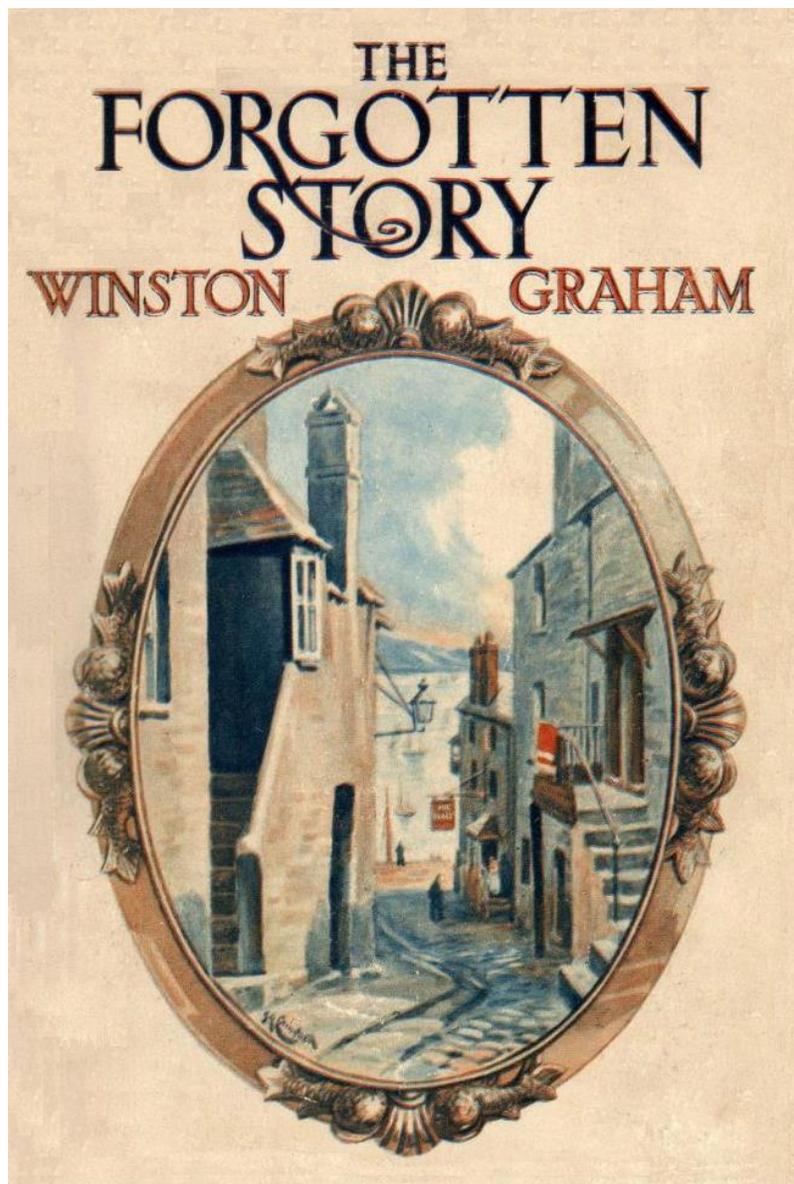


(not) FORGOTTEN STORIES, '45 and '83

Winston Graham had a busy war. After failing medicals for both Navy (his preferred choice) and Army, from 1940 to 1946 he served as a coastguard. With his new wife Jean (they were married in September 1939) he ran a B&B. In 1942 the couple's first child Andrew was born – and on top of all that, between the conflict's start and end, no fewer than six WG titles were published. The last of these, from Ward, Lock in February 1945 (see image below), was *The Forgotten Story*.



The book, "scribbled down in the spare moments of a broken and traumatic few years"¹, is set for the most part in a quayside Falmouth eatery called Smoky Joe's, though ends with a shipwreck off Sawle. Its action runs from June to December 1898, its characters include an eleven-year-old lad, a young couple who met in March, married in April and separated in May, her father, uncle, step-mother and beau plus divers others and its plot concerns coming of age, intrigue and multiple murder.

Though it may not read like it now (for, whilst not without merit, it compares unfavourably with *The Merciless Ladies* published the year before), WG came to regard *The Forgotten Story* as his breakthrough novel. When interviewed in November 1977 on BBC Radio Four's long-running *Desert Island Discs*, host Roy Plomley asked him: "Which was your first success?" WG replied:

Well, I suppose ... The war came – I'd written several before the war – and then the war perhaps in a way matured me and the reading public had become more book-conscious at the end of the war and I wrote a book called The Forgotten Story, which was a story of Falmouth at the end of the nineteenth century, and that I think was really the beginning of things.

And in some ways it was. The book was his first historical romance, the first to effectively render its Cornish backdrop (earlier efforts *Into the Fog* and *Strangers Meeting*, though set in Cornwall, could have been anywhere), the first that would eventually be filmed (by HTV, in 1982) and the first (of thirteen!) that he allowed in later years to remain in print.

Where did the story come from? WG again:

During my time as a coastguard I spent many long hours looking down at ... the weed-grown timbers [sic] ... of a French ship called La Seine [see second image below] which had been driven ashore in a January [sic] gale in 1900 ... [One of our watch], Tom Mitchell ... had seen the vessel actually come in and the following day, as a boy of nine, had clambered over the

ship. He was able to tell me all the details of the wreck and I pondered over the lives of the people who had been drowned [sic] and those – the majority – who had been saved. On one of my infrequent days off I took my wife to Falmouth and found a rather disreputable café-restaurant where the proprietor did not send round to take your orders but bargained fiercely with you as you came in as to which joint you should have some slices of, these being arrayed on the counter at his side. As sometimes happens with an author, two fairly disparate scenes come together to make a novel, and from these scenes – the shipwreck and the café – emerged The Forgotten Story.²

[Note: the metal-hulled French barque *La Seine* was driven ashore between Chapel Rock and Droskyn Point, Perranporth in the late morning of 28 December 1900 and wrecked the following day; all twenty-five crew were saved.³ WG's timber-built *Maid of Pendennis* foundered off Sawle on 9 December 1898 with the loss of one life; in those regards the two stories differ. Nonetheless, Tom Mitchell figures in both. WG acknowledged the valuable contribution of an eye-witness prepared to share his memories by namechecking him (*FS*, Epilogue, first page) in his novel.]

