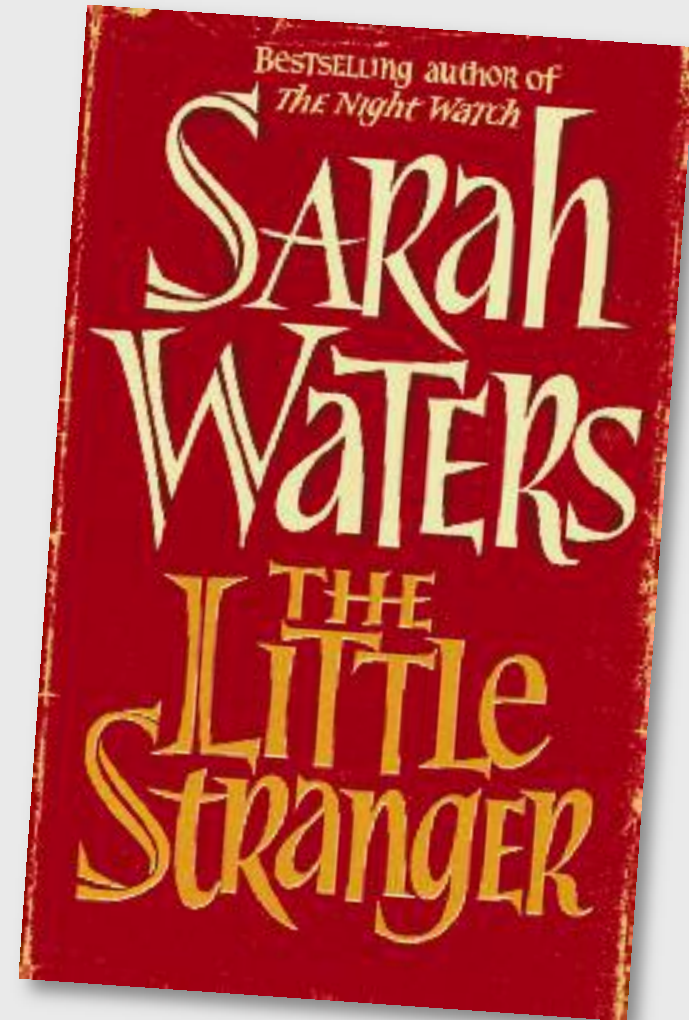


Garden Paths and Blind Spots

When I interviewed Sarah Waters in 2006, I reminded her of an attempt I had made on our first meeting to try and 'claim' her as a Welsh Writer. Though now residing in London, she was, of course, born in Pembrokeshire, and I continue to hope to see her to reflect on that aspect of her identity in her fiction. Her response, however, was candid: 'I love London precisely because I have come to it from a small town in Pembrokeshire – which was a great place to grow up in, but London seemed to me to be the place to go to perhaps slightly re-invent yourself, or to find communities of people – in my case, gay people – that you couldn't find at home.'¹ In her new novel, *The Little Stranger*, she does not return to Wales, but she does return to the countryside, setting the novel in the rural Warwickshire village of Lidcote, near Leamington Spa. Waters has, of course, established herself as a writer of lesbian historical fiction and has self-consciously situated her work within a lesbian literary tradition. In the months and weeks prior to the publication of *The Little Stranger* rumours circulated, allegedly prompted by Waters herself, that there were to be no lesbian characters in it and, indeed, at first sight there are not.

The Little Stranger is set just after the end of the Second World War and just before the introduction of the National Health Service in 1948, therefore taking up where the 1947 section of her previous novel, *The Night Watch* (2006), ends. While *The Night Watch* situates at its heart a community of single women, predominantly lesbian, *The Little Stranger* is told through the eyes of a first-person male narrator, Dr Faraday, to whom the reform of the health service is a matter for concern:

*I had only very recently begun to make a profit.
Now ... private doctoring seemed done for. On top of
that, all my poorer patients would soon have the
option of leaving my list and attaching themselves to*



another man, thereby vastly reducing my income. I had had several bad nights over it. (36)

