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Searching for Pearls: Rosamunde Pilcher's The Shell Seekers *(1987)*

This article deals with a particular novel and a general situation as regards literature. The novel analysed here is Rosamunde Pilcher's *The Shell Seekers* (1987), an instance of the well made realistic contemporary novel in English without significant literary aspirations. The main focus of this article is the study of the shortcomings of the current academic strategies used to study fiction. Because of the important influence of Modernism, plenty of successful authors of more modest skills than purely literary authors are being neglected. Even though the recent interest in popular fiction has rescued significant genres from neglect, there is still a middle ground, –placed between formula fiction and literary fiction–, that is left unattended. This article tries to reverse this trend by looking at a remarkable instance of the so called commercial novel and vindicating a thorough revision of the way the study of Literature works today.

I. Finding *The Shell Seekers*

There is no particular reason why the specialist in Literature in English or the reader of literary fiction should be aware of the existence of Rosamunde Pilcher's novel *The Shell Seekers* (1987). Pilcher sells millions of copies of her novels worldwide, but, like many other successful writers, she is routinely excluded from the apparently comprehensive lists of contemporary authors available to researchers and students of literature (see Section III). Nonetheless, she keeps a loyal readership in her own country (the United Kingdom) and also in foreign countries that receive her work through translation, such as Spain. In fact, it was thanks to two admiring Spanish readers of *The Shell Seekers* (my mother and my sister in law) that I first heard of this novel. Despite all our claims to a scientific attitude, the fact is that literary research is often prompted by casual encounters with the texts we eventually write about, often involving quite extra academic motivations. In the research leading to

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this essay there is, then, a personal narrative that begs to be flaunted against all the rules of good taste in academic prose. I hope the reader will bear with me and my tale of discovery.

Both my mother and my sister in law –good examples of the omnivorous 'common' (female) reader whom we, the uncommon academic readers, so often ignore– agreed with enthusiasm that *The Shell Seekers* tells a most beautiful, memorable story about a family. No further clues were given to me. Soon I came across an American paperback edition of Pilcher's novel sold in Happy Books (Barcelona), the type of popular bookshop which offers all sorts of books at discount prices. I bought the book for 1,400 pesetas as I considered how we, researchers of the printed word, mix private pleasure with professional interest and bear the burden of funding our own research, something which scientists are seldom expected to do, if at all. The book was piled together with other commercial novels in English of diverse genres –from Stephen King to Sue Grafton–, in a rather unattractive basement display; there was no indication of their genre. The cover, decorated with a rather tasteful pattern of flowers similar to those of elegant head scarves, contained enthusiastic excerpts from many reviews but gave no indication, either, of the book's genre or contents. Yet, because I vaguely remembered having glimpsed the pastel coloured cover of the Plaza & Janés Spanish translation and because I associated this with a similar edition of Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White*, my impression was that Pilcher would turn out to be a belated Victorian. Which she did, in many ways.

I read the book and loved it, for which I duly thanked the fellow readers who recommended it. Despite my initial misgivings about Pilcher's cliché ridden prose, I soon started enjoying the story –especially, Pilcher's skill in visualising different atmospheres, from London to Ibiza, and also in controlling the sympathy and the aversion of the reader towards her characters. *The Shell Seekers* (582 pages long in the edition I read) takes its title from the most cherished possession of the main character, 64 year old Penelope Stern Keeling. This is a painting by her famous father, Lawrence Stern, showing a few children (among them Penelope herself) gathering shells on a Cornwall beach in the 1920s[1]. I will leave the critical analysis of the novel for the next section and just claim here that *The Shell Seekers* is a very attractive novel, despite not being a Booker Prize candidate– something which, on the other hand, maybe Pilcher's novel needn't be to succeed.

My narrative continues with my (failed) attempt to transmit my enthusiasm to other readers –two male readers, actually: one a student of English Literature, the other yet another 'common' reader.

I was deeply worried about my inability to label this book– middlebrow was the only tag I could think of, and to explain its attractive beyond our clumsy critical vocabulary. But after summarising the plot for them I became even more worried, for these two friends hinted that this was a 'woman's novel'. My disappointment was so noticeable they hastily added this label needn't be patronising but just descriptive: *The Shell Seekers* seemed to be the kind of text mostly women write and mostly women read (quite another matter is that readers are mostly women). To prove them wrong, I decided to check how this novel is sold. I was certainly afraid that bookselling policies would significantly alter my perception of a book I had regarded so far as a skilful novel of remarkable beauty. And so they did, in a way.