Though not happy with the finished work ("I have never written a novel I thought less well of at the time," he said in *Memoirs*), the book began to sell briskly and WG eventually changed his mind. Contemporary reviews were positive:

Mr. Graham's characterisation is always convincing and the backgrounds effective. (Daily Telegraph)

An extra-pleasant period piece. (Sergeant Cuff, The Saturday Review)

One can safely rely on Mr. Graham. He is one of the few authors who bring a nice subtle touch into the treatment of plot and characters. (Irish Independent)



(1) *La Seine* soon after her wreck (2) The remains as WG and his fellow coastguards would have seen them four decades on

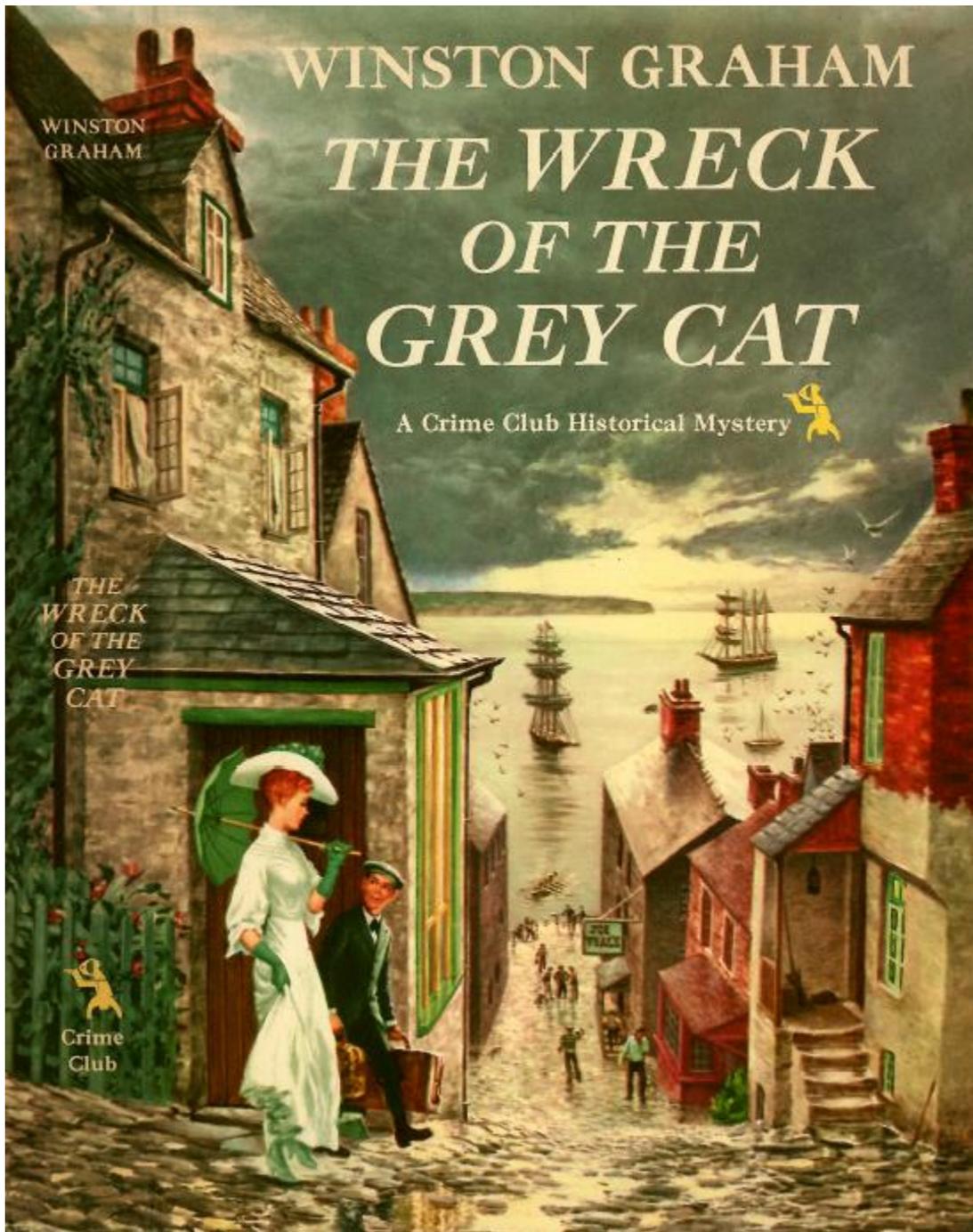
The characters are true to life, the setting is excellent, the dialogue is vital and real, while the theme itself is fresh and original ... This is a novel of real power and worth and the author may be congratulated on having written his best work.
(Hobart Mercury)

