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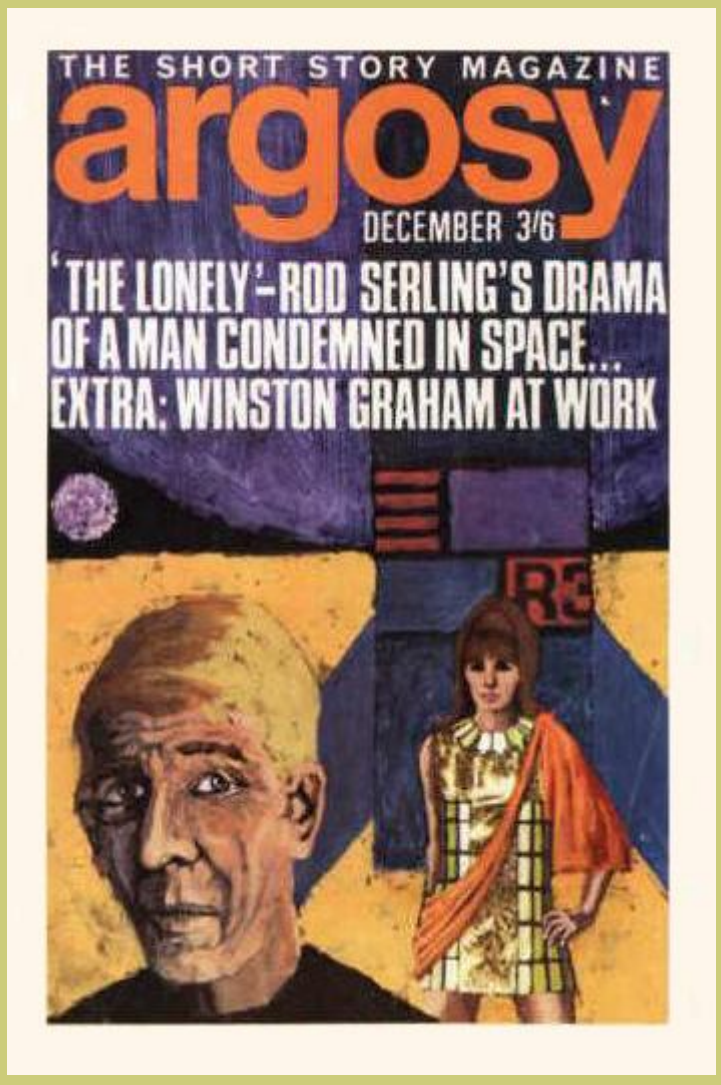

ARGOSY PROFILE

ARTHUR POTTERSMAN talking to an author dedicated to the craft of writing . . . the man who produced *Marnie* and *The Walking Stick*

Winston Graham

WINSTON GRAHAM has never been an electronics engineer, an insurance loss-adjuster, a safebreaker, or a crippled girl. He has never undergone the experience of recovering his sight after a lifetime of blindness, or being suspected of his wife's murder, or being beaten about in a boxing ring.

These are the stuff of his novels, the stories Winston Graham has been writing for over 30 years with ever-increasing success. And these are the sensations he learns from his own writing as much as he imparts to us.

This tall, very professional writer—"the most successful unknown writer in England," he described himself a few years ago—has been talking to me about his life and times in the wake of his latest novel's stupendous success.

Film rights were sold in *The Walking Stick* for a very big sum before the book was published by Collins in April this year and this story about a lame girl's love for an artist who falls among thieves has been reviewed excitedly on both sides of the Atlantic, and has been a double book club choice in the United States.

Winston Graham says, "With every novel I write, I discover something new *to me*. It may perhaps be old to somebody else. But it's new to me, and this to me gives it a zest of discovery.

"When I write I try to have something I want to *say* apart from having something that I want to *tell*, but I try to disguise

the message, so that it is assimilated without people being necessarily aware of what it is."