I chose FNAC, Barcelona, for my (very narrow) field research, thinking that this French owned centre of cultural consumption would follow patterns typical of most of Europe's chain bookshops. *The Shell Seekers* could be found (February 1998, when I write) in two sections of FNAC's bookshop: the 'Romantic Fiction' section within the 'English Literature' section (selling original paperbacks in English) and the 'Novela Romántica' section (selling translations to Spanish of mostly British and American novels). Yet, this novel was also placed on two displays (one of books in Spanish, one of books in English) offering a mixed assortment of paperbacks. That is to say, Pilcher's novel was available both as romantic fiction and as general paperback fiction, in either the Spanish translation or the English original. The company the book kept on the romantic fiction shelves was a list of popular (female) names including V.C. Andrews, Jennifer Blake, Philippa Carr, Jude Deveroux, Victoria Holt, Johanna Lindsey, Valerie Sherwood, Danielle Steele, Barbara Wood, Jean Plaidy, Judith Krantz, Maeve Binchy, Barbara Taylor Bradford, Alexandra Ripley and Joanna Trollope. Yet, on the tables displaying the paperback general fiction Pilcher was surrounded by other male and female writers such as Arundhati Roy (winner of the Booker Prize 1997) and Carol Shields (short-listed in 1993).

In fact, I bought Roy's *The God of Small Things* because I had been interested in this novel by a paper I heard delivered at a conference. The author[2] had discussed with great insight and irony how this Booker Prize winner had been marketed in the USA and the UK: and, yes, the tasteful paperback edition kept the photo of the beautiful novelist which, we were told, had certainly something to do with the enormous sales and success of this very literary novel. I did not buy, however, Carol Shield's *The Stone Diaries* because the daisies on the cover were not very promising (too feminine...) and because I could not make up my mind about a novel simultaneously

endorsed by the Booker Prize committee and commercial novelist Joanna Trollope. These two books will resurface again in this narrative. The provisional conclusion after my visit to FNAC, in any case, was that, as far as publishers and booksellers were concerned, *The Shell Seekers* should and could attract both the romantic fiction reader and the general fiction reader[3].

My bungling field research led me to visit a second hand English bookshop near my own home in Barcelona, modestly called Bookstore. There I found Carol Shield's *The Stone Diaries* and bought it on impulse as it was too cheap to resist buying, acts of consumption being another of these factors left unresearched except in marketing surveys. Again, Pilcher's books could be found in both the romantic fiction section and the general fiction section. The owner of the shop, an Englishwoman devoted to science fiction, explained to me her policy: romantic fiction fans will read Pilcher as a romantic writer and usually ignore her place in the general fiction section; literary readers will avoid the romantic fiction section but will trust the book-seller's decisions as to where authors should be placed and, so, will buy Pilcher's books from the general section if they are inclined to do so. I was not told what happens when, for instance, a man who reads Pilcher as general fiction (if such man exists, I am beginning to doubt it) discovers that she is also marketed as a romantic fiction writer.

This led me to the conclusion that readers are happy to be tricked by unreliable labelling. Publishers and booksellers know it and will do the best to please the readers and stay in business. Still, something is amiss here, for *The Shell Seekers* is not really romantic fiction: love is there, but it is not quite the only focus of the plot. I have not read other novels by Pilcher and it might well be that this one is an exception, but I doubt it, being her most famous novel and, also, considering her loyal readership. On the other hand, general fiction sections in bookshops seem to cover too much ground and mix too many different styles and purposes as to be reliable indicators of the actual state of literature. Distinctions carefully made in the academia are lost to common readers: they will buy Salman Rushdie and Ken Follet, Jeanette Winterson and Judith Krantz together, more often than it is thought, just because they have heard of them, and not precisely through reading academic journals[4].

Labelling is, curiously enough, both too restrictive and too lose, especially as regards books that are neither anonymous formula nor literary fiction, which is the case of Pilcher's novel and of many, many others. This middle ground, sometimes badly covered by the label commercial fiction, seems to be a direct descendant of the middlebrow fiction of Victorian and Edwardian roots that Woolf and

the other Modernists so successfully discredited. And because it is discredited, we have forgotten how to handle it and its links with still much admired nineteenth century novels such as Dickens'. The labels we use are painfully inadequate: popular vs. literary (is the literary always unpopular or the popular always badly written?), romantic vs. general (are love stories confined to Harlequin paperbacks?), genre vs. mainstream (isn't the mainstream novel just another genre?, isn't the novel a genre?). The theoretical tools we use do not help much, either, for they are not useful to decode the complex sociological and anthropological reality behind writing, publishing and reading.

But the main point I want to make here is that as formulaic popular genre fiction gains the attention of the academia (though the definitions of 'formula' and 'genre' are questionable) and as literary fiction holds its place mainly thanks to literary theory, the realist authors who are neither experimental nor literary, and others who cannot be conveniently labelled, are ignored. Analysing a novel by Stephen King or by Martin Amis turns out to be easier than analysing one by Michael Crichton or by Terry Pratchett, not to mention the host of "minor", successful authors such as Pilcher. We do not have the appropriate tools to analyse authors like this yet, and we often disguise our shortcomings by parading our contempt for them. Sadly.

