

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

On Spouses and (Small) Charges

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Jane Cornwell died on the 27th February 2021. She was 82. Her death didn't pass unnoticed; it was noted in many of the UK's daily newspapers, online and on the radio. Her name though, is unfamiliar to many. She was not a television, radio or digital personality; she was not an author, artist or actor; she was not a politician, broadcaster or social influencer, in fact, she was not one who sought the limelight at all, 'She declined interviews and stepped out of photographs – even family ones' (Cornwell 2021: 27). Jane operated behind the scenes, in a career spanning nearly 50 years. It began in the early 1970s when she met David Cornwell. The couple married in 1972 and their first collaboration appeared in 1974: *Tinker Tailor, Soldier, Spy*.

Jane was the wife of John Le Carré, David's pen name. Le Carré wrote over 30 novels, short stories and screenplays during a 60 year career. Jane was with him for much of this time, helping to bring his work to fruition. Ostensibly, she typed, turning Le Carré's handwritten manuscripts into legible text, returning it to him so he could work on it once more. Yet as their son observed, she was much more than a typist. She refined, reframed and 'trained the novels as they grew' (Cornwell 2021: 27), and the reason we see or hear little of her is that these editorial interventions were conducted in private and happened before the text ventured out of Le Carré's writingrealm (Doyle 1998).

As work in literary geography grows and evolves we have begun to know and hear more of this writingrealm. A particularly strong thread here has been a focus on reflective practice amongst writers, be they academics (Hawkins and Price 2018; Mundell 2018) or those working within more creative traditions (Williams 2013). Much of this, though, has explored relationships to landscape and the situatedness of place – to where places are, to what they contain and to what they evoke. In comparison, we still know little about the people in these

places, the social relationships sustained between them and the manner in which this shapes writing practice. This should, perhaps, not surprise us, for social relations are slippery things; they are hard to pin down, hard to quantify and, when you are in the midst of them, it is often hard to recognise their power and influence.

The past two years though have offered something of an opportunity. Since spring 2020 many of us have had to re-forged our working practices. Offices have been vacated as home-working has become more normalised, we may no longer mix with colleagues face-to-face and we have come to accept a range of curtailments to our freedom. We have become more conscious of our everyday geographies, of where we can go, with whom we can meet and how we should comport ourselves. A part of this, is that the already porous division between home and work, private and public has been breached further, and for many of us, our homes and the people, places and animate life within them have taken on a new significance. We have become more conscious of how we work, of the practices of our work and of the patterns and places where this work is most easily carried out. This consciousness often surfaces as a result of the out-of-placeness we feel, of the people and things not in their 'proper' place: children at home not at school; negotiating with spouses, partners or housemates for places or time to work; the interruption of doorbells or noisy neighbours; pets caterwauling round your feet or the distractions home life affords.

This out-of-placeness became very palpable when Jonathan Ashworth, a British politician, was Zoom-bombed by his children whilst conducting a BBC interview. It is this sense of the unusual and the challenges it presents that can make us ponder what 'works best' for us, of who we rely on to assist in the conduct of our work and how we manage the social relationships that compose our lives. Those who describe themselves as writers, whether creative or otherwise, are often familiar with home-working, but lockdowns and restrictions may well have complicated their practice. In complicating it, though, I hope it has also generated space to reflect on 'how' and with 'whom' this practice unfolds. Not every writer has an intimate working relationship akin to that of Jane and David Cornwell, but many may have partners or friends they invite to read early drafts, they may have children they rely on to be 'elsewhere' to enable them to physically get to work, they may have pets who require daily outings or other routines that are crucial to how they work. Lockdown has turned us inwards and attuned us to the domestic sphere in new ways, but it has also made us think about what we have taken for granted, the people, the places and the institutions that make our work possible (and impossible).

I have always enjoyed working from home. The capacity to multi-task, to get 'ahead' with domestic tasks – laundry on, dishwasher on –, the freedom to take breaks, go for walks and drink coffee when I feel the need and to know I'm unlikely to be interrupted as I think and write my way through ideas is delightful. Lockdown upended this, my space became a collecting bay for 'possible things' – yogurt pots, cardboard boxes, the things we usually recycle – these were deposited in my space for future building projects. My room became an invitation to play – my desk, never the tidiest, was rifled, my chair became a mountain for climbing, pens were lifted never to return and my computer was enlisted in 'secretarial' play. My working room is not tucked away in a far corner of the house, it is in the midst of things,

and while I have a door I can shut, it is not enough, for I can never be inattentive to the sounds of my children. If it is ‘my turn’ to work, my ears are alert to their shouts of joy or their cries of pain. I can’t shut them out, and nor do I want to, but it makes my practice tougher, slower and more spasmodic. Focus is more challenging, thoughts are harder to sustain and develop and distraction is just round the corner. Not to mention that ‘work’ often does not flow when my turn arises. So, my small charges complicate my practice, but they also inspire it. *Walking with goats and Gruffalo* would never have emerged without them, they have turned my attention to the sense of awe and wonder that is the world and they have demanded that I story-tell as we move along. As my space has presented them with invitations to play and innovate, their engagement with the world has presented me with more invitations for practice than I can accept. These invitations have taken me out of my routine, out of my usual way of doing things, and in leading me into new places they are ‘training’ me to work in new ways and to work collaboratively across generations and geography.

Like Jane Cornwell, my children (and lockdown) have refined and reframed how I work. They cannot (yet) read the words I write, but they direct me and challenge me in other ways: they are my collaborators. Carrie Mott and Daniel Cockayne (2017) have recently drawn attention to how ‘citation matters’, and to how we need to acknowledge the range of influences and inspirations that shape our work, if we are to unpack the politics of publication. It is impossible to quantify the influence of ‘others’ on our work, especially where this influence comes not in a textual or digital form, but it is impossible for me to escape or deny that my children have had a hand in the words you read.

Works Cited

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