Winston Graham lives in a big and beautiful old house at Buxted, Sussex. It was here that we talked, between strolls round his tennis court and swimming pool, before lunch and during it. His parents (father was a wholesale merchant) took him from his birthplace, Manchester's Victoria Park, as soon as he left school, aged 17, and settled in Cornwall.

"They were chiefly concerned with keeping me alive," he reminisces with a slight grin at his own obduracy in drawing breath ever since. "I'd had pneumonia when I was seven, and again at 14. I was generally ailing. I had a fairly disagreeable school life, always far more away than I ever was there. I think I was an unsatisfactory child"—this with an air of decisiveness. "I used to be in bed a great deal."

There was one compensating advantage: young Winston spent his days off school doing maths problems and reading—"what I liked, everlastingly, some good, some bad." But, most important, "it was without the benefit of teachers. And convalescence has its own special value," he says, "bringing with it as it does a release from the worse tyrannies of illness and leaving the mind suddenly free, free for introspection and adventure. Illness in youth, if not too severe, is one of the most valuable forms of education."

Winston Graham concedes that his mother must have had a lot of faith in her young would-be-writer son, an unquenchable optimism.

Mr. Graham senior died when Winston was 19, and Mrs. Graham, who had a small private income, told her son, "If you want to write, I'll stake you to it for a few years."

He produced a novel in two years, got it published two years after that, at 23. He described it to me as "a plain thriller, set in London and Yorkshire, under the general influence of Sapper and A. E. W. Mason.

"It earned me £29," he added. "But it justified my existence, which was absolutely desperately necessary then for me. I was terribly shy of admitting to outsiders that I wanted to be a writer.

"From then on I produced a novel every 18 months. This didn't seem to do me a lot of good until 1945. I had two novels more or less brewing during the war, *The Forgotten Story* and *Ross Poldark*, novels about historical Cornwall which when published suddenly hit the public taste."

His mother had had to maintain him for about five years.

"Then the government took the responsibility off her for a time," is Winston Graham's rather sardonic reference to his wartime experiences.

"Some of the novels I wrote then earned up to £100 each, but I keep them under my hat now. I have been approached to have them reissued, but I've always said No. To me, even at the time of writing, I was conscious that they were *experimental* books, not in the literary sense, but in the sense that a reasonably good carpenter first practises not by making a *new* chair, but by 'inventing' a chair for himself."

Winston Graham has done virtually nothing (excluding the war) for 30 years but write novels, and short stories known to Argosy readers. He sampled the film business, in 1946, with the script for *Take My Life*, of which he says now, "It took six months for the film business and me to be mutually disenchanted. The film people thought they had found a new genius, but I broke off first, I'm glad to say. You're never your own master there. Other people impose their ideas on you."

He tallies the journalistic experience of three articles, no more, and murmurs that what few blandishments television has offered, he has resisted.

Novels are what he lives by, works at, has come almost to live for—and this implies no disregard for his grown-up family (Andrew, 25, is an economist in the Cabinet Office; blonde Rosamund, 21, has just married an American communications engineer; his wife Jean shares his work, as I shall shortly relate).

"There are two schools of thought about what the novelist should do," muses Winston Graham. "Some say he should only write about what he has personally experienced. Wordsworth's 'emotion recollected in tranquillity', so to speak." Then he goes on: "Those who hold this view will not accept the historical novel as a work of art." (Winston Graham has written historical novels, notably *The Grove of Eagles* and the Poldark series, set in Cornwall.) "They would say that a writer cannot go back farther than Stendhal and Tolstoy did, who drew on the reminiscences of their father or grandfather. If you attempt to probe back beyond that it is, in their view, not true art.

"But it is possible to begin a novel far from one's own experience, and ultimately to produce a satisfying work, even if you start—as I did—with a book entirely separate from anything you have known personally. This is the other extreme, and of course not to be recommended in itself; but with each novel

I have written, and as life has accumulated, I have drawn more and more on personal experience, and gained thereby. The great danger of beginning purely autobiographically is that one is liable to dry up."

