tend to believe it, but I can't explain to you, except in the absolute brilliance of my prose, which I rather doubt, there is some secret that other people don't have.

Winston Graham talking about his final Poldark novel *Bella Poldark*.

* * * * *