

Quotable Quotes

“By a long-established printer’s convention, a copy editor wanting to rescue a deletion puts a row of dots under it and writes ‘Stet’ (let it stand) in the margin. This book is an attempt to ‘Stet’ some part of my experience in its original form... All this book is, is the story of one old ex-editor who imagines that she will feel a little less dead if a few people read it.”

On first publishing *The Tailor’s Cake* by Noel Devaulx... “There was bafflement for a while, then an increasing fascination. These were surreal stories in which characters who assumed you knew more about them than you did moved through strange places, such as a busy sea-port which was nowhere near the sea, or a village in which everyone was old and silent except for foolish laughter... Perhaps they were allegories — but of what? The only thing I felt sure of was that the author was utterly convinced by them — he couldn’t have written them in any other way.

I would soon begin to find such fantasies a waste of time — of my time, anyway — but then, in addition to liking the sobriety and precision of the style, I felt the pull of mystification: ‘I can’t understand this — probably, being beyond me, it is very special.’ This common response to not seeing the point of something has a rather touching humility, but that doesn’t save it — or so I now believe — from being a betrayal of intelligence which has allowed a good deal of junk to masquerade as art. Whether that matters much is another question: throughout my publishing life I thought it did, so I am glad to say that the publication of *The Tailor’s Cake* in 1946... was the only occasion on which I succumbed to the charm of mystification.”

On poetry...

“I was nervous in the world of poetry. My mother used flatly to refuse to read it, declaring that it made no sense to her, and although I was shocked and embarrassed on her behalf in my teens... I had in fact inherited her prosaic nature. Poetry moves me most sharply when it ambushes me from a moment of prose, and I can’t really understand what it is that makes a person feel that to write it is his *raison d’etre*. ... I also felt a kind of nervous reverence which I now find tiresome, because it was what I supposed one *ought* to feel in the presence of a superior being; and poets, although they do have a twist to their nature which non-poets lack, which enables them to produce verbal artefacts of superior intensity, are not superior beings. In the distant days when they were singing stories to their fellows in order to entertain and instruct them, they were useful ones; in the days when they devised and manipulated forms in which to contain the more common and important human emotions they were clever and delightful ones; and in the comparatively recent days when they have examined chiefly their own inner landscapes they have often become boring ones...”

“Geoffrey Hill’s dense and knotty poems... were, for me, the richest in sudden flashes and enduring illuminations. ‘If you are really without religious feelings,’ he once said to me, ‘how can you like my work?’ To which the answer is: ‘Does an agnostic have to dislike a Bach cantata or Botticelli’s *Nativity*?’ If an emotion or a state of mind has forced someone to give it intensely appropriate expression, that expression will have power enough to bypass opinion.”

On editing Gitta Sereny’s manuscript for *Into that Darkness*:...

“No reading I have ever done has shaken me as much as the reading I did that night. Having seen the film of Belsen made when the Allies got there I thought I knew the nature of what had been done; but of course I didn’t. Groping my way into the history of this ordinary, efficient, ambitious, uxorious Austrian policeman [Franz Stangl, Kommandant of Treblinka, one of the four extermination camps in German-occupied Poland] through the astonishing material about Hitler’s euthanasia programme to which he was transferred — all the men employed in the extermination camps, except for the Ukrainians, worked for that programme — was intensely interesting, but frightening because I knew where it was going. And then it got there. And then

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the voices began to tell me what it had really been like...I remember walking round and round the room as though I were trying to escape what was in that pile of paper and I didn't sleep that night. But one editorial decision I was able to make then and there: we must use no adjectives — or very few. Words such as 'horrifying', 'atrocious', 'tragic', 'terrifying' — they shriveled like scraps of paper thrown into a blazing fire."