What does that mean—"drawn more and more on personal experience"? First, Winston Graham explained what it does *not* mean.

"I have simply been living, and that contains a lot. You don't have to whore around Paris to live. *Everything* is grist to the mill, *everything* is accumulative."

On the other hand, he concedes that you can't write about a solicitor's office, for instance, or a doctor or a bank clerk with quite the authority you could command if you had actually been in such a job.

But then again, he finds that, as if to compensate, he has developed over the years the ability "to get into other backgrounds very quickly. It's a sort of empathy, not only of background, of course, but also of character."

When Winston Graham needed to know about the insurance world for *Fortune is a Woman* he went to see an old tennis-playing friend from Cornwall who was also a member of Lloyds. "My friend said, 'Of course, come up,' and he put a director of his firm at my disposal who took me round all the loss-adjuster firms. They all greeted him, obviously anxious to oblige. I picked on one, and with the right sympathetic approach I managed to stay in their office and even go out on jobs with them for a few days."

The electronics background for *The Sleeping Partner* came partly from another friend of Winston Graham's, a man who had rocketed from being a mechanic to owning his own factory in 10 years. "He said to me one day, 'You know, I've had an interesting life.' I said, 'Tell me'—and in the end I visited his factory, stayed there, got involved with Harwell where I found myself asking all sorts of things I wasn't expected to ask.

"I wanted the character in my novel to be working on something that would give a thread of continuity to the story. I asked my friend to suggest a suitable invention—he offered a scintillation-counter, a kind of sensitive Geiger-counter. I said fine and got a few vague details from him, but when I wanted to know more, I discovered that it was 'classified'.

"I could have glossed over what I didn't know and made it up. Only half a dozen people in England could have told me I was wrong if I'd made a mistake in detail, but I hate to be corrected on such things, even by one expert.

"I badgered Harwell through a variety of friends and came up against a complete blank wall. Eventually, when I had had thoughts of scrapping the whole book, my factory-owning friend was able to put me in touch with a man who was actually building a scintillation-counter, and he was able to get a security clearance.

"When it was all written, I sent the book to the expert to vet it. That was essential, not from my point of view for security, but lest I had expressed something wrongly.

"And, do you know, after all that, I cut most of the technical detail out of the story eventually. One has to be harsh with oneself."

This is one of the keynotes of Winston Graham's writing, his professional discipline. His work habits have been "corroded by success", he says; but when writing a novel his routine is still a five-day working week from 10.30 in the morning until 1 p.m., and from 5 to 7.30 in the evening.

When for *Night Without Stars* he needed to *describe* an eye operation, he went to *see* an eye operation. "I talked over details at length with a specialist, and wrote the passage. Then a week or so later he rang up and asked me if I'd like to see the operation performed. I said, 'God, thanks, no!' But after 12 hours of indecision—if I was a writer, what was I thinking of, turning that down?—I got dressed up in surgeon's coat and mask and went along and saw it all at close quarters. Afterwards the surgeon's wife laughed to see the colour of my face. I never mind dead people; but to see the surgeon cut his patient's eye made me feel terrible.

"And after all that, I only slightly altered three sentences in the book, which I am sure made not the slightest difference to anybody's satisfaction."

Of course, that last remark isn't strictly true. Winston Graham was happier for the rewrite.

Can you imagine that his readers have noticed he revises each of his novels when it comes to paperback re-issue? He entirely rewrote *Night Journey* (originally published in 1941) by hand when that was republished. And he read through and revised *Fortune is a Woman* (1953), *The Little Walls* (1955) and *Sleeping Partner* (1956) for their Fontana paperback editions—"Not much," he says. "Just where necessary.

"There are always one or two passages that I think could be shortened, made a bit more stark. I feel they are now just that little bit improved. Any novel can be read after ten years with a much more detached view and improved a little."

He does concede, then: "It's more for my own pleasure than anything else."

