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Lit

A WELL-READ ONLINE COMMUNITY

General Questions for Fiction

I couldn't find specific questions for this book, so...

MB

Use our general fiction questions to get your book club discussions off to a good start. They're basic but smart.

We feel smarter using your questions. They help us get to the heart of the book!

Gert Stein and Alice B. Toklas -- Paris, France

1. How did you **experience** the book? Were you engaged immediately, or did it take you a while to "get into it"? How did you feel reading it—amused, sad, disturbed, confused, bored...?

2. Describe the main **characters**—personality traits, motivations, inner qualities.
   - Why do characters do what they do?
   - Are their actions justified?
   - Describe the dynamics between characters (in a marriage, family, or friendship).
   - How has the past shaped their lives?
   - Do you admire or disapprove of them?
   - Do they remind you of people you know?

3. Do the main **characters change** by the end of the book? Do they grow or mature? Do they learn something about themselves and how the world works?

4. Is the **plot** engaging—does the story interest you? Is this a plot-driven book: a fast-paced page-turner? Or does the story unfold slowly with a focus on character development? Were you surprised by the plot's complications? Or did you find it predictable, even formulaic?

5. Talk about the book's **structure**. Is it a continuous story...or interlocking short stories? Does the time-line more forward chronologically...or back and forth between past and present? Does the author use a single viewpoint or shifting viewpoints? Why might the author have choosen to tell the story the way he or she did—and what difference does it make in the way you read or understand it?

6. What main ideas—**themes**—does the author explore? (Consider the title, often a clue to a theme.) Does the author use **symbols** to reinforce the main ideas? (See our free LitCourses on both Symbol and Theme.)

7. What **passages** strike you as insightful, even profound? Perhaps a bit of dialog that's funny or poignant or that encapsulates a character? Maybe there's a particular comment that states the book's thematic concerns?

8. Is the **ending** satisfying? If so, why? If not, why not...and how would you change it?

9. If you could ask the **author** a question, what would you ask? Have you read other books by the same author? If so how does this book compare. If not, does this book inspire you to read others?

10. Has this novel **changed you**—broadened your perspective? Have you learned something new or been exposed to different ideas about people or a certain part of the world?

Farmington Hills - Main

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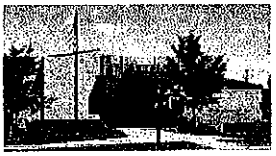

Farmington - Branch

Add a review; Add a review

Author: Bainbridge, Beryl/ West, Timothy (NRT)
Title: The Girl in the Polka Dot Dress
Publisher, Date: Chivers Audio Books 2011
Format: Audio Books, Sound Recording, Book
ISBN 0792780507
Polaris CN 422364

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Author Notes

Trade Reviews

Library Journal Review

In this posthumous novel, British author Bainbridge paints a hypothetical picture of what might have been happening in 1968 America amid the turmoil of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy. Through young English Rose and her unlikely companion, known to her as Washington Harold, the reader is taken on a cross-country trip in search of the elusive Dr. Wheeler, an acquaintance of both. Along the way, the pair always seem one step behind their mysterious quarry and meet a host of interesting characters who all have a link to this man. Rose wants to find Dr. Wheeler because he is the one stable and bright spot from her troubled childhood. Washington's reasons for finding Dr. Wheeler do not become clear until a surprise ending. All aspects of this novel come together in an exciting and curious encounter with presidential candidate Robert Kennedy. VERDICT Both vivid and dark, this page-turner is sure to be sought after by both historical fiction and mystery lovers. Highly recommended.-Leann Restaino, Girard, OH (c) Copyright 2011. Library Journals LLC, a wholly owned subsidiary of Media Source, Inc. No redistribution permitted.

Publishers Weekly Review

In Bainbridge's (1932-2010) final, unfinished novel, she transports readers to the spring of 1968. In this era of high-profile assassinations Rose, a damaged young Englishwoman, arrives in Baltimore to begin a cross-country odyssey in search of Dr. Wheeler, a member of Robert Kennedy's entourage. Rose met Wheeler in the U.K. and fell somewhat in love, as he provided much needed solace from her unhappy life: warring parents, a child taken away and given up for adoption. Accompanying Rose on her trip is Washington Harold, a friend of a friend, who also seeks Wheeler, but his motives are more sinister: Washington Harold's wife committed suicide after having an affair with Wheeler, and he wants revenge. The story reaches its apogee in L.A. at the Ambassador Hotel, where the private fates of these two people collide with RFK's very public one. Assembled by Bainbridge's editor from her manuscript after her death, this is a novel that the author longed to complete; the pacing isn't always right and the characters could be more sharply defined. Still, for lovers of Bainbridge's oeuvre, this is the book that places the period at the end of her life's work and shouldn't be missed. (Sept.) (c) Copyright PWxyz, LLC. All rights reserved.

Booklist Review

Bainbridge's latest novel skews history in a wholly original way. Harold Grasse and Rose, the English girl of the title, are on a quest to find a Dr. Wheeler. Their cross-country trip in a camper van begins in a Washington, D.C., rocked by race riots after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and ends at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles at the precise moment Robert Kennedy is shot (a mysterious girl in a polka dot dress is in fact part of the conspiracy theories surrounding RFK's death). Who is Dr. Wheeler? Rose is looking for him because she sees in him a savior, while Harold blames Wheeler for Kennedy's death. Incidents and a motley mix of characters encountered during their journey are all ingredients in a brew of politics, history, and religion in an America that erupts too easily into violence. On a more intimate scale, the dynamic between Harold and Rose teeters between irritation, disgust, and need. Never revealing too much, Bainbridge is a master of the telling, small detail.--Quinn, Mary Ellen Copyright 2010 Booklist

Librarian's View

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About the Author

Full text biography:

Beryl Bainbridge

Birth Date : 1934

Death Date : 2010

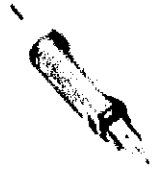
Known As : Bainbridge, Beryl Margaret

Place of Birth : United Kingdom,Liverpool

Place of Death : United Kingdom,London

Nationality: British

Occupation : Writer



about this author

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Awards:

Booker Prize nomination, 1973, for *The Dressmaker*, 1992, for *An Awfully Big Adventure*, and 2001, for *According to Queeney*; Booker Prize nomination and *Guardian* Fiction Award, both 1974, both for *The Bottle Factory Outing*; Whitbread Award, 1977, for *Injury Time*; Litt.D. from University of Liverpool, 1986; Booker Prize nomination, and Whitbread Award, both 1996, both for *Every Man for Himself*; Booker Prize nomination, W.H. Smith Fiction Prize, *Commonwealth* Eurasian section winner, and James Tait Black Memorial Prize for Best Novel, all 1999, all for *Master Georgie*; named Dame of the British Empire, 2000; David Cohen British Literature prize (shared with Thom Gunn), 2003, for lifetime achievement; the Man Booker "Best of Beryl," 2011, for *Master Georgie*.

Personal Information:

Born 1932 (some sources say November 21, 1934), in Liverpool, England; died of cancer, July 2, 2010, in London, England; daughter of Richard (a salesperson) and Winifred Bainbridge; married Austin Davies (an artist), April 24, 1954 (divorced, 1959); children: Aaron Paul, Johanna Harriet, Ruth Emmanuella (with Alan Sharp). **Education:** Attended Merchant Taylor's School and Arts Educational Schools. **Politics:** Socialist. **Religion:** "Lapsed Catholic." **Avocational Interests:** Painting, reading, sleeping, smoking.

Career Information:

Novelist and actress. Actress in England on radio and television, and in repertory theaters in Windsor, Salisbury, Dundee, Liverpool, and London, 1943-72; writer, 1956-68, beginning 1972; *Evening Standard* (newspaper), London, England, weekly columnist, 1986-92. Has also worked in a wine-bottling factory and as a clerk for Gerald Duckworth and Company (publishers). Host of British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) television series *English Journey*, 1983, and *Forever England*, 1986.

Writings:

FICTION

- *A Weekend with Claud* (novel), Hutchinson (London, England), 1967, revised edition published as *A Weekend with Claude*, Duckworth (London, England), 1981

- *Another Part of the Wood* (novel), Hutchinson (London, England), 1968, revised edition, Duckworth (London, England), 1979, Braziller (New York, NY), 1980.
- *Harriet Said* (novel), Duckworth (London, England), 1972, Braziller (New York, NY), 1973.
- *The Dressmaker* (novel), Duckworth (London, England), 1973, Carroll & Graf (New York, NY), 1996, published as *The Secret Glass*, Braziller (New York, NY), 1973.
- *The Bottle Factory Outing* (novel), Braziller (New York, NY), 1974, reprinted, Carroll & Graf (New York, NY), 1994.
- *Sweet William* (novel; also see below), Braziller (New York, NY), 1975.
- *A Quiet Life* (novel; also see below), Duckworth (London, England), 1976, Braziller (New York, NY), 1977, Carroll & Graf (New York, NY), 1999.
- *Injury Time* (novel), Braziller (New York, NY), 1977.
- *Young Adolf* (novel), Duckworth (London, England), 1978, Braziller (New York, NY), 1979.
- *Winter Garden* (novel), Duckworth (London, England), 1980, Braziller (New York, NY), 1981.
- (Editor) *New Stories 6* (anthology), Hutchinson (London, England), 1981.
- *Watson's Apology* (novel; also see below), Duckworth (London, England), 1984, McGraw-Hill (New York, NY), 1985.
- *Mum and Mr. Armitage* (short stories; contains "Mum and Mr. Armitage Clap Hands," "Here Comes Charlie," "People for Lunch," and "The Worst Policy;" also see below), Duckworth (London, England), 1985, McGraw-Hill (New York, NY), 1987.
- *Filthy Lucre; or, The Tragedy of Andrew Ledwhistle and Richard Soleway* (novel), Duckworth (London, England), 1986.
- *Watson's Apology* [and] *Mum and Mr. Armitage, and Other Stories*, McGraw-Hill (New York, NY), 1988.
- *An Awfully Big Adventure* (novel; also see below), Duckworth (London, England), 1989, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 1991.
- *The Birthday Boys* (novel), Duckworth (London, England), 1993, Carroll & Graf (New York, NY), 1994.
- *Collected Stories*, Penguin (London, England), 1994.
- *Every Man for Himself* (novel), Duckworth (London, England), 1996, Carroll & Graf (New York, NY), 1996.
- *Master Georgie* (novel), Duckworth (London, England), 1996, Carroll & Graf (New York, NY), 1998
- *According to Queeney* (novel), Little, Brown (Boston, MA), 2001.
- *The Girl in the Polka Dot Dress* (novel), Europa Editions (New York, NY), 2011.