II. *The Shell Seekers*

A summary of *The Shell Seekers* may or may not clarify matters. This chronicle of a death foretold narrates the life of Penelope Stern Keeling, including her Cornwall childhood and youth, the grey years of her adult life in London and her last days in her pretty Cotswolds cottage. The narration begins just after Penelope's first heart attack (mid 1980s) and meanders backwards and forwards in time, focusing especially on the W.W. II years, when she lives the love story that marks her life. Penelope's life is intertwined with the lives of family and friends and acquaintances and they all receive leisurely attention from Pilcher, who diverts the reader's attention from Penelope's love story with other narratives of personal loss and gain.

Pilcher articulates her novel on two axes: the immediate plot takes the few months between Penelope's first heart attack and her death; the remote plot comprises her past. The immediate plot concerns Penelope's complex relations with her three grown up children, born of an unhappy wartime marriage to Ambrose, prompted by her getting pregnant on their first date. The main issue discussed by Pilcher is Penelope's right to do as she pleases with her legacy, the paintings and sketches inherited from her father. The novel narrates how instead of surrendering to the claims of her

greedy children, middle class, rural housewife Nancy and London stockbroker Noel, Penelope uses the little she has to find her own satisfaction in life. In this she is supported by her younger daughter Olivia, a successful career woman who is also a genuinely satisfied unmarried woman. Nancy and Noel resent the shabbiness of their childhood, spoiled by a hard-drinking, money-quandering father that abandoned Penelope for a younger woman, and crave for a material satisfaction that Penelope will deny them. Instead, she donates *The Shell Seekers* to the Cornwall gallery her father favoured (where she met her lover), uses the money raised by selling two Stern panels to return to her beloved Cornwall on a farewell holiday and legates the very valuable Stern sketches to a young couple, Danus and Antonia, her middle class, moody, Scottish gardener and the daughter of Olivia's dead lover, Cosmo.

Penelope's apparently eccentric decision is grounded on Danus' physical resemblance to her dead lover, Richard. It is only after Penelope's death that Olivia discovers her mother's well kept secret, though Richard was never a secret for Penelope's father nor for other friends who shared her life during W.W.II. Richard's presence is the only ray of light in a biography otherwise marked by the obscurity of a woman's limited life. For *The Shell Seekers* narrates a life that is ordinary in all its extension, even as regards the love story and Richard himself, seen for too short a period to really notice his vices and virtues. The tragedy of Penelope's life is common enough: she marries the wrong man for the wrong reasons, falls in love with the right man as her husband stays away from her. Her lover is killed in action and she returns to her husband after the war, never mentioning Richard to him. Then two more children, a bitter divorce and old age follow, as her children's lives unfold and she feels how far they have grown apart.

There is nothing extraordinary here, nothing excessive, nothing fantastic, nothing original. Yet, ordinary as this may be, Penelope's life is unique: she is the twentieth century Everywoman but she is not anonymous. Penelope is memorable not because she is a model of anything (her imperfections are many) but because her life, and the role that war plays in it, exemplifies one of the great themes of contemporary fiction: life's missed chances. This is not explicitly stated; indeed, we tend to confuse this subject with the vaguer, more general, "meaning of life". But, as I see it, one of the main questions that the modern novel investigates is at what point a promising life can be turned into a failed life. We no longer believe in the traditional narrative of the search for happiness in a fulfilling marriage, though it is true that one of the major plots of current fiction concerns the finding of happiness in a second, successful union beyond the confining idea of marriage (a plot which is truncated in this novel). Yet, more and more novels examine the lives of characters from beginning to end in search of clues to understand, and –presumably avoid–, the disasters of ordinary life. This is a subject touchingly rendered by Pilcher in *The Shell Seekers*, despite (or maybe because of) her lack of sophistication and her directness.

The Shell Seekers is, no doubt, a 1980s heir of the eighteenth century sentimental novel and of the nineteenth century domestic novel. However, Pilcher offers a particular version of sentimentalism and domesticity. The death of Richard, killed on D Day as he lands on a Norman beach leading his battalion, has pathos. Yet this cruel accident of life is believable and elicits sympathy without cloying sentimentalism. Actually, Pilcher proposes as a model what I will call stoic sentimentalism, of a very British kind. Emotion is never gratuitous in this novel; what is more: it is always tightly controlled. Penelope and her daughter Olivia are well-balanced, very strong women who know how to live alone and how to control their emotions without ever being callous, though they may seem so to more passionate Mediterranean readers. Pilcher issues constant warnings against the temptation of easy tears, even at crucial sentimental moments such as Olivia's mourning of Penelope. In contrast, Nancy, Penelope's eldest daughter, is presented as a whimpering, insufferably 'feminine' woman who is all nerves and emotions, none of them right. Pilcher is unsympathetic towards Nancy's suffering and impatient, which clearly indicates that sobriety is preferable to excess for her. This, of course, distances this novel from conventional romantic fiction.

