

Poldark creator finds his sense of Place

Poldark author Winston Graham has returned to Cornwall for the setting of his latest novel. Perhaps best known for his enormously popular and successful tales of Demelza and Ross, it is easy to forget that he has had a career spanning half a century and is the author of more than 30 books.

But it is in Cornwall where his heart lies.

The Ugly Sister, to be published by Pan next week, finds him returning to Cornwall in the early 19th Century.

Winston Graham was in Cornwall last week visiting a few of his favourite places with his daughter, and took time to speak about his latest creation.

It is set in 1820, the Napoleonic Wars have ended and the age of steam has dawned. Emma Spry, one side of her face disfigured at birth, is an outcast as she grows up in the family home, Place House, on The Roseland.

Her beautiful sister Tamsin is the object of her difficult mother's love and social ambition.

But the dark focus of all their lives is Bram Fox, a predatory young male who is dangerously attractive and self-seeking.

"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."

Winston Graham's Cornish novels are characterised by their attention to historical detail and the inevitable research that goes into creating the characters and places. But he has a light touch, sprinkling the necessary facts rather than pouring them on in dollops like many writers of historical fiction.

"For some reason I felt that because I have spent so much time in Cornwall the research would be easier this time. The fact is there was far more than I had anticipated – there was just as much as for Poldark."

He said he was given a great deal of assistance by the county's librarians, especially those at the Cornish Studies Library in Redruth.

"They were so helpful," he said. "They couldn't do enough for me really."

The main characters – Emma Spry and Bram Fox – are the products of Mr Graham's imagination and he describes the plot as a love-hate relationship.

He said women with problems have been a recurring theme in his novels.

Poldark's Demelza, convincingly portrayed on screen by Angharad Rees, was perhaps the most famous. Then there was the psychologically damaged Marnie, and now Emma Spry, who battles against her physical disfigurement.

"I just seem to have a preoccupation with disadvantaged girls," he said.

Winston Graham, who lived at Perranporth for 35 years, wrote his first novel when he was 23. The Poldark series has sold more than five million copies, and been televised three times in 22 countries.

A fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, he was awarded the OBE in 1983.

His current projects include an autobiography.

"I'm not very enthusiastic about doing it," he admits. "It requires no imagination. The problem is that I have no murky past. A friend who knows me well said my life has been 'too exemplary'. I wasn't sure how to react to that."

He has also just completed a short story called "Eclipse" to be published in *The Sunday Express* on August 8.

The Ugly Sister by Winston Graham is published by Pan at £5.99.

Simon Parker, *The Western Morning News*, 3 August 1999

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