

6

An Interview with Sylvia Townsend Warner (1971)

Chris Bowles

(*Dorset Evening Echo*, 1 October 1971)

From a Dorset Cottage, an Authoress Scores Success in America

Who would expect an English authoress, living in a cottage in the heart of the Dorset countryside, and writing highly-praised books containing a quiet mixture of fantasy and fatalism, would find the bulk of her success in the United States?

Yet such is the case with Miss Sylvia Townsend Warner, who has a new book, *The Innocent and the Guilty*, published this month.*

Her tree-shrouded home is off a lane in Frome Vauchurch, Maiden Newton.

This new book contains nine short stories, all but two of them first published in *The New Yorker*. But why, when all the stories are set in England and Wales?

Liked

'*The New Yorker* likes my work,' says Miss Townsend Warner simply. 'They have the first chance of anything I write and they usually take it. Yes, I am much better known over there than here.'

Only today I got a letter asking me why won't I join the Society of American Authors – which I can't, of course, as I'm not American.'

She has, however, lived over there for two spells.

She was guest critic for the *New York Herald Tribune* during the days of prohibition.

* *The Innocent and the Guilty*, Chatto and Windus, 1971.

'Americans are fascinated by England – they have a love-hate relationship,' she explains. 'If you write about it and are ironical they love you for that. About a third of *The New Yorker* is by English authors.'

Miss Warner, who has a youthful alertness that belies the fact that she is in her late 70's, told me that she started off as a musicologist, with a particular interest in old music. Writing began during the 1920's as a diversion during the evenings.

Lucky

In America she won the Book of the Month prize for her novel, *Lolly Willowes*, and her fantasy, *Mr Fortune's Maggot*, won the Literary Guild of America prize.

'I've been very lucky in America ever since,' she said.

She came to Dorset by accident to visit the writer T.F. Powys, author of *Mr Weston's Port Wine*.¹ She continued to travel down and eventually bought a house.

Up to her death two years ago Valentine Ackland shared the house. The two women collaborated on *Whether a Dove or a Seagull*.²

Miss Warner knows the writer David Garnett well, and personally admires the work of Defoe, has been influenced by Proust, and is full of approval for Chekov.

Loose

'I admire him because he has the quality of detached compassion which I think is very important in any fiction writer.'

Of this new book, she says: 'There is a fatalist tendency in it. People always talk about innocent and guilty as if they are opposites.

When the innocent are let loose in the world, they create an enormous amount of trouble.'

Her two favourite pieces in the collection are 'But at the Stroke of Midnight', about a woman leaving her husband and adopting a new character in the process – this took her months to write – and 'Oxenhope', about a man returning to a place he knew in his youth.

To young writers, her advice is, 'enjoy it.' Be self-indulgent, write what you want to, and enjoy your agonies, she says.

Writing in the future she sees as getting far more experimental and personal.

Maiden Newton may be peaceful, but it certainly doesn't altogether meet with her approval.

'It has all got rather dull and respectable in this village. I suppose I am drawn towards people who are entertaining, and rebels are usually more entertaining than the respectable.

Listening

I think what I am is an anarchist.'

She is also an admirer of the young, particularly for doing something active like working for Shelter instead of waiting for other people to do something.

'The ideas of young people are well worth listening to,' she said.

One final point about this extraordinary wide-awake woman – she wrote the section on notation in *Grove's Dictionary of Music*.

Notes

1 The newspaper has fortified Powys's novel *Mr Weston's Good Wine* (1927).

2 The correct title is *Whether a Dove or Seagull*.