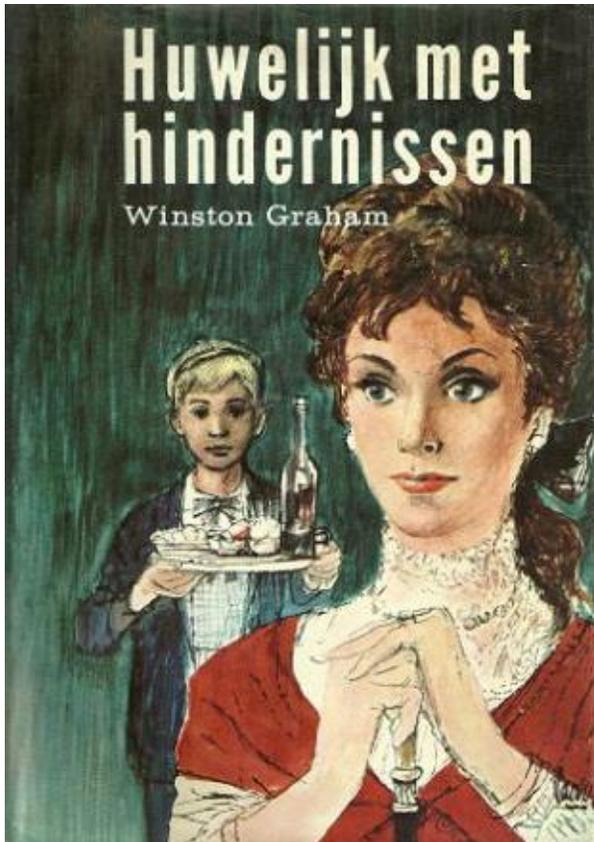
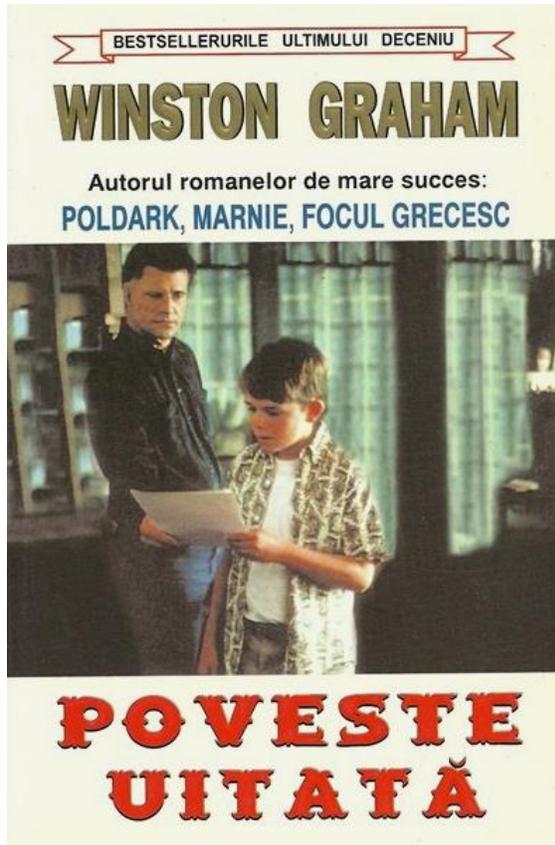
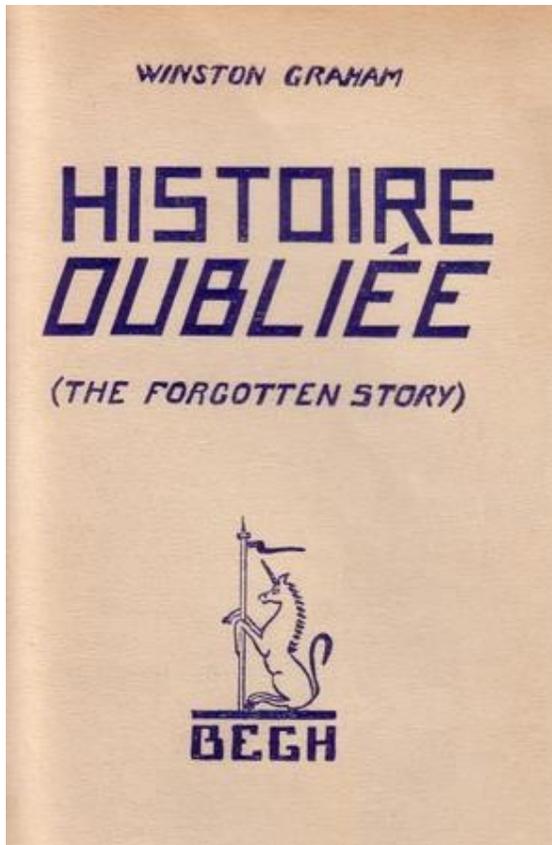
In 1946, Editions Begh published the book in French as *Histoire Oubliée* – the first of very many translations of WG's work into languages (29 to date) around the world.⁴ Ten years later, with the author established in the USA, American publishers looked over his back-catalogue and decided that *The Forgotten Story* was ripe for a new lease of life. When Doubleday published it for The Crime Club as *The Wreck of The Grey Cat* in 1958 (see image below), it was actually their eleventh WG title (preceded by the first four Poldark novels and six others) – although the earliest written. Though it is not always the case, in this instance the original and re-issued texts are virtually identical – perhaps because, as a period rather than contemporary piece, it needed no updating. Apart from the silent correction of a typo in Chapter XII, just one change was made. This saw the ill-fated *Maid of Pendennis* renamed *The Grey Cat* in order to accommodate the wish for a more redolent and thus marketable title. In all reprints of *The Forgotten Story* since, the revised ship-name is retained.

Also in 1946, on the back of a well-received and ultimately successful screenplay co-written with actress Valerie Taylor, WG began a dalliance with the UK film industry and in short order the screen rights of his two most recent non-Poldark novels – *The Merciless Ladies* and *The Forgotten Story* – were snapped up by production company Gainsborough Pictures. WG penned screenplays for both⁵, hoping to consolidate on the left-field triumph of *Take My Life* – but it was not to be.

In his entertaining memoir *Schoonerman* (The Bodley Head, 1981; including a short foreword by WG), Captain Richard England recounts how, in 1949, with cargoes increasingly hard to find, he chartered his schooner the *Nellie Bywater* and crew to London Films for the shooting of Michael Powell's French Revolution swashbuckler *The Elusive Pimpernel*. That job done and eager for

more such work, he then struck a verbal agreement with Gainsborough Pictures to advise on and appear in their film adaptation of WG's *The Forgotten Story*. But within a week of shaking hands, and before any further progress was made in the matter, in October 1949 the company folded and that, for Captain England and crew, and *The Forgotten Story* too, was that.⁶