NONFICTION

- *English Journey; or, The Road to Milton Keynes*, Duckworth (London, England), 1984, Carroll & Graf (New York, NY), 1997.
- *Forever England: North and South*, Duckworth (London, England), 1987, Carroll & Graf (New York, NY), 1999.
- *Something Happened Yesterday*, Duckworth (London, England), 1993.
- *Front Row: Evenings at the Theatre: Pieces from the Oldie*, Continuum (New York, NY), 2005

TELEVISION SCRIPTS

- *Tiptoe through the Tulips*, 1976.
- *Blue Skies from Now On*, 1977.
- *The Warrior's Return*, 1977
- *It's a Lovely Day Tomorrow*, 1977.
- *Words Fail Me*, 1979
- *Sweet William* (based on her novel of the same title), BBC, 1979.
- *A Quiet Life* (based on her novel of the same title), BBC, 1980
- (With Phillip Seville) *The Journal of Bridget Hitler*, BBC, 1980.
- *Somewhere More Central*, 1981.
- *Evensong*, 1986
- (With Udayan Prasad) *According to Beryl*, BBC, 2001.

Contributor to books, including *Bananas*, edited by Emma Tennant, and *Winter's Tales 26*, edited by A.D. Maclean; contributor to periodicals, including *Spectator*, *Listener*, *Times Literary Supplement*, and London *Sunday Times Magazine*.

Media Adaptions:

Sweet William, *The Dressmaker*, and *An Awfully Big Adventure* were produced as films

Sidelights:

Beryl Bainbridge was counted among Great Britain's "half-dozen most inventive and interesting novelists" by *New York Review of Books* contributor Julian Symons. After beginning her fiction-writing career in the 1960s, Bainbridge won critical acclaim and a wide readership on two continents for her chronicles of the lives and neuroses of the English lower middle classes. Reviewers have cited Bainbridge for her satiric but naturalistic portrayals of the drab and desperate British poor, and her depiction of "the hidden springs of anarchy that bedevil the least adventurous of us, booby-trapping our lives and making them the occasion of violent and dangerous humor," according to *Spectator* contributor Harriet Waugh. Bainbridge's tales of urban wildness often stray into the realm of violence and nightmare, where trapped spirits collide with thwarted ambition and the bosom of the family offers more grief than relief. *Newsweek* correspondent Margo Jefferson commented that "Bainbridge's books are melancholy, provincial landscapes in which violence, like a thunderstorm, always threatens, sometimes strikes." *New York Times* columnist Anatole Broyard suggested that Bainbridge "established herself as the high priestess of the rueful. She has opened a thrift shop in English literature, a home for frayed, faded, out-of-fashion and inexpensive people. The name of her shop might be Things Out of Joint. ... Bainbridge's people have all missed the train, or boat, the main chance. They are stranded in themselves, left behind by a world rushing toward the gratification of desire."

Fiction writing was Bainbridge's second career; during her teen and early adult years she worked as an actress on the radio and in repertory theaters. At age sixteen she met and fell in love with her future husband, artist Austin Davies. They were married in 1954, although Bainbridge had misgivings about the match. While awaiting the birth of her first child in 1956, Bainbridge began to write a novel. She derived the plot from a newspaper story about two girls who murdered their mother, and drew on her own childhood experiences to enhance and alter the details. The resulting work, *Harriet Said*, was completed in 1958 but remained unpublished until 1972. Barbara C. Millard noted in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*: "When Bainbridge submitted the manuscript to publishers in 1959, she received outraged responses, including the comment that the book was 'too indecent and unpleasant even for these lax days.'" Editors were aghast at the novelist's tale of juvenile sexuality, voyeurism, and murder; their response so daunted Bainbridge that she returned to the stage. In 1959, her marriage ended, she moved with her two young children to London and started writing again. In 1967, her second novel, *A Weekend with Claud*, became her first book to be published.

"Bainbridge's publishing history is perhaps the kind of thing you'd expect of a writer who is preoccupied with the idea of isolation," noted Karl Miller in the *New York Review of Books*. "It may be that this portrayer of shyness and constraint, who appears to be no punctuator, found it difficult to cope with the embarrassment of a debut, and of getting herself properly published." Indeed, Bainbridge eventually revised her first two published books, *A Weekend with Claud* and *Another Part of the Wood*. In the London *Times*, Bainbridge attributed her success as an author to her acquaintance, in 1970, with Anna Haycraft, fiction editor for Gerald Duckworth and Company: "She had read my two published books, didn't like them all that much ('rotten' was the word she used) and wanted to know if I had written anything else. I showed her *Harriet Said*. ... Duckworth published it, employed me in the office for a year, put me on a monthly salary and suggested I write another novel as soon as possible." Bainbridge added that Haycraft helped her to find her authorial voice. "It was she who told me to abandon the flowery and obscure style of my two later books and return to the simpler structure of the first. She pointed out that, in my case, clarity came from writing from my own experience. . . I gradually learnt the best way, for me, of expressing what I wanted to say, and wrote a novel a year from then on."

Critics have suggested that although *A Weekend with Claud*, *Another Part of the Wood*, and *Harriet Said* lack the polish of later Bainbridge works, they nonetheless demonstrated a burgeoning talent at work. *New York Times Book Review*

contributor Gail Godwin observed that *Harriet Said* "certainly ranks in content with the more celebrated thrillers of corrupt childhood, but it has literary and psychological virtues as well. The architecture of its narrative would have satisfied Poe: every incident advances the design. The language, though simple, often has the effect of poetry ... [and] there are also several remarkable passages which reveal, so accurately, adolescence's frequent, unpredictable swing between mature and infantile behavior." Assessing *A Weekend with Claud*, Millard wrote: "The novel lacks the author's characteristic crispness: its fuzzy prose is rescued only by the pointed imagery which projects an exact vision of the despair and folly of love and lovemaking." A *Washington Post* reviewer found *Another Part of the Wood* "a scrupulously detailed, wryly witty and ultimately harrowing study of manners in the British middle and working classes, of the effects of dependency on a variety of weak people and of the lies we all tell ourselves to make life bearable and the deadly passions that lie buried under the dull surface of our daily banalities. ... This slow-moving book does acquire a cumulative momentum, pointing toward an effective, quietly powerful end, and much of the detail work is exquisite."

The Dressmaker, later published in the United States as *The Secret Glass*, remains one of Bainbridge's best-known works. Set in Liverpool during World War II, the novel explores the painful and claustrophobic existence of a young woman who lives with her two unmarried aunts. Millard suggested that the book "depicts the cramped, impoverished lives of working-class Liverpudlians during the darker days of 1944. The psychological realism of the novel goes beyond reminiscence and proves Bainbridge a master of detail and atmosphere." Godwin felt that *The Dressmaker* "will attract readers not for its suspense-entertainment but for its sharp character study and unrelenting Naturalism. ... The author is painstaking in her evocation of era and perceptive about the world of manners in working-class Liverpool" and "has much to tell us about those pressure cookers of family life and limited means." A *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer wrote: "To have disinterred so many nasty things in the woodshed and yet evoked a workaday image of Liverpudlian optimism and resilience, in so few claustrophobic pages, is a remarkable achievement. Miss Bainbridge's imagination pushes her towards nightmare, and her eye for detail is macabre; but because she writes with taut, matter-of-fact simplicity this seems as authentic as any contemporary image the camera has preserved of that mercifully vanished past."

The Bottle Factory Outing draws on Bainbridge's experience of working in just such a factory. The central characters are factory workers Brenda and Freda. Brenda, a shy young woman, is being stalked by the plant manager; the more outgoing Freda is in love with the manager's nephew, but her pursuit of him is doomed. She ends up murdered at the company picnic, and Brenda discovers Freda's body. "The catastrophe is only the beginning of Freda's strange voyage in Brenda's care, as survivor and victim change roles," Millard related. *Contemporary Novelists* essayist Val Warner dubbed the novel a "flamboyant black comedy" and praised Bainbridge's "rare lyricism" and "Joycean acceptance of her characters." Millard noted that the author uses much theatrical symbolism--role-playing, rehearsals, and so forth--and that "such a motif aptly conveys Bainbridge's central theme, the conflict between self-knowledge and self-deception, between the person and the role, between reality and fantasy."

Sweet William, like *The Bottle Factory Outing*, finds Bainbridge dealing with "the human tendency toward self-deception and self-parody," according to Millard. In this book, a young woman named Ann becomes caught in the web spun by the title character, a playwright who is deceptive and amoral. Ann's love for William leads her to give up everything else in her life while he goes through a string of lovers. It emerges, however, that Ann can be deceptive, too. "The novel asserts that possessiveness and selfishness are invariably intermingled with love," Millard observed. Warner particularly praised the pivotal characterization of Ann's mother because "it was in reaction against her vicious pettiness that the daughter was vulnerable to William."

A Quiet Life reflects much of Bainbridge's life in its tale of the sometimes difficult relationships between family members. Framed within the story of a brother and sister meeting to divide an inheritance, the novel is largely in flashback form, as the brother, Alan, remembers events that occurred shortly after World War II. "At the end of the novel it is clear that Alan has remembered only what he could bear and has transformed or forgotten what he could not," Millard reported. Warner commented that in *A Quiet Life* Bainbridge focuses "devastatingly ... on what children become in reaction to their parents." Also, according to Millard, the novel provides an example of "Bainbridge's skill at defining theme through black comedy." *Injury Time* is also semiautobiographical in its focus on love affairs at midlife. Binny is a forty-year-old single mother in love with a married man; they try to give an elegant dinner party, but it ends up being crashed by bank robbers on the run. The novel's absurd action, which Bainbridge has said is based on things that happened to her, is a

catalyst for character study. "Using multiple points of view, Bainbridge returns to the problems people have distinguishing reality from their own invented scenarios," Millard explained. Observed Warner: "Beneath the black comedy ... the meaner and more generous impulses of the two main characters come through, in all their ambivalence."

