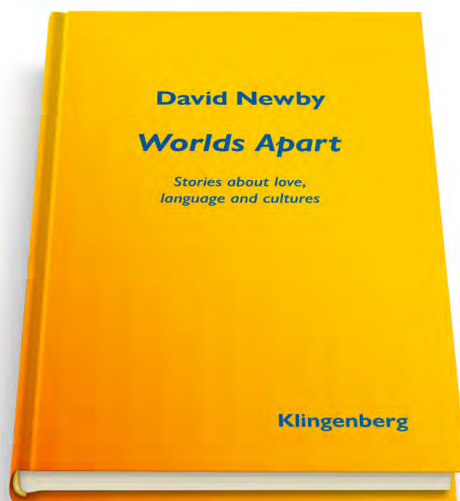


Extracts from the stories



David Newby
Worlds Apart
Stories about love, language and cultures
ISBN 978-3-903284-00-5



© 2018
Verlag Klingenberg Graz

David Newby
Worlds Apart

*Stories about love,
language and cultures*

Verlag Klingenberg

Contents

The Bird's Trilogy:	
Teaching Birds to Talk	7
Teaching Birds to Sing	13
Teaching Birds to Fly	21
Culture Lovers	31
Carol's Christmas	71
Joy of Man's Desiring	87
Framing	151
The Reading Circle	165

Teaching Birds to Talk

I've got this budgerigar at home. Name's Penny. And she's a talker. They say that female budgerigars can't talk. But this one can. Just like a woman. 'My name's Penny,' she'll say, 'What's yours?' And lots of other things besides. It took me months to teach her. When I think of the hours I've sat by that cage repeating over and over again: 'My name's Penny, my name's Penny' till I was blue in the face. For a long time she just used to sit there staring at me as if to say: 'Tha's bonkers, lad!' That's what me two mates Arnold and Terry in the *Pig in the Poke* used to say too.

'Tha's bonkers, Cyril! Female budgies don't talk. Everyone knows that.'

Then one day – I can remember it as clear as a bell – I was just putting me boots on to go off to the *Pig in the Poke*, when suddenly she shouts out: 'My name's Penny – what's yours? My name's Penny – what's yours?' over and over again as if her very life depended on it. Do you know, I was so happy when I heard that, I nearly burst into tears. I don't think I've ever been so happy in my life. Well, perhaps the first few weeks with Natalya. But that's all water under the bridge now.

Course it's not really talking. Just sounds. At least that's what Natalya used to say. I wonder if she knows what she's saying. I wonder if birds can think. Sometimes I just sit next to her cage gazing at her for hours and she gazes at me and I think, 'I wonder

Worlds Apart

what she's thinking.' 'Penny for your thoughts, Penny.' That's what I say to her. And she says it back to me: 'Penny for your thoughts, Penny.' I suppose if it was real talking, she'd say 'Penny for your thoughts, Cyril.'

I made no secret of the fact that I got Natalya from a marriage bureau. The owner had got the photos all laid out in neat little rows on his desk. Reminded me of the rows of bird cages it did, when I went to buy Penny. Come to think of it, he probably said more or less what the pet shop owner said.

'Now Mr Stanley, which of these young ladies takes your fancy?' It was hard to tell. I mean, it wasn't just me fancy she was going to take, it was the rest of me life, half of me bungalow, half of me bathroom, half of me bed. She was going to be coming with me to the saloon bar of the *Pig in the Poke*. It was much more than me fancy.

'It's hard to say from just a photo,' I said. 'This one looks presentable enough, but I'd like to have a chat with her.'

'Ah, Mr Stanley,' he said, 'a chat would cause something of a problem with regard to her present location. At this precise moment in time she is not residing in the immediate vicinity.'

'You mean, she's not in Yorkshire?' I said.

'No,' he replied, 'she's not in Yorkshire, she's in Minsk.'

'Where's Minsk?' I said.

'Minsk! You don't know Minsk! Minsk is but a short plane ride from Leeds Airport.'

And Leeds Airport is but a short car ride from my bungalow. But the marriage bureau man didn't want me to fetch her in person. Said he would deliver her to my door. We'd done all the paper work and the financial aspects the night before so when he brought Natalya, he dropped her at the garden gate with her belongings and

Culture Lovers

Deep down, in his heart of hearts, Professor Heinrich Strasser did not really like the English.