On the other hand, even though Penelope is not a feminist, there is a marked sense of independence in her ways and a denial of the alleged joys of family life in all fronts. Again, Nancy, who is pathetically clinging to her belief that her family, two rude children and a grunting husband, is a success, is condemned as an example of futility. Mother, wife and housewife like Penelope, Nancy is, nonetheless, a nonentity, whereas Penelope is pure personality. Even though she is no career woman like her daughter Olivia, Penelope manages to make her life rich and fulfilling despite the loss of her only true chance of happiness. Her family matters to her, much, but she is peculiar in that she denies the traditional bonding between mother and children: she judges her children with rigour and impartiality and comes to the conclusion that she loves Olivia best because she likes her as a person, as a friend, not because she is her daughter. In fact, Pilcher consistently rejects the idea that blood ties have a claim over one's affections (and property!) so that Penelope's choice of Danus as her main beneficiary is also a statement against

the obligations she is under as a mother. Olivia supports her mother in this and, again to Pilcher's credit, she appears to be genuinely satisfied with her life as a single career woman, unlike many heroines of romance or even of literary feminist fiction.

I will turn now to the other two books in my narrative, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Carol Shields' *The Stone Diaries* (1993). As I have noted, Roy won the Booker Prize; Shields came close. Yet, despite the cultural distance (Roy sets her book in India, Shields in Canada and the USA), these two books share much with Pilcher's. They all deal with family life and narrate a story involving a woman and the conflicts in her life. Of course, many other novels do the same. But what interests me here are two points. Roy and Pilcher share the same subject: life's cruelties. Shields and Pilcher share the same approach to a woman's life: the ordinary becomes a source of literary pleasure when it is singled out by them for their novels.

Roy's novel hinges on the doomed affair between a middle class Indian woman and an untouchable man. Possibly because melodrama embarrasses Roy, she cloaks the actual love story in a barrage of baroque late Modernist prose, tinged with the exotic airs of India, which is why she has won the Booker Prize. A man is loved and destroyed by the awful circumstances of the social and political reality in both Roy's and Pilcher's novels. Still, Roy spares no feeling for her lovers, stranding them in almost absolute darkness, preferring to direct her feelings towards the words in her elaborate prose. Pilcher makes do with the prose her talent permits her to write but invests much effort in expressing the reality of her characters' lives; she does care for them, old fashioned and trite as this may sound. And it must be noted that her characters live a tangible reality, reflecting life as it was in Britain in the 1980s or the 1940s and not the fantasy of romance. In this she is close to Shields, whose Daisy Goodwill Flett lives a life even more ordinary than Penelope's (there is not even a great love story, though her handsome husband dies in their honeymoon) in a totally realistic setting. The reader lives Daisy's life with her and is invited to go along until the end and also to mourn her, as Pilcher does for Penelope. The prose is crisp and crystal clear, not Arundhati's convoluted orgy of colour and light, but a more modest stream, always sweet but ironic in the best Austen tradition.

The point I want to make here is that even though of these three books Roy's ranks highest because of the distinction awarded to her, reading her is not more rewarding than reading Pilcher or Shields, that is, provided the reader is interested in reading about women's lives at all. The quality of Roy's prose is high, very high. The reader can see this is a book in which each sentence has been written and rewritten and in which the writer has tried hard (and has very often succeeded) to find the most original phrase. It is sparkling prose, but because it sparkles so, it draws too much attention to itself and distances the reader from the reality of the characters. I could feel a strange haze between them and me, and because Roy delays for so long the telling of the causes of the disgrace of Rahel and Estha's family without building up any kind of suspense, this is something only popular novelists stoop to do..., when tragedy strikes it just seems not enough to sustain the fabric of the 300 odd pages and her flamboyant prose. In fact, because the tragedy she narrates is not as 'original' as her prose they clash badly, with the result that the feelings of the couple and the family in question somehow seem to be slightly trivial, absurd, especially in comparison with the writer's admirable skills.

Shields' prose produces the opposite effect: with Roy I feel she takes too long to begin the story she really wants to narrate (indeed, hers is a novel of truncated beginnings), with Shields I feel she gives Daisy's life too few pages. Which is good, her prose (more conversational, less strained but deeply felt) leaves the reader asking for more, a great merit considering the life she narrates is so ordinary. Shields makes the point well: any life is valuable and worth telling. This Pilcher also subscribes. The difference is that she has much more to tell about Penelope's life (there is Richard, after all) but worse prose to tell her tale with. So the reader cannot see in Pilcher's novel an effort similar to that made by Roy and Shields in the writing of their books. What is worse, because the book is well plotted and grips the reader's attention immediately, unlike Roy's, and because the prose is unobtrusive (it is plain Victorian or Edwardian prose, extra Modernist in any case) we get the impression that this was an easy book to write, which may not be true at all. We know how to measure the effort made at producing literary prose, but we know much less as concerns storytelling and plotting, which we take to be minor ingredients in current novel writing. Our ignorance of this matter (in both senses: we don't know and we purposely don't want to know) is what obscures the significance of the books that the readers less interested in the beauties of literary fiction read. And these readers are far many more than the readers of literary fiction. One should think they deserve more attention than they get and so do the writers who write for them, with all their artistic limitations.