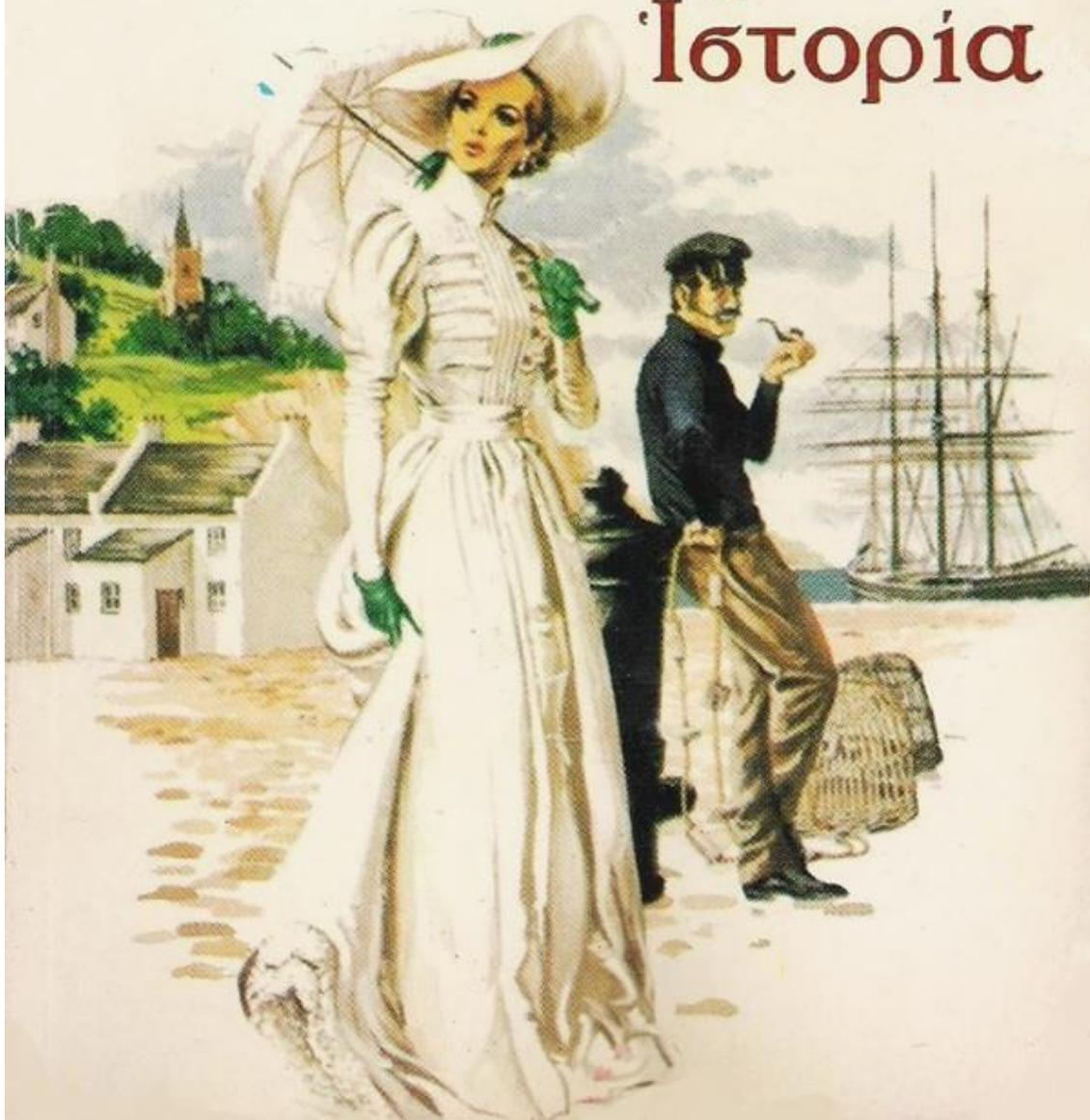




Η ΝΕΑ ΕΠΟΧΗ ΤΟΥ ΒΙΒΛΙΟΥ ΣΤΗΝ ΕΛΛΑΔΑ



Ουίνστον Γκράχαμ
Ξεχασμένη
Ίστορία





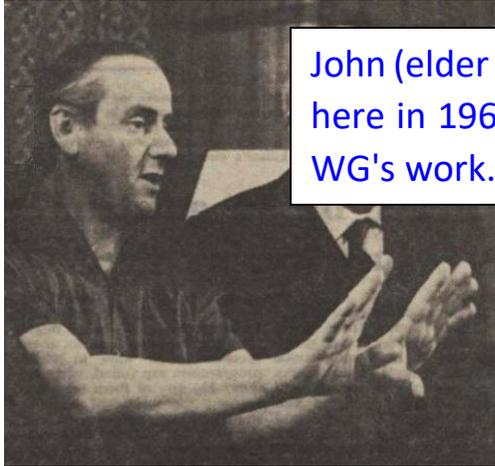
Foreign language editions: Page seven: (1) French, Editions Begh, 1946 (2) Romanian, Orizonturi, 1997 (3) Dutch as *Huwelijk met hindernissen* or *Marriage with obstacles*, De Geillustreerde Pers, 1963 (4) Italian (abridged) as *La Lettera Del Mistero* or *The Mystery*

Letter, Cino del Duca, 1982; page eight: Greek, Papyrus, 1972; page nine: Russian, HP, 2020

Yet the tale *did* make it onto screen even so, for in 1982, independent television company HTV filmed a six-part adaptation of the novel. The serial was broadcast twice in the UK, from 5.30 to 6 p.m. on Sunday 9 January to Sunday 13 February 1983 with a repeat screening from 4.20 to 4.50 p.m. on Wednesday 27 June to Wednesday 1 August 1984.



Written by Arden Winch (*Colditz*, *Wings*, *Blood Money*) and directed by John Jacobs (who fifteen years earlier had also brought WG's *The Sleeping Partner* to the small screen for Anglia Television), the production starred Angharad Rees as Patricia, Jonathan Kent as Tom, Alexis Woutas as Anthony, Lila Kaye as Madge, Van Johnson as Perry and John Stratton as Joe. Rees, of course, was no stranger to WG aficionados, having previously played Demelza so memorably in the BBC's two seventies *Poldark* series.



John (elder brother of David) Jacobs (1924-2001), seen here in 1966. He twice directed TV dramatisations of WG's work.

Though it is not known to what extent WG was involved in the production of *The Forgotten Story*, he probably paid at least one visit to the set, as the following anecdote suggests:

When veteran Hollywood star Van Johnson was in the West of England last year making ... The Forgotten Story ... actor and ... author met for the first time. The impulsive, extrovert American put his arms round the publicity-shy English creator of the Poldark books and kissed him. "But you look so young," said Johnson. "I thought you were dead!" "A lot of people do," replied the author.⁷

And how faithful was adaptation to source? A novel may be as broad, rich, expansive, multi-stranded and many-peopled as its author chooses – he can introduce, without constraint, as many scenes, themes and characters as the telling of his story demands. But, when put on screen, all that changes, for considerations of time, budget and target audience apply – and, in the particular case of *The Forgotten Story*, all three of those considerations influenced critically the nature of the adaptation ultimately realised.