Bainbridge's eye for telling details is again evident in *An Awfully Big Adventure*. To write this story she drew on her girlhood growing up in Liverpool. Like the author, the novel's protagonist, Stella, works as the assistant stage manager of a local repertory theater. Innocent yet determined to become worldly, Stella unwittingly influences the fate of all the older members of the company as they stage a production of *Peter Pan*. The novel brims with the dark humor typical of Bainbridge, including a scene in which Stella traumatizes an audience full of children by failing to revive Tinkerbell at the end of the play. *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer Lindsay Duguid commented: "Despite the grim setting and the characteristically bleak view of human nature, there is a mellowness about *An Awfully Big Adventure* which may come partly from the autobiographical element, but which is perhaps also due to its being set in the past. However sharp the details of poverty, ... the retrospective picture has inevitably a blurred sepia halo." Duguid argued that while the novel's themes and settings are similar to those in her previous works, she invests the novel's subjects with a "new richness and complexity." Writing in the *Women's Review of Books*, Francine Prose remarked that the most striking characteristic of *An Awfully Big Adventure* "is how sympathetic its characters are without being, exactly, likeable." Prose called the novel "a joy to read; the narrative jogs along swiftly, turning and circling back on itself, pushed forward by the momentum of the characters' separate ambitions, quirks, desires and frustrated imbroglios." While faulting the conclusion as somewhat predictable and melodramatic, she asserted that such "minor reservations" do not detract from Bainbridge's "terse wit, her precision, her economy of style and, above all, the absolutely unique sensibility with which she observes and records the unjust, upsetting, clumsy and terribly moving comedy of errors that we call human relations."

As a writer Bainbridge was frequently inspired by history and her own travels. Her novel *Young Adolf*, for instance, describes a family reunion in Liverpool between Adolf Hitler and his half-brother Alois, who did indeed live in England. Broyard contended in the *New York Times* that the book "has all the improbability of history. It is funny in a way that will make you shudder, sad in a way that will astonish you with unwanted feelings of sympathy. In making Hitler human, Miss Bainbridge has reminded us once again that it is persons, not abstract forces, that engender our disasters." *Christian Science Monitor* contributor Bruce Allen likewise asserted that the novel's best effects "rise out of Bainbridge's genius for finding latent menace in the dreariest everydayness." Noting that the fictional Hitler "is less ... an embryonic monster than a subtle revelation of the social enfeeblement that let him grow and prosper," Warner called *Young Adolf* "Bainbridge's most ambitious book, with the tension deriving from our knowledge of what is to come, historically. Against this appalling factual scenario, details like the brown shirt made for the penniless Adolf by his sister-in-law ... are intensely black comedy."

The novel *Watson's Apology* is based on a notorious Victorian murder case in which minister and schoolmaster J.S. Watson beat his wife, Anne, to death after years of increasingly unhappy wedlock; they had barely known each other when they married. According to Merle Rubin in Chicago *Tribune Books*, Bainbridge uses the framework of documents surrounding the murder trial to weave "her fictional fabrication: thickly detailed, redolent of the specific time and place, and suffused in the grimly desperate atmosphere of a misbegotten marriage." James Lasdun, in *Encounter*, wrote that Bainbridge's "achievement is to show how very ordinary and unmysterious were the forces at play upon Mr. Watson and his wife. What propelled them towards tragedy was an accumulation of the kinds of mutual disappointments that could afflict any marriage under similar circumstances." The Watsons's story, opined Michelle Slung in the *Washington Post Book World*, is "creepy, sad and suspenseful, all at once," and Bainbridge tells it in "tantalizing style." *New York Times Book Review* critic Marilyn Stasio deemed *Watson's Apology* "an extraordinarily lively work of the imagination because the facts themselves remain so obdurately dull," although the critic added: "For all [Bainbridge's] compassion for poor Watson's unarticulated miseries, she's a bit miserly with her sympathy for Anne."

The basis of *The Birthday Boys* is the South Pole expedition launched in 1911 by Robert Falcon Scott, An Englishman. Scott was determined to reach the pole before his rival, Norwegian Roald Amundsen. In January of 1912 he and his party did reach the pole, despite a series of unfortunate incidents, only to find that Amundsen had been and gone a month before. On their return trip, Scott and his entire party perished from cold and hunger. For years, they were held up by the British as examples of gallantry and courage, but it has more recently been argued that Scott's stubbornness

and lack of preparation contributed greatly to the tragedy that befell his party. Using Scott's journal as a starting point, Bainbridge fashioned journals in the voices of the other team members to create her version of their fatal adventure.

Reviewing *The Birthday Boys* for the *New York Times*, Michiko Kakutani suggested that in this "affecting novel" Bainbridge creates a parable for the sort of brave, foolish optimism that flourished in Victorian England but died during World War I. The author "recounts their journey ... with both sympathy and unflinching candor, capturing the boyish idealism and impetuosity that initially impel their journey, and the weariness and terror that gradually overtake them during their mission's final days." Furthermore, wrote Kakutani, Bainbridge renders their hardships with a verisimilitude so palpable that one "has the sensation of sharing the characters' experiences in that dangerously beautiful landscape firsthand. *The Birthday Boys* is a riveting tale by an enormously versatile writer." *New York Times Book Review* contributor Gary Krist added that in giving voice to Scott and his party, Bainbridge provides "some of the most convincing and slyly revealing first-person narrative I've ever read." While she subtly questions the heroic image of Scott and casts a jaundiced eye on "the whole ethos of action, conquest and empire," Bainbridge also creates a novel "that succeeds on many levels besides the political, most notably the visceral level of the adventure story," Krist averred.

Again focusing on the Edwardian era, Bainbridge's *Every Man for Himself* plumbs the depths of the 1912 sinking of the *Titanic*. As a *Kirkus Reviews* writer commented, this real-life tragedy "is not played for the usual melodrama but used as the backdrop for the coming-of-age story of a well-connected, uncertain young man." The young man, Morgan, has been rescued from poverty by his aunt's fortuitous marriage to millionaire J.P. Morgan. This rescue is not entirely secure, however; although Morgan's formidable uncle expects him to find some sort of gainful employment, the young man is cast adrift with plenty of time and opportunity for drinking and getting into mischief. Once again, reviewers noted Bainbridge's ability to evoke character and history with a few deft passages. A *Publishers Weekly* contributor applauded *Every Man for Himself* as a "meticulously observed account that almost offhandedly convinces the reader that this is exactly what it must have been like aboard the doomed liner." For John Updike, writing in the *New Yorker*, such telling details do not come so neatly, however. "Bainbridge writes with a kind of betranced confidence," wrote Updike, "seeming to lose all track of her story only to pop awake for a stunning image or an intense exchange," and "her sudden details make a surreal effect."

Another historical novel, *Master Georgie* draws readers to Liverpool and the Crimea of the mid-nineteenth century. The title refers to George Hardy, a doctor and amateur photographer from a wealthy family. His story has three narrators, all of whom are dependent upon George. Myrtle, an orphan taken in by George's parents, grows up to become his lover and bears him children when his wife cannot. Pompey Jones, a boy of the streets, becomes George's photographic assistant and also his lover. Dr. Potter, the third narrator, is George's scholarly but impoverished brother-in-law. All three accompany George to the Crimean War, which was the first conflict to be photographed. It also was a very poorly executed war, and its most famous moment was the suicidal charge of a group of light cavalry, immortalized by Alfred, Lord Tennyson as "The Charge of the Light Brigade."

Master Georgie joins *The Birthday Boys* and *Every Man for Himself* to form what *Time* reviewer Elizabeth Gleick viewed as "an ambitious trilogy of novels that dissect great examples of human folly." Gleick went on to write that saying that Bainbridge writes historical novels "is like saying that Jane Austen wrote domestic comedies." Bainbridge's characters witness history but sometimes falsify it, explained the critic, citing George's composition of war scene photographs. By the same token, through their complicated relationships they sometimes deceive themselves, each other, and their repressive Victorian society. Gleick dubbed *Master Georgie* "a deadpan tale of secrets and lies," while in *Commonweal* Daniel M. Murtaugh considered the book "a very rich novel," although "not an ingratiating one on the first reading." He advised, "Go back and read it again, and it will astonish you."

Published in 2001, *According to Queeney* is a historical novel that explores the long friendship between real-life English author Samuel Johnson and his wealthy benefactor Hester Thrale through the eyes of Hester's daughter, Queeney. *Quadrant* contributor Paul Tankard commented, "Rather than sketch an elaborately realistic background, Bainbridge provides glimpses of odd, unexplained snippets of daily life. There are lots of deaths, of pets, old people, and particularly children. Hester Thrale seems always to be pregnant or to have just lost a baby. Brushes with death are part of everyday experience, contributing to a sense of uncertainty about the meaning of things, which is reinforced by a

great many mysterious minor occurrences, which look as if they might be going to add up to something, but don't seem to."

Rebecca Abrams, who reviewed the book for *New Statesman*, felt that "if *According to Queeney* has a fault, it is that the progression of events and relationships is almost too meandering to sustain the reader's attention. There is something static about the pacing of the novel so that, technically impressive as the various parts undeniably are, there is a lack of momentum to the whole." Abrams concluded that it "is not the best of Bainbridge's historical novels, but it is an exuberant homage to the stupendous Johnson." Thomas Mallon, in a review of the novel for the *New York Times Book Review*, remarked that *According to Queeney* "has its share of sharp, offbeat perceptions, as well as the grotesque comic touches that have always been one of Bainbridge's strongest suits. (When conversation turns to an actor's losing his teeth in the middle of a performance, 'Mrs. Thrale was aware there wasn't one among them, herself included, who wasn't secretly engaged in running their tongue along their gums.')" Mallon added: "If this isn't Beryl Bainbridge's finest or most ambitious work, much of what's always been striking, and irreducible about her still abides within it." "The writing, as one would expect, is spare and evocative. This is a beautiful piece of work--a clear prism, through which the mature understanding of an acute observer of human nature darkly gleams and sparkles," asserted *Spectator* contributor Salley Vickers.

Before Bainbridge died of cancer on July 2, 2010, she was working on *The Girl in the Polka Dot Dress*, which was inspired by Bainbridge's rediscovery of a diary she had written on a trip to the United States in the 1960s. According to Bainbridge's wishes, the unfinished manuscript for the novel was assembled by her editor, Brendan King, after her death, and then published in 2011. Set in the United States in 1968, Washington Harold and Rose, the English girl of the title, are on a quest to find Dr. Fred Wheeler, a member of Robert Kennedy's entourage. Rose met Wheeler in England years ago and he provided much needed solace from her unhappy life. Washington, also seeks Wheeler, but his motives are more sinister: His wife committed suicide after having an affair with Wheeler, and he is seeking revenge. Their cross-country trip in a camper van begins in a Washington, DC, and ends at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, California, at the precise moment Robert Kennedy is shot.

Several reviewers commented on the novel's construction, particularly the ending. "This odd, angular picaresque feels chaotic and choppy," especially towards the end, noted a *Kirkus Reviews* contributor of the novel. The contributor added: "Still, it shows off the author's gifts for compression and dark, deadpan wit." Of the ending, *New Statesman* contributor Olivia Laing felt that "it is here, however, that the problems with the book's construction become apparent. The end supplied is a graft, made from a flashback originally set at the beginning of the novel. It is impossible to know what Bainbridge would have come up with if she had been given, as she hoped, a few more pages, a few more days."

