

Topic Page: [Pym, Barbara \(1913 - 1980\)](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/pym_barbara_1913_1980)

Summary Article: **Pym, Barbara**

From *Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Literature: The Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Fiction*

The English novelist Barbara Pym was born in 1913 and was brought up in Oswestry, a small town in Shropshire. Her childhood was happy. The family was church-going and the Church of England, both in its inhibitions and absurdities, is a presence in all her work.

She attended a girls' boarding school and then went on to study English at Oxford. Her love of English poetry is evident in her work, which is rich in literary allusion. Her fiction is often concerned with women who are "educated, upper middle class, mildly scholarly" (Rossen 21), people on the fringes of academia. At Oxford she fell in love but was rejected. Though she continued to enjoy a busy romantic life, Pym at this time appears to have chosen the life of a single woman and author over marriage.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s she wrote a number of early unpublished works, some of which were published after her success was assured (*Crampton Hodnet*, 1985; *Civil to Strangers and Other Writings*, 1987). During World War II she was a Wren (member of the Women's Royal Naval Service). In 1946 she took employment at the International African Institute where she worked until her retirement in 1974. *Jane and Prudence* (1953) is set in a village but suburban London is more typically the setting of her novels. Anthropology increasingly interested her and from *Less than Angels* (1955) on the world of anthropology became almost as important to her fiction as the church.

Some Tame Gazelle (1950), a novel centered on a pair of comic spinsters based on herself and her sister, Hilary, was her first success and led to a succession of remarkable works in the 1950s. *Excellent Women* (1952), now a Penguin Classic – in which Mildred, the self-effacing spinster who is the narrator, declares, "I suppose an unmarried woman just over thirty, who lives alone, and has no apparent ties, must expect to find herself involved or interested in other people's business, and if she is also a clergyman's daughter then one might really say there is no hope for her" (5) – is widely regarded as her most successful work. It was followed by *Jane and Prudence*, a tale of two women, one married, the other not; *Less than Angels*; and *A Glass of Blessings* (1958), her *Emma*, in which the heroine is gently humbled after she falls for an obvious homosexual. Her heroines are enormously likable even when they become, as she intends, frustrating to others or themselves. Love in her work is an elusive necessity, yet women are often hesitant or subtly selfish, and men are overbearing and egotistical, but also weak. Her women are often in love but satisfactory resolutions for romance are hard to come by. What emerges in her work is a presentation of frequent deprivations, lack of appreciation, unsatisfied longings, triviality, unexpected rewards, hopefulness, poetry, and rich humor.

Her dialogue is deft and her character's voices subtly differentiated. Her ability to evoke the unspoken between characters is particularly adept. There is an uncomfortable conversation about shared bathrooms between a male and female tenant in *Excellent Women*, which may stand for her subtle evocation of the body as much as does her sexual humor (male characters in her works have such names as Rockingham or "Rocky," Fabian Driver, Piers Longridge, and Everard Bone).

Though she continued writing, Pym failed to find a publisher between 1963 and 1977. She was then identified by Lord David Cecil and the poet Philip Larkin as the most underrated writer of the century. She went on to enjoy a revival and a correspondence and friendship with Larkin, whose influence on her

later work is clear. She could now publish *Quartet in Autumn* (1977), a touching and compassionate study of four retirees adrift in London, and *The Sweet Dove Died* (1978), a harsher depiction of contemporary sexual life. Her last novel, *A Few Green Leaves* (1980), set in the village where she lived in her retirement, is a gentle, saddened work which has been said to be about “the passing of the gentry as an influence on local lives” (Shulz 116). She died from cancer in 1980.

Pym's legacy lies in her achievement in proving that the novel of the comedy of manners – the novel in the tradition of Jane Austen and Trollope's Barchester novels – was relevant to modern English life. Her sensitivity to domestic life and particularly to the lives of women has been echoed in the fiction of a number of her contemporaries. What Larkin called her “plangent qualities” and her fine comedy are likely to ensure a future for her work.

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MICHAEL COTSELL

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