Screen time

Average episode length, exclusive of credits, is twenty-three minutes, giving screenwriter Winch a total of just two hours and eighteen minutes to put his rendition across. The book – and it is not a *long* book – tells four stories: of

Madge's black-hearted villainy, of Pat's and Anthony's coming of age and of *The Grey Cat's* fateful last voyage. The screen adaptation gives us most of Madge's tale, though with a dismayingly perfunctory wrap-up, Pat's is sketchily addressed and *The Grey Cat's*, due presumably to insurmountable production difficulties, is dispensed with altogether (the storm that besets the ship is recreated tolerably well but of wreck and rescue the viewer sees naught). Likewise, Anthony, voice of the novel, assumes on screen a more peripheral role, his contribution reduced for the most part to mere "Yes, Tom" / "No, Uncle" support; his character, despite reciprocated affection, intrigue, derring-do and shipwreck, "grows" not one iota. The book's *graffito* incident in which he resolutely defends Pat's honour is cut, so too his interactions with both Fanny (another downwritten part) and the patrons of The Ship and Sailor. He delivers the novel but hefts in its adaptation little weight.

Production budget

The book opens with Pat meeting Anthony at Falmouth Station, after which the pair stroll together through the streets and alleyways, past the urchins and cabbage-stalks, the sailors and crooked bow windows, through the sights, sounds and smells of the turn-of-the-century seaport town, so introducing both Anthony and the reader to its briny cosmopolitan milieu. On screen, this journey is taken in a darkened coach, for the simple reason that it could then be filmed on a rudimentary set with a minimum number of actors rather than requiring location filming, expensive set dressing and many extras in period costume. The scriptwriter, we conclude, must tailor his work to fit his producers' budget.

But paper and ink are cheap and thus it is with blithe unconcern that WG uses his author's licence to take his readers to Falmouth police court, to the town cemetery to put flowers on a dead mother's grave and afterwards to Swan-pool to feed the swans, to an itinerant drama troupe's tent-show on the Town Moor where Anthony hears augury concerning Joe, to The Ship and Sailor tavern where veiled aspersions concerning Madge and Perry fly, on a late night cross-country journey to Maenporth, on foot and by farmer's cart on the way there and via the cemetery on the way back, where Anthony is drawn,

moth to flame, to a lamplit double exhumation, on rowing boat excursions on and across the Fal, on a landau-ride out to the Norway Inn and back; of all this the TV viewer gets precious little (though a moonlit cemetery path is mocked up and the show tent becomes a theatre). The adaptation's action, rather, sticks in the main to Smoky Joe's café with brief excursions into a darkened coach (as previously mentioned), a boathouse, the deck and cabins of *The Grey Cat*, Tom's office and sister's home, the cemetery (for Joe's burial) and an unnamed Sawle inn bedroom to close. No more than a few seconds of film were shot on location in the entire series. In short, the book ranges free as its begetter's imagination; its adaptation sadly not. Here's what Sue Craig wrote in *Filmed in Cornwall* (Bossiney Books, 1999):

The Forgotten Story was based on a Winston Graham tale and starred an American actor called Van Johnson. With shooting to take place in Cornwall, the production buyer, Bryn Siddall, worked for three weeks getting props organised. In particular he needed period – 1890s – clinker-built boats, including several that had to look really dilapidated, if not wrecked. Not only did he find suppliers for many suitable boats, he also found a farm with an incredible collection of horse-drawn vehicles in various states of disrepair – just what he wanted.

After all this effort the co-producers pulled out and the whole production was shifted north to the Bristol area. A waterside inn set was built in the studios and, with the addition of a few strands of seaweed, Castle Combe in Wiltshire was converted into a Cornish fishing village, although rumour has it there were problems with trout jumping in the stream. Some of the boats were transported on low-loaders to an airfield near Bath where they were placed on tyres and rocked to give the impression of rough seas. Various film archives were raided for "authentic" shots of the sea. Buckets of water were also enthusiastically thrown over the actors and a fire hose brought in to give the impression of stormy weather. The finished product was pure fictional Cornwall.

Target audience

HTV's serialisation of *The Forgotten Story* was broadcast early on Sunday evenings, when viewers of every age down to the youngest might be watching – yet WG's tale is a grim one, featuring an eleven-year-old boy whose mother has just died and whose father doesn't want him, a pair of estranged newly-weds, one of whom is driven by unrequited love to assail the other, filial treachery and the cold-blooded depredations of a vile multi-murderess. It was inevitable, then, that the story's darker elements would be downplayed and characterisations softened accordingly.

The adaptation sends Madge's character through an arc from domineering and shrewish to brazenly scheming (planning the metamorphosis of Smoky Joe's café into the Harbour Restaurant – Fine Food and Wines whilst its proprietor lies sick in bed upstairs) to outright murderess and Lila Kaye plays the part she's given commendably well – but only in the novel is Madge grotesque from the outset. Joan Sims would have been perfect for the role, although to have brought WG's character to the screen as originally written would have been to offend Sunday teatime sensibilities too grievously.

Joe, too, is redeemed from the book's narrow, mercenary misanthrope to a sentimental soul, gruff but genial, who hopes to have found in Anthony the son he never had. By the end of the novel's fourth chapter, Anthony is ready to declare, on minimal supporting evidence, that "the old man's bark was worse than his bite" but, on screen, much of the serial's third episode is given over, in scenes not penned by WG, to uncle / nephew bonding (so setting up that episode's conclusion, in which Joe dies and Anthony weeps). Indeed, after an affecting two-hander in the café in which Joe teaches Anthony how to carve meat, a continuation up in Joe's room as he lies mortally ill in bed is arguably the most touching and memorable passage of the series:

Joe: If you're with us long enough, there's a lot I'll teach you. Never had a son, you see. How to sail a boat, how to groom a horse, all the knots the sailors use, how to tell what the weather'll be by looking at the sky and the birds and the way

the sea's running. And navigation. They make a holy mystery of navigation but if you can know the stars it's not that difficult. How to pick a joint of meat at the butcher's. You'll know that. You'll never get fobbed off with all that stuff they just want to be rid of. How to fire a rifle – see? Oh, I'll teach you about all the strange peoples of the world. The women who put great wooden discs in their lips so that they look like a walking stack of plates [chuckles] and the girls in Burma, they got rings round their necks so that they get longer and longer, like a giraffe [chuckles]. And the Chinese women who tie up their feet so that they're no bigger than a box of matches. And men with bones through their noses [chuckles] and them that has a dozen or more wives, and the ones who run around stark naked as the Lord made them because, poor heathens, they don't know no better. Maybe your own father's told you all this, eh?