"What makes this novel different from the ones that have gone before is its darkness," contended *New York Times Book Review* contributor William Boyd. He continued: "The novel is suffused with death--the famous assassinations that marked the 1960s, of J.F.K. and Martin Luther King Jr., and Jack Ruby's murder of Lee Harvey Oswald--but also the deaths encountered as the journey progresses. A funeral for a young man killed in Vietnam, a dog run over, a pervert stabbed by his victim: the body count is bleak and impossible to ignore. And because this is Bainbridge's last novel, written during what she knew was a fatal illness, one wonders--legitimately--if her own prospective demise prompted these somber meditations." *The Girl in the Polka Dot Dress* "is very gripping, very funny and deeply mysterious. She has abandoned the oblique historical miniatures with which her last decade had been occupied--the worlds of Dr Johnson or the Crimean war--and she has returned to that vein of comedy in which a self-projection becomes caught up in a series of grotesque, fantastical events," noted *Spectator* contributor A.N. Wilson. Wilson added: "The formula of the journey in the baking American heat is a powerful narrative device, and the mutual misunderstandings between the two travelers are a constant source of tragi-comedy." "Never revealing too much, Bainbridge is a master of the telling, small detail," asserted Mary Ellen Quinn in a review of the novel for *Booklist*.

Bainbridge also published a few nonfiction works including *Forever England: North and South*, which is a portrait of six English families, three from the North and three from the South. "Bainbridge gets her subjects to bare their souls as they cope with cramped living quarters, joblessness, mortgages and life's various traumas," as a *Publishers Weekly* contributor put it. *Something Happened Yesterday* contains columns Bainbridge wrote for the *Evening Standard*, and

Front Row: Evenings at the Theatre. Pieces from the Oldie is a collection of approximately eighty theater reviews by Bainbridge from the magazine the *Oldie*, from 1992 to 2002.

In addition to her books, Bainbridge also adapted several of her books for the screen and served as a host-commentator on two British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) travel serials. She once explained that she wrote to work out her own "personal obsessions," because she believed that writing, "like old photographs, gives a record by which past experience can be remembered." *New York Review of Books* essayist Frank Kermode characterized Bainbridge's ability as "an odd and ... fantastic talent," while in the *New York Times Book Review*, Guy Davenport made the observation that Bainbridge "has her comic eye on cultural confusion. She makes us see that it goes deeper than we think and touches more widely than we had imagined. The most appalling muddles can still be laughed at, and laughter is a kind of understanding." In 2011, *Master Georgie* was announced as the winner of a special prize, the Man Booker "Best of Beryl," created to honor the late author. Bainbridge was short-listed five times for the Booker Prize--the most that any author has been shortlisted, but never actually won.

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The Robert Kennedy Assassination


Robert F. Kennedy with Cesar Chavez

"If they're going to shoot, they'll shoot."

- Candidate Robert F. Kennedy to aide Fred Dutton, April 11, 1968.

Robert F. Kennedy, who had made many enemies during his time on the Washington scene, was well aware of the dangers he faced in trying to reclaim the Presidency lost in 1963 when his brother was killed in Dallas. Fate befell him just after midnight on June 5, 1968, moments after declaring victory in the California Democratic primary. Escorted through a kitchen pantry in the Ambassador Hotel, RFK was assailed by Palestinian Sirhan Sirhan firing a .22 pistol. Kennedy was shot multiple times, and five others were wounded by gunfire. While bodyguards and others wrestled with Sirhan, who continued to shoot wildly, Kennedy collapsed in a pool of blood. He died the following day.

In the assassinations of President Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., the evidence tying the alleged assassins to the case was circumstantial and almost too neat. But here, Sirhan was apprehended on the scene firing a gun within a couple of feet of Kennedy. An open-and-shut case? Ironically, the RFK assassination has the starkest physical and eyewitness evidence indicating a conspiracy involving Sirhan and at least one additional gunman.

WHO WAS SIRHAN SIRHAN?

Sirhan Bishara Sirhan

An early indication that there might be more than meets the eye in this case came with the discovery of Sirhan's diaries. Page after page featured repetitive writing, with such phrases as "RFK must die" and "Robert F. Kennedy must be assassinated" occurring over and over, coupled with such curious phrases as "pay to the order of" and "my determination to eliminate RFK is becoming more the [sic] more of an unshakable obsession." An entry from May 18 noted that "Robert F. Kennedy must be assassinated before 5 June 68."

Sirhan Bishara Sirhan was born in Jerusalem in 1944, and moved with his family to the U.S. when he was 12. He had been employed exercising horses at the Santa Anita racetrack until an accident in 1966. He was obsessed with mystical powers, apparently believing that he was learning to control events with his mind, and fascinated with hypnosis. Psychiatrists determined that he was highly susceptible to hypnosis, and may have produced his strange writings while in a trance.

Sirhan has continually maintained that he has no memory of writing in his notebook, nor of the events that night at the Ambassador Hotel. This has led many to believe that he may have been a real "Manchurian Candidate," programmed to shoot RFK and then fail to recall who put him up to it.

THE POLKA-DOTTED DRESS GIRL

Sirhan was seen in the hotel - including in the pantry itself - in the company of a girl wearing a polka-dotted dress. The girl and another male companion were seen running from the pantry after the shooting. RFK campaign worker Sandy Serrano, taking a break out on a balcony, saw them run from the hotel, the woman gleefully shouting "We shot him. We shot him." When Serrano asked who they meant, the girl replied "Senator Kennedy."

Unbelievable as this sounds, their behavior was corroborated by LAPD officer Paul Sharaga, who was

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The *Incomplete Justice* Series

1. At the Ambassador Hotel
2. Stalking RFK?
3. "They are all fibbing..."
4. "No, there were no other guns..."
5. Mind Games?
6. "I don't know any other people..."

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Document Collections

Special Unit Senator LAPD Collection. Microfilmed files of the LAPD's Special Unit Senator investigation, plus later hearings on the RFK case.

FBI LAFO Files. FBI Los Angeles Field Office files.

Sirhan Sirhan Trial Transcript. Transcript of court proceedings, including pre-trial hearings, trial testimony, and closing arguments.

Appeal Documents. Court filings and other documents related to the appeal of Sirhan Sirhan's murder conviction and death sentence.

Request to Los Angeles County Grand Jury. 1992 request for investigation based on issues arising from release of LAPD files.

Petition for Writ of Habeas Corpus. Petition for a new trial for Sirhan Sirhan, submitted by the late attorney Lawrence Teeter.

Report on the Medicolegal Investigation of Senator Robert F. Kennedy. Autopsy report by coroner Thomas Noguchi.

See all RFK Assassination Documents.

Multimedia

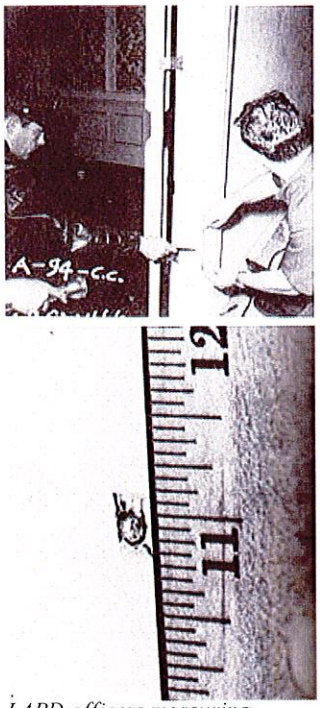
told the same thing by an elderly couple in the parking lot behind the hotel. Sharaga was the source of an All Points Bulletin (APB) on the suspects. The girl was described consistently by most of the witnesses: dirty blond hair, well-built, with a crooked or "funny" nose, wearing a white dress with blue or black polka-dots.

There were many other witnesses to the polka-dotted dress girl, in the hotel and in the company of Sirhan in the weeks prior to the assassination.

The End of the American Dream - The Assassination of Robert F. Kennedy (Canadian Broadcasting Co.) Watch full-size

A SECOND GUN

There was other eyewitness testimony of a second shooter. Dr. Marcus McBoom saw a man with a partially-concealed pistol in his hand, running from the pantry. Photographer Evan Freed, one of the polka-dotted dress girl witnesses, swore out an affidavit in 1992 that he had seen a gunman, not Sirhan, shoot RFK from behind (Sirhan was by virtually all accounts in front of RFK and not closer than a few feet away).



LAPD officers measuring apparent bullet hole in doorframe, with closeup from photo

Freed's account in fact matches Robert Kennedy's autopsy report. Coroner Thomas Naguchi determined that RFK had been shot three times, all from the rear at a steep upward angle, with powder burns indicating that the fatal shot being fired from 1 or 2 inches away.

Sirhan's Iverson .22 revolver held a maximum of 8 bullets. Two bullets were removed from RFK, and five from other victims. One of the three bullets to strike RFK grazed him and was determined by LAPD to have gone into the ceiling, though it was never recovered. That accounts for all 8, even conceding the LAPD's reconstruction which explained away bullet holes found in ceiling tiles, by positing that one of the bullets had ricocheted back down and struck victims (causing two ceiling holes in the process).

What is not accounted for are bullet holes in the doorframe where RFK's party had entered the pantry. Photographs taken by the FBI, LAPD, and AP show apparent bullet holes, which have been circled and initialed. Some pictures show police officers pointing at them; one AP photo is labeled "Bullet found near Kennedy shooting scene." Two police officers depicted in the photos told author Vincent Bugliosi that they had observed an actual bullet embedded in the wood of the center door frame. Hotel waiter Martin Patrusky said that police officers told him that they had dug two bullets out of the center divider. FBI agent William Bailey, in the pantry within hours of the shooting, said he could see the base of the bullet in the center divider. Other confirmation comes from photographers and even the carpenter who assisted in removal of the door frame for police evidence.

Conspiracy Test: The RFK Assassination, Part I (Discovery Channel) See all 11 parts

More RFK Video

- Documentaries
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Book Previews

R.F.K. Must Die!, by Robert Blair Kaiser

- Epilogue. "The case is still open. I'm not rejecting the Manchurian Candidate aspect of it."
- Appendixes

Books of Interest

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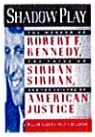

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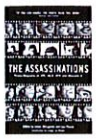

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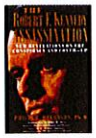

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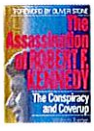

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SPECIAL UNIT SENATOR

What did the LAPD do with all this evidence of conspiracy, and more not mentioned here? The files of their investigation, released twenty years after the assassination, show that the evidence was ignored, and in some cases actively countered. The LAPD set up a Special Unit Senator (SUS) group to handle the investigation, and the tactics of some of its members have been called into question. Enrique Hernandez, who conducted polygraph exams for SUS, was among the most aggressive.

