

AS BROADCAST

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"BOOKCASE"

Narrated by Neville Powley

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NARRATOR: This week we hear about the work of two women novelists and also about a ruthlessly masculine sport, that of prize fighting. As it happens, the first of our women writers is herself no stranger to prizes, though of a strictly literary kind. Some 18 months ago the Booker Prize of £5,000 for the best novel of 1970 was awarded to Bernice Rubens for her story of Jewish family life called "The Elected Member", published also in the United States under the title "The Chosen People". So Bernice Rubens, a documentary film maker by profession, ^{who} already had three previous novels to her credit, earned herself a literary reputation to be reckoned with. Her latest novel, the first since her prize-winning success, has just been published. It's called "Sunday Best". Chris Bickerton has been reading the book and talking to the author.

BICKERTON: This is a remarkable novel on several counts, and it marks quite a departure for Bernice Rubens, not least because this is not specifically a Jewish novel. It opens as a first person account of a man approaching middle age. He's George Verrey Smith, who likes the ring of his name, will not quite admit to his 42 years, is a schoolmaster and has lost confidence in his teeth. He leads an average boring suburban life. There are occasions when he can't bring himself to say his wife's name. His marriage to Joy has reached a stage of resigned indifference. ..so far, so normal. But then a neighbour dies and it's the first of a series of calamitous events that send George Verrey Smith scuttling for a bolt-hole, for reassurance, security. And it's then that Bernice Rubens springs her first shock on us. George Verrey Smith seeks consolation, even happiness, by dressing up in women's clothes. He's a transvestite. At her flat in Hampstead I asked Bernice Rubens what had prompted her to create a transvestite hero.

RUBENS: I was interested, and always have been interested, in the problem of identity, and I thought that the idea of finding a man who dressed ^{up} to be other than he was would be an interesting peg on which to hang this idea.

BICKERTON: Do you know anything about transvestites?

RUBENS: No - except what I've read in general reading. I've never met a transvestite. I don't know how authentic, medically, the portrait of George Verrey Smith is. I just felt that he was right for me, and that ^{as} far as I can feel.

BICKERTON: He's right for me too. George Verrey Smith is driven by distress into assuming a female identity as Mrs. Emily Price. He's driven into the open from the secrecy of his study, where he was in the habit of dressing in the "Sunday Best" clothes of the book's title. And he's driven by a series of catastrophes into a desperate flight to Brighton where he becomes even more confused about who he, or she, really is. And overall is the ghost of a brutal butcher father. It seems to me a very sympathetic and believable study of a troubled personality, but as Bernice Rubens told me, not everyone has found it so.

RUBENS: I find that the people who like it are men. The men seem to like it very much, the women don't like it at all. I would have thought it would have been the other way around, because I think that this kind of book would be more of a threat to men than it is to women. There may be a feeling around that since the idea of womens liberation, for instance, is very much in the air, that women should concern themselves with some kind of protest.

BICKERTON: And perhaps committed women like that don't see the funny side of the book, because although there's a vein of sadness and confusion, even an element of tragedy in "Sunday Best", it is also richly comic, even uproarious. George hiding in a bathroom, buying womens' clothes for himself, tackling his pompous headmaster the Reverend Richard Baines, who George calls "the Cloth". Even the moment of truth at the end of the book when Emily Price is faced with the inevitability of becoming George Verrey Smith again, is wryly humorous. I asked Bernice Rubens whether she felt a mixture of tragedy and comedy was part of being Jewish.

RUBENS: I think this is something which is inevitable; insofar as all writers are writing from their own experience, the Jewish writer tends to write from his experience too. His experience is a very pressurised one. It's an experience which is lived on a very acute level. He tends too to write on the border line of tragedy and comedy, and in this area it's very difficult not to be a comic writer and to be a very serious writer at the same time. I think whatever I write, at any time, would be essentially a Jewish novel. It doesn't have to be about Jews, and it doesn't have to be in a Jewish family or a Jewish environment at all. But because I am writing it, and because I'm bringing into that novel my historical Jewishness, my historical national consciousness, it's going to be, whether one likes it or not, a Jewish novel.

POWLEY: Bernice Rubens talking to Chris Bickerton about her novel "Sunday Best". Well from the somehow very contemporary oddities of Bernice Rubens' characters, let's go back 150 years or so to the rather less subtle world of the early prize fighters. It's often said that modern professional boxing cannot, and perhaps should not, survive. But whether you agree with that or not, a book has just appeared which makes clear exactly why and how prize fighting, that ancestor of boxing, began. It's called "Boximania", and the author is John Ford. We asked Neil Allen, a sports writer for "The Times" newspaper, to take a look at it.

