

Susan Howatch b 1940

Unlike many people, I did not come to Susan Howatch through her gothic novels, like *The Dark Shore* or her historic family sagas – the best known of which is *Penmarric* (which I still haven't read – surprisingly given my appetite for historical fiction) but because, in the days of book clubs, I yet again failed to send the bit of paper back and got through the post a copy of *The Rich are Different* – the first part of her family saga of life in the USA from the 20s to the 60s – the second one is called *The Sins of the Fathers* – and yes I bought that one too! The title – *The Rich are Different* is apposite taken as a quote from – yes – *The Great Gatsby* by F Scott Fitzgerald. But read it and you will think, "I know this story!" It's the story of Julius Caesar, Anthony and Cleopatra and Octavian (or Augustus) down to the fact that the main character, Paul van Zale, has epilepsy – which Caesar allegedly had – and this in the 20s when anti-convulsant drugs were not available. Susan Howatch's device of using real historical characters as mirrors of her fictitious ones is found too in *Penmarric*, *Cashelmara* and *The Wheel of Fortune* – where the Plantagenets are her models although the settings are hundreds of years later – and in the characters of her Starbridge novels – more of which later!

Susan Howatch was born in 1940 in Leatherhead in Surrey and went to Sutton High School for Girls and then to London University where she studied law. She then went to New York for work and it was here that she met and married Joseph Howatch, a sculptor and writer and in 1971 they had a daughter. Following the breakdown of her marriage, in 1980 she returned to England and eventually settled in Salisbury. By then she was already a successful novelist. She found herself "rich, successful, and living exactly where I wanted to live," but feeling a spiritual emptiness which she ascribed to "trying to hold my divided self together" and questioning her life and what she should do with it. Living in Salisbury she found herself increasingly drawn to the Cathedral and had a spiritual epiphany and began to study Christianity and in particular, Anglicanism, in earnest.

This now brings me to her tour de force – The Starbridge novels. Six books spanning a period from the 1930s to the 1960s – all revolving round the triumphs and disasters of various clergymen based in and around Starbridge – a thinly disguised Salisbury. I first read these when I was in the library one day and saw her name – having read *The Rich are Different*, I knew she could write well – so I borrowed the first in the series – *Glittering Images* – and I was hooked. How to describe these novels – Trollope for the 20th century maybe – with more sex (although much of it repressed). In each of the books, where many of the characters overlap, we are presented with a story from one particular

character's viewpoint and each of them represents a particular strand of Anglicanism which was in the ascendancy at the time.

Any book whose first sentence is, "My ordeal began one summer afternoon when I received a telephone call from the Archbishop of Canterbury" has to make the reader curious. The Archbishop is real - Archbishop Lang, who was archbishop at the time of the abdication, the recipient of the phone call, Dr. Charles Ashworth, a Cambridge theologian, is fiction. But it is through the eyes of Ashworth that this story is told. The Archbishop's commission is for Ashworth to travel to Starbridge and try and find out what on earth is going on in the Bishop's Palace and particularly to discover whether there was anything amiss in the relationship between the Bishop - Alex Jardine - and his wife's companion, Lyle Christie. There are plot twists, discussions about AP Herbert's divorce bill which was currently going through the House of Lords, a very charismatic spiritual advisor who was Abbot of the Fordite order of St. Benedict and St. Bernard. Alex Jardine is loosely based on Herbert Hensley Henson, who was Bishop of Durham from 1920 until his retirement in 1939. Each chapter has a quotation from the works of Henson at its head.

Each of the books in the series has a title which points us towards the weakness of the narrator - in *Glittering Images* Ashworth is concerned about how things appear - he has something of a spiritual and nervous breakdown as a result of his visit to Starbridge and is helped to understand himself by Jon Darrow who is the narrator of the second book - *Glamorous Powers* - which opens with Darrow having a vision which seems to be calling him back to the world. Darrow's character is based loosely William Ralph Inge who played a leading role in the revival of interest in mysticism in the 20th century - he was a good friend of Hensley Henson, and thought that there should be a third way between the Evangelical and Anglo-Catholic wing of the Anglican church - a spiritual religion based on a firm belief in absolute and eternal values as the most real things in the universe - a reverent and receptive attitude to the beauty, sublimity and wisdom of the creation, as a revelation of the mind and character of the Creator - a complete indifference to the current valuations of the wordling'. It is quotations from Inge that head each chapter. In this book Darrow uses his glamorous powers unwisely at times!

