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The Triumph of Fay Weldon

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Kehua!

by Fay Weldon
Europa, 316 pp., \$17.00 (paper)

Praxis

by Fay Weldon
Penguin, 251 pp., \$15.00 (paper)

Down Among the Women

by Fay Weldon
Academy Chicago, 216 pp., \$14.00 (paper)

Auto da Fay: A Memoir

by Fay Weldon
Grove, 366 pp., \$14.00 (paper)

Splitting

by Fay Weldon
Atlantic Monthly Press, 246 pp., \$12.00 (paper)

The Bulgari Connection

by Fay Weldon
Grove, 190 pp., \$12.00 (paper)

She May Not Leave

by Fay Weldon
Grove, 284 pp., \$13.00 (paper)

Long Live the King

by Fay Weldon
St. Martin's, 344 pp., \$14.99 (paper)

The New Countess

by Fay Weldon
St. Martin's, 327 pp., \$25.99

The image of an English woman writer of the first

rank, for well over a hundred years, has been of a sensitive, well-bred, well-read person who is nevertheless somewhat nervous and unhappy, prone to mental and physical ailments and in extreme cases to self-destruction. Though she feels deeply, this woman's erotic life is limited or shadowed in some way; she is seldom happily married, and probably has no children.

Yet the first famous portrayal of a great woman storyteller in English literature is almost exactly the opposite of this stereotype. Geoffrey Chaucer's Wife of Bath is a cheerful, strong-willed, eminently sane matron who has had five husbands as well as what Chaucer discreetly calls "other company in youth." In a patriarchal world, she has managed to share power with men and make them and herself happy.

In real life, the nearest thing in contemporary Britain to the Wife of Bath as a storyteller is Fay Weldon. She shares with her predecessor a strong personal voice—practical, funny, wise—and not only physical appearance but multiple marriages. Many of the stories she tells have the moral of the Wife of Bath's Tale: that what women want is their own way. If they get it, they will make men happy; if not, not.

Fay Weldon's early novels were hailed as brilliant feminist fiction. From *The Fat Woman's Joke* (1967) to *Praxis* (1978), they were (among many other things) stories about the difficulties and prejudices women had faced over the years. The characters in these novels are treated as second-class citizens, exploited and ill-paid by their employers, scorned and ill-used by the men they love, and defamed by the general public. *Down Among the Women* (1971) for instance, shows, as Finuala Dowling in her excellent early critical study puts it, how "women acquire power through association with one another, and lose it through association with men."^{*} In *Praxis* the heroine was deliberately conceived as in a literal sense everything misogynists have accused women of being, and yet in the end clearly admirable:

I went through all the bad words women are called and made her these: whore, adulteress, murderess, incestuous, thief, lecher.

Weldon also did all she could to make sure that this novel was not seen as just an entertainment:

In *Praxis* I tried to remove my remarks from the narrative. Though it's part of my



Paul Popper/Popperfoto/Getty Images

Fay Weldon, circa 1985

pleasure to direct myself to the reader.... I also cut out most of the funny lines, so it was taken more seriously.

Fay Weldon knew about the names women can be called and the troubles they can face from personal experience. When she was a child in New Zealand her father more or less deserted her mother, who had to scramble and beg from relatives to support herself and her two daughters. Later, though Weldon had graduated from St. Andrews University, she could not find an office job that paid enough to live on, and had to work as a waitress and artist's model. She became involved with a young folk singer and became pregnant, but though he offered to marry her, she refused, and she also refused to have an abortion.

At twenty-five, unable to both take care of and financially support a small child, she married a man twice her age who, it turned out, would not sleep with her; instead he wanted her to sell herself to other men and tell him about the experience afterward. He also would not let her take a daytime job, but encouraged her to work at night as a hostess in a strip club, where she learned that "it wasn't beauty men were after but availability, and their own certainty of not being rejected or humiliated."

As soon as her son was old enough for school, Fay Weldon left her creepy husband. She got a job in advertising, and turned out to be very good at it—she invented "Go to Work on an Egg" and "Unzip a Banana!" (Her most famous slogan, "Vodka Gets You Drunker Quicker," was finally never used.) At this time English advertising firms deliberately hired literary types: poets were thought to make especially good copywriters, and they usually needed the money, as did Fay Weldon. "I could still not afford to have any moral qualms about what I was doing for a living," she remarks in her autobiography, *Auto da Fay* (2002).

An auto-da-fé, or "act of faith," was the Spanish Inquisition's infamous ritual of confession and penance, sometimes followed by a public execution by fire. Weldon's book is a fascinating, occasionally shocking account of her own life up to the age of thirty-seven, when she began to write full time—one of many freely chosen Acts of Fay. She does not spare either herself or most of the people she has known, some of whom may have wished that this confession had ended with, or better yet been preceded by, a public burning.