Anthony: No, he was away most of the time, but my mother taught me quite a lot.

Ah, women. Look, no disrespect to your mother, but women don't know about these things. They've got their uses, I'm not denying that, but they don't know what's interesting and what isn't. The trouble ... [seized with pain]

Are you alright, Uncle Joe? Shall I go and get Aunt Madge?

No, no. She's a good woman and a good nurse but I can't stand all that praying. Her by my bed muttering prayers. I can't abide that.

In the book, letters from Anthony's father are kept from the boy as a result of Madge's closeness and Joe's reluctance to spend money on his schooling. In the adaptation, the reason is both simpler and more benign: because Joe wishes to become Anthony's surrogate father.

The fight in the café which in the book is vicious and ugly (knives are brandished, blood is spilt, an arm is broken and four men are rendered unconscious) becomes on screen a powder-puff *pas de deux* that, presented

in slo-mo over a jaunty soundtrack with no hint on any side of threat or menace, lurches closer to comedy than confrontation. Tom removes Pat not through a window and so off the premises but merely through a door and into a storeroom, where his pent-up passion finds momentary release ("We are married, you know," he reminds both her and the viewers) with a kiss which, after prior reluctance, she appears to accept with muted pleasure.

Ned's proposition to Pat to go with him to Australia is followed up in the book by two kisses which she does not resist and then a third which she does. The screen pair, wholly chaste, and definitely *not* married, don't even touch hands.

The novel finishes strongly. In marked contrast, the final fifteen minutes of the serial is feeble. We hear that Madge no longer recognises Pat and is "quite mad" – but see nothing of her. The fate of the ship and its crew is not mentioned. That Tom and Pat should reconcile was to be expected, but with these words by Tom?

Quite a long time ago I got worried about your father. His skin looked dry and he handled things so clumsily, as though he had no feeling in his fingertips. I thought perhaps he was taking some sort of drug, so one night ... I took away the remains of his supper and had it analysed. It contained traces of arsenic. I went straight to the police but the traces were so slight. You see, I wasn't certain of anything and there was nobody I could ask. I'd quarrelled with Joe and you and I, we'd hardly speak to each other. I tried to drop hints but, well, quite naturally, I suppose, you thought that I was just trying to frighten you so you'd come back to me. Then Joe died ...

He goes on to tell her that she's "the only woman that I'll ever love" which, of course, is enough to win her completely. But would Pat have been pleased to hear that Tom knew her father was being poisoned *but did nothing to stop it*? More likely, surely, that it would have turned her against him more resolutely than ever.

Other plot changes

Other plot aspects are condensed, combined, reworked or simplified. Winch pays far more attention than WG to the question of Joe's wills, which is doggedly pursued by Joe's sister Louisa, excellently played by Elizabeth Ashley. Through her we learn that in his last ten years he made at least eight, each with a different Falmouth solicitor. Madge is first mentioned in the fourth, then, in the fifth, sixth and seventh inherits everything *in trust for Pat*. Only in the last (after Pat has married against Joe's wishes) does she inherit absolutely. In other words, the motive for her wickedness is writ large. It is made plain in the novel that Madge murders four people – her mother and sister, Joe's wife and then Joe – but on screen this is reduced to two. The screen interactions of Anthony and Tom are telescoped and Pat's backstory is changed: we are told that she and Tom separated after six months of marriage, which is contrary to WG's carefully constructed timetable of events (in the novel they parted after just three weeks); likewise, Winch tells us that Joe married Madge in 1894 (i.e. between his fourth and fifth wills), which is two years before his first wife Christine died at Madge's hand, in the novel and, I suspect, on screen also.

Yet the plotting of the novel, too, leaves something to be desired. All turns on the temporary alienation of Joe and his daughter Pat. Following her precipitous marriage to Tom, of which he does not approve, Joe disinherits her and in so doing, we are told, signs his own death warrant. But she is nineteen and so could not have married without her father's consent which clearly would not have been given, which makes for a large plot-hole. (Though screen Pat's age is not stated, she also "married without consent", so cannot be more than twenty-one. Angharad Rees, thirty-eight at the time of filming, plays the much younger character with convincing charm and aplomb.) WG acknowledges the anomaly – the marriage should be "annulled" on that basis gripes Joe – but the hole remains. Furthermore, all we are told of the Tom / Pat union is that they met in March and married in April – which, in view of a turn of events so extraordinary (since, while she was quixotic and mettlesome, he was anything but) is entirely unsatisfactory. Indeed, the whole of the Tom / Pat story arc fails to convince.

Perry, likewise, is given no plausible motive for falling in with Madge's murderous designs on his brother, for whom he feels quite genuine if unarticulated affection. She is no Siren and he no Seddon, thus that he would have allowed her dire *coup* to proceed to its grisly conclusion without intervention makes little sense on either page or stage. (It doesn't help the serial's cause, either, that Van Johnson plays so poorly – indeed, his attempts at carving in episode two are laughably inept).

Tom and Pat's boathouse interlude is one of the novel's seminal scenes, through the course of which she passes, thoroughly "shaken up", "bruised and breathless", but not the victim of "conquest", from girlhood to womanhood – a transition noted and eloquently described ("her face was beautiful then rather than pretty in its strange suppressed wildness") by the keen-eyed Anthony. We are given to understand, in other words, that far from being traumatised or brutalised by this encounter, as some claim,⁸ it has *quicken*ed her; has infused her with an irrepressible radiance which is the essence of beauty; has taken her to a new plane of comprehension from which there will be no going back. Her principal complaint on leaving her husband after three weeks of marriage was that he was too lawyerly and cold-blooded. She had discovered this night that he was not always so, and something fundamental about her own nature too.