III. Researching *The Shell Seekers*, Criticism and 'commercial' fiction

My narrative continues with a visit to my university's library in a rather futile attempt to find information about Pilcher– there was

nothing on the Internet. I inspected books on the history of twentieth century literature, dictionaries of twentieth century literature, surveys of the twentieth century novel, dictionaries of women writers, surveys of the twentieth century novel by women, reputed analysis of popular or genre fiction, analysis of love in fiction and of the romantic novel... and though my search may not be complete, what emerges is a sadly incomplete picture of what literature and fiction in the twentieth century are. I am tempted to claim that what is circulated is a severely distorted version of the truth, not to say a lie.

Harry Blamires' comprehensive *Twentieth Century English Literature* (1986) excludes commercial writers, except for an odd section in chapter 5 ("The Post War Scene: The 1920s and 1930s") titled "Popular writers", dealing mainly with J.B. Priestly, Compton Mackenzie and Hugh Walpole. Among the women Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers, Margaret Kennedy and Mary Webb are mentioned. Ian Fleming and the ubiquitous John Le Carré are mentioned in the context of the 1950s novels, but there is no explicit analysis of genre or commercial fiction. This I have found to be the general trend. *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (1990), edited by novelist Margaret Drabble, contains an entry for Mills and Boon but not for romantic fiction or genre fiction. Barbara Cartland is not mentioned, either, but Christie and Le Carré enjoy the honour of an entry to themselves. Ian Ousby, editor of the more correctly titled *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English* (1993) is much more generous with commercial fiction: his guide has entries for detective fiction and science fiction, two of the genres that have generated most academic interest, and also for genre fiction. This peculiar entry (what genre?) is a good summary of the situation of commercial fiction writers but it is absolutely biased, listing all the usual clichés and making no effort at distinguishing between authors of different ranges and qualities.

The surveys of the twentieth century novel are no such thing: they are surveys of literary fiction, but not of the 'novel' which is a much larger category. Malcolm Bradbury's *The Modern British Novel* (1994) contains an interesting attempt at contemporary canon making, the "Appendix: The British Novel since 1876: A List of Major Works" (463 487). The writers coming from outside literary fiction that have made it to the top according to Bradbury are: Brian Aldiss, J.G. Ballard, Agatha Christie, Ian Fleming, P.D. James, John Le Carré and Tom Sharpe. Why these and not others is not said, though it is implied that they have transcended their genre. D.J. Taylor is, nonetheless, even less generous and only mentions Le Carré among the de-genred authors in his *After the War: The Novel in England since 1945* (1994).

As can be seen, the commercial women writers who are being canonised are crime writers. My guess is that the crime novel written by women has become respectable because the women who write it challenge notions about femininity: theirs is a realm of violence, closer to masculinity than, romantic fiction. Nonetheless, it should not be thought that the surveys of women's fiction are less biased and more inclusive than the surveys of general fiction written by men. Lorna Sage's article "Female Fictions: The Women Novelists" in Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer's *The Contemporary English Novel* (1979: 67-88) only eulogises Iris Murdoch, Margaret Drabble, Muriel Spark, Doris Lessing, Angela Carter and Beryl Bainbridge, falling into the temptation of canonising some at the expense of offering a sweeping panorama of all. In her own *Women in the House of Fiction: Post War Women Novelists* (1992), Sage follows the same trend, though enlarging the field to include Americans such as Toni Morrison and post colonial writers such as Buchi Emecheta. Elaine Showalter also defined her field in this narrow way in her classic *A Literature of their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (1978), but at least she was speaking of Literature and not of the 'novel'.

Thomas F. Staley's *Twentieth Century Women Novelists* (1983) studies only Lessing, Murdoch, Olivia Manning, Barbara Pym, Susan Hill, P.D. James, Drabble, Spark, Edna O'Brien and Jennifer Johnston, while Olga Kenyon narrows her range even more by stating that her book *Writing Women: Contemporary Women Novelists* (1991) is feminist. She leaves out, presumably, in this way, all the women writers who though women may not be feminists. Rosalind Miles' *The Female Form: Women Writers and the Conquest of the Novel* (1987) mentions only Agatha Christie as a token commercial writer, but this seems to me more acceptable than the attitude of Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert. In their very long, three volume study *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century* (1988, 1989 and 1994) they only deal with the Modernist female writers, as if these were the only female writers worth reading in our century.