Though Fay Weldon's early novels were widely admired, after a while the chorus of praise diminished. Many people want to be writers, and no wonder. It is deeply satisfying to tell stories and to make your opinions and observations known—to be noticed and admired. Unfortunately, some do not have the necessary talent or luck. Others, though gifted, just get lost in the crowd.

The main problem is one of supply and demand. If you are a painter or a musician, there will always be a local call for your skills. In every large town there are people who like

music and want to attend live concerts; there are people who like art, and want a real painting to go over their sitting-room sofa. Local musicians and artists can therefore find audiences and patrons. If the population increases, there will be more potential concertgoers and more sofas, and thus work for more musicians and artists.

There are now over three hundred college writing programs in the United States. But no matter how much the population increases, people will not need more writers: they can all read the same books, in multiple copies. As a result of this imbalance, only about one percent of graduates from writing programs go on to write for a living, whereas 90 percent of medical school graduates become self-supporting doctors.

It is natural to be annoyed by well-known writers. Why should they, and not I, be rewarded for telling stories, relating their experiences, and talking about things that interest them? The only way many of us can forgive them for their talent and luck is to think that they are really miserable and afflicted people. It is good if a writer had a horrible childhood, was deeply unlucky in love, drank or took drugs, committed suicide, or died young of an unpleasant disease. It is also useful to think that for this person the “creative process” was painful, even agonizing, that they suffered from writer’s block, or were misunderstood and mistreated by their friends and family. If the work of these unfortunate persons was, besides, completely neglected and/or rejected while they were alive, that is best of all. Then we can, sometimes almost completely, forgive them.

When Fay Weldon first became known for novels about poor, overworked, and underloved young women who had been damaged and undervalued in a callous, male-dominated society, she was celebrated and admired. Like her heroines, she too had been cheated and mistreated and exploited. But as time passed, she became rich and famous, the author of many best-selling novels and prize-winning TV dramas, married to a good-looking and successful antique dealer and the mother of four attractive sons, with a beautiful house in the country. Worst of all, she openly declared that she was very happy, and that for her writing was fun. As a natural result, some people began to care less for her, and to put it about that she was not really a very good writer. She wrote too much, and too easily; she was having too good a time. She was popular, maybe, but wasn’t she rather shallow and commercial?

In 1991, however, things went wrong for Fay Weldon: her husband of thirty years, Ron Weldon, left her for a New Age therapist who compared his astrological chart with Fay’s and declared that they were very bad for each other; among other things, Fay’s planets were blocking Ron’s artistic creativity. Luckily, this woman said, there was someone nearby whose chart was a perfect fit with his—the therapist herself.

As this news leaked out, Fay Weldon’s work began to be taken more seriously again: her revenge novel, *Affliction* (1993), was widely praised, and *Splitting* (1995), in

which a divorced woman develops multiple and often miserable personalities, was a critical success. But Weldon did not remain a pitiable and admirable figure for long. Eight hours before her divorce from Ron Weldon became final he dropped dead of a heart attack. She was now rich and free: she kept her beautiful country house, married an attractive poet fifteen years younger than herself, and went on writing.

Instead of learning from past experience and keeping a low profile, Fay Weldon began telling interviewers how happy she was and how much she enjoyed writing. Then, in 2001, she did something that for a while ruined her reputation as a serious writer: she accepted £18,000 (nearly \$30,000 at today's rates) from the fashionable jeweler Bulgari for a novel in which the company's products would be mentioned at least twelve times. Not only did she agree to the deal, she came up with an amusing story in which the word "Bulgari" appears thirty-three times, including the title: *The Bulgari Connection*.

According to Samuel Johnson, "no man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money." Apparently the Bulgari deal sounded like a good idea at the time; but for Weldon's literary career it was a mistake. Especially, some said, when the payment was so small compared with the probable publisher's advance for a novelist of her reputation. Some critics even made references to the famous, perhaps apocryphal anecdote attributed to, among many others, George Bernard Shaw. According to this story, Shaw asked a society woman if she would sleep with him for five million pounds. She replied: "My goodness... Well, I suppose...we would have to discuss terms, of course..." He then asked if she would sleep with him for five pounds. Indignantly, she exclaimed, "Mr. Shaw, what kind of woman do you think I am?" "Madam," he said, "we've already established that. Now we are just haggling about the price."

Today Samuel Johnson has been proved wrong: a lot of intelligent and talented people not only write, or blog, for little or nothing, but pay to have their books printed, distributed, and publicized. For most of them, according to an informal survey I made last week, product placement is bad enough in film and television: in fiction, it is reprehensible. It is definitely not something any sensitive English lady writer would do.