Professionalism and detachment. A phrase that assumed greater importance as Winston Graham and I talked on through the lengthening shadows of a Sussex afternoon.

"I approach my life with objectivity, if I can," he said, a harsher rephrasing of his earlier, borrowed self-analysis, "emotion recollected in tranquillity."

He continued, "When the experience is sufficiently distant, but not too far, I can write about it with detachment. I must draw on bits of my own life when I write. I draw on bits of myself with every character. No man can write about a humorist unless he possesses a sense of humour himself, or about a miser unless he has walked bad-temperedly through the rain a few times to avoid a four-and-sixpenny taxi fare.

"The whole of life," he philosophised (and was to return to this theme, too, later on), "is a question of keeping a balance. In doing sufficient work but in the avoidance of overwork. Often it happens that I get into a novel and come to a knotty problem I can't see my way round. I can make myself quite ill if I don't get over the hitch. But I also know that the last time such a thing happened I did nothing for ten days, then came back to the book, and the problem solved itself. The danger is, that's an awfully good excuse for not working at all.

"I'm hung up on my new novel at the moment because I want to tell it in the first person, through an unpleasant type of solicitor, the kind that novelists often sneer at in books. The lure and the attraction to me is, if he's the narrator, he can't sneer at himself!

"I think maybe I have stamina and perseverance. At least, I have never in my life started a novel I haven't finished. Of course, characters develop without you. One has a certain control, but almost the minute you set them down they say something you didn't expect. If they don't, then they are never truly alive.

"At a man's first appearance, I know what he looks like, but I try not to bother to describe him yet, for fear of setting him off on a slightly different slant from what he may choose himself.

"There is a fine balance between impulse and method all the time."

Why does he continue to write? Winston Graham agrees himself with the implication: "I've got most of the things I want. Obviously I just want to write the sort of book I choose to write next!

"I never like repeating myself. I find myself quickly bored by a particular type or style. Of course over a long period similarities of theme and purpose and style are bound to show. But I do like to change from book to book as much as I can. That's the incentive that induces me to write."

Where has the purely *personal experience* formed (as opposed to informed) a Winston Graham novel?

He gave me examples of this, perhaps with some reluctance, I felt. *Marnie*, about a psychologically disturbed but beautiful young woman: "I knew someone like her, though the character in my novel is considerably changed. There wasn't any personal attachment there, except the attachment of a fascinated interest.

"You see, *personal experience* varies. Sometimes it is very close, sometimes distant. *Night Without Stars* started when I met a man in a train who told me he had just recovered his eyesight, after being blind for 20 years. He said, 'When the bandages were taken off my eyes I saw a middle-aged man beside my bed. He said to me, *Hello, Father.*' "

Winston Graham and I sat in silence and digested that one. Then he added, "Because I was afraid of that subject, I sheered away from what might have been a rather sentimental story of a blind man, and instead I wrote a novel of suspense in which blindness and the recovery of sight were put to different uses."

What about *The Walking Stick*? I asked—too brusquely, I feared, for Winston Graham's first reaction seemed to be to slip away from our conversation. I already knew of his talks with various directors of one of the great London auction rooms, the head of the leading private-security organisation, a Scotland Yard detective, and even one of the leading safebreakers in London.

After a meeting with the cracksman, introduced by a crime reporter friend, he got in touch with the manager of one of the big safe manufacturers, "who lives and breathes and talks as fondly about safes as an orchid-grower would about orchids. I put to him the safebreaker's ideas, got his reactions. Then back to the safebreaker. Then I wrote the passage—but after that I found I couldn't get in touch with the safebreaker again. Perhaps he was 'inside'? He was pretty jumpy when I met him the second time. I remember his telling me it wasn't a job for youngsters."

Winston Graham took his wife with him when he was writing *The Walking Stick*. They stayed at the Spanish Galleon in Greenwich for a while so that he could explore London's dockland. "Jean can be in a room ten minutes," Mr. Graham told

me, "and when she comes out she can tell you everything that's going on in there. I can be in the same room two hours and not know a thing. Yet she says it comes out when I write, as though I've taken it in through my pores.