It was clear enough that the Stangl interviews were the thread on which the rest must hang, but it was not easy to decide where to break them and introduce other voices:...From time to time we got stuck: there would be a chunk of material, fascinating in itself but seemingly impossible to fit in. 'Oh God, we'll just have to sacrifice it', I would say; and then, a little later there would be some slight shift in the mass of the book, and click! in would go the problem piece, fitting exactly. This happened with almost uncanny regularity. Gitta *thought* she had just been collecting everything she could find, but the extent to which she had unconsciously been structuring her book became clearer and clearer. An interviewer does, after all, control the direction of an interview, and the further she had delved into Stangl's background, the more sure her touch had become at discovering what was relevant. We shortened a good deal, but we did not, in the end, have to leave anything out.

That was the most impressive thing about her work on this book: the way she knew, even when she felt as though she didn't, exactly what, in this most complicated operation, she was after. That, and her astonishing power as an interviewer which enabled her to draw out of people all that they had to give."

"The reason why working on it was so important to me was that its subject engaged me so completely. I still think — and often — of how that unremarkable man became a monster as the result of a chain of choices between right and wrong — some of the early ones quite trivial — and the way in which no one he respected intervened in favour of the right, while a number of people he respected (senior officers, a priest, a doctor — his idea of respectability was conventional) behaved as though the wrong were right. Chief among them, of course, the Fuhrer. Stangl did not have a strong centre — had probably been deprived of it by a dreary childhood — so he became a creature of the regime. Other people without much centre didn't — or not to the same extent — so some quality inherent in him (perhaps lack of imagination combined with ambition) must have been evident to those who picked him for his appalling jobs. But it was surely environment rather than genes which made him what he became."

On writing well...

That whole holiday was a joy, not only because it was my introduction to the beauties of tropical seas shores and forests, but because *I knew the place so well*. Of course I had always been aware of how well V.S. Naipaul and Michael Anthony wrote, but until I had stepped off an aeroplane into the world they were writing about I had not quite understood what good writing can do. There were many moments, walking down a street in Port of Spain, or driving a bumpy road between walls of sugar cane or under coconut palms, when I experienced an uncanny twinge of *coming home*; which made the whole thing greatly more interesting and moving than even the finest ordinary sightseeing can be. And after that I was always to find what I think of as the anti-Mustique side of the Caribbean, dreadful though its problems can be, amazingly congenial."

" 'Thinking up' books on demand is one of the idlest occupations in all of publishing. If an interesting book has its origins in a head other than its author's, then it either comes in a flash as a result of compelling circumstances, or it is the result of someone's obsession which he has nursed until just the right author has turned up. Books worth reading don't come from people saying to each other 'What a good idea!' They come from someone knowing a great deal about something and having strong feelings about it. Which does not mean that a capable hack can't turn out a

passable book-like object to a publisher's order; only that when he does so it ends on the remainder shelves in double-quick time."

...two of [the books I edited] have floated to the surface as being of great value to me. Neither was part of a literary career; neither of them sold well; neither of them will be remembered by many readers. What is remarkable about both of them is the person who speaks. The first ... *Parents Unknown: A Ukrainian Childhood*, by Morris Stock. ... Some quality at the centre of Morris Stock had been able to triumph over formidable odds.

And the same was true of Daphne Anderson, who wrote *The Toe-Rags*. By the time I met her Daphne was the beautiful wife of a retired general, living in Norfolk, better-read and more amusing in a gentle way than I expected a general's wife to be. It was astounding to learn that this woman had once been a barefoot, scabby-legged little girl whose only dress was made from a sugar-sack, knowing nothing beyond the Rhodesian bush and speaking an African language—Shona—better than she spoke English

... Daphne was sent to a convent school. Right from the beginning the child had fallen on every tiny scrap of good that came her way—every kindness, every chance to learn, every opportunity to discriminate between coarse and fine, stupid and wise, ugly and beautiful, mean and generous. School came to her —...as a feast of pleasure. She does not, of course, tell her story as that of an astonishing person. She tells it for what happened, and out of delighted amazement at her own good luck. It is the reader who sees that this person who should have been a wreck had somewhere within her a centre so strong that all she needed were the smallest openings in order to be good and happy. ...

