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The beauty and the psycho

The acclaimed novelist Elizabeth Jane Howard tells of her seduction by a conman she now suspects of murder

Rosie Millard

THIS ARTICLE IS THE SUBJECT OF A LEGAL COMPLAINT

Although she is now referred to as a "classic British author", Elizabeth Jane Howard feels she has only recently become an adult. "Adolescence is not a finite state," she explains. "Plenty of people are in their fifties and are still adolescents. I feel grown-up now." She pauses. "But it's taken a bloody long time."

Well, at least she's had an interesting adolescence. Notwithstanding the acclaimed literary output – which includes the much-loved Cazalet Chronicle series – Howard, 85, has been married three times, her best-

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known husbands being Peter Scott, son of Scott of the Antarctic, and the novelist Kingsley Amis.

En route, she also notched up a number of distinguished literary lovers, including Arthur Koestler, Laurie Lee, Cecil Day-Lewis and Kenneth Tynan.

“I seemed to have the kind of appearance that made people want to go to bed with me,” she says. White-haired and dark-eyed, she is still beautiful, in an imperious way. And her latest novel, Love All – her 14th – draws on her considerable personal knowledge of the vagaries of love.

“I have had a life ‘crowded with incident’, as Lady Bracknell would say,” she reflects, lighting a cigarette. “And a very unreal and romantic idea about love. I thought – still do – that it is one of the most important things . . . but it certainly got in the way of my work, very much.”

Didn’t her love life feed into her fiction? “I think my life probably was good for my writing,” she says, “but I was a very slow learner: I have to repeat mistakes several times before I learn from them.”

In fact, her most dangerous error led her to write one of her most acclaimed novels, Falling (1999). The bestselling author Louis de Bernières, a Suffolk neighbour, applauded her for at least getting, in his words, a jolly good novel out of it, Howard says wryly. “Although it was very alarming at the time.”

This particular saga started with an appearance on Desert Island Discs. At the time, she was recovering from an operation, living alone and feeling vulnerable. So the invitation to come and be fussed over by Sue Lawley had been rather welcome. “Afterwards, I got a batch of about 80 letters from the BBC, and some were completely dotty.” In what way? “Oh, from people with terrifying addresses like Erection Towers,” Howard says, laughing.

There were some respectable missives, though, including one from a man called Fergus Brand. He was from the north, clearly well educated and a huge fan of her novels. Would she like to meet him for tea, he wondered. She forgot to respond; he wrote another letter, then another. “He wrote very well,” Howard says.

She had been single since her marriage to Kingsley Amis had collapsed in 1980. “He didn’t really like women all that much – which didn’t dawn on me for a long time,” she says. After she walked out on him, he never spoke to her again. “Kingsley had an enormous amount of resentment,” she adds with a sigh. So Brand’s letters, landing regularly on the doormat of her 18th-century farmhouse, constituted the type of courteous male attention Howard had long been without.

The letters became increasingly intimate; and then Brand came to stay.

She even paid half his air fare. “I’ve never liked living alone, and so the thought of someone coming into my life in this way was rather marvellous,” she says. He was 62; she was 74. And he was fantastic in bed.

“It was very nice having a lover,” Howard says. “He was very good. It was very inviting and very flattering.” He wanted to be with her for ever. And she? “I wanted it to happen, so I suppose that made it easier for him.”

When Brand eventually proposed, Howard turned him down, though she was not against the idea of him moving in permanently. “I was very open to the idea of somebody turning up who could be a marvellous lifelong companion. When I did discover the truth about him, it was a terrible shock.”

Brand, it turned out, had spun a compendium of lies. He had also studied his prey, having read all Howard’s books as well as biographies of Amis and Scott – so he knew all the buttons to press. Howard had no inkling of this, nor did she ever pause to wonder why he didn’t have a job or any friends. All right, her own friends thought he was a bit of a bore, but the opprobrium of her circle just “threw me more into his arms”.

And then he slipped up. He told Nicola, Howard’s only child (by Scott), that his third wife had died in a riding accident in the West Country. Nicola, who is formidably well connected in the riding world, investigated. No such accident had taken place. Nicola’s husband researched the register of deaths at Somerset House; no such fatal accident had been recorded.

Other things, however, had. “I was so shocked by the lies and also the implications. His second wife, whom he said had died from a brain tumour . . . well, on the death certificate, there was something much more open. I think he killed her,” Howard says.

“The man was a psychopath. His plan was probably to marry me and then murder me. He wanted the money.”

Her fears were compounded after Nicola met a doctor whose practice was in the West Country village in which Brand had once lived. “She said, ‘Do you know Fergus Brand?’, and the doctor said, ‘I wouldn’t allow him into my house. He is one of the most dangerous men I have ever met.’

“He also said Fergus had beaten up another wife so badly that she fled because she was terrified he would come back and kill her. No one knows where she is.” In the end, Howard found the strength to write Brand a letter, telling him their affair was over. Wasn’t she afraid that he might suddenly reappear and menace her?