But of course, as some of her critics pointed out, Fay Weldon is not really English. Though she was born near Manchester, she and her mother and sister moved to New Zealand before Fay was a year old, and stayed until after her fourteenth birthday. She was what might be called a Wild Colonial Girl, willful, vulgar, and free, so what could you expect? Especially since she did not apologize: instead, in her autobiography, which appeared in 2002, the year after *The Bulgari Connection*, she wrote, perhaps defiantly: "I have always had...what others see as low tastes. I like blockbusters out of Hollywood, thrillers, gold taps, country music,...and Coca-Cola." She also tells the story of a nightmare she had at the age of six, in which she was pursued by a vending machine, as if daring readers to say that apparently it had caught her.

In any case, Fay Weldon did not reform, but went on writing novels that were full of dramatic events and fun to read, and in which her intelligence was sometimes disguised by a casual, throwaway manner. As Finuala Dowling remarks, much of Weldon's work is actually metafiction. "Weldon herself conflates autobiography, biography, and literary criticism," and often speaks directly to her readers in the first person—tacitly admitting that what they are reading is an invented product. She also gives them good advice.

Fay Weldon's novels often have a narrator who resembles the author herself. In *She May Not Leave* (2005), for instance, the story is told partly by the heroine's grandmother, Frances, who is seventy-two—the same age Fay Weldon would have been when this book was written. It relates the tale of a perfect au pair, who comes to take care of the heroine Hattie's new baby so that she can go back to work, and gradually takes over Hattie's child, partner, and house. Whenever Frances is speaking the narrative is interrupted by her comments. Frances has a lot to say about contemporary life, which in her view is not necessarily an improvement on the past:

News of the outside world flows like chlorinated water from radio and television: houses are better warmed and food cupboards more easily filled, but those who live in them are as much as ever at the mercy of employers and...rules of current cultural etiquette....

Not only is there a warning in the title, *She May Not Leave*, the book is full of useful advice of all sorts from Frances, always casually thrown off. "People are as moral as they can afford to be, no more nor less." "Guilt is to the soul as pain is to the body, a warning that harm is being done." "In nature there is one carnivore to eleven herbivores and it's just your bad luck when you run into a carnivore."

Frances's attitude toward men is cool and practical. Essentially they are another species, which women cannot help but find attractive but should not trust too far. "Most men behave well enough when they are in a position of authority and responsibility," and it is useful and sometimes wonderful to have one around, but counterproductive to treat him too well. Of one of her daughter's coworkers who has lost her married lover, she remarks merely, "She'd made the mistake of telling him she loved him and that drove men away, everyone knew except her, apparently." Men, in Frances's view, "want what other men have, not what they can have for the asking."



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Drawing by Edward Gorey

Whether she is speaking as the author or as an imagined character, Fay Weldon's tone is frank, direct, and usually good-natured, but the stories she tells are not necessarily happy ones. Divorce, infidelity, desertion, poverty, and loss are common in her fiction; almost no one can always be trusted. Help can come, often from an unexpected quarter, but usually when life trips you up and knocks you down, you just have to pick yourself up and carry on, while doing your best to enjoy any good things that come your way.

Fay Weldon's latest project has been a trilogy of novels set in the early years of the twentieth century, featuring an aristocratic family and their servants. Weldon knows this territory well; as a teenager she lived in the basement of a London mansion where her mother worked as a housekeeper, and she had already drawn on this experience to write the first episode of *Upstairs, Downstairs. Habits of the House* and its two sequels have a mixed cast, some of whom are well-known historical figures and others not. (This combination of real and invented characters was common in the nineteenth century and has been revived recently by many well-known and respected authors, including E.L. Doctorow, David Lodge, Colm Tóibín, and Lee Smith.)

Though well-researched and full of energetic invention, Fay Weldon's historical novels are obvious potboilers, hot and commercially tasty but unlikely to attract literary readers. They will be more interested in her latest contemporary novel, *Kehua!*, which is both the story of a scatty and dangerously impulsive young woman called Scarlet and a fascinating ongoing account of what it was like to write this novel. Though presented as just a casual good read, it is in fact a complex example of metafiction.

In *Kehua!* we move from a narrator who pretends to be one of the characters but resembles the author to a narrator who pretends to be the author herself. Chapters of Scarlet's adventures alternate with chapters in which someone called Your Writer speaks directly to the reader about her problems as an author and her real life. The two narratives run simultaneously, mirroring and contradicting each other.

