

# MARGARET DRABBLE

AUTHOR OF *THE RADIANT WAY*

## *A Natural* CURIOSITY

'Her confident  
and marvellously  
accomplished  
new novel'

— *London Review  
of Books*



# A NATURAL CURIOSITY

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Margaret Drabble



PENGUIN BOOKS

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PENGUIN BOOKS  
A NATURAL CURIOSITY

Margaret Drabble was born in Sheffield in 1939 and went to the Mount School, York, a Quaker boarding school. She won a Major Scholarship to Newnham College, Cambridge, where she read English. She was awarded the CBE in 1980.

She has written several novels: *A Summer Bird-Cage* (1963), *The Garrick Year* (1964), *The Millstone* (1965, filmed as *A Touch of Love* in 1969), *Jerusalem the Golden* (1967), *The Waterfall* (1969), *The Needle's Eye* (1972), *The Realms of Gold* (1975), *The Ice Age* (1977), *The Middle Ground* (1980) and *The Radiant Way* (1987), all of which have been published by Penguin. She has also published a short critical book on Wordsworth and many articles, as well as *Arnold Bennett: A Biography* (1974), *The Genius of Thomas Hardy* (1976, edited), *A Writer's Britain* (1979) and *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (1985, edited).

Margaret Drabble has three children and is married to the biographer Michael Holroyd.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

*A Natural Curiosity* is a sequel to *The Radiant Way*, and picks up some of the characters and stories, while adding others. I had not intended to write a sequel, but felt that the earlier novel was in some way unfinished, that it had asked questions it had not answered, and introduced people who had hardly been allowed to speak. At the moment of writing this, I intend to write a third but very different volume, which will follow the adventures of Stephen Cox in Kampuchea.

Margaret Drabble  
London, 1988

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## BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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### **The Ice-Age**

Anthony Keating is middle-aged. His undoubted talents have brought him a dodgily prosperous living as a property developer, an estranged wife, a devoted mistress, several children and a heart attack.

### **The Realms of Gold**

Frances Wingate is a very competent lady. A successful archaeologist with four healthy children, she is famous and, above all, independent. So, what is she searching for on her trips into the distant past of the desert or the nearer past of her family?

### **The Middle Ground**

The middle years of Kate Armstrong are caught between parents and children and are free of neither. When Kate is forced to make a reconnaissance of the middle ground of her life, she makes some surprising discoveries.

### **The Millstone**

Rosamund – independent, sophisticated, enviably clever – is terrified of true maturity. Then, ironically, her first sexual experience leaves her pregnant . . .

### **The Garrick Year**

This novel takes the lid off a theatrical marriage; inside we find Emma, married to an egocentric actor playing a year's season at a provincial theatre festival, David, her husband – and Wyndham the producer. The mixture rapidly turns to acid.

### **Jerusalem the Golden**

The girl from Northam was grateful to find herself accepted in London intellectual circles. She could become the golden girl and have real affairs with married men, just like in the novels.

*and*

### **A Summer Bird-Cage**

### **The Waterfall**

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## BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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### **The Radiant Way**

'*The Radiant Way* shows a Dickensian desire to encompass the whole of contemporary British life, with its widening social and regional gulfs . . . humane, intelligent, engrossing' – *Independent*.

Liz, Alix and Esther were among the most brilliant of their generation. To these three gifted and ambitious young women, fresh from Cambridge in the 1950s, the world offered its riches.

On New Year's Eve 1979 they reunite to celebrate the birth of a new decade. What does the future now hold for Liz, assured Harley Street psychotherapist, wife, mother and stepmother; for relentlessly well-intentioned Alix, teaching English literature to young girl offenders; and for Esther, eccentric connoisseur of art, resolutely single and living at the wrong end of Ladbroke Grove.

In exploring the lives of these three women and in telling of their loves and losses, their hopes and fears, Margaret Drabble creates an unforgettable panorama of our changing times.

Margaret Drabble's powerful and acclaimed novel of the 1980s is the precursor of *A Natural Curiosity*.



*Friday, 2 January 1987*

A low pale lemon grey sun hung over the winter moor. It swam, haloed, in the grey mist. The road climbed gently into obscurity. Dimly on either side appeared straw-grey tufts of long grasses, pale reeds, patches of dwindling, lingering snow. Grey shades, yellow shades, a soft damp white light. Alix Bowen gazed ahead, exalted. She was on her way to see her murderer. Her heart sang, in the cold landscape, as she drove towards the flat summit of the moor.

Alix Bowen goes to see her murderer quite regularly. This will be her first visit for a month, her Christmas gift, her New Year's gift. Some of her friends disapprove of what could now, Alix realizes, be described as an obsession, but most of them are too polite to comment. Her husband Brian says nothing to deter her. He smiles indulgently, anxiously, as he listens to her stories. If he thinks her interest excessive, or unnatural (which it is, and he must), he does not say so.