Not that he would ever betray this sentiment overtly, of course. He would stand to attention with vicarious pride (and Prussian posture) on the infrequent occasions when *God Save the Queen* was struck up. He would argue with eloquent conviction the literary superiority of Shakespeare over Goethe. He would appear unable to quell the tears of mirth which cascaded down his cheeks as Benny Hill launched into yet another litany of *single entendres*. To any passing observer, of whom there were many – students, visiting academics, fellow-members of the German-British Society – he seemed steadfastly to wear his osmotically acquired Englishness on his smartly suited sleeve.

Yet somewhere in the impenetrable grey-mattered recesses of his highly accomplished brain had been hatched, he knew not when, a tiny maggot of cultural antipathy, which as the years had gone by and the troubled waters of life had washed against Professor Strasser's crumbling bridge, had grown into a sizeable, wriggling worm of loathing.

For most people, this worm would have caused few problems. After all, the odium of otherness is not uncommon to the human race. Yet since Professor Strasser was Head of the English Department at the German University of Darmfurt, which in order to

Worlds Apart

justify its existence and to attract European Union cash, was currently marketing and branding itself under the slogan '*Deutschlands Multi-Kulti-Uni!*', this steadily increasing aversion was the cause of some professional soul-searching and indeed personal *angst*. At the end of the day – to use an expression he never would himself – there was no denying the fact that, like an agnostic priest, a dyslexic proof reader, an agoraphobic farmer, Heinrich Strasser had a problem.

To be fair, he did not dislike all of the English. He liked George Bernhard Shaw, despite the fact that he was a socialist; he revered Oscar Wilde, despite the fact that he was a homosexual; he veritably adored Jane Austen, despite – and perhaps because of – the fact that she was a woman, a woman who in his view toed the domesticity and uxorial duty line, whatever feisty feminists proclaimed at conferences. No, he had nothing against the English as such, at least, not against those long dead, safely locked away in their fiction-lined coffins and at the mercy of a literary critic like himself, who could post-mortem them at his post-modern will. It was the warm breath of the unpredictable living, the animated native, that caused him discomfort and disgust.

Carol's Christmas



*Deck the halls with boughs of holly,
Fa la la la la, la la la la,
Tis the season to be jolly,
Fa la la la la, la la la la,
Don we now our gay apparel,
Fa la la la la, la la la la,
Troll the ancient yuletide carol,
Fa la la la la la ♪ ♪*

'Deck the halls with boughs of holly, fa-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la, Tis the season to be jolly, fa-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la,' sang Frederick Fellows rumbustiously at the top of his voice. Like someone permanently wearing headphones, he was unaware that his own perception of his singing was at odds with both his aptitude and its amplitude, which frequently sent shock waves through the triple glazing of whatever room he happened to be singing in. Having a self-image which was coated in a thick layer of psychological hyperbole, when singing Christmas carols he imagined himself as Frederico, the fourth tenor, on a Viennese stage.

However discordant the melody may have been, at least the words of his song were in accordance with his present activity, which found him, one week before Christmas Day, straddling the top rungs of an aluminium step ladder, his arms stretching upwards

Worlds Apart

clasping, if not a bough, then a plastic clump of replica holly, which he had bought that morning from *Tesco*, and which was hardly to be distinguished from the real thing except for its over-abundance of berries. This he was attaching to the ornate candelabra-style light hanging from the ceiling of the entrance hall of his mock-Georgian detached house. For Frederick, who had a generally child-like nature especially concerning matters festive, it was indeed the season to be jolly and jolly was exactly what he was. Well, except for one small detail, but we'll come back to that later.

*In the bleak mid-winter
Frosty wind made moan,
Earth stood hard as iron,
Water like a stone;
Snow had fallen, snow on snow,
Snow on snow,
In the bleak mid-winter
Long ago.*

THE STORY – PART 1

SETTING THE SCENES – PRE-MORTEM

1.1. The
pastoral
novel – first
paragraph

It was a beautiful day. The sun was shining and the birds were singing. The sheep were bleating and the cattle lowing. The dogs were slumbering and the cats stretching. Caterpillars were squeezing from pupae and tadpoles were acquiring limbs. Bumble bees were buzzing around blooming buttercups and wasps were wefting and warping their way along willow hedges. Ploughmen were homeward plodding their weary ways. And rambling roses were meandering macaroni-like around garden gates.



1.2. The
novelist

The novelist who was writing these words was sitting at the desk of his study penning the first paragraph of his latest novel. Like his other novels, it was to be set in a Dorset country village and would be a bit of Thomas Hardy with touches of Joanna Trollope: something to suit all tastes. It was to begin with some pastoral scene-setting par excellence. But he was finding it difficult to hold back the clichés (and the alliteration).

1.3. The
novelist's
wife

Meanwhile his wife was wifing her way around his study in a distracting, wifely way ...