

## HILARY MANTEL

### The novelist at home on Bastille Day.

*(Europe.org)*

As a teenager in the north of England, Hilary Mantel dreamed of moving not to London or Paris, but to Budleigh Salterton. It seemed to her on her first visit, as she stood on the cliffs and gazing down on its white houses, that there was something Mediterranean about the Devon town. This was an unusual reaction to such a quintessentially English place; but earlier this year, at the age of 58, she realised her ambition. She and her husband now live in an extraordinarily neat penthouse apartment with a glorious view across the beach to the sea.

It is hard to tempt her away from it: indeed, following last year's victory in the Man Booker Prize and two spells in hospital, she has accepted only two public engagements for the whole of 2011. 'The Booker has been nothing but good for me,' she says, 'but there are so many invitations on the back of it that you could really never write another book again.'

As a young woman she taught in Botswana (where her husband was working as a geologist), and I would guess that she made an ideal schoolmistress – not because there is anything bossy about her, but because she radiates warmth and enthusiasm. Her first concern when we meet is whether I have had something to eat on the train; the day after our interview she emails me to apologise for being too talkative: 'Now I am recovering my health I am like a genie corked up in a bottle and striving to be out.'

Since our rendezvous falls on Bastille Day, we begin by discussing her first novel, *A Place of Greater Safety*. Mantel's interest in the French Revolution stems from her history O-level course: 'For teenagers, the idea of sudden transformation – for fairly obvious reasons – is extremely interesting; and the idea of rising up against a despotic regime. At that age, you naturally

understand Revolution; whereas when you get older, you have to work intellectually to understand it.'

She regrets having read law rather than history at university, and is anxious that her novels should be taken seriously by historians. She found herself writing a fictional account of the Revolution 'because I had no authority to write anything else'. The first draft, written in her twenties, took five years ('it consumed my youth in a way'); then she was diagnosed with the endometriosis which has overshadowed her life, a publisher lost part of her enormous manuscript (the book runs to 871 pages in paperback), and the project seemed best shelved. Not until thirteen years later was *A Place of Greater Safety* published, winning the *Sunday Express* Book of the Year Award.

She believes the delay was probably for the best: 'I don't think people would have known what to make of it, or me. Even in my thirties it was regarded as an outrageously ambitious enterprise.' One thing that surprised her was the degree of ignorance that reviewers showed about the French Revolution: 'I suppose over the years I've lost sight of the Anglo-centric view of history. To the average English reader the Revolution was a comparatively obscure subject; to me it was the central subject in the world.'

Does she then consider herself a political writer? 'Yes: intensely political. The theme of revolution, in overt or disguised forms, pops up again and again in my books – whether it's a question of personal transformation or the transformation in society. The defining question in the French Revolution is "What are human rights, and who should have them? Do they extend to women and slaves?" That's what I've been preoccupied with.'

A second preoccupation is 'history and how we construct it – how we memorialise the dead. The old cliché about history being written by the winners is more or less my motto: I'm always trying to imagine what it would be like if it could be written by someone else. Those are undying, unchanging political themes, but I try to find different contexts in which to explore them.'

She starts writing the moment she wakes up in the morning: ‘It might be the remnants of a dream, or a plan for that day. What it does is break your resistance to writing: you cannot say, “I cannot do it,” because you’ve already done it when you were too doopey to say no.’

As her study attests, she is exceptionally well organised: besides a whiteboard with notes for her new novel – a sequel to *Wolf Hall* – there are files on each chapter (‘I’ve got all sorts of scenes and bits of dialogue already written’), on characters and sixteenth-century life (‘Ideas and Objects’, ‘Customs and Manners’), and on matters of historical dispute. She is already planning its successor (a novel set in Africa in the 1970s and 1980s) and the book after that – a non-fiction study of the Polish playwright Stanisława Przybyłowska, ‘who locked herself away and starved herself to death in the quest to write the perfect play about the French Revolution’.

Though Mantel does a great deal of research, she is careful not to weigh her books down with detail. ‘Only the tip of the iceberg is on the page. I hate those historical novels where people are always getting dressed so that the author can show off their knowledge of costume. You have to be so comfortable in your chosen world that you take all that for granted.’

One consequence of her Booker Prize success has been an explosion of overseas interest in her work. ‘From my translation record in Europe being rather patchy, *Wolf Hall* has gone into 31 languages: I just got my Lithuanian contract this morning.’ She is particularly pleased that *A Place of Greater Safety* is to be translated into German: ‘The first time I read from it in public was in Leipzig, in a students’ club about 18 months after the Wall came down – and they got it, they really did.’ How *Wolf Hall* will go down in China and Vietnam she is less sure: ‘but I guess any country that’s had warlords understands it. And I think what does work anywhere in the world is stories that have a mythic air. People understand about the man with six wives who keeps killing them, because that’s Bluebeard.’

She has never thought of herself as an English writer. ‘Growing up in the north, from an Irish Catholic family, Englishness seemed somewhere else; and when you saw pictures of thatched cottages and hollyhocks and Cotswold stone, you thought, “That is England” – but you didn’t think, “That’s where I live.” I continued to feel that I was a northern writer, and maybe I could become a European writer.

‘But it just shows how little you know, because ten years on from ranting about this to anyone who would listen, I really undertook *Wolf Hall* as an exploration of the roots of English nationalism, writing about a time when England pulled away from a European identity – although Thomas Cromwell, paradoxically, was a thorough European. And then look what I’ve done: I’ve come down here to live in the middle of abundant Englishness, almost caricature. So I don’t know what that’s about – maybe in ten years I’ll be able to tell you. But I’m not giving up on being a European.’