Alix's old friend Liz Headleand is less restrained. 'You're barmy, Alix,' Liz would comment, from time to time, over the phone, as Alix reports her murderer's latest intimations, her own most recent speculations. But then, Alix tells herself, Liz is probably jealous. Liz, a professional psychotherapist, probably thinks it quite wrong that an amateur meddler like Alix should have acquired such easy and privileged access to so notorious a criminal. Liz had missed her own chance to befriend the murderer. She, like Alix, had been in the same building with him, had been more or less held hostage by the police on his behalf: if Liz had

thought quicker then, had acted quicker then, he could by now have been Liz's murderer, and Liz herself could be driving to visit him across this lonely moor.

The murderer had come Alix's way, without much intervention on her part. He had followed her, as it were. He and Alix were inextricably, mystically linked. Well, that was one way of looking at it. It was not Alix's, whatever her friends might suspect. But it *was* rather odd, reflected Alix, as she drove along through the mist at a steady fifty miles an hour, that he should have turned up here, more or less on her doorstep. She had moved north from London a couple of years ago, and he had followed her, though less voluntarily. It took Alix under an hour to drive from her north Northam suburban home to reach the desolate top-security prison which now housed Paul Whitmore. Not exactly her doorstep, but near enough: in the old days, when she had worked in London, it had taken her at least an hour and a half to drive across the city to work, whereas here, up here in the north, you could be out of town in ten minutes, in the depths of the landscape in twenty, and safely arrived at the iron gates of Porston Prison in fifty. If that's where you wanted to be.

'O come, O come, Ema-a-aniel, Redeem thy captive I-i-israel, That into exile dre-e-ear is gone, Far from the sight of Go-o-od's dear son,' sang Alix, cheerfully, as the white mist parted for her. She had the illusion of moving in a small patch of light, her own small pocket of clarity. She took it with her, it moved with her. The pale sun loomed. The horizons were invisible, but Alix knew they were there, would be there, and that she herself would see them again. The sleeping place of the sun, near the freezing of the sea. As the Ancients put it. And the sun indeed seems to slumber, up here in its dim haze, in its cold thrall.

Alix had brought a book as a Christmas present for her murderer. A new, illustrated book about Roman Britain and the resistance of the Brigantes. She had been browsing in it the night

before, captivated by tales of Client Queen Cartimandua's deals with the Romans, by the stubborn resistance of her divorced husband Venutius. Colourful stuff, and colourfully narrated. It would make a good television mini-series, the story of Cartimandua. The treacherous Celtic queen, gold-torqued, magnificent, betraying her people for the civilization and comforts of the Romans: the rejected consort, hiding out in the snow with his bands of warriors. North and South, the Two Nations. One could make it topical, surely – a hint in the portrayal of Cartimandua of the Prime Minister, duplicitous Britannia, striking deals with a powerful America, abandoning the ancient culture of her own folk? Those stiff hair styles would surely lend themselves well to allusion, to analogue.

Alix had become intrigued, excited, the night before, and had got out her battered old purple Penguin Tacitus to look up the story, and yes, there it was, most aptly prefigured. 'And so Agricola trained the sons of chiefs in the liberal arts . . . the wearing of our national dress came into favour . . . and so, little by little, the Britons were led on to the amenities that make vice agreeable: arcades, baths, and sumptuous banquets. They called such novelties "civilization", when they were in reality only a feature of their enslavement.'

She read this passage aloud to Brian, who nodded agreement: Coca-Cola, McDonald's, blue jeans, jacuzzis . . . yes, that was surely what Tacitus had in mind. But, continued Brian, mildly, he didn't suppose that the Brigantes and the Iceni and the Silures were very nice people, really, either. Hadn't they burned people alive in wicker cages? Hadn't they consulted the gods by inspecting the twisting human entrails of their tortured and sacrificed victims?

'A bit like P. Whitmore, you mean?' said Alix.

'Well, yes. Not unlike P. Whitmore.'

'I think those are just atrocity stories,' said Alix. 'Roman

propaganda against the native population. Recent research seems to indicate that maybe the ancient Britons weren't even very war-like. They were just peaceful farmers. That's the newest theory.'

'Really? And the figure of 60,000 Romans put to the sword by Boudicca is just a historical figment too, is it?'

'I don't know,' said Alix. 'I think that's a different period. And anyway, how can they possibly have known? How can they have counted?'

She paused, reflecting that P. Whitmore said he could not quite remember how many of the inhabitants of North Kensington he had killed. Brian, who could read her mind, said, 'And P. Whitmore, is *he* atrocious?'