The novel is promisingly announced on page one as a "tale of murder, adultery, incest, ghosts, redemption and remorse." It also features a collection of native Maori supernatural beings, notably the *kehua*, "wandering spirits of the homeless dead," who resemble large ragged gray and black fruit bats and "flap around on the edges of one's vision...." When aroused they rub their wings together, making "a clattering chattering sound." They are single-mindedly devoted to their task, which is to guard the *hapu*, or kinship group, and herd them together. When members of the *hapu* leave New Zealand, the *kehua* accompany them, sometimes by stowing away in the overhead compartments of planes. Arriving at their destination, the *kehua* hang from trees or the roofs of buildings near their targets.

When the story starts, they are roosting in a small palm tree in the London apartment

where Scarlet has lived for six years with Louis. He runs a design company, and is described as “a thoroughly reasonable, thoughtful and considerate person.” But Scarlet is bored, and has fallen for Jackson, the narcissistic star of a popular vampire film series. Suddenly it seems to her that “Louis could be seen by others not as an alpha male but as a pretentious wanker. At least Jackson had the respect of a lot of howling, enthusiastic, underdressed girls.” All this, of course, upsets the *kehua*.

The metafictional aspect of the novel is complicated by the fact that Scarlet’s grandmother Beverley has so much in common both with Fay Weldon, and with Your Writer. She grew up in New Zealand, she has been married three times, and she lives in a beautiful old house in the country. Your Writer describes her as a “wise old owl,” and remarks that “she takes a pleasure in rash action, and always has.... She will do anything for a bit of excitement.” As it happens, these are character traits that Fay Weldon has already attributed to herself in her autobiography.

In the Your Writer sections of *Kehua!* the narrator talks to us in a casual, friendly way about her chosen occupation: “Some novels...charge along like a river in flood; others spread sideways and lie calmly over neighboring fields. This is one of the latter.” She also speaks of her characters as if they were close acquaintances. This is a technique that was common in nineteenth-century fiction, and the effect here, just as with Trollope or George Eliot, is to make Scarlet and everyone else in the book seem more rather than less real. But Your Writer also reminds us that they do not in fact exist. “Novels can no longer sit on shelves and pretend to be reality,” she insists; “they are not, they are inventions.”

At first, Your Writer is scornful of the assertion of more romantic authors that they are not in total control of their stories. “Those writers who claim that their characters take off on their own are irresponsible,” she says. “Their personages may escape, but they become lawless and inconsequential.” Later, though, Your Writer contradicts herself. She acknowledges something that many authors of fiction have felt: that in some ways our stories are not under our conscious control. She tells us that as time passes, “I get less real, these characters get more real.” She has “the sensation...that you don’t exactly write novels—you simply unfold them, or fish them up from a well.” Halfway through the story she remarks, “At five o’clock this morning I was startled awake by the clear realization of what was going to happen at the end of the book.” Essentially, Your Writer is herself a *kehua*, watching over members of a kinship group and following them about, making “a clattering chattering sound” that might be compared to that of a typewriter or a computer keyboard.

While Scarlet’s difficult life continues, Your Writer is also having unsettling experiences. An old friend who has become a New Age clairvoyant comes to call and claims that the house is full of poltergeists and bloodstains. A dog who may not exist crosses the lawn in front of the window, and the basement of Your Writer’s house, where she is working,

begins to seem haunted by servants from the past. She hears noises that suggest someone in the old kitchen next door is ironing and sweeping the grate; soon she begins to believe that this person is a nineteenth-century kitchen maid named Mavis. Later she becomes aware of the ghostly aural presence of a laundress and a cook, and finally of the former owner of the house who descends the stairs to the kitchen to seduce Mavis. At the same time, the characters in the novel she is writing begin to operate as ghosts, doing or saying things she hasn't consciously planned.

Though critics have spoken of Fay Weldon as someone who has an outstanding gift for storytelling but no great intelligence or education, she is clearly extremely smart and knows exactly what she is doing. Now and then she drops hints that reveal this: for example, the business of Scarlet's partner Louis is called MetaFashion.

Kehua! is not only a good story and lot of fun to read, it is a remarkable account of what it's like to write a novel by someone who's been doing this for over fifty years. Of course, Your Writer is not really Fay Weldon, but another metafictional invention, whose house and husband have different names from those of the author. Still, what she says about the process of writing a novel seems authentic, and matches experiences that Your Reviewer, who is perhaps not really Alison Lurie, has had: "How they're crowding around me now, these characters," she says at the end of the book. "They too want to get out of here." And still later: "The lights went on again and I wrote The End and closed the document and shut the laptop and went up the worn stone steps, and left them all to it, ghosts and characters alike."

* *Fay Weldon's Fiction* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1998). ↵