The novel is, then, primarily about changing class structures and the gradual democratisation of Britain and, on the face of it, the lesbian is edged out as successfully as the old aristocratic family, the Ayreses, are edged out of their home, Hundreds Hall. From the family's perspective, the gradual 'down-sizing' of their dominance begins prior to the narrative opening and finds most flagrant expression in the 'new build' council houses that spring up on part of their former estate, not to 'give back' to the very community that has shored up their dominance, but through economic necessity. The family's demise is the book's primary focus, a process also underway before the start of the novel, the father (Colonel Ayres) being dead of an aneurism, their first child, Susan, having died of diphtheria at the age of seven and Roderick, the son and heir, having been seriously wounded in the war in a plane crash. Worse, however, is to befall him, his mother and sister Caroline as the book progresses, events explored by means of a ghost story. As Betty the maid observes, 'There's a bad thing in this house, that's what! There's a bad thing, and he makes wicked things happen!' (129)

The Gothic features centrally in most of Waters's work, often employed to expose readers to the 'underside' of society, that 'place' in which the illicit resides. Mansions are, of course, the centrepiece of any Gothic novel and readers will not be disappointed with Hundreds Hall, with its 'oak-panelled walls' and 'lattice-work ceiling' (61). Hundreds is an eighteenth-century family seat which resembles, at the start of the novel, Du Maurier's Manderley, in their shared preoccupation with memories, lost grandeur and family tragedy, not to mention the fact that what defines its dereliction is as much the garden as the house itself. Faraday tells us, 'I remembered a long approach to the house through neat rhododendron and laurel, but the park was now so overgrown and untended, my small car had to fight its way down the drive...' (5)² In this preoccupation with the garden, what is also established is the importance of land boundaries as affirmations of social boundaries. Faraday observes that, even in the house's heyday, 'The solid brown stone boundary wall, though not especially high, was high enough to seem forbidding' (4) but, on the warm summer day when he first takes tea with the family, he contemplates the panoramic view through the French doors, down from the entrance to the South terrace, and what strikes him is the continual breaching of possible visual boundaries:

An overgrown lawn ran away from the house for what looked like thirty or forty yards. It was bordered by flower beds, and ended at a wrought-iron fence. But the fence gave onto a meadow, which in turn gave onto the fields of the park; the fields stretched off into the distance for a good three-quarters of a mile. The Hundreds boundary wall was just about visible at the end of them, but since the land beyond the wall was pasture, giving way to tilth and cornfield, the prospect ran on, uninterrupted, finishing only where its paling colours bled away completely into the haze of the sky. (25)

A tension is evident, even here, between the presence of boundary markers and their breach. Verbs such as 'run away' convey nature's struggle to resist the family's elevation, an elevation that is implied to be topographical as much as social, for in order to be able to see this far into the distance one must be raised above one's surroundings. Furthermore, *The Little Stranger* is a novel about trespass: Faraday enters the house, in the fictive present, as the family doctor, but he was previously here as a child of ten, on Empire Day, when the family were giving out commemorative medals to the village children. His mother had previously been in service to the family, a position that enabled her to gain access to the interior of the house for them both. As the boy wanders off to explore he is taken over by a sense of avarice: 'I wanted to possess a piece of [the house]' (3), an urge that results in him gouging from the wall a piece of a decorative plaster border, in the shape of an acorn (one is reminded of the economic maxim 'from little acorns do giant oak trees grow'), which he conceals in his pocket. Though he excuses his childhood vandalism as 'the work of a moment' (3), the desire to possess never leaves him, a desire that finds expression, in part, in his decision to court Caroline, resulting in a rather sinister fantasy, as he lies in his own bed, of 'nudging] open the swollen front door ... inch[ing] across the chequered marble; and then ... creeping, creeping towards her, up the still and silent stairs'. (325) Indeed, it is at the end of this book that we see this desire most fully realised, as he steals into the house under cover of darkness – like a ghost.