Both of [these books] I loved not for being well-written (though both were written well enough for their purposes), but because of what those two people were like. They brought home to me the central reason why books have meant so much to me. It is not because of my pleasure in the art of writing, though that has been very great. It is because they have taken me so far beyond the narrow limits of my own experience and have so greatly enlarged my sense of the complexity of life: of its consuming darkness, and also —thank God— of the light which continues to struggle through."

"People who buy books, not counting useful how-to-do-it books, are of two kinds. There are those who buy because they love books and what they can get from them, and those to whom books are one form of entertainment among several. The first group, which is by far the smaller, will go on reading if not for ever, then for as long as one can foresee. The second group has to be courted. It is the second which makes the best seller, impelled thereto by the buzz that a particular book is really something special; and it also makes publishers' headaches, because it has become more and more resistant to courting. ...

What has been happening is that slowly—very slowly, so that often the movement was imperceptible—group number two has been floating away into another world. Whole generations have grown up to find images more entertaining than words, and the roaming of space via a computer more exciting than turning a page. Of course a lot of them still read; but progressively a smaller lot, and fewer and fewer can be bothered to dig into a book that offers any resistance. Although these people may seem stupid to us, they are no stupider than we are: they just enjoy different things."

On Brian Moore and his first wife Jackie:...

They were both great gossips—and when I say great I mean great, because I am talking about gossip in its highest and purest form: a passionate interest, lit by humour but above malice, in human behaviour. We used often, of course, to talk about writing—his and other people's, and eventually mine—but much more often we would talk with glee, with awe, with amazement, with

horror, with delight, about what people had done and why they had done it. And we munched up our own lives as greedily as we did everyone else's."

On Jean Rhys:

No one who has read Jean Rhys's first four novels can suppose that she was good at life; but no one who never met her could know how very bad at it she was.

...her creed as a writer transcended her own attitude[s].

Her creed—so simple to state, so difficult to follow— was that she must tell the truth: must get things down *as they really were*. Carole Angier, in her biography, has demonstrated how this fierce endeavour enabled her to write her way through to understanding her own damaged nature; and it also enabled her, in her last novel, to show Dominica's racial pain as it really was.

...Jean writing at her best knew more than the Jean one met in everyday life. I did not want her to publish 'The Imperial Road' because I did not want anyone to despise as racist a writer who could, when it mattered, defeat her own limitations with such authority."

The proofs of *Sleep if Off, Lady* came in from the printer while Jean was in London, and she told me she was worried about checking them because she feared she was no longer capable of the necessary concentration. So I suggested that I should read them aloud to her, going very slowly, and doing no more than twenty minutes at a time. As soon as we began she became a different person, her face stern, her eyes hooded, her concentration intense. When I was halfway down the first galley-proof she said: 'Wait—go back to the beginning—it must be about three lines down—where it says 'and then'. Put a full stop instead of the 'and', and start a new sentence.' She was carrying the whole thing in her mind's eye.

This tiny incident seemed to me to give a clear glimpse of the central mystery of Jean Rhys: the existence within a person so incompetent and so given to muddle and disaster—even to destruction— of an artist as strong as steel."

On Alfred Chester:

"he remains the most remarkable person I met thought publishing..."

...he talked to me about identity, explaining how painful it was not to have one: to lack a basic 'I' and to exist only as a sequence of behaviours. Did I have a basic and continuous sense of identity, has asked, and I was tempted not to say 'Yes' because such a commonplace lack of anxiety seemed uninteresting compared with the condition he was claiming. I think I put the temptation aside because I didn't take him seriously. How could quartz-like Alfred feel, even for a second, that he had no basic identity?"

On V.S. Naipaul:

"A beginning writer sometime makes mistakes which he can remedy if they are pointed out, but a novelist of Vidia's quality and experience who produces an unconvincing character has suffered a lapse of imagination about which nothing can be done. It happened to Dickens whenever he attempted a good woman; it happened to George Eliot with *Daniel Deronda*. And as for my own attitude—I had often seen through other people who insisted on telling the truth about a friend's shortcomings: I knew that *their* motives were usually suspect. But my own were as invisible to me as a cuttlefish becomes when it saturates the surrounding water with ink."