Sandy Serrano, one of the prime witnesses to the girl in the polka-dotted dress and a male companion, was browbeaten by Hernandez into retracting her story. The following exchange is typical of the treatment given Serrano in lengthy interview sessions:

> *Hernandez: "I think you owe it to Senator Kennedy, the late Senator Kennedy, to come forth, to be a woman about this. If he, and you don't know and I don't know whether he's a witness right now in this room watching what we're doing in here. Don't shame his death by keeping this thing up. I have compassion for you. I want to know why. I want to know why you did what you did. This is a very serious thing."*
>
> *Serrano: "I seen those people!"*
>
> *Hernandez: "No, no, no, no, Sandy. Remember what I told you about that: you can't say*

you saw something when you didn't see it..."

Eventually Serrano went along with the LAPD. And once she had retracted her story, the "fact" that Serrano had made up the story was apparently used to discredit other corroborating witnesses, who generally didn't know that their story was being repeated by others. The pattern of isolation and even intimidation recurs repeatedly in the transcripts and tapes of interviews, many of whom retracted statements under pressure. In other cases, like Evan Freed, the interviews in the record do not contain information that the witness has later stated he or she told the police, and it is not always clear where the truth lies. Some evidence was simply ignored - or lost. This missing evidence included the memo of Paul Sharaga, the officer who interviewed the elderly couple who also saw a woman and man fleeing the scene of the shooting gleefully shouting "We shot him! We shot him!" Sharaga had enough presence of mind to retain the original mimeograph.

The door frames, which according to many witnesses had bullets embedded in them, were destroyed by the LAPD after Sirhan's trial. They were not admitted into evidence in that trial. Other evidence, including photographs taken in the pantry by a teenager named Scott Enyart, never saw the light of day.

The LAPD Summary Report deals with many of the witnesses to accomplices or other evidence indicating conspiracy, and dismisses them all in a variety of ways. In some cases, for example polka-dotted dress girl witness Booker Griffin, witnesses are said to have admitted making up their story, but inspection of the raw LAPD files fail to substantiate the alleged retractions.

THE TRIAL OF SIRHAN SIRHAN

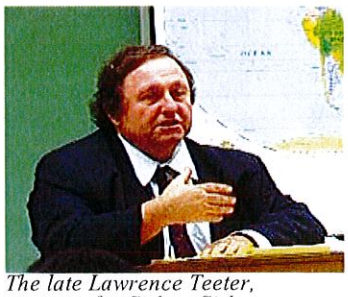
But what about Sirhan's defense team? Wouldn't this evidence have to be given to his lawyers, and then come out a trial?

Several factors worked against this. First, not all evidence was shared with Sirhan's lawyers. Even the autopsy report, whose conclusion of point-blank shots from the rear would seemingly exonerate Sirhan of RFK's actual murder, was not given to the defense until they had already stipulated Sirhan's guilt. The defense early on decide to pursue a "diminished capacity" defense, and the autopsy report didn't change that strategy.

It is important to understand the motivations of each side in the legal system's "great engine of truth." Neither side had anything to gain by bringing in evidence of conspiracy. For the prosecution, it would simply muddle what otherwise seemed a simple case. And for the defense, conspiracy implies pre-meditation, and thus knowing guilt. Introducing evidence of accomplices would not be helpful to their client.

Sirhan Sirhan was his own worst enemy at the trial, using it as a platform for expressing anti-Semitic political views and touting the Arab cause. Whether these issues were really motivation for a shooting he claims not to remember executing remains a mystery.

Finally, Sirhan's later attorney Lawrence Teeter uncovered evidence that Sirhan's lead trial lawyer, Grant Cooper, was compromised. Cooper was on one of the defense teams in the Friar's Club scandal case, a defendant in which was none other than Johnny Roselli, and one day grand jury papers were found on Cooper's desk at counsel table, possibly planted there, perhaps by Roselli himself. Cooper faced a potential indictment over this incident, which could be grounds for disbarment, and the matter was left pending for the duration of the Sirhan trial. Afterwards, Cooper was let off with a $1000 fine.



The late Lawrence Teeter, attorney for Sirhan Sirhan.

Sirhan Bishara Sirhan was found guilty of first-degree murder and sentenced to death. While he was on death row, California abolished the death penalty, and commuted his sentence to life in prison, where he remains. Attorney Lawrence Teeter was fighting for a retrial at the time of his own death in 2005.

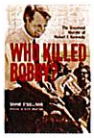
BALLISTICS REVIEWS

Ted Charach produced a documentary entitled "The Second Gun" in 1970, and questions continued to grow around the RFK case in the early 1970s. Criminalistics professor Herbert MacDonnell had signed an affidavit in 1973 stating that a bullet removed from RFK's neck, exhibit #47, could not have been fired from Sirhan's gun. He further stated that, based on the differing number of cannelures (grooves), it could not have been fired from the same gun as exhibit #54, a bullet removed from victim William Weisel. In a 1974 public hearing, California state crime lab veteran Lowell Bradford concurred.

The Forgotten Terrorist
Mel Ayton
Potomac Books, 2007

Special Unit Senator
Robert A. Houghton with Theodore Taylor
Randhom House, 1970

Who Killed Bobby?



Shane O'Sullivan
Sterling, 2008

See all RFK books.

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Part Two: Stalking RFK?

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RFK Assassination: New Revelations from the FBI's Kensalt Files, by Mel Ayton.

RFK Assassination Far From Resolved, by Thom White.

A Letter to the American People (and Myself in Particular) on the Unspeakable, by James W. Douglass.

Sirhan Sirhan:

Sirhan Sirhan: Assassin of Modern U.S. History, by Denise Noe.

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Did the CIA Kill Bobby Kennedy?, by The Guardian.

The BBC's Flawed RFK Story, by Jefferson Morley and David Talbot.

Forensics:

Dan Moldea Accidentally Uncovers the

Paul Schrade, one of the victims, and Congressman Allard Lowenstein. Both pursued the RFK case for many years.

In 1975, a court-appointed panel of seven ballistics experts was convened. While the headlines coming from the panel's work read "RFK Second Gun Theory Ruled Out," the reality was more subtle. Lowell Bradford, one of the panel members, said the question of a second gunman was "more open than before."

Subsequent research has uncovered serious problems with the marking of evidence bullets. Following the trail of Pasadena criminalist William Harper, researcher Rose Lynn Mangan discovered circumstantial evidence for a switch of crime scene bullets. For example, she found that the Kennedy neck bullet (#47), which should have a "TN31" etched in its base, instead says "DWTN." There is reason to believe that even the Sirhan gun was swapped with another gun. LAPD criminologist DeWayne Wolfer had in fact introduced into evidence at Sirhan's trial the test gun, and represented it as the murder weapon, despite the different serial numbers.

It is worth noting that the 1975 panel discovered that two bullets allegedly removed from Sirhan's car contained traces of wood on both the base and the tip. Were these bullets dug out of the door frame?

In 2004, a tape recording which featured the gunfire in the pantry surfaced. Made by Polish freelance journalist Stanislaw Pruszynski, the tape was analyzed by a team led by Philip Van Praag, who announced that the tape revealed thirteen shots fired in the space of five seconds. Sirhan's gun could hold only eight bullets. As in the JFK acoustics evidence, this finding is the subject of debate.

STALKING RFK?

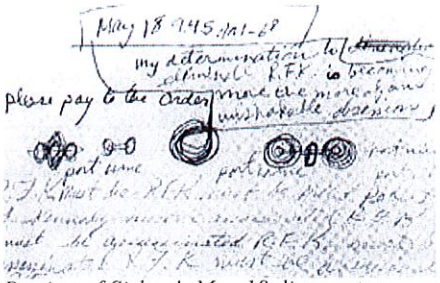
Such malfeasance on the part of the LAPD may be hard to believe. But the dismissive treatment of witnesses to Sirhan's accomplices is hard to refute, despite attempts to do so.

There were pre-assassination sightings of Sirhan in the company of a woman whose description matches the polka-dotted dress girl, and these sightings indicate that they were stalking Robert Kennedy.

On May 20, night manager Albert LaBeau of Robbie's Restaurant in Pomona encountered a man with a coat thrown over his arm - in the company of young woman. The pair were aggressively trying to gain access to a lunchroom where RFK would be - climbing over a stair railing in one of multiple attempts. LaBeau picked Sirhan's photo out of a set of 25 pictures of young dark-skinned males.

Ten days later, a campaign worker named Laverne Botting was approached by a young woman and two men, trying to get a copy of Robert Kennedy's schedule. Her story was corroborated by another volunteer, Ethel Crehan.

On June 1, three days before the primary, Dean Pack was hiking with his son in the Santa Ana mountains when they came upon a young man who resembled Sirhan, shooting a pistol in the company of a girl and another man. The three were quite hostile; Pack had a "funny sensation that it would be possible for them to put a bullet in your back."



Portion of Sirhan's May 18 diary entry (click to enlarge)

Several witnesses saw a similar-looking girl, in a polka-dotted dress, in the Ambassador Hotel on the night of the primary. Irene Gizzi saw three people, matching the trio seen by others, and noted that they didn't seem to fit in with the exuberant crowd. As noted before, the girl and another man were seen in the pantry, rushing out of it, and leaving the hotel gleefully shouting "We shot him!"

THE "WALKING BIBLE"

Another strange story in the RFK case concerns Jerry Owen, the "Walking Bible." Owen himself went to authorities shortly after the assassination, with the story that he had happened to give Sirhan and another man a lift, and had subsequently gone to the Ambassador Hotel to collect $300 for a horse he was going to sell to Sirhan. Owen said he encountered there a blonde girl and two other men.

In the end, the LAPD determined that Owen, whose background of criminal violations included a conviction for arson in conjunction with a church building, was telling a tale. But why would he make up

Conspiracy to Assassinate RFK, by John Hunt.

Robert Kennedy's Headwounds, Part 1: The Case for Conspiracy, by John Hunt.

Acoustics:

An Open and Shut Case: Foreword, by Paul Schrade.

RFK-Pruszynski Press Conference, by Philip Sheridan.

How the Discovery Channel Duped the American Public About the RFK Assassination Acoustics Debate, by Mel Ayton.

Other Evidence:

The Nearness of History: Scott Enyart vs. LAPD on the RFK Photos, by Dave Manning.

Ted Charach's Press Conference: Thane Eugene Cesar's Gun Found, by Dave Manning.

See all RFK essays.