What kind of academic essay would, mention Barbara Taylor Bradford, Penny Vincenzi, Danielle Steele, Shirley Conran, Jackie Collins, Judith Krantz, Jacqueline Susan, Virginia Andrews, Pamela Haines, Catherine Cookson, Sally Beauman, Maeve Binchy and, among the men, Erich Segal, John Le Carré Wilbur Smith and Sydney Sheldon? And what for? The article is Philippa Gregory's "Love Hurts", to be found in Sarah Sceats & Gail Cunningham (eds.) *Image & Power: Women in Fiction in the Twentieth Century* (1996: 139-148) and the intention is, of course, to discredit these writers as producers of politically incorrect fiction that still insists on victimising women

despite the two hundred years lapsed since the onset of the genre that first victimised women: the sentimental novel. Gregory, herself a novelist, uses interestingly no bibliography and constructs her thesis out of her opinions as a reader of contemporary commercial fiction.

She notes that the novels she calls 'sex and shopping fiction' (because they focus on consumption and eroticism) are at heart tales of very conservative morals in which the sexual double standard survives and in which the heroines are just pseudo liberated women but not quite the real thing. She does not say, though, whether the dissatisfaction and suffering of these women mirrors reality nor whether this pain relates to the unfulfilled promises of feminism. Her conclusion is that "the modern novel, like its eighteenth century predecessor, celebrates female vulnerability and female pain... Two hundred years of real life change and literary experimentation has made little difference to the women of popular fiction: they are still the specialists in suffering" (147). Gregory ignores, though, the question of whether after two hundred years of feminism (from Wollstonecraft onwards) women are less vulnerable or in less pain. I should not think so, though the vulnerability and the pain may come under a different disguise.

The reference books are also disappointingly limited. Janet Todd's 1989 *Dictionary of British Women Writers* has entries for just a few commercial women writers: Blyton, Cartland, Christie, Cookson, P.D. James, Dorothy Sayers and Ruth Rendell. Almost the same list of Joanne Shattock's *The Oxford Guide to British Women Writers* (1993). She claims in the introduction that "I have tried to emphasize, in my selection, the diversity of women's writing across genres and periods" (viii), but, clearly, she has not. Out of more than 400 names of women writers from the Middle Ages to today she only chooses seven commercial writers, one of them hardly popular. Shattock's categories are also confusing and inconsistent: if Cookson is defined as a "popular novelist" does this mean that the others are unpopular? Why is P.D. James a "mystery and crime writer", whereas Rendell is a "novelist and crime writer" and Christie a "crime novelist"?

Kathleen Wheeler's *A Guide to Twentieth Century Women Novelists* (1997) commits similar sins of omission. Her list of 135 main authors includes no commercial writer at all, though she claims that "this critical guide is an introduction to the rich, varied and astonishingly large body of twentieth century fiction by women writing in English" (viii), which, again, it is not. In fact, it is a guide to the literary novel by women: Modernist, post modernist and post colonial but not a guide to the 'novel' and not even to 'fiction', which, presumably, should also include the short story, drama and even screenplays. Virginia Blain, Patricia Clements and Isabel

Grundy's The *Feminist Companion to Literature in English* (1990) is perhaps the most ambitious survey of women's writing I have come across, though I am puzzled by the use of the word feminist in its title, especially because it does not distinguish between feminist and non feminist women writers. They list, again, Cartland, Christie, Cookson, Patricia Highsmith, Shirley Jackson, P.D. James, Sayers and Rendell but also a host of (very respectable) women writers in the fields of science fiction (Marion Zimmer Bradley, Octavia Butler, Suzette Haden Elgin, Ursula Le Guin, Marge Piercy), horror (Suzy McKee Charnas, Anne Rice) and crime (Sue Grafton, Sara Paretsky). The odd woman out here is Maeve Binchy, defined by her publishers as Rosamunde Pilcher's heiress, or so claim the paperbacks by her I have seen. Pilcher herself deserves no entry in this book.

An additional problem is that the work of writers such as Pilcher is classed as romantic fiction, but the studies devoted to this field tend to focus only on Mills and Boon, Harlequin and Silhouette romantic fiction (characterised by the relative anonymity of the authors) and not on a specific author or authors. Amazingly, it is still possible to write about love in fiction ignoring the popular genre of romantic fiction. Joseph Allen Boone, for instance, ends his survey of love and fiction *Tradition Counter Tradition: Love and the Form of Fiction* (1987), with Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, an odd choice. The standard bibliography on romantic fiction are the books by Tania Modleski *(Loving with A Vengeance: Mass produced Fantasies for Women*, 1982), Janice Radway *(Reading the Romance*, 1984) and Carol Thurston *(The Romance Revolution: Erotic Novels for Women and the Quest for a New Sexual Identity*, 1987). Others, such as Mariam Darce Frenier, *Good Bye Heathcliff: Changing Heroes, Heroines, Roles and Values in Women's Category Romances*, 1988, have followed in their wake. Modleski was the first to contend that the Harlequin and Gothic romances for women and TV soap operas are texts in tune with the special needs of women in coping with a patriarchal environment, which is why they deserve critical attention. Radway, setting out from an initially feminist position, turned to the readers of romance for information and found that they are not anti feminists duped by patriarchy but women aware of the ideological and practical roots and consequences for their lives of the consumption of romantic fiction. Thurston attacked the patronising feminist attitude of some researchers who could not bring themselves to respect the choices of the women who read or write romantic fiction:

