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21. You're a Dyke, Angela! (1987)

Rosemary Auchmuty

Friendships have always provided women with vital social, emotional, professional and political support. They are also important in any examination of the construction of sexuality. Tolerated, even encouraged, when perceived to keep women content and not meddling in men's affairs, they become profoundly threatening whenever women seem to be banding together to plot against men's power, either publicly (like the suffragettes) or privately (as lesbians, for instance). Because schoolgirl stories are fundamentally about female strength and bonding, they provide an interesting example of a phenomenon which was at first tolerated and even encouraged, but which came to be seen as a threat of such magnitude it had to be exterminated.

School stories were a Victorian creation, a product of the middle class that emerged in Britain after the Industrial Revolution and rose to cultural domination in the 19th century. The long haul up the social ladder was accomplished by means of education. New public schools like Marlborough and Rugby, set up for middle-class boys, were copied by the pioneers of girls' education at Cheltenham, St Leonard's, Wycombe Abbey and Roedean. Lacking an alternative model for a genuinely equal girls' schooling, feminists like Emily Davies campaigned for a structure and curriculum identical with boys', garnished with the odd concession to 'feminine accomplishments'. They argued that men would never take women seriously unless they could be seen to succeed in the same system. Middle-class girls' schools thus acquired the familiar characteristics of boys' schools: examinations, compulsory games, school uniforms, prefects, a moral code based on honour, loyalty and playing the game; and, of course, they were single-sex institutions. These ideas were taken over in turn by the girls' high schools and passed on, after the Education Acts of 1870 and 1880, to Board School children by ex-students who went into teaching. Hence, although the schoolgirl culture and the books which described it were the privilege of a small proportion of the population, compulsory education created a large new reading public steeped in middle-class ideals and aspirations, who were to become the main market for the schoolgirl story.

The credit for writing the first Victorian school story belongs not to Thomas Hughes for his *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857), but to Harriet Martineau, whose novel

The Crofton Boys appeared in 1841. Girls' school stories were a later development. The real founder of the genre must be Angela Brazil (1869–1947), who published her first school story in 1906 and went on to write nearly 50 more. The 1920s and 1930s were the heyday of the formula. Its popularity was enhanced by the evolution of the series, whereby the same characters featured in a number of books as they traversed the path from schooldays through marriage and motherhood to the daughters' schooldays.

The typical successful writer of schoolgirl stories was female, middle-class and unmarried. Apart from this we know little about her; there are few biographies and critical studies are generally uninterested in such 'inferior' authors. From the information we do have, one significant factor emerges; in real life, as well as in their

writing, they devoted their energies to girls and women. Angela Brazil organised parties for local schoolgirls; Elsie Oxenham was an enthusiastic member of the English Folk Dance Society and a Camp Fire Guardian; E.M. Brent-Dyer, as well as teaching girls, was into folk dancing and the Girl Guides; Dorita Fairlie-Bruce was involved in a similar organisation, the Girls' Guildry. To judge by the dedications in their books (dedications are always very revealing), their chief friends were women. Most were emphatic that they wrote out of love for their subject and their audience, which were, of course, the same: girls and women. 'I confess I am still an absolute schoolgirl in my sympathies', wrote Angela Brazil in her autobiography, entitled (naturally enough) *My Own Schooldays*. Brent-Dyer's biographer suggests that her imaginative world was in part a kind of wish-fulfilment, depicting the life she would have liked for herself.

Both adult women and girls read schoolgirl stories. Older correspondents to the *Chalet Club Newsletter* were among E.M. Brent-Dyer's most enthusiastic fans, confessing that they read the Chalet School books because they were 'more interesting' than anything else, and describing the characters as 'almost real — one knows them as friends'. Schoolgirl stories enjoyed conservative support because they represented conventional values. But they were also bought by many whose outlook was progressive, if not feminist. The right to education had been one of the great battles fought by the Victorian women's movement and their victory was still fresh in their beneficiaries' minds. As Sara Burstall, former headmistress of Manchester Girls' High School, wrote in 1933:

For generations men have felt loyalty and gratitude to their schools; emotion which has found its way into song not only at Eton and Harrow and Clifton. Stirring and beautiful as these songs are, they do not express more than is felt by women who, under the new era, have gained from their schools opportunity, knowledge, discipline, fellowship, and who look back in loyalty and affection to those who taught them.

For such women, many the mothers of young readers, school story ideals were revolutionary, representing women's new-found freedom and dignity.

School stories also offered hope in the face of a strong social reaction against feminism in the years after the first world war. This was a profoundly repressive era for women. The general opinion was that women had become too independent as a result of the political and economic gains of the Victorian and Edwardian women's movement and their war work. They were being forced back into the home, with

marriage and motherhood presented to them as the only acceptable female goals. At a time when their outlook was shrinking, the timeless, apolitical, independent nature of schoolgirl stories offered a liberating role. Even in books where the heroines did grow up and marry, they still managed to preserve an independent spirit and close links with the girlfriends of their schooldays.