Other Links

Robert F. Kennedy Memorial. The website of this NGO includes a page of links to RFK speeches.

The American Experience: RFK. Web page for the PBS includes a Kennedy family timeline.

Robert Kennedy's speech on the death of Martin Luther King Jr.. Includes both text and audio of RFK's Indianapolis address, which asked everyone to "dedicate ourselves...to tame the savageness of man and make gentle the life of this world."

The Robert F. Kennedy Assassination Archives Collection. This archive at the University of Massachusetts was created by Professor Philip Melanson, who wrote several books on the assassinations of the 1960s.

California State Archives: Robert F. Kennedy Assassination Investigation Records. The California State Archives holds the physical evidence of the crime as well as voluminous reports.

Real History Archives - RFK Assassination. Lisa Pease website includes essays on political assassinations, including RFK's.

Sirhan's longtime research Rose Lynn Mangan has a website devoted to the case, with many scanned primary source materials.

Robert F. Kennedy Assassination on wikipedia.

The RFK Assassination. This website is maintained by David K. Lewis.

bobby-kennedy.com. Created by JFK Lancer Productions and Publications.

such a story?

Authors Bill Turner and Jonn Christian researched the Owen story and interviewed Bill Powers, a cowboy who ran Wild Bill's Stables less than a mile from where Owen lived. Powers told them that Owen had told him, before the assassination, about a horse trainer named Sirhan, and further that Powers had seen Sirhan in the back seat of Owen's car during a visit where Owen flashed large bills to pay off a pickup truck Powers had sold him.

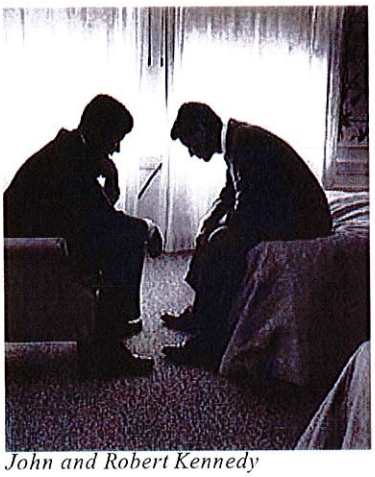
If Owen knew Sirhan, was his story a pre-emptive cover story for meeting up at the Ambassador Hotel, possibly to supply a getaway vehicle?

WHO KILLED RFK?

Sirhan Sirhan was in the pantry firing a gun that night at Robert Kennedy, with intent to kill. But the autopsy report, coupled with dozens of eyewitnesses to the scene, cast grave doubt on the otherwise obvious conclusion that Sirhan actually fired the shots that hit RFK. Furthermore, the evidence is strong that Sirhan was stalking Kennedy in the company of a young blond girl and another male companion.

Many researchers have cast suspicion on Thane Eugene Cesar, a security guard with right-wing views on race who was escorting Kennedy by the arm through the pantry, was seen drawing his gun and possibly firing it, and told false stories about a .22 he owned (that he had sold it before the assassination, rather than after). But at least one witness claimed to see a different gunman to the rear of Kennedy firing the fatal shots.

The girl in the polka-dotted dress was never found - the LAPD insisted that campaign worker Valerie Schulte was the girl seen by some, despite differences in her appearance and clothing. There was another man, Michael Wayne, who was seen running from the pantry and subsequently tackled and taken away for questioning. Wayne had similarity in appearance to one of the individuals reported to have been seen in the company of Sirhan, and more intriguingly he had in his possession the business card of radical Minuteman Keith Duane Gilbert.



John and Robert Kennedy

Sirhan may be lying when he claims to have no memory of the assassination. Journalist Robert Kaiser, who worked with Sirhan extensively as part of the defense team, caught him in several lies and presents in his book *R.F.K. Must Die!* a nuanced treatment of Sirhan as having multiple sides: at different times clever and evasive, mystical, ingratiating, studious, and schizophrenic. Sirhan may be lying about his lack of memory; it is also at least possible that he and his accomplices did stalk RFK, but that the highly suggestible Sirhan had been hypnotically programmed to block memory of the shooting and his associates.

Who were the accomplices? The LAPD decided not to try to find out. Sirhan's sometimes-stated contention that he killed Kennedy for political reasons, in particular RFK's support for Israel, doesn't hold up well under analysis. For one thing, the TV documentary he cited as provoking him was seen in L.A. on May 20, and Kennedy's speech supporting fighter jets to Israel wasn't given until the 26th. But it was on May 18 that Sirhan wrote "RFK must die" over and over in his notebook.

Political views related to the Arab-Israeli conflict may have motivated Sirhan Sirhan. But that motivation was not necessarily that of his accomplices, whoever they were. The tenuous conspiracy leads that exist, including Jerry Owen and perhaps Michael Wayne, point toward right-wing religious extremists, but there is not enough to go on to make any definitive statement. The giddy behavior of the polka-dotted dress girl and her companion seem hardly that of professional killers. But Robert Kennedy had accumulated many powerful enemies during his career - CIA officers, organized crime bosses, Vietnam war hawks, ardent segregationists. Given the fear that Kennedy's achieving the Presidency could induce in them, it is not at all clear who the ultimate sponsors of Sirhan and his accomplices might have been.

COMMENTS ON THIS PAGE

Make a Comment

- by clintbradford on Thu, Nov 23, 2006: Bobby - The Movie

July 3, 2010

Beryl Bainbridge, Mordant Novelist, Is Dead at 77

By WILLIAM GRIMES

Beryl Bainbridge, whose sparely written, mordant novels, often with a dark comic edge, made her one of the most distinctive and admired voices in postwar British fiction, died on Thursday in London. She was 77.

The cause was cancer, said Kent Carroll of Europa Editions, her American publisher.

Ms. Bainbridge, a former theater actress, emerged on the fiction scene in the 1960s with a series of taut, often bleakly funny novels that drew heavily on her experiences growing up in a shabby-genteel household in Liverpool during and after World War II.

This background lent a pungent, unmistakable flavor to her fiction, a drab dreamland populated by plodding characters whose lives, through missed meanings and missed opportunities, swerve suddenly out of control. Violence is always on the menu. The jolly company picnic in "The Bottle Factory Outing" begins with a series of comic misadventures and ends, inevitably, with a death.

Reviewing "A Quiet Life" (1976), about an ordinary couple struggling along in postwar Britain, the novelist Anne Tyler pointed to Ms. Bainbridge's "knack for depicting ingrown worlds (people entangled at close quarters, bitter and desperate, gnawing away at each other) and her ability to pounce on the startlingly comic underside of the most hopeless situation."

In her later novels, Ms. Bainbridge tended to use historical events as her starting point. She first employed this approach in "Young Adolf" (1978), the imagining of a visit Adolf Hitler may or may not have made to Liverpool in 1912, and went on to develop a substantial inventory of fictions rooted in incidents as varied in time and subject as the voyage of the Titanic ("Every Man for Himself," 1996) and the final years of Samuel Johnson ("According to Queeney," 2001).

Usually less than 200 pages, the novels arrived with clockwork regularity. "W expect our yearly Beryl Bainbridge," the historian Richard Cobb wrote. "It is a one that she alone can satisfy."

Beryl Margaret Bainbridge was born in Liverpool. Although most sources, including her Who's Who entry, give her birth date as Nov. 21, 1934, her birth was registered in early 1933, The Associated Press reported.

Her father was a salesman who went bankrupt in the 1930s. Her mother, nicknamed the Duchess, made it clear to one and all that she had married beneath her. The home atmosphere, tense and claustrophobic, turned out to be a rich source of material for Ms. Bainbridge.

"I write to make sense of my childhood experience," she told The New York Times in 1981. "Everything else you grow out of, but you never recover from childhood," she continued. "So I go over it again and again."

At 14 she was expelled from Merchant Taylors', a private girls' school, for illustrating a dirty rhyme. She briefly attended a stage school and then began acting in repertory theater, with only modest success.

After marrying Austin Davies, an artist and scenery painter, she began writing a novel based on a newspaper article about two New Zealand girls who murdered one of their mothers. (The case later inspired the film "Heavenly Creatures.") "Harriet Said," completed in 1958, met with rejection on the grounds of its unsavory subject and frank treatment of teenage sexuality.

"What repulsive little creatures you have made the central characters, repulsive beyond belief," one publisher wrote to her. The novel was not published until 1972.

Discouraged, Ms. Bainbridge stopped writing and raised her children, a task made more difficult when she and her husband divorced in 1959. After moving to London, where she lived the rest of her life, she briefly worked in a wine-bottling factory pasting on labels, an experience she put to use in "The Bottle Factory Outing."

Gradually, she returned to writing. "A Weekend With Claude" appeared in 1967 and "Another Part of the Wood" in 1968.

In 1970 a friendly editor, Anna Haycraft, the wife of the owner of the publishing company Gerald Duckworth, took an interest in her work despite having hated the first two novels. The Haycrafts found her a clerical job at the company, published "Harriet Said" and encouraged Ms. Bainbridge to rewrite her first two published books, which were reissued in the early 1980s.

Quite quickly, Ms. Bainbridge hit her stride with artfully sinister novels like "The Dressmaker" (1973), "The Bottle Factory Outing," "A Quiet Life" and "Injury Time" (1977).

One of Ms. Bainbridge's most richly comic novels, "Sweet William," about a single woman in

London who embarks on a disastrous affair with a rake, was made into a film in 1980, with a screenplay by the author. Sam Waterston and Jenny Agutter played the lead roles.

The enthusiastic critical response to "Young Adolf" encouraged Ms. Bainbridge to pursue her particular brand of historical fantasy, atmospherically recreating historical events through the eyes of fictional characters.

In "Watson's Apology" (1984) she used court depositions and newspaper accounts to reconstruct both a Victorian murder and a marriage. The Crimean War was the setting for "Master Georgie" (1998), and Scott's expedition to the Antarctic was the starting point for "The Birthday Boys" (1991).

"An Awfully Big Adventure" (1989), a comedy of misadventures about a brooding teenage girl who joins an acting company in Liverpool in the 1950s, marked a return to her early manner. It was made into a film, released in 1995, with Alan Rickman, Hugh Grant and Georgina Cates.

Ms. Bainbridge is survived by two daughters, Jo-Jo Davies and Rudi Davies, and a son, Aaron Davies, all of London, and seven grandchildren.

At her death, she was at work on "The Girl in the Polka-Dot Dress," a novel about the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy. By chance, Ms. Bainbridge had been in Los Angeles when the assassination took place.