If the book pulls its punches in describing this liaison, of course the TV serial – teatime family viewing, remember – inevitably follows suit, offering in evidence only the single kiss described above; as a direct consequence, the encounter's key relevance to the futures of Tom, Pat and Anthony is too little stressed. But such nuance is not this scriptwriter's currency. His brief was to render WG's visceral tale into anodyne, innocuous, inoffensive fare, pruning, twisting and subverting as necessary, and that – bargain basement Graham – is what we get. Provided you don't hope to see the book or anything much like it before your eyes, you might even enjoy HTV's offering, for it is played with pleasing enthusiasm by all its cast (though clearly some are more gifted than others). But finally this *Forgotten Story*, like so many other productions before and since, confirms how unsatisfactorily the magic of quality literary fiction transfers from page to screen in any hands.

No matter. Here's the author in 1983 on his flawed but enduring, war-drafted first period novel:

*"There's always been a kind of joke attached to the title of my first successful book," he says. "I once said to my agent ... 'What's happened to The Forgotten Story?' and he said: 'It's forgotten!' It's been a continuous joke ever since. The truth of the matter is that it's never been forgotten. It's never been out of print ... and this year we've seen the television series. So I've done pretty well out of it."*⁹

Indeed.

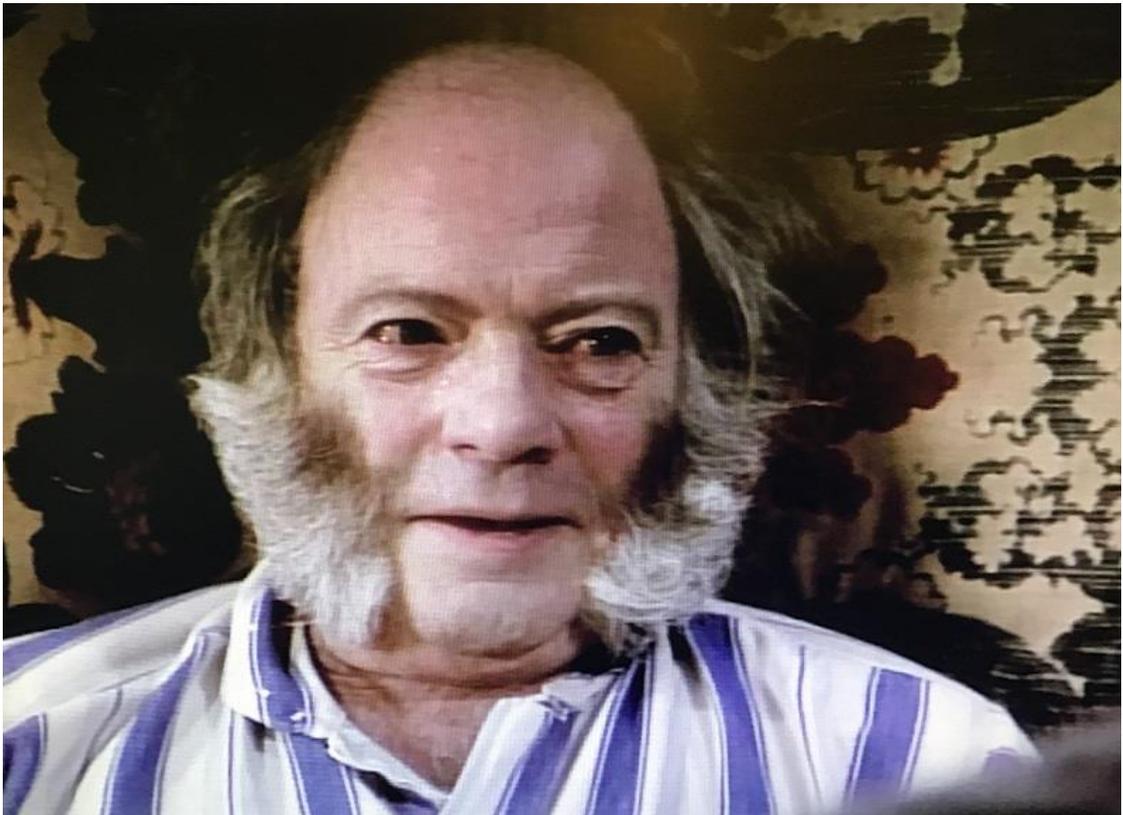
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[Below: *The Forgotten Story* \(HTV, 1983\), selected screenshots:](#)