On Molly Keane:

In spite of liking her so much I have to consider my acquaintance with her as less than a friendship, properly speaking. Someone in her seventies with two daughters to love, a wide circle of acquaintances and an unusually large number of true and intimate friends of long standing,

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hasn't much room in her life for new close friends. I see that only too clearly now that I have overtaken the age Molly had reached when we met: one feels almost regretful on recognizing exceptionally congenial qualities in a newly met person, because one knows one no longer has the energy to clear an adequate space for them. When Molly and I exchanged letters about her work I was always tempted by her image in my mind to run on into gossip and jokes, while hers were quick scrawls about the matter under discussion; and enjoyable though our meetings were when she came to London, they didn't much advance the intimacy between us..."

"...Molly was alive to everything around her—to the daughters she worried about and adored, the people she knew, the events she remembered, her garden, the food she cooked, the problems and satisfactions of writing. And it was also the fact that day by day I became more aware of the qualities she kept hidden: her courage, her unselfishness—simply her goodness.

The chief difference, it seems to me, between the person who is lucky enough to possess the ability to create—whether with words or sound or pigment or wood or whatever—and those who haven't got it, is that the former react to experience directly and each in his own way, while the latter are less ready to trust their own responses and often prefer to make use of those generally agreed to be acceptable by their friends and relations. And while the former certainly include by far the greater proportion of individuals who would be difficult to live with, they also include a similarly large proportion of individuals who are exciting or disturbing or amusing or inspiring to know. And Molly, in addition to having charm and being good, was also a creator."

On the relaxation of the "grip on our trade of a particular caste":

"Two quintessentially 'caste' writers, one from the less pretentious end of the scale the other from its highest reaches, were Angela Thirkell and Virginia Woolf. Thirkell is embarrassing—I always knew that, but would have published her, given the chance, because she was so obviously a seller. And Woolf whom I revered in my youth, now seems almost more embarrassing because the claims made for her were so high. Not only did she belong to the caste, but she was unable to see beyond its boundaries—and that self-consciously 'beautiful' writing, all those adjectives—oh dear! Caste standards—it ought not to need saying—have no right to be considered sacrosanct."

One book leads to others

Wide Sargasso Sea, Jean Rhys
Good Morning, Midnight, Jean Rhys
Kindred Spirits, Jeremy Lewis
 Franz von Papen's memoirs
Into that Darkness, Gitta Sereny
Good Behaviour, Molly Keane
The Year in San Fernando, Michael Anthony
Grendel, John Gardner
Working Orders, Michael Irwin
Striker, Michael Irwin
Azadi, Chaman Nahal
The Pigeon Girl, Merce Rodoreda
Jamie Is My Heart's Desire, Alfred Chester
Here Be Dragons, Alfred Chester

Rating

9/10

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One important thing I learned from this book

“writers wrote [memoirs] , of course, but rarely did they become known for the memoir alone...Publishers and readers thought instead of ‘autobiographies’, in which intimate personal disclosure took a back seat to records of achievement. The boundary between the two forms is blurred and bridgeable: V.S. Pritchett’s wonderful account of his early life, *A Cab at the Door*, was described as ‘autobiography’ when it first appeared in 1968, whereas now it would have ‘memoir’ written all over it. Gore Vidal explained the difference in this way: ‘A memoir is how one remembers one’s own life, while an autobiography is history, requiring research, dates, facts double-checked’. His statement is arguable, but it has the virtue of simplicity. More important, by stressing subjective, unverified memory it permits the memoirist to misremember and, unconsciously or otherwise, to embroider and invent—an indulgence it has to be said, that Diana Athill has never been interested to take.” (From the Introduction by Ian Jack to *Life Class, The Selected Memoirs of Diana Athill* containing the Book Club selection *STET*.)