"I talk to her—Jean's the only person I ever talk to about my books. I never consult my agent or publisher, but it's useful to talk to somebody. Every day brings some problem to solve."

This was all very interesting, but it seemed to be drawing us away from my original question. Did *The Walking Stick* actually derive from some personal experience?

Reluctantly Winston Graham told me how, more than 25 years ago, he had fallen in love with a lame girl. "She was very beautiful, very charming. She just happened to have a lame leg. I felt that she wouldn't accept love, and that's what happened."

Like the heroine of his latest novel, this lost love fiercely rejected anything that seemed to her sensitive heart to be pity. And of his fictional girl, Winston Graham told me, "When a young man came along who wanted to make her happy, there was likely to be tragedy."

What does Winston Graham say of himself?

"My novels are getting somewhat more cynical in general theme. I don't think I'm disillusioned with people. Isn't this just true of all human beings, or at least all human beings who continue to grow and develop? My books have become a little less kindly. One could also say that like everything else they are influenced by this age, but I try hard not to be fashionable; to attempt to be fashionable, to me, is the ultimate failure."

Later, as he gave me a thumbnail sketch of his life, he added clues to his character: "In the war I put down for joining the Navy, but I was rejected and went into the Coastguard Service instead; not very glorious or adventurous. On occasions it got interesting, when a mine was washed up, or our coastal convoys were attacked.

"But as a result I had immense periods of solitude, when I was on watch alone for six hours and often all through the dark hours. At such times the mind fed on itself. I could come to feel either gradually exalted or very melancholic. Burton wrote (in *Anatomy of Melancholy*): 'Man in solitude is either a god or a devil.' I know exactly what that means.

"I have had this feeling of melancholy all my life. Possibly it's the poetic instinct, even if I'm not a poet. I am often perfectly happy with the passing hour, but one is seldom long able to forget that it *is* passing. I have felt this since I was a boy."

Solitude was obviously important to Winston Graham still, as a writer.

As we strolled beneath the chestnut trees at the bottom of his huge garden, he said he was reminded of a beach bungalow he used to keep in Cornwall, whither he would walk along the sea's edge, a refreshing walk, to write his novels through the long days of summer. "I miss the view and sound of the sea breaking," he said.

Now he has a perfectly pleasant study in his house instead: "I like to get away to an upstairs room where I'm less accessible, away from the phone."

He has tried living abroad, in the south of France. He sold up in Cornwall in 1960 and drove down with his family in two cars. "I love the sun," he recalls, "but constant sun can be enervating, and I seemed unable to put down permanent roots in France."

Now, living near enough to London, he dabbles a little in modern art, cherishes a Siamese cat, indulges a fondness for music and golf. He visits London once a week or so, "to recharge my batteries. I know a lot of people. I get around."

He fell to talking of the "stages" of his own life almost as though we were discussing someone else: "First the unknown schoolboy, then the unknown novelist. Then the war and early marriage. Then the children and my first success. Later came great success and my children growing up."

Does he seek consolation in religion?

"I'm religious without being orthodox. I can't say I really believe in any precise dogma. If I had been born in Bangkok I would probably be technically a Buddhist, as here I am technically a Christian. Who was it wrote: 'The gods in bliss scribble a baby jargon on the skies, for us to analyse.'? Well, who can do it? Not I with my logical mind. If I could feel, as some people do, that this were an experiment leading towards something different and better, I would be much happier. How does one come at the illogicality of faith?

"I live by doing nothing in excess. I don't mean *being mean*. I do things wholeheartedly, but I seek a balance, an equilibrium, a kind of tension between extremes. My daughter thinks I'm a bit pessimistic, but I don't think pessimistic is quite the word. Anybody who has the sort of imagination that goes with creating novels over a great many years must also have the sort of mind that automatically looks all round a question.

"Most people think I'm a fairly cheerful character."