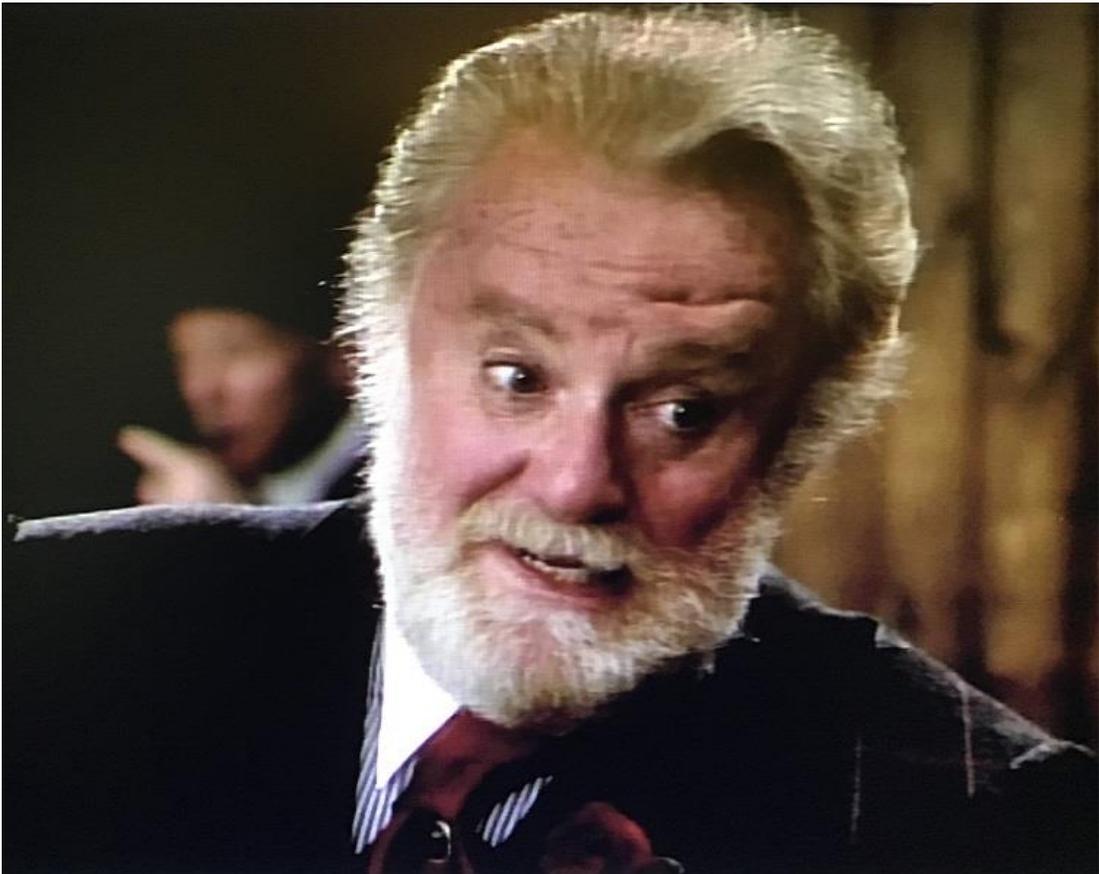




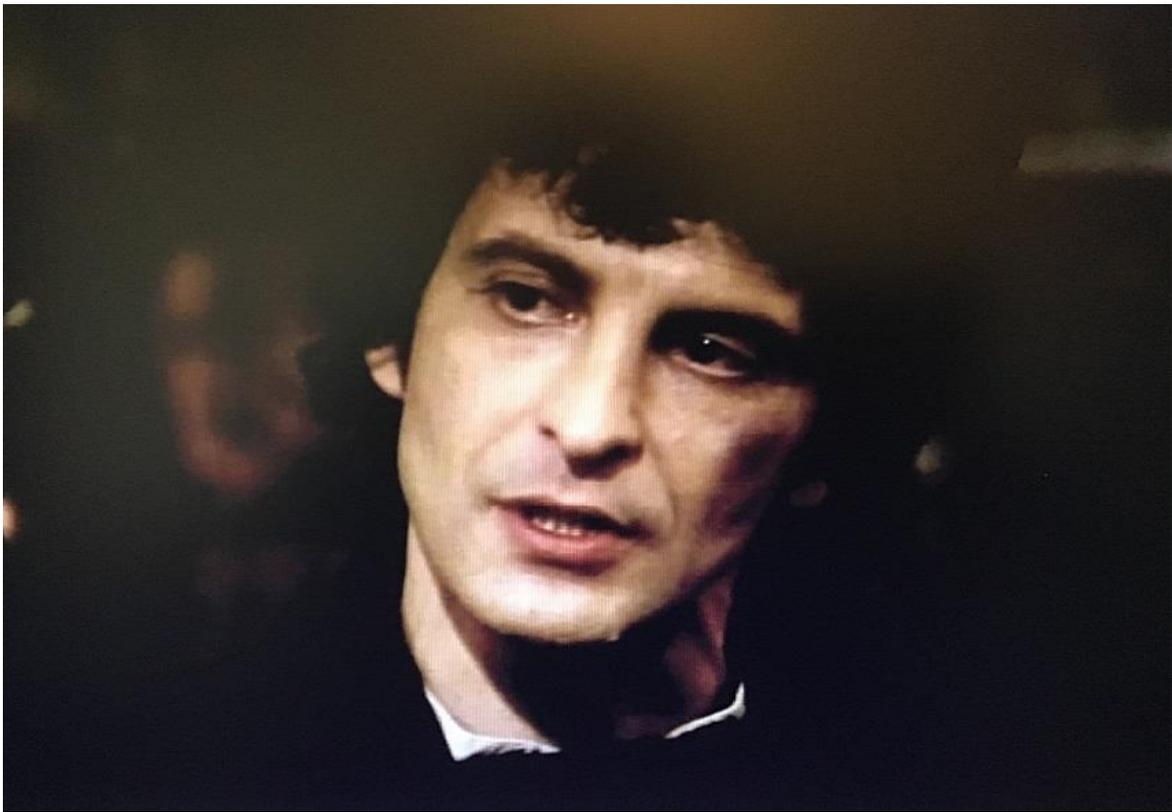
Angharad Rees as Pat



Lila Kaye as Madge / John Stratton as Joe



Alexis Woutas as Anthony / Van Johnson as Perry



Jonathan Kent as Tom / George Camiller as Ned



Elizabeth Ashley as Louisa / On the storm-beset deck of *The Grey Cat*

NOTES AND SOURCES

^{1,2} *Memoirs*, 1.5

³ For a detailed report of the incident see page seven of the *Royal Cornwall Gazette* of Thursday 3 January 1901.

⁴ Begh's *Histoire Oubliée* (1946) was WG's first translation **in book form**. However, nine years earlier, his fifth novel *The Dangerous Pawn* was serialised in Stockholm daily newspaper *Nya Dagligt Allehanda* in 73 instalments from 17 July to 27 September 1937 (for more info, see [SERIALISATIONS](#)).

⁵ The WG archive at the Courtney Library, the Royal Cornwall Museum, River Street, Truro holds an original typescript copy of the author's *Merciless Ladies* screenplay dated 19 May 1948 but unfortunately no contemporaneous *Forgotten Story* screen treatment.

⁶ Though it could have been different, for *The Hollywood Reporter* of 10 February 1959 disclosed that director Michael Curtiz had optioned *The Wreck of the Grey Cat* as a starring vehicle for David (son of Alan) Ladd – but, once again, sadly, no production resulted. Options on *The Tumbled House* (John Farrow, Farrow Enterprises, 1960/61; Granada, 1978), *After the Act* (unnamed French and American interests, 1965) and *Angell, Pearl and Little God* (Paramount, 1970) all similarly came to nothing.

^{7,9} *Woman's Weekly*, 30 July 1983

⁸ See, for example, Ellen and Jim Have a Blog, Two, posts dated 30 August 2011, 2 March 2015 *et al*.

* * * * *