The third book, *Ultimate Prizes*, introduces us to Neville Aysgarth - to my mind the most "Trollopian" of Howatch's narrators. He is the Archdeacon - I suspect gaiters would have suited him well. But the book opens, "The most appalling feature of the morning after I nearly committed adultery was my lack of surprise." Aysgarth's theology is based on that of Charles Earle Raven, who became convinced that theology and science should be drawn together. He believed that

divine purpose operated through and in the evolutionary process and that there was an essential unity in all created things. It is Raven who is quoted at the start of each chapter. In the course of this book, where yet again, Jon Darrow comes to the rescue – this time of Aysgarth – much to his chagrin – Aysgarth doesn't hold with Anglican priests being called Father – Aysgarth reluctantly works in the local POW camp and as a result of this comes into contact with Bishop George Bell, Bishop of Chichester. Bell was possibly the best man never to have become Archbishop of Canterbury – mainly because of his outspoken views. Although not a pacifist and passionately anti-Nazi, he made speeches appealing for the preservation of Christian values in the conduct of the war and urged the government to support those Germans who were trying to overthrow Hitler. He was instrumental in setting up the World Council of Churches.

The fourth book, *Scandalous Risks*, again features Neville Aysgarth but is narrated by Venetia Flaxton, the daughter of Aysgarth's best friend – the Earl of Starmouth. The scandalous risk of the title is the affair that these two have – made even more risky by the fact that Aysgarth is now Dean of Starbridge Cathedral – where the Bishop is none other than Charles Ashworth – and the two of them don't get on. This book is set in the 1960s – at the time of the publication of *Honest to God* and it is John Robinson who heads each of the chapters.

The fifth book, which is slightly out of sequence, is *Mystical Paths* and follows Nicholas Darrow, Jon's son, as he investigates the disappearance of Aysgarth's eldest son, Christian. The subject of homosexuality is raised in the narrative – still illegal at the time of the narrative. The dominant theologian in the church at this time was Archbishop Michael Ramsay – The combination of eccentricity and a deep personal holiness made him seem a remote figure to some in the turbulent 60s but others appreciated his traditionalism at a time when ALL traditions were coming under attack. He later adopted a more flexible approach recognising that the widespread questioning of both Christianity and the Church needed careful answering, not instant condemnation. It is Ramsay who heads each chapter. The Darrows (father and son) share the thoughts of Christopher Bryant who made a special study of psychology whilst a Cowley Father. He gained many insights into religious belief from studying Jung's psychology – his best known work is probably *The River Within*.

The final book in the series takes us full circle – *Absolute Truths* is narrated by an elderly, but still troubled Charles Ashworth, now retired, and recounts a difficult period in his time as the Bishop of Starbridge – some of his problems involve his somewhat complicated personal life and others involve his *bête noir* – Neville Aysgarth, whose obituary in The Times opens the book. The two theologians quoted in this book are

Austin Farrer – a lecturer in both theology and philosophy who was concerned, among other subjects, with providence, evil and suffering – and Reginald Somerset Ward who believed in a rule of life which enabled people to get the best out of their souls, bodies and minds. He was concerned with a God-centred wholeness.

I have not told you to plots of these books – because I don't want to spoil them for you – despite there being very little action and an awful lot of talking and even more thinking – these books are, like all Howatch's novels, thumping good reads! She also wrote a trilogy – the *St. Benet's Trilogy* which is set in London in the 80s and 90s and where we meet Nick Darrow again who runs a healing centre from his church. These three books, whilst having the church as their centre have an increased emphasis on characters who are not clergy.

There are two areas of spiritual life which obviously interest Susan Howatch, who has now given up writing and has returned to live in Leatherhead. She used some of the profits from her writing to found the Starbridge Lecturer in Natural Science and Theology in the Divinity Faculty at Cambridge in 1994 devoted to linking these two fields. Her other area of interest and expertise has been Anglican Spirituality, and she is the Editor of the Anglican Library of Spirituality – a series of 8 volumes which include Evelyn Underhill as well as several of the theologians she uses in the Starbridge novels – Austin Farrer, R Somerset Ward, Charles Raven and Christopher Bryant.

More than a historical novelist with a keen eye for detail and rigorous research, Susan Howatch has allowed ordinary people to gain some understanding of the issues which have confronted (and in many cases, still confront) the Anglican church in the 20th century.

Read the books – I guarantee that, like Karen, you won't be able to put them down!