Ms. Bainbridge, who was made a Dame Commander of the British Empire in 2000, struck an unassuming pose about the art of fiction. "I am of the firm belief that everybody could write books, and I never understand why they don't," she told the reference work "Contemporary Novelists" in 1976. "After all, everyone speaks. Once the grammar has been learnt, it is simply talking on paper and in time learning what not to say."

SARAH PAULSON
BRAD PITT
ALFRE WOODARD

September 9, 2011

Beryl Bainbridge's Bobby Kennedy Novel

By WILLIAM BOYD

THE GIRL IN THE POLKA-DOT DRESS

By Beryl Bainbridge

162 pp. Europa Editions. Paper, $15.

On May 30, 1888, Anton Chekhov wrote exasperatedly to a friend, the newspaper editor A. S. Suvorin, complaining about the state of contemporary Russian literature, filled with its moral injunctions and its pious prescriptions for human behavior. The writer, he insisted "should not be a judge of his characters or what they say, but an impartial witness. . . . It's time for writers, especially writers of real artistic worth, to realize . . . that in fact nothing can be understood in this world." In a real sense, these phrases encapsulate the Chekhovian credo: nothing makes sense, mediocrity is the true demonic force, life is weird and vulgar, judgment is irrelevant. And to many writers, post-Chekhov, this point of view has appeared very attractive. In English literature since World War II, two writers in particular have made this take on life and the human predicament their personal forte — Muriel Spark and Beryl Bainbridge. Bainbridge, who died last year, of cancer, at the age of 77, pushed this attitude of amused, quietistic indifference to its ultimate level. Her succession of short novels (17 in all) demonstrates a beguiling relish in people's fundamental opacity, eccentricity and inability to conform, however hard they may happen to be trying.

Bainbridge's work can be divided into two broad types. The early novels ("Harriet Said," "The Bottle Factory Outing," "Injury Time") were almost "kitchen-sink" in the sense that they reflected a known humdrum world often closely related to the author's own autobiography. Later in her career, she began to use historical events and real people ("The Birthday Boys," "Every Man for Himself," "Master Georgie") as spurs to her creative imagination. But whether she was writing about Adolf Hitler or the Titanic or Scott's expedition to Antarctica, what colors and defines the world of

Bainbridge's novels is this same sense and relish of the absurd, the perverse and the inexplicable. People are very odd, her fiction repeatedly tells us; they behave in the strangest ways, and they are psychologically messed up to a degree that they — and we — can barely surmise.

Perhaps it's fitting, then, that this posthumous, incomplete novel, "The Girl in the Polka-Dot Dress," brings together the two strands of Bainbridge's fiction and knits them into a perplexing, dark narrative that — hindsight affording insight — almost seems to prefigure Bainbridge's death. The novel is set in 1968 and concerns the journey of Rose, an Englishwoman in her late 20s, who travels to the United States and there, with the help of a friend of a friend called Harold, embarks on a quest to find a man, a certain Dr. Wheeler. Also an American, Wheeler was in England during Rose's youth and was instrumental in saving her from her self-destructive instincts. Wheeler provided her with a philosophy that she could live by and with. And now — for reasons that are never fully clear — she wants to find him again.

Harold knows Wheeler too. They were friends until Wheeler had an affair with Harold's promiscuous wife, Dollie, and Harold is keen to meet him again. But his motives are more sinister, and he has armed himself with a revolver. So Rose and Harold set off in Harold's camper van on a journey across the country in pursuit of the elusive Dr. Wheeler. They travel from Baltimore to Washington, D.C., then up to the Canadian border, finally heading west toward Los Angeles, Dr. Wheeler always one step ahead of them. On the way, they stay with friends of Harold — all misfits and cranks in some way — or else park in campsites or stay in shabby motels. They are the most unlikely couple — a kind of neurotic, low-rent Humbert Humbert with his grubby, diffident Lolita — and, this being a Bainbridge novel, the journey is often very funny.

Harold is irritated by Rose and her smoking habit; she doesn't wash enough; she seems remarkably incurious about the landscapes she's passing through. Rose finds Harold boring and fastidious, intently spraying the camper van with insect repellent. No one has a sharper eye than Bainbridge for human foibles and pretensions; no one better understands importunate human needs and the urgent desire to assuage them, whether it's a stolen cigarette in a car park or soulless sex in a hotel bedroom.

What makes this novel different from the ones that have gone before is its darkness. The novel is suffused with death — the famous assassinations that marked the 1960s, of J.F.K. and Martin Luther King Jr., and Jack Ruby's murder of Lee Harvey Oswald — but also the deaths encountered as the journey progresses. A funeral for a young man killed in Vietnam, a dog run over, a pervert stabbed by his victim: the body count is bleak and impossible to ignore. And because this is Bainbridge's last novel, written during what she knew was a fatal illness, one wonders — legitimately — if her own prospective demise prompted these somber meditations.

Various religious options are explored. Rose attends a funeral [illegible] on a theosophist meeting; she prays from time to time. But th[illegible] is meager and the conviction erratic. Dr. Wheeler's harsh judg[illegible] human condition is the one that obsesses her: "If you want a [illegible] guide you through life, you have to accustom yourself to looking upon the world as a penal colony. If you abide by this you'll stop regarding disagreeable incidents, sufferings, worries and miseries as anything out of the ordinary. Indeed, you'll realize that everything is as it should be; each of us pays the penalty of existence in our own peculiar way." This is Chekhov pushed to the edge of nihilism.

As Rose and Harold journey through a turbulent country riven with race hatred and riots, they pick up Dr. Wheeler's trail. He is part of the entourage around Robert Kennedy, who is running for the presidential nomination. It becomes clear that the eventual rendezvous will take place at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, site of the novel's final, famous death. But we never reach that moment, since Bainbridge left the novel unfinished.

Rose, wearing a polka dot dress to impress Dr. Wheeler, is seen standing on a chair beside Sirhan Sirhan listening to Bobby Kennedy. We can only guess at what might have happened next. The novel's coda takes the form of a reproduction of an actual newspaper report of a witness to the Kennedy assassination who recalled seeing a girl in a polka dot dress run from the hotel claiming that "we shot Senator Kennedy."

Curiously, its incompleteness doesn't diminish this short, haunting novel. History tells us what really happened next, and Rose and Harold's fictional

part in it can be imagined in any number of ways. The novel functions in the same way as Camus's "Étranger" or Beckett's "Waiting for Godot" (it could easily be entitled "Looking for Dr. Wheeler"). The unanswered questions add to its mystery and strange power.

I didn't know Beryl Bainbridge well, but our paths crossed from time to time. I last saw her at an authors' party hosted by a major London bookshop. As I left, I bumped into Beryl, who had gone outside to smoke a cigarette. We chatted and she said, dryly, "I don't really enjoy these occasions, do you?" I admitted I didn't. "But," she added, "I suppose we have to make an effort." We said goodbye, Beryl trod on her cigarette, smiled and went back in to the party.

William Boyd's new novel, "Waiting for Sunrise," will be published next spring.

persons who "programmed" him.[16] This theory was supported by psychologist and hypnosis expert Dr. Eduard Simson-Kallas after 35 hours of work with Sirhan in San Quentin prison in 1969 after his conviction which Sirhan claimed then, and to this day, to have no memory of the assassination or aftermath.[17]

The woman in the polka-dot dress

Kennedy campaign worker Sandy Serrano reported seeing a girl in a polka dot dress running from the scene with a man accompanying her, and claimed that the girl exclaimed, "We shot him! We shot him!". When asked to whom the girl was referring, Serrano reported that the girl said, "We shot Senator Kennedy!"[18][19] Another witness, Evan Freed, also saw the girl in the polka dot dress.[20] This report was connected by alternative theorists such as with another report of a girl wearing a polka dot dress who was supposedly seen with Sirhan at various times during the evening, including in the kitchen where the assassination took place.[21][22] Serrano stated that preceding her supposed encounter with the polka-dot dress girl, she heard a series of shots that sounded like a car backfiring.[18] However, following this claim, LAPD criminologist DeWayne Wolfer conducted tests to determine if Serrano could have heard the shots from her location. He found that there would have been a change in sound level of 1/2 decibel at Serrano's location resulting from a shot being fired in the kitchen of the hotel, and concluded that she could therefore not have heard the shots as she claimed.[23] Additionally, Kranz commented in his report that Serrano admitted to fabricating the story following further interviews with investigating officers and that he was unable to find evidence to corroborate any aspect of the original account[23] However, in the documentary RFK Must Die, Serrano was adamant that what she saw and heard was true. Serrano stated that LAPD SGT Hank Hernandez bullied her into recanting her account; and audio of the 38-minute interview between Hernandez and Serrano furthered her assertion that she was bullied into withdrawing her account.

CIA involvement

In November 2006, the BBC's *Newsnight* program presented research by filmmaker Shane O'Sullivan alleging that several CIA officers were present on the night of the assassination.[24] Three men who appear in video and photographs from the night of the assassination were positively identified by former colleagues and associates as former senior CIA officers who had worked together in 1963 at JMWAVE, the CIA's main anti-Castro station based in Miami. They were JMWAVE Chief of Operations David Morales, Chief of Maritime Operations Gordon Campbell and Chief of Psychological Warfare Operations George Joannides.[24]

The program featured an interview with Morales's former attorney Robert Walton, who quoted him as having said, "I was in Dallas when we got the son of a bitch and I was in Los Angeles when we got the little bastard".[24] O'Sullivan reported that the CIA declined to comment on the officers in question. It was also alleged that Morales was known for his deep anger toward the Kennedys for what he saw as their betrayal during the Bay of Pigs Invasion.[25]

After further investigation, O'Sullivan produced the feature documentary, *RFK Must Die*. The film casts doubt on the earlier identifications and ultimately argues that the man previously identified as Gordon Campbell may, in fact, have been Michael D. Roman, a now-deceased Bulova Watch Company employee, who was at the Ambassador Hotel for a company convention.[26]

References

The INDEPENDENT

The Girl In The Polka-Dot Dress, By Beryl Bainbridge

Reviewed by Paul Bailey

Friday, 20 May 2011

The Girl in the Polka-dot Dress could be described, glibly, as a "road novel", since most of the action takes place on the freeways of America as Harold Grasse drives his newly bought, second-hand camper from Maryland to California in the summer of 1968. The portly, bearded Harold's passenger is a young Englishwoman named Rose, who has come to the United States on a one-way ticket with the intention of leaving her dreary lodgings in Kentish Town for ever.

Both Washington Harold, as she calls him, and Rose are on a mission to find a certain Dr Wheeler, who has a rare talent for being elusive. For Rose, whose childhood was overshadowed by domestic violence, physical and verbal, Fred Wheeler, the kindly visiting American in a trilby hat, is nothing less than her saviour. He treated her with dignity and respect at an especially bad time in her blighted life, and her single, overriding ambition is to be reunited with him.