'Well, that's what I'm trying to work out,' Alix had said, closing the Tacitus, getting up to put on the kettle.

Yes. P. Whitmore was very interested in the ancient Britons, and knew quite a lot about prehistory. Indeed, Alix wondered if the book she had bought him was perhaps a little too easy for him, a little too popular in tone? But it *was* new, and covered the new excavations by Ian Kettle at Eastwold, and had new speculations about the relationship of the Parisi and the Brigantes. And some very attractive photographs of Celtic mirrors and shields. And an authoritative introduction by an important professor, a real professor.

'If it's not too easy for me, surely it can't be too easy for him?' asked Alix, doubtfully, returning with a pot of coffee.

'Don't be absurd, my darling,' said Brian. 'He's lucky to get any book at all. I think it's a perfectly acceptable book. I'd be quite pleased if somebody gave me such a nice book. I think you've done him proud.'

And so, really, did Alix.

So why is Alix Bowen in such a good mood, as she drives across the top of Houndsback Moor?

Alix Bowen is in a good mood partly because her protégé, Paul Whitmore, is offering her intellectual and psychological stimulus of an unusually invigorating nature. He has come to her by chance, but it is almost as if she had invented him, as an illustration of whatever it is she wishes to discover about human nature. At the age of fifty, Alix had come to recognize that for some reason as yet obscure to her, she, an exceptionally law-abiding and mild-mannered and conscientious citizen, has always been peculiarly interested in prisons, discipline, conviction, violence and the criminal mentality. Is it perhaps *because* she is so 'nice' that she is so intrigued? Does her interest express her other darker ever-repressed self? Will that repressed self break out one day wildly or can it remain for ever latent, as, apparently, can the aggressive nature of *Onychomys leucogaster*, the stocky stubborn mouse of Utah (see study by L. D. Clark)? It is getting a little late for it to break out now. She is already fifty-one, inexorably heading for fifty-two. Or maybe it is precisely *because* she definitively *lacks* this element in her psyche that she is drawn towards it, and has spent so much of her adult life teaching in prisons and studying the deviant behaviour of female offenders? As though in a search for her own wholeness? Or in search of a refutation of the concept of original sin?

Alix does not know. But she does realize that in P. Whitmore she has stumbled upon an uncannily appropriate subject of inquiry. He fits her queries geometrically. He is like a theorem. When she has measured him, she will know the answer to herself and to the whole matter. The Nature of Man. Original Sin. Evil and Good. It is all to be studied, there, in captive P. Whitmore, towards whom she now drives, bearing her propitiatory copy of *The Queen, the Rebel and Rome: A Study of the Resistance of the Brigantes AD 40-AD 79*. It is not entirely coincidental that Porston Prison is sited in the heartland of the ancient territory of the Brigantes. The interest of Paul Whitmore and Alix Bowen in the

Brigantes has been much stimulated by the location of the prison and by the recent Yorkshire Television programme on the finds of Ian Kettle's dig. Had the prison been in Newport, or Colchester, other aspects of the historical past might well have captured their attention, other tribes might have solicited their sympathy: but then, of course, they would not have been together to be so captivated.

Paul Whitmore is serving a life sentence. He was convicted of the murder of four women and one man, although he claims to have killed at least one more. The last of the corpses was that of an old friend and professional acquaintance of Alix's, a young woman called Jilly Fox, whose severed head was discovered in Alix's car in a shabby street in North Kensington. Paul Whitmore was in the habit of decapitating his victims. He did not know why, or so he told Alix, but Alix was in the process of working it out.

Paul Whitmore had become something of a folk monster, because of the sensational nature of his crimes. His personality, however, did little to stimulate that sensation. He was a dull-voiced, monotonous, studious young man, not a flamboyant monster. The Horror of Harrow Road (for such had been his sobriquet) proved something of a disappointment, to those in search of *La Bête Humaine*. Even the women's lobby found him rather dull. There was not much to get at, in Paul Whitmore. No obvious hatred of women, no Ripper-like despising of prostitutes. The crimes had not been sexual, or not obviously so. Members of the anti-racism lobby had slightly more to build on, as most of the victims (although not Jilly Fox) had been black, but they had not managed to build much, for even they conceded that maybe the victims had been black for geographical reasons, because Paul Whitmore happened to live at the wrong end of Ladbroke Grove. They suggested that the police might have been more active had the victims been white, pointed out that it was only after the peculiarly noticeable murder of the white Jilly

Fox that P. Whitmore had been apprehended, but these arguments did not carry much conviction, even to themselves. P. Whitmore remained unclaimed, unwanted.