The Abbey Girls in Love

One of the most popular series of schoolgirl stories was Elsie Jeanette Oxenham's Abbey books¹. To dip into the early volumes of this series is to be transported into a world where women's love for women is openly and unselfconsciously avowed on almost every page. And to follow the rise and fall of these books' popularity gives a fascinating insight into the changing attitudes to women's friendships over the years.

The Abbey books appeared at the rate of about one a year from 1920. While clearly intended for the female juvenile market, they are only loosely linked to the school the girls attended and its customs (in particular, country-dancing and the annual crowning of a May Queen). The early books really focus on the relations between the various women characters, even after they have left school. Though individuals fall in love with men and marry, these events are seen in terms of their effect upon their women friends. In the 1920s EJO considered women's loyalty to other women sufficiently important and socially acceptable to lavish page after agonising page upon it:

Mary: 'I ought to be thinking about Jen. I've been sorry for her all through, and I've wanted to help her; but I've been thinking about myself, what *I* wanted, how *I* felt. Ann forgot all about herself, and thought only of helping Jen. But almost from the first I was thinking how I'd failed her and how awful it was; and it made me still less able to help... I was hardly any use; I just collapsed like a baby — and it was because I was so much upset because she turned from me to Ann...' (*The Abbey Girls Win Through*, 1928, p.73)

Some extracts from an early volume, *The Abbey Girls Go Back to School* (1922), illustrate EJO's struggle to balance love for one's women friends and love for one's man. At a vacation school of the English Folk Dance Society, the Abbey girls meet 'Madam', of whom Cicely remarks: '*Like her!* There isn't anyone else!... If she looked ill, I'd feel there was something wrong in the universe' (p.187). But this heroine-worship must give way to the greater claims of heterosexual love. By the

end of the book, after an extraordinarily brief courtship (mercifully concealed from the reader), Cicely is engaged to be married, and 'Madam's' place has now been filled more appropriately by 'Dick'.

But husbands are strongly resented by the unmarried women for taking their friends away. When Joy marries, in *Queen of the Abbey Girls* (1926), Jen moans: 'I daren't face the thought that we've really lost Joy; it doesn't bear thinking about' (p.129). And when Joy returns from her honeymoon, leaving her husband shooting game in Africa, Rosamund declares: 'It's ripping to have Joy come back alone. We like Andrew of course; but I'm quite content to have him in East Africa' (*The Abbey Girls Win Through*, 1928, p.175). So, clearly, is EJO, who contrives to have him murdered on safari by some 'wild natives' so that Joy may be left free to bring up twin daughters with the help of her women friends.

The 1930s brought a change. When the eleventh book in the series, *The Abbey Girls Play Up*, appeared in 1930, the characters had moved on a few years. The focus is now very much more domestic; Joan, Joy and Jen all have young families and a new and even less convincing approach to heterosexual romance is in evidence. Jen introduces Maribel to her husband's cousin and a relationship develops which seems to be entirely based upon meaningful looks: 'Mike Marchwood's eyes had been saying something very emphatic, which he might not put into words' (p.163). Maribel discusses the phenomenon of love with her chum, but the subject embarrasses them: 'Oh, I say, Bel, don't let's be idiots! Come and play tennis, and forget all this tosh!' (p.166). Would that they did! But Maribel is engaged by the end of the book.

In the early and mid-20s the members and activities of the English Folk Dance Society were of central importance to EJO. But by the late 1920s she had come to feel that her attitude to them was no longer appropriate. Would it be too far-fetched to suggest that the Society and its activities represented more to EJO than healthy exercise? And is it just a coincidence that her change in attitude is expressed in a book she was writing in 1928, the year of the trial of *The Well of Loneliness*?

Lesbians at the Abbey

Lesbianism was not seen as a threat to morality before the 1920s. Indeed, it was hardly even recognised as an idea. Close friendships between women, particularly young women, were encouraged in Victorian times. After 1885 male homosexual acts were made illegal, but no mention was made of women. By the 1920s the writings of Havelock Ellis, Krafft-Ebing, Hirschfield and Freud on normal and deviant sexuality were well-known in intellectual circles in Britain, and an attempt was made

in 1921 to bring lesbian acts within the Criminal Law. It was argued, however, that silence about this 'abomination' would be a better preventative than criminalisation and the Bill was defeated. As a result, lesbianism was slow to enter the popular consciousness. The trial of *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928 put an end to that. The press coverage of this famous scandal was probably the most significant factor in creating a public image of lesbianism, as defined by psychiatrists and sexologists. Though Radclyffe Hall's novel was banned, there could hardly be a reader in the country who did not know what it was about. EJO and her sister-writers must surely have begun to realise that the behaviour of their characters was open to 'misinterpretation'.