Harold sees the doctor somewhat differently, as a vain, heartless seducer, among other failings, and is possessed of an unspoken desire to exert revenge on him. Their search for the devilish redeemer is the starting-point for Beryl Bainbridge's final book, which was all but finished when she died of cancer in July last year.

It is a pleasure to record that The Girl in the Polka-dot Dress ranks among the finest of Bainbridge's fine works of fiction. The narrative is by turns sombre, terrifying and hilarious. Here is a typically laconic passage: "Mrs Shaefer opened the door to them. She was short and stout and wore a stained apron over a long black dress. Before she said hallo she swore at a man with a ponytail who was standing behind her. She called him a shithead. Rose felt at home. The man with the hair tied back gave Harold a bear hug."

That "Rose felt at home" is a masterly touch, a casual aside that's funnier for being true. A Bainbridge joke is always there to serve a moral purpose, not for the sheer sake of it, as in so much dire comic writing.

Rose is someone that only Beryl Bainbridge could have created. She is reminiscent of the girls in her early, partly autobiographical, novels - resilient against all the odds, sharp-witted when it suits her, annoyingly vague when she's distracted. The great success here is that she and Harold are two of a desperate kind, without their ever acknowledging the fact to one another.

Harold's mother was as satanic as Rose's father, and he is every bit as scarred by memories as she is. The one good thing to emerge from Harold's past is that a halfway decent stepfather left him some money with which to buy stocks and bonds - a financial comfort, at least. Rose has an abandoned baby, an abortion, and failed relationships to remember. Harold worships his departed wife Dottie, who had dozens of specious reasons not to have sex with him, resisting his every attempt to make love to her.

It has to be noted that sexual liaisons in Bainbridge's fiction are often abrupt, occasionally over before they have even begun. Rose has become an expert at lying back and thinking of England or whatever, as a particularly chilling scene brilliantly demonstrates.

Harold and Rose talk a lot, frequently at cross-purposes. We, as readers, share the pain they are unable to express. When revelations come, they are comically expressed: "The night before he'd commented on the way she drummed her fingers on her knees when listening to the radio and she'd said she'd been good at playing the piano, until her mother had battered her knuckles with a spoon whenever she struck a wrong note. That, he'd said, sure was a dumb way to encourage a love of music, and she'd retorted that piano lessons cost a lot of money, and anyway she preferred the ukulele."

Does Rose really prefer the ukulele, or is she jokingly covering up the disappointment she still feels at being denied those piano lessons? Again, a Bainbridge joke makes you laugh and then makes you think - a trait she first employed when she started writing 50 years ago. The Girl in the Polka-dot Dress is full of echoes - from The Dressmaker, from An Awfully Big Adventure, from Injury Time and Harriet Said, the creepiest and most upsetting novel she wrote. It's as if Bainbridge is investing the gauche but knowing Rose with a lifetime's experience of the essential mystery of human behaviour - the mystery that keeps great writers writing to the very end, even as they realise that it will remain unsolved, except by flashes of illumination.

This is not one of Bainbridge's historical reconstructions, despite the fact that the plot hinges on the assassination of Robert Kennedy. A girl in a polka-dot dress was seen running from the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles after the six shots were fired. In the final chapters, a diminutive man in a yellow sweater with the ambition of becoming a jockey is introduced, and a crazy hypnotist tells Rose that his name is Sirhan. (Sirhan Sirhan was sentenced to life imprisonment for Kennedy's murder.)

The Girl in the Polka-dot Dress reads like a summation of Beryl Bainbridge's art. It is carefully constructed, as always, but there is a sense in which the author is returning to her roots, using the rich material of her early life in wartime Liverpool to devastating effect, and that Rose is the last repository for those feelings that first inspired her to abandon acting and become a novelist. The constant theme in Bainbridge's novels, the all-important concern, is death. The idea of extinction informs her fiction from the beginning to the end of her writing life. It's no wonder that she loved Dr Johnson, with his great fear of the beyond, and was moved by the plight of the passengers on the Titanic, and those idealistic birthday boys who perished in the Antarctic.

Although she has an absurdist's eye for the random vagaries of life, she never treats death as a laughing matter. She was fascinated by murders, particularly those that take place in living rooms and kitchens and bedrooms. Many years ago, I asked her about her lapsed Catholic faith and she replied that she was happier with hellfire and damnation than the tenets of the second Vatican council. She was the kindest and least judgmental person I have ever known, but I think she believed in the notion of sin and its terrible and terrifying consequences.

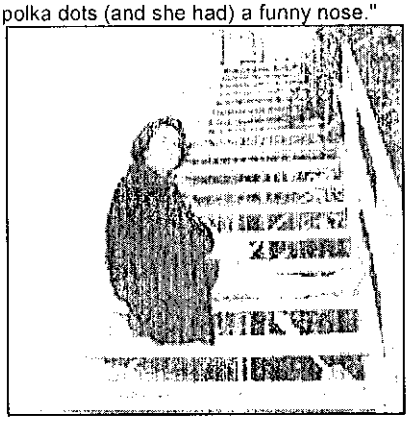
Paul Bailey's new novel is 'Chapman's Odyssey' (Bloomsbury)

"...try as we may to make a silence, we cannot."

— John Cage

The evening of the murder, police interviewed Vincent DiPierro, a college kid and part-time waiter at the Ambassador Hotel, whc said he had spotted Sirhan Sirhan before the shooting, standing near the tray table. What had drawn his attention to the would-b assassin was the woman to whom he was whispering. DiPierro thought she was quite attractive, despite a small pug nose. She brown hair and blue eyes and wore a "white dress with black or purple polka dots". Moments before Sirhan leaped forward to sh he murmured in her ear and she smiled.

That same night at the police station a 21-year-old campaign worker named Sandra Serrano also told the investigators about a mysterious polka dot-wearing lady. Having gone out for some fresh air, Serrano found sanctuary on the steps that led down from ballroom to the street. At about 11:30 p.m., she said, a trio comprised of a young couple and a young male who looked like Sirha Sirhan ascended the steps from the parking lot and entered the ballroom. The woman wore a polka-dot dress. Not long after, claimed Serrano, the couple, minus the third party, came bolting down the steps, exuberantly crying, "We shot Kennedy!" When police asked her for a more accurate description of the dress and the woman who wore it, the witness replied, "white dress with polka dots (and she had) a funny nose."



Sandra Serrano

(California State Archives)

That wasn't all. The polka-dot lady had also been seen by a police sergeant named Paul Sharaga. He had been cruising on-duty near the vicinity of the Ambassador when he heard a radio report about a shooting at the hotel. Turning his squad in that directic he parked it in the adjacent lot and ran inside. But as he reached the sidewalk outside, already in clamor, he overheard a gigglin couple pass by him, mumbling, "We shot Kennedy!" The female wore polka dots. By the time it dawned on him what was going (they had disappeared into the darkness. Sharaga immediately radioed their description into headquarters.

The LAPD discounted the strange tales. Says Manny Pena, SUS chief investigator, "I found no credence that there was a gal in polka-dot dress who said, 'We shot Kennedy'. What (we believe they all) heard was, '*They* shot Kennedy'...If we didn't dispel tha we could still be looking for the gal."

But, why the LAPD never saw "credence" in a matching story related by three unrelated people — including a policeman — was never explained. Nor was it explained why any innocent person would laugh when they heard someone was shot.

Because Serrano was the most adamant about the existence of the phantom lady, she was turned over to a Sgt. Enrique Hernandez for in-depth questioning on the topic. The interview lasted more than an hour and, badly shaken from the almost-accusatory nature of the interview, she took and failed a polygraph (lie detector) test. Here is a segment of the actual transcript, which is taken from Dan E. Moldea's *The Killing of Robert F. Kennedy*:

HERNANDEZ: I think you owe it to Senator Kennedy, the late Senator Kennedy, to come forth, be a woman about this...Don't shame his death by keeping this thing up. I have compassion for you. I want to know why. I want to know why you did what you This is a very serious thing.

SERRANO: I seen those people!

HERNANDEZ: No, no, no, no, Sandy. Remember what I told you about that: you can't say you saw something when you really didn't see it ...

SERRANO: Well, I don't feel like I'm doing anything wrong...I remember seeing the girl!

HERNANDEZ: No, I'm talking about what you have told here about seeing a person tell you, 'We have shot Kennedy.' And that's wrong.

SERRANO: That's what she said.

HERNANDEZ: No, it isn't, Sandy...

SERRANO: No! That's what she said.

HERNANDEZ: Look it! Look it! I love this man!

SERRANO: So do I.

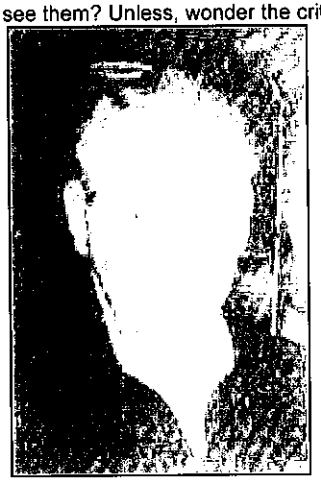
HERNANDEZ: And you're shaming (him)...!

SERRANO: Don't shout at me.

HERNANDEZ: Well, I'm trying not to shout. but this a very emotional thing for me, too...If you love the man, the least you owe him is the courtesy of letting him rest in peace.

When questioned by reporters about the brutal interrogation tactics practiced on the girl by Hernandez, the police defended them as normal routine.

Right or wrong, the police did seem to snuff the polka-dot controversy expediently, critics all agree. The LAPD thereafter reported that waiter Vince DiPierro admitted he had embellished his story, that there was no polka-dotted young lady standing by the tray table near Sirhan. But, one item remains fact on record: After the police questioned six women who were known to wear that design of dress that evening, one lady named Valerie Schulte voluntarily came forward to say that she had been standing in the area where DiPierro claimed to have seen her, although she did not know Sirhan. Nevertheless, she was there. Now, even though Schulte's nose is not "pug," why did DiPierro recant his original testimony of seeing polka dots when, indeed, it turned out that he probably did see them? Unless, wonder the critics, he, like Serrano, was "questioned" in a similar fashion.



Sergeant Paul Sharaga

Sergeant Sharaga's story, in the meantime, likewise withered."(Sharaga) believes that due to the noise and confusion at the time what was said and what was misinterpreted was 'they shot him'," reads an LAPD memo. But, when author Moldea interviewed Sharaga in research for his book, the former sergeant said that the department had simply gone ahead and recanted his testimony for him. Personally, he sticks to his statement to this day: He had seen the girl in the polka-dot dress