The opening catalyst for Faraday's return to Hundreds is an 'illness' faked by Betty, actually prompted by anxiety over the uncanniness of the house. This recalls Waters's second novel, *Affinity* (1999), set in the Victorian period, in which the social invisibility of the serving classes is used as a mechanism for hoodwinking the

reader. As such we are, on this occasion, primed for signs of trickery: after all, the social similarities between the two texts are clear. *Affinity* is another novel in which a bereaved upper-class family is recovering from the death of the father and, in that text, the central protagonist, Margaret Dawes, is betrayed by her maid, Ruth Vigers, into parting with her identity and inheritance in order to enable Ruth to elope with a female prisoner called Selina, with whom Margaret falls in love and is helping to escape. Thus are we left questioning our class 'blind spots'. Like *The Little Stranger*, *Affinity* employs the supernatural (in that case clairvoyancy) to suggest messages can be communicated despite physical barriers to that communication and that objects can likewise be transported. Waters discredits the allure of the occult in *Affinity*, revealing it as a veneer for deception, under the cloak of which her characters seize a licence to roam unchecked, as surely as their servitude impedes their social advancement. Nevertheless, in *The Little Stranger*, no sooner do ghosts begin to walk the floors than we quickly suspect Betty might be implicated, a suspicion not lost on the social-climbing Dr Faraday, hence the following conversation he has with Caroline, initiated by her:

'That ghost of Betty's: it might have been him, the whole time.'

I said, 'It might have been Betty herself! Have you thought of that? You've only had trouble, haven't you, since she's been in the house?'

She made a gesture of impatience, dismissing the idea.

'You might as well say we've only had trouble since you've been in it!' (365)

This reprimand to Dr Faraday is also a reprimand to us: Waters, a novelist who delights in writing books requiring us to engage in the intricacies of plot, is not going to be 'second-guessed' by reproducing earlier tricks. Betty is, in fact, far more visible, even in her invisibility than Vigers was in *Affinity*. Our attention is drawn openly to the fact that Betty is 'unmemorable' (10) and that she stands 'with her gaze lowered, just as she had been trained' (97). If suspicions are in any way justified they should accrue around Faraday, for we are already wary – perhaps even resentful – of trusting this male usurper, whom we did not expect to be trampling across Waters's pages. Faraday is needed, however, for what he represents. His social origins, combined with his educational advantage, give added credence to an era in which birthright no longer secures social

standing, as well as facilitating his mobility 'up-' and 'down-stairs'. He shares Betty's origins, if not her limitations, but what both also share is a 'back stairs' initiation into Hundreds as children. Though fourteen, what is repeatedly emphasised about Betty is her childlikeness, a misnomer in *The Little Stranger*, in which children are not 'liked' at all.

Not just a book about any kind of trespass, *The Little Stranger* is primarily a book about children and trespass: hence perhaps Faraday's greatest reservation about the new council housing: 'the flimsy wire fences ... would do nothing to keep the children of the twenty-four families out of the park ...' (248) Despite this, by far the most intrusive of child trespassers belong to the upper classes: Gillian Baker-Hyde (and who can overlook the Gothic implications of the word 'Hyde?') and Susan, the dead daughter, whom Mrs Ayres longs to haunt the house. The Baker-Hydes are the rival nouveau riche family, recent incomers residing at Standish, the 'neighbouring' Elizabethan manor. Though disliking what they represent, the Ayreses decide to throw a welcoming party, as if to prove to themselves they still can. Gillian is 'eight or nine' (86) and her arrival startles everybody, being utterly unforeseen. The child is, undeniably, brattish: boasting that her parents 'regularly allowed her to drink brandy after her supper, and [she] had once smoked half a cigarette', the other guests turn to Dr Faraday to prompt his disapproval which, when forthcoming, is quickly augmented by Caroline's: 'It's bad enough the little wretches getting their hands on all the oranges ...' (92)

As the narrative develops, it turns into a conventional ghost story, though one complicated by Faraday's insistence that all 'happenings' are symptoms of mental instability. Faraday's namesake Michael Faraday, of course, discovered electromagnetic induction which, like the occult, is an invisible power source with its own mysterious ability to invigorate the lifeless. In *The Little Stranger*, Dr Faraday also works with electromagnetic fields, undertaking research into the use of 'induction coils' to treat muscle injuries (48), a treatment he uses on Roderick with some success, until Roderick's own 'brush' with the supernatural renders him a lost cause. Electricity connects science and the supernatural in the text, beginning with the telephone, which starts to ring of its own accord, then the internal system of bells and speaking tubes that connect up various parts of the house, which also take on animation. In a book in which servants, children and trespass (actual or perceived) coincide one cannot overlook the relevance of Faraday's mother. A nursery maid at Hundreds before marriage to Faraday's father, though dead before the novel opens, Faraday had

inherited from her tales of bad treatment by a former mistress. Thus, when strange calls and whistles start emerging from the speaking tube connecting the kitchen to the nursery, even Faraday wonders if, 'in putting my ear to the cup, I would hear my mother's voice.' (334)