> *Contrary to the voices of doom warning that romance novels are the opiate of the female masses, operating both to subvert the women's movement and to condemn addictees to a derivative, vicariously experienced life, these tales of female becoming appear to have played the role of unsung and often unjustly maligned*

> *heroine to the feminist movement's macho and often sadistic hero, reaching millions of women most feminist writing, whether fiction or nonfiction, has not. (11)*

To finish, I would like to turn briefly to a book that is still essential to approach commercial fiction: John Cawelti's *Adventure, Mystery and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (1976). I would like to use Cawelti's courageous but not wholly successful study of popular or commercial fiction to prove that there is no clear standpoint to define Pilcher's novel nor those of many contemporary (middlebrow?) writers. In his solid introduction, Cawelti defends that popular fiction is based on formula ("a structure of narrative and dramatic conventions employed in a great number of individual works" 1976: 5) and that formulas respond to the very human need for enjoyment and escape. He maintains, though, that formula literature is "a kind of literary art" (8) and that its standardisation corresponds to the need to reach pleasure as soon as possible within a well known context. Formula writers, however, have to be careful not to bore their audiences, hence the constant introduction of new elements that make or break conventions. Unlike literary fiction, formula fiction does not aim at originality and has no pretensions to being avant garde art. He then establishes a basic typology of literary formulas, including adventure, romance, mystery, melodrama and a peculiar category called, "alien beings or states".

The romance is said to be the feminine equivalent of the masculine adventure story and to thrive in an atmosphere of moral fantasy in which love triumphs. Yet, Cawelti identifies "more sophisticated types of love stories" (42) in which one member of the couple may die: *Romeo and Juliet,* for instance. The difference between this play and Erich Segal's *Love Story* is that the former is a tragedy caused by social reasons, whereas the latter is just sentimentalism because the death of the woman is caused by a biological accident, cancer. One wonders how the victims of biological accidents would react to this diminishment of their tragedy. As far as Pilcher's *The Shell Seekers* is concerned the definition clarifies little, for Richard dies because of a social and political conflict (W.W. II); his death should, therefore, be tragic and closer to Romeo's than to Oliver's wife. Melodrama, on the other hand, Cawelti argues, is full of sentimental incident and accident and is characterised by the belief in the "essential 'rightness' of the world order". Pilcher's world is not especially benevolent, though it is true that Danus comes out of a potential biological accident unharmed (he was misdiagnosed an epilepsy). The benevolence is relative: Penelope deprives her children of their heirloom to play goddess ex machina in Danus and Antonia's lives.

After analysing formula fiction in different chapters (dealing with crime, detective fiction and the western) Cawelti turns his attention to what he calls "the best selling social melodrama" which, there is the hub, does not seem to respond to any of the formulas of his typology. Social melodrama comes from Charles Dickens and is now (or was in the 1970s) exemplified by the work of Harold Robbins, Jacqueline Susan and Irving Wallace. Because authors of this type closely depend on the spirit of their times, of which they are a sign, they rise quickly but dwindle out of collective memory twice as fast. Except for Dickens, of course, now fully accepted as a literary writer. One wonders whether the passing into oblivion of these authors does not depend on other factors such as the lack of interest of those who write histories and dictionaries of literature.

The social melodrama mixes private with public life, so that the fates of the characters are marked by the historical events that surround them, as is Richard's in *The Shell Seekers.* Yet, Pilcher's novel is not a large canvas full of intricate research, such as the novels of James Clavell or Michael Crichton. The striking reversal of fortune is there, as happens in most social melodrama, and so is the endorsement of middle-class values, but Pilcher is not interested in eroticism, power, money or social mobility as the writers of social melodrama are. There is an awareness of history, social conditions, money and gender issues in *The Shell Seekers* but the same can be found in Roy's and Shields' novels and they are not regarded as formula fiction.

Cawelti implicitly defines the literary writer as that who seeks originality and who is sincere, whatever that may mean. He notes, though, that many writers of the social melodrama or other formulas defend their sincerity despite their inability to rise to high standards of originality. The point to note here is the separation between the artistic and the "other" writer for, as Cawelti notes, "the modernist movement in all the arts has placed such emphasis on the uniqueness of anything worthy of being called serious art that few of our greatest writers are widely read or understood by the great mass of their countrymen, let alone conceived of as important spokesmen for their values" (287). That is to say: those who are read and understood, those who are the true spokespersons of their time are the 'others', the ones who narrate their times with sincerity and less than artistic prose. People like Pilcher. This is why when we read them we feel very close to their characters; this is why it is so easy to believe in their existence, beyond labels and formulas.