“I was very nervous for some weeks afterwards about the possibility of

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him turning up unannounced, but I thought, ‘I can’t just not live in my house because I’m, well, afraid’,” says Howard, a woman who doesn’t look as if she admits to being frightened of much. She informed the police about Brand. They were “incredibly discreet and supportive. They were prepared to stop him if he came to Stansted or Heath-row by air. He always came by air”.

When she learnt that Brand had died about three years ago, she felt “enormously” relieved. “I don’t think I’ve ever been relieved before at the news that someone has died.”

He was still very much alive when she published Falling, the book inspired by her experience, which was then turned into a television drama starring Penelope Wilton as the elderly heroine – based on Howard – and Michael Kitchen as the conman Henry Kent. After the book was published, Howard received a postcard, signed “Henry”. It was from Brand. That was the last time she heard from him.

“There are two things about psychopaths like him which are worth knowing,” Howard says briskly. “One is that they don’t have any friends. The other thing is that they don’t seem to do anything. If you get these two things together, look out.” She says she’s much warier now, although she still yearns for a companion. Female, this time. “I’m past wanting sex,” she says. “I don’t have anything against it, and it’s fractionally possible I might find someone . . . but I certainly don’t search for it, which I might once have done. This [the Fergus Brand experience] put the kibosh on that idea.”

We walk through her warm, low-beamed house, which is furnished with large sofas, elegant carpets and modern landscape paintings. The bookshelves are crammed with novels ranging from Bleak House to The Beach. A fat visitors’ book attests to the many friends who come and stay; Howard is a formidable cook and hostess.

As we eat heavenly rough-cut pâté and Normandy cheese, produced from a proper larder, Ed – her silver-grey lurcher – gallops frantically around the large, lush garden, which has a river running through the bottom. To her great sadness, Howard can no longer manage the garden herself and has to use a motorised buggy to get around it.

Dwindling into inactivity is certainly not an option. She writes for four hours every morning and still attends a women’s group in London, as she has done for the past 30 years. Does she keep up with the top literary circles – once epitomised by herself, Amis and their friends?

“Well, I find Martin [Amis – her stepson] perfectly amiable, but I don’t see him much.” Does she admire his novels? “I think there is a school of writing which is obsessed with style, and they have a few friends who feel as they do. I think they are much too conscious of hierarchy.”

Having been at the very hub of the English literary set at its blazing postwar height, she is now in a perfect position to knife it ever so delicately in the back. “I think it’s all got a bit pompous. If I were with Martin more, I would laugh with him about it.”

Does she think Martin Amis now considers himself a grand old man of letters? “He does!” she says, with a laugh. “And Kingsley never, ever, did, nor did any writer whom I’ve ever known. If you are an artist, you should just get on with the job.”

Getting on with the job is a cardinal maxim. “People have a very grandiose view of the world,” she says. “It’s easier to imagine yourself in an operatic version of real life – standing on the ramparts in a Puccini dawn, preparing to plunge to your death, instead of just getting on with it.”

Well, marching out on three husbands is rather operatic, I suggest. “Bolting? I suppose each time it was an extreme gesture. I don’t think I had the choice with Kingsley. It was a question of staying and becoming a drunk, or leaving him.”

Looking back, she feels her sexual conquest of so many of the big names of her youth owes more to a lack of self-esteem than any desire to conquer. “I was always looking for affection, and that was my way of getting it. I thought it was because they loved me. And it was no such thing. I was very naive.”

What, so none of her famous lovers really fell in love with her? “Laurie [Lee] loved me, and I loved Laurie. But he was married, and I loved Cathy [his wife], and so did he. He and she came from a very bohemian family, and people went on like that.”

Her own life sounds ferociously bohemian too, what with all that bolting and drinking and writing and energetic bed-hopping. “It depends what you mean by bohemian,” she says. “Some people think it means that you are broad-minded, which means you don’t mind people going to bed with one another.

“Well, I was quite faithful to Kingsley. I think if you are married to someone, you have to put them first, above all other people in your life. If women are sexually satisfied in their marriage, they don’t look elsewhere. Men can be sexually satisfied and still look elsewhere, because it’s their nature. It’s a very interesting difference between us.”

Another difference may be that, like many women, she is never quite convinced that she has done her absolute best. When she finished writing Love All, she had to fight the urge to start again in case she had not quite done justice to her theme. But she is very pleased with the title.

“We need to love all, but ‘love all’, as in the tennis score, is what happens if nobody does anything about it,” she says. In her life at least, the pursuit of love has been a recurring theme; it may indeed have cemented her place in English literature.

“It’s all grist to the mill,” says Howard, who is not so much a grand old dame of letters as an incurable romantic.

Love All, by Elizabeth Jane Howard, is published by Macmillan at £16.99

Have your say

This "pschyo" still has family and this article is insensitive, but then Elizabeth Howard sounds like an egotistical airhead . What 74 year old invites a stranger to come to live with her and then tells everyone about the sex? Certainly not a lady!!

Sarah, Dover, Kent

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