ALLEN: Conceited as most "experts" in journalism, I thought that I knew just about all there was to know about 18th and 19th century prize fighting. But my pleasant surprise was to find that Mr. Ford has approached his subject from a new and important viewpoint - that of sociology. He gives us plenty of vivid detail about the champion boxers and their most important fights. He describes carefully the many differences in rules between the prize ring and modern boxing, and he has a marvellous chapter on technique and training. But his important contribution is to paint clearly the social setting in which prize fighting became a sport, attended or followed by thousands, including even King George IV and two of his brothers, the Dukes of York and Clarence. Prize fighting was undoubtedly brutal, but, argues Ford, it would be wrong to accuse its supporters of cruelty. Rather, they were insensitive in a period in English history when public executions were sometimes attended by thousands and when the poor led lives of squalor, relieved only by brawling or drinking. The prize fighters were invariably unskilled or semi-skilled working class who would risk terrible beatings for the sake of perhaps no more than fifty pounds, of which the large part would go on drink at the post-fight celebrations. A considerable proportion of the most popular fighters came from the immigrant population. Jews like Daniel Mendoza, from whom the actor Peter Sellers is descended. Negroes like Tom Molyneux and Bill Richmond, and Irishmen like Dan Donnelly. The men who stormed the turf to battle with bare fists for contests sometimes lasting close to two hours, were milkmen, butchers, coal heavers, bricklayers, carpenters and grooms. Most of their fights took place because of the nation's obsession with gambling, whether it was over a horse race, cricket match or bull baiting by dogs. Most financial backing during the golden age of the prize ring came from the nobility, known as the Corinthians. With time on their hands and money in their pockets they found/welcomed a break from elegant leisure in backing their favourite fighters. Prize fighting was declared illegal by parliament in 1750 and there was often considerable difficulty in staging fights in a county where ^{the} local magistrates were determined to see the law carried out. Eventually the prize ring fell into total disrepute, as the nobility became disgusted by an increasing number of fixed fights. By 1825 one devoted reporter was forced to write "The Corinthians have ceased to grant either the light of their countenances or the aid of their purses towards the encouragement of the ring." In the end the new society would not support such a brutal pastime. But Mr. Ford has resurrected all the light and shadow of the ring to illustrate unforgettably a fascinating chapter in English social history.

NARRATOR:

Sports writer Neil Allen of "The Times". The colourful setting of the prize fighting ring has, of course, inspired a good deal of romantic fiction with a period flavour. But our last writer this week is a romantic novelist who prefers to keep her books firmly in the present day. Mary Howard is the author of popular novels aimed more or less specifically ^{of women} under the age of 40. It's probably true to say that her stories pull fewer punches than many others of their kind. Two of her books - "The Bachelor Girls" and "The Interloper" - are already available as Pan paperbacks, and two more have just been added to the Pan list. One called "The Repeating Pattern" is the story of a woman's love affair with a rich and divorced older man, played out against a glamorous Mediterranean background. The other, "The Pleasure Seekers", uses the familiar idea of girls leaving school and coping for the first time with the snares of the big world outside. When Leigh Crutchley talked to Mary Howard, he asked her if she always made use of rich and glamorous characters in her books.

HOWARD:

I don't think, if you actually analyse my work, I do. But I think rich people are just as interesting as poor people. I think rich people are very interesting, because they think they're above life and they're not. Life always catches up with them. But the temptation and the struggle for people to be rich is very ^{much} underlined today. Everybody is trying to climb into this sort of life, to buy themselves free of the world's troubles, and they're all scrambling to do this, And I think the conflicts on the way to this are very interesting - very interesting indeed.

CRUTCHLEY:

So you use this as a background to explore the various pitfalls of life?

HOWARD:

Yes, yes. If you look ^{at} "The Repeating Pattern" situation, it is between a girl without money who is brought into these surroundings, and her discovery of the hollowness that underlines the riches. I don't believe rich people are as happy as all that - it isn't true. You can buy yourself a lot of comfort, but you can't buy yourself self-realisation and happiness.

CRUTCHLEY:

Do you believe that your characters' emotions are those of people today?

HOWARD:

Oh yes. But of course there again-I mean, with my sort of entertainment writing you have to compare it to the theatre. Once the thing is manufactured, invented, once it is, if you'd like to call it-art, it is not quite reality. Therefore everything one writes is perhaps a little larger than life.

CRUTCHLEY:

But you think that your readers can identify themselves?

HOWARD:

I certainly hope so, and I should think the younger people - yes, I think so.

CRUTCHLEY:

How do you keep pace with the thinking of the younger people? They seem to go so fast and change so often.

HOWARD:

Well listening to them is the only thing. You have to listen to them. You have to know young people. You have to talk to them, and you haven't to impose your own ideas on them. You've got to let them talk to you. Particularly I remember in "The Bachelor Girls", although I know quite a lot about popular music, I didn't know enough. And I did get a boy who was a very well known arranger for a pop group to come and talk to me, and in the end he told me such a lot about it.

CRUTCHLEY:

Another constant in your books is the conflict and attraction, I suppose, that age has for youth and vice versa.

HOWARD:

Yes, I think this is a very subtle thing and one of my literary idols, Colette, understands it more than anything. and this, in my opinion, infers that it isn't the older and the more sophisticated people that seduce youth, it's youth that seduces age. Youth has this awful greed for experience, greed for finding out about life and love and everything. It may be broken hearted for a very short while over an older person, but they come through it. It's nearly always the older person who is left, regretfully. The older person is trying to recapture their youth, the young person is just learning about life.

NARRATOR:

The thoughts of romantic novelist Mary Howard. And her two books, "The Pleasure Seekers" and "The Repeating Pattern", are published as Pan paperbacks, price 25p each. John Ford's illuminating book about the early days of boxing, called "Boximania", is published by David & Charles, price £2.75p. And the new novel by the prize-winning novelist Bernice Rubens, is called "Sunday Best" and it comes from Eyre and Spottiswood, price £1.95p. I'll be back with some more books at the same time next week.