In his conclusion, Cawelti complains, like me, against "the lack of solid data about audiences for the various formulas" and vindicates a new conception of art, based on admitting that there are different

kinds of artistry and that the artistry based on convention and standardisation should be valued as much as that based on the quest for originality. There is, he claims, too, an artistry of the moment, the art of the best seller writer, that we fail to appreciate, not to mention the fact that many of these best sellers still appeal to other ages: think, for instance, of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*. Still, the problem is that Cawelti cannot see beyond either originality or formula, which is why he fails to pinpoint a solid definition of the social melodrama.

There is a continuous line between the nineteenth century and the twentieth century novel that has been obscured by the prominence of Modernist literature and criticism. The Bennetts and the Galsworthys of Woolf's times did not vanish just because she (and others) willed their disappearance; their heirs are still alive and kicking and demanding an attention that they deserve. We may be puzzled by the survival of the Victorian and Edwardian novel into our post modern times, but this is the only possible explanation for the existence of novelists like Pilcher. We cannot be satisfied with the sharp distinction between the artistic and the popular, indeed, it is high time we look beyond it and see, at last, the writing and reading of fiction as the very complex social phenomenon it is and not just as a struggle between the angelic post modernists and the villainous commercial writers. Let's search for pearls among the many volumes of the global library and let's not cast away any book, least we cast them all for good.

NOTAS

[1] The painting may have been suggested to Pilcher by William Dyce's eerie painting of the same subject, "Pegwell Bay, Kent, A Recollection of October 5th 1858" (painted in 1859/60), though Stern painted Cornwall in the 1920s. This is a speculation based on my recalling Dyce's painting as I read the book, an intertextual interference stemming from a visit years ago to the Tate Gallery.

[2] Padmini Mongia, "The Making and Marketing of Arundhati Roy", unpublished paper presented at the conference, "India: Fifty Years after Independence", Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona and Universitat de Barcelona, September 1997.

[3] Curiously enough, as I was browsing around the shop, a group of four young girls, my guess is that they were first year university students, fell with great enthusiasm onto the Pilcher paperbacks displayed on the general fiction section in Spanish. One of them claimed she had made presents of Pilcher's novels to many (female) friends and the four chanted unanimously the praise of Pilcher's novels, especially *The Shell Seekers*. Being shy and not a bold sociologist or anthropologist, I missed the chance to intrude upon the girls, and ask who had recommended the books to them, why, how, when. The inevitable conclusion is that there seems to be a level of reading and a group of readers we miss by focusing only on literary fiction, among whom the young occupy an important position. It is curious to note that much attention is paid to gender issues but hardly any to the readers' age groups as if all we readers were a homogeneous species after the age of 18.

[4] Other marketing strategies further blur the distinctions. Plaza & Janés) .s is currently offering its Spanish readers the chance to travel to romantic Venice if they collect the coupons to be found in any of a series of seven romantic novels, including Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* and Ondatjee's *The English Patient*, together with Barbara Wood and other 'romantic' writers.

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El discurso crítico de Northrop Frye como texto literario

Frye's critical work can be described as literary on two levels. First because its texture shows the rhetorical power usually associated with literary texts. Second because Frye 's criticism can be read as a kind of romance, the genre which he defined as the core of all fiction, given that its narrative articulates the story of a quest, and is therefore the perfect fictional embodiment of our human lives envisioned as a quest. The body of Frye's writings can be described as a long romance in which we hear a prophetic voice that proclaims that the power of literature can expand our vision and set our spirit free. Each one of his texts is an adventure in his critical quest, and at the end of each one of them he emerges as the successful critic-hero, ready to transmit to his readers the visionary gleam he has found in literature.

En el prólogo de *A Natural Perspective* (1965) Frye se define a sí mismo como un *Odyssean critic*, es decir, un crítico que por temperamento se siente atraído hacia la comedia y el *romance*, formas literarias en las que la historia lleva a los personajes a un final feliz, y podríamos decir que el *romance* determina la estructura de sus propios escritos, pues cabe considerarlo en su función de crítico como "a knight on a continuing quest: that of removing the dragon from the hoard, or mystery from communion" (Hartman 1966, 111). No podemos ver a Frye como un pensador posmoderno porque "however darkly or ironically, he still holds the hope of 'genuine human life'" (Lee and Denham 1994, xix) y además "his Aristotelian and liberal tendencies towards unification and universals go against the present critical climate" (Hart 1995, 161)[1]. Sí podemos, sin embargo, considerar que se adelantó al cuestionamiento posmoderno de la diferenciación entre discurso crítico y discurso literario, pues planteó en su obra la igualdad de ambos en cuanto a su validez y también la posibilidad de que el discurso literario de hecho invadiera con

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