

## THE ART OF SUSPENSE

A radio programme running, without introduction or credits, 28 minutes and 24 seconds, *The Art of Suspense* was first broadcast on the BBC's Home Service (precursor of today's Radio 4) from 11.00 to 11.30 on Thursday 25 May 1961 and then probably widely after that on the BBC's Overseas (now World) Service. A pristine recording is held by the British Library.

The programme was compiled and narrated by **Douglas** (nephew of journalist, author, satirist and minor celebrity Malcolm) **Muggeridge**. In 1956, Muggeridge quit reporting for *The Liverpool Post* to become a BBC radio producer. He was appointed Controller of Radios 1 and 2 in 1969 and Managing Director of External Broadcasting (with responsibility for the World Service) in 1981.

In preparation for the programme, Muggeridge quizzed six British authors – four full-time and two part-time – about thrillers and thriller-writing and then structured his narrative around a succession of audio clips – 22 in all – drawn from their responses. His interviewees were:

**Geoffrey Household** (1900–1988): a Bristol-born thriller writer best known for his 1939 novel *Rogue Male* (Household contributed six clips to the programme)

**Maurice Edelman** (1911–1975): a Welsh Labour Party politician and part-time author of novels, history, biography and screenplays who represented Coventry constituencies in the House of Commons for the last thirty years of his life (three clips)

Richard Clayton (1907–1993): a Croydon-born civil servant who, under the pseudonym of **William Haggard**, published fictional spy thrillers (three clips)

**Dennis Wheatley** (1897–1977): an English writer whose prolific output of thrillers and occult novels made him from the mid-thirties

until the late sixties one of the world's best-selling authors (three clips)

**Gerard Fairlie** (1899–1983): a London-born novelist, biographer and screenwriter on whom Sapper based (at least in part) his Bulldog Drummond character. After Sapper's death in 1937, Fairlie himself published seven Drummond titles, among many others (three clips) and

**Winston Graham** (1908–2003) (four clips)

Muggeridge opens with the plain question: "What is a thriller?" and in the fleeting half-hour that follows attempts to answer it by considering its form (stereotypical, melodramatic) and the degree of crossover between associated genres (the adventure story, suspense novel and whodunnit). He weighs the importance of plot; of character versus situation; of background or setting and of the inclusion of some "love interest". He looks at the mechanics of writing; also the authors' aims and purpose and their views on style. Finally he conjectures upon the thriller's future.

Wheatley thought love interest "essential, because perfectly normal"; Household, in contrast, saw it, within the confines of a thriller, as "entirely unnecessary" and its absence preferable – although he conceded that the book would probably then hold less appeal to women readers, that didn't matter, he believed, provided it pleased enough men. Re style, the same author aimed for "clarity ... with an undertone of beauty". Regarding the process of writing, Fairlie describes a well-ordered regimen of regular hours: typically 9:30 to 12:30 then 14:30 to 19:00 daily; full-time civil servant and part-time author Haggard, on the other hand, "writes anywhere – on a bus, a train, or in a gondola" and on anything – the back of an envelope, on scraps or whatever comes to hand. On the thriller's future, Household says: "We've had enough of it. In twenty years it will disappear." But Edelman is more optimistic, citing Graham Greene, whom, he considers, in "taking the genre to a new level" has thereby given it a healthy future. The four contributions made by WG to the programme are as follows:

**Clip 4 (of 22)** DM: The play's the thing. I think most thriller writers would agree. But I'm sure they'd also agree that in the first-class thriller of today the characters are of almost equal importance to the plot. The two things seem to go hand in hand. Listen to Winston Graham, author of *Fortune is a Woman*, *The Sleeping Partner*, *Greek Fire*.<sup>\*</sup> Here's how he got the idea for his famous *Night Without Stars*:

*\* Although the programme was broadcast two months after the first UK publication of Marnie, no mention is made of that book, or even its predecessor The Tumbled House. Presumably the interview with WG pre-dated Marnie's first appearance, and possibly that of The Tumbled House (published in October 1959) also.*

WG: Ten years ago or more I met a man in a train who had just had an operation on his eyes and he was seeing actual things for the first time for about 25 or 30 years and he told me that one of the things that happened to him as soon as he recovered his sight was a middle aged man came up to his bed and said: "Hello, Father," and that made an enormous impression on me and for some time I felt I wanted to write about it, but it seemed to me to fall always into the rather conventional and somewhat sentimental story of the blind man recovering his sight. And a couple of years later I was in Paris and I met a very clever and intelligent Frenchman who had been a member of the Resistance and he was then suffering already the beginnings of the bitter disillusion of a man who had worked and fought and killed for his ideals and was seeing a return of the old France that he thought had gone forever. And those two people didn't seem to have any connection. A few weeks later I was in Nice and I went into a shoe shop and was served by an attractive French girl whom I got talking to and heard a little of her story and from that time there seemed to grow a story of an Englishman who had been blinded in the war who went to the south of France to recuperate and fell in love with a girl he never saw and came into contact with and eventually conflict with a Frenchman who had lost his ideals; from being anti-German had become anti-social and eventually something of a criminal. That was something of the way the story of *Night Without Stars* came into being.

**Clip 8** DM: Sometimes an isolated situation catches the imagination of the writer and acts as an initial spur to the whole plot. Winston Graham admits this happened to him in *Greek Fire*:

WG: I'd often had the idea of writing a novel in which a man is wanted by the police and to escape them he joins a party which is being shown round a newspaper and as the newspaper is being printed so they come gradually to the end and the proprietor of the newspaper proudly takes a paper off the press and there is a photograph with WANTED over the top of the man who is a member of the party. And that was rather a sort of a carrot in front of a donkey, that was something which one should work towards. But by the time I got there I nearly cut it out because it seemed to me it was striking a slightly false note. But I kept it in because it was the thing I had been moving towards.

**Clip 17** DM: One or two of these writers said that their sole purpose [in writing] was to entertain but others agreed that over and above the story itself they liked to draw a moral or at least give the book an undercurrent of extra meaning. Winston Graham was one:

WG: *In Fortune is a Woman*, for instance, although ostensibly it was a novel about an insurance agent who got involved in a fraud and involved with a woman whom he thought was in the fraud, it was also to me an attempt to contrast two men, one who before the war had been a down-and-out and whom the war had made, given him self-respect, given him a position, given him something to live for, and one who before the war was one of the landed gentry and whom the war had broken physically, financially and, in the end, morally. Mind you, I disguised the thing so well that probably nobody notices what I'm about, but I like to have something to say. To me it makes the novel doubly worth writing.

**Clip 22** DM: I suppose the truth is that today the thriller has become respectable and in its highest and most accomplished form it can vie for esteem with any other kind of fiction. What's more, from the point of view of authorship, any division between the thriller and the ordinary novel can be purely arbitrary, as Winston Graham points out:

WG: To me, at least in the last fifteen years, since the war, I've never been able to write a suspense novel or a thriller unless it measured up to some extent to the demands of the novel. Similarly, I've never really been able to – or only twice, I think, been able to write a novel which didn't to some extent bring in some of the suspense of a thriller. That may be to my detriment because I haven't been able to be pigeon-holed in quite the ordinary way. The way I would like to see the thriller develop is that it almost ceased to be called that and became the novel of suspense or the suspense novel or just the novel.



Douglas Muggerridge (1928-1985)

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