Alix Bowen had kept quiet about her association with him, her claiming of him. She did not fancy poisonous letters from either lobby, or from the general public, which would, *en masse*, though not human soul by human soul, have liked to see the Horror hung, drawn and quartered and mouldering on Tower Bridge, rather than visited by Alix Bowen bearing an illustrated book on Roman Britain costing £9.95.

She talked about him to Brian, and to her friend Liz Headleand, and to her employer, the ancient poet Howard Beaver, the Grand Old Man of Yorkshire letters. The ancient poet was way beyond all moral judgement, and was possessed, in the last evenings of his life, with what Alix considered an admirably lively curiosity about Paul Whitmore.

The ancient poet would listen, fascinated, as Alix described what she had learned of Paul's childhood and background. The father was a butcher, the mother a hairdresser, in a small town in the north Midlands. When the mother ran off with a lorry driver, Paul had been taken into care for a while, and then returned to his father. He had been taken on a school outing at the age of eleven to see the Bog Man of Buller. He had become obsessed by death and human sacrifice. He had devoured books on the Druids and Stonehenge, on the Celts and the Romans, on the old gods. History had been his favourite subject, although he had also, less dangerously, enjoyed botany. He had no doubt seemed a docile pupil, with a good future ahead. A quiet boy, who liked to avoid the playground's rough and tumble, who liked to keep his nose in a book.

Beaver too had been, was interested in ancient Britain. He had even written a poem about the Bog Man of Buller. He was very interested in Paul Whitmore's interests.

He made Alix find the poem, read it aloud to her, noisily. It was an uncollected piece, originally published in *Collusion*. 'You can read it to your murderer, if you like,' he offered, helpfully, provocatively.

'No thank you,' said Alix, primly. 'I don't think he'd like it. He's not into Modernism. He likes Swinburne.'

Reading Swinburne, alone, in his lonely flat. Dusky ladies, delicious tortures, Our Lady of Pain.

Paul did not, in fact, read Swinburne, but he might have done, reflected Alix. As she invented P. Whitmore.

The ancient poet found the whole subject very entertaining.

A poet and a murderer. Odd company I now keep, thought Alix to herself jubilantly as she traversed the sodden high flatland, beneath a winter sky.

Ancient crimes arise to declare themselves, to invite detection. Graves weep blood, sinners return to the fatal scene, the primal crime. And Alix Bowen once again finds herself in front of Paul Whitmore, in the visiting room, with its strange huge view. This Victorian building is so designed that once inside, once through the clanging gates and the turning of the keys, one cannot see the walls and watch-towers that surround it. There is an illusion of freedom, of space, of being islanded upon the moor. Not imprisoned, but stranded, with all perspectives opening, helplessly, widely, impersonally, meaninglessly, for ever.

Alix is entranced and appalled by this view, but looks down from it to Paul Whitmore, who is inspecting Alix's gift.

'Thank you very much,' he says, politely.

'It's really quite interesting,' says Alix. 'In fact, I think I may get myself a copy too.'

Paul Whitmore leafed through the pages, pausing at a photograph of a Parisi chariot burial. A skeleton lay between two great preserved iron wheels, which retained traces of wooden spokes.



'There's an exhibition of British archaeology on at the British Museum,' said Alix. 'A friend sent me a catalogue. I must try to get down to see it.'

Paul was reading the captions. 'A woman,' he said. 'A tribal queen, it says. They say she was buried with a side of pork on top of her. And an iron mirror.'

'A side of *pork*?' echoed Alix. 'I missed that bit. Show me.'

He handed the book back to her. She stared.

'I can't see a side of pork,' she said.

'I suppose it rotted,' said Paul Whitmore.

'Then how did they know it was there?' asked Alix. Foolishly. Paul looked at her in friendly contempt, and they both laughed.

'I don't know much about archaeological techniques,' said Alix, in apology.

'I had a letter from my Dad,' said Paul. 'He says he's shut up the shop. My fault, he says.'

Alix did not want to imply that it was not, so said nothing.

'He blames me,' continued Paul, experimentally.

'He must be getting on a bit anyway,' said Alix, as a diversionary tactic, as a semi-excuse. One of these days, Alix fears, Paul will ask her to go and visit his father. She half hopes he will, half fears it. Paul's father had been pursued by and interviewed by the press at the time of the trial, but had not said much. Would he have more to say now?

'Fifty-eight, he is,' said Paul.

A silence fell, during which Alix reflected that she was getting on a bit too and that, though it did not seem so to her, it must seem so to others, including Paul, who was young enough to be her son.

Paul abandoned the subject of his father, turned another page, and lit on a picture of a coin portraying the vanquished Britannia, elegantly perched. From the next page, the Colchester sphinx with a human head in her forepaws gazed bare-breasted at them.