If asked to select one word summarising Waters's fictive vision, it would be 'queer'. It is a word in which she delights in all its senses, spanning the full semantic spectrum from 'eerie' to 'gay'. What is clear is that Waters evokes the lesbian as a shadow-presence when she employs the term in any of its other senses and one would be tempted to argue that when she uses queer to mean lesbian it carries with it the sense of uncanniness that lesbians have historically provoked within patriarchy. Despite this, in *The Little Stranger* it looks as if the lesbian has dissolved into a less specific sense of 'queerness' or, to evoke the title, 'strangeness'. Perhaps, to put it more playfully, it is as if Waters chooses the Warwickshire setting to send the lesbian to Coventry. And yet, the word 'queer' populates this novel from the start, gathering pace around the speaking tube incident. Fittingly, it is first voiced by Caroline, the 'natural spinster' (9), who counters Betty's claim that the house 'gives you the creeps' by retorting, 'Hundreds is quiet, but there's nothing queer about it.' (15) Seemingly voiced as a defence, gradually we learn of Caroline's dislike for Hundreds and her desire to be free from it and its trappings. Refusing to settle for a heterosexual marriage of convenience to Faraday, by the end she has decided to leave for 'London, at first' (Waters's own words coming back to us now), 'But after that, perhaps America, or Canada ... Don't you see? I need to... get out. Get right away. England's not good any more for *someone like me*. It doesn't want me.' (448 – my italics)

There are a number of identifiable candidates for the identity of the Hundreds ghost, not to mention – considering the house is built in 1733 – many more whose names could never be known. What haunts above and beyond any of these competing claims is the queer itself, used in this novel as a signifier for the absence of lesbianism rather than, as is more common in Waters's writing, its presence. Considering that Waters was born in 1966, twenty years after the setting of *The Little Stranger*, how much more difficult would it have been for a lesbian like Caroline Ayres to avoid negating her presence as a lesbian ('Hundreds is quiet, but there's nothing queer about it') in this raw, scarred, but 'new' post-war Britain, with its health reforms, its family housing policies and its emphasis upon women being impelled into marriage and motherhood as a means of replenishing the casualties of war. Perhaps here we have an explanation of her apparent rejection of those 'little wretches [who get]

their hands on all the oranges' for they are, of course, the fruits of heterosexual reproduction, whose increasing numbers push the spinster more and more to the margins.

Waters is a member of that contemporary generation of writers who are well-schooled in literary theory. An author of academic publications before turning her hand to novel-writing, she is as accomplished a writer for the academic 'hungry' to decode the gender theory in her texts as she is for the educated reader simply looking for a challenging but pleasurable read. She is a commensurate storyteller whose satisfyingly 'chunky' novels are akin to a gorgeous meal, but she delights in – indeed insists on – making us think while equally delighting in leading us up garden paths. In *The Little Stranger* she hides the lesbian 'in full view', utilising to do so the many blind spots of Dr Faraday. Simultaneously, however, she challenges us to see the unseen: the ghost, electricity, 'the apparitional lesbian'.³

Bibliographical details of book under review

Sarah Waters, *The Little Stranger* (Virago, HB, £16.99, ISBN 978184408601)

Notes

¹ Lucie Armitt, 'Interview with Sarah Waters (CWWN Conference, University of Wales, Bangor, 22nd April, 2006)', *Feminist Review*, vol. 85, 2007; 117-27 (p.119)

² Compare the opening description of Manderley in Daphne Du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938; London: Arrow Books, 1992). 'The drive wound away in front of me, twisting and turning as it had always done, but as I advanced I was aware that a change had come upon it ... Nature had come into her own again and, little by little, in her stealthy, insidious way had encroached upon the drive with long, tenacious fingers.' (p.5)

³ For a full discussion of this term see Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), in which she argues that 'When it comes to lesbians ... many people have trouble seeing what's in front of them.' (p.2)

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