Take, for example, the introduction to Norah and Con in *The Abbey Girls Win Through* (1928):

They were a recognised couple. Con, who sold gloves in a big West-End establishment, was the wife and home-maker; Norah, the typist, was the husband, who planned little pleasure-trips and kept the accounts and took Con to the pictures. (p.9)

Descriptions such as these caused critics great amusement in the 1950s and afterwards. How could EJO have been so naive, or so explicit? But these words were written before *The Well of Loneliness* trial, before the lesbian scare had made women in couples into objects of suspicion and disgust. EJO was simply describing a phenomenon which she and her readers were familiar with, which they saw all about them in the male-depleted generation after the first world war. In the same book Ann observes that:

Perhaps Miss Devine remembers that girls often live in twos. She used to be in the office herself; she'll know girls don't like to go and leave their other half alone. (p.12)

EJO does distinguish between 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' relationships between women, but in the early books the distinction was not the one that Freud and Havelock Ellis would have made. 'Unhealthy' relationships were unreciprocated, uncontrolled crushes. For example, Jen, in *Queen of the Abbey Girls* (1926), speaking of Amy's unreciprocated crush on Mary:

I've heard the girls at school talk like that about certain mistresses, but I didn't know grown people in business kept it up... Of course it's a sign there's

something wrong with the girl. ...that she should let her liking run away with her, as if she were a schoolgirl. That's wrong. It's uncontrolled; want of balance. (p.186–7)

From 1930 on there is an ever-declining expression of love between women in the books and much more of a feature is made of heterosexual romance, marriage and motherhood. Possibly because it was now clear that only young women could safely be open about their feelings for one another, EJO made the decision in 1938 to revert to the pre-marriage years of her original characters. She produced seven stories which filled in gaps in the first sequence. The title of the first of these, *Schooldays at the Abbey*, is revealing of the switch. Though the books continued to be about women's friendships, the relationships described are reduced to the level of schoolgirl passions. Meanwhile heterosexual love is idealised. Here is Joan, aged about 18, in *Schooldays*:

It must be a wonderful thing. I don't suppose it will ever happen to me, but it must be the happiest thing in the world (p.116)

Contrast this with Jen in *The Abbey Girls in Town* (1925):

It's that man. Being in love's a fearful disease. I hope I never catch it. (p.299)

If the early Abbey books were about women's friendships, the later ones are about marriage pure and simple. Even Mary, the only spinster among the principal characters and the one who earlier stood for EJO's own experiences and aspirations, becomes a mouthpiece for the marriage party-line. World-famous ballerina Damaris gives up her career to marry: 'Other people can dance, but only Damaris can marry Brian', says Mary, incredibly. 'Other people don't dance as she does', Nanta objects. 'You do think she ought to give it up, Mary-Dorothy?' 'To be married — yes, Nanta, I do.' (p.172).

Two Queens at the Abbey (1959), the last in the series, is yet more preposterous. With a sense, perhaps, that she had to tie off all loose ends before she died, EJO launched every character into frenzied heterosexual activity. Nanta, aged 19, marries and falls pregnant; Littlejan, aged 19, marries and has a baby; Rosamund has her seventh, Jen her ninth. Jansy, Joan's daughter, talks of marrying Dickon, Cicely's son (both are aged 16); Lindy gets engaged to Donald, one of Maidlin's rejects. When good old understanding Mary prepares supper for Littlejan (Queen Marigold),

whose husband has just gone off to the Antarctic, she remarks that 'Marigold is hungry for more than sandwiches tonight' (p.65). In 1924 Mary had been hungry for a sight of Jen!

The Abbey Girls Sink Without Trace

As a source for attitudes to women's friendships over 40 years, the Abbey books are remarkable. They show how in the 1920s schoolgirl story writers had a unique freedom to explore all the dimensions of women's love for women. As the years passed this freedom was progressively curtailed, with writers becoming more and more confused and restricted by the new heterosexual demands and the negative image of lesbianism. In later decades critics looked back and sneered at their naivety, or amused themselves by exposing (or denying) the homosexual tendencies of schoolgirl heroines and their creators. A.O.J. Cockshut, for example, takes up 'The Lesbian Theme' in his *Man and Woman: A Study of Love and the Novel*, commenting that 'an inferior writer like Elsie Oxenham might in her innocent unawareness use language seeming to imply a lesbian relationship, while meaning no such thing'. He noted, however, that the public showed a 'calm acceptance' of her 'puerilities'. 'Lesbianism simply did not enter into most people's calculations'. Of course it didn't. This was because during the period in which the schoolgirl story flourished, lesbianism was progressively redefined. From a deviant sexuality caused by abnormal genetic or social development, it was extended to encompass all intimate relationships between women, whether explicitly sexual or not (in which case they were categorised as 'latent' or 'unconscious'). This was represented as a newly-discovered scientific fact, not the man-made invention that it was. A new equation sank into the public mind; close friendships between women = lesbianism = sexual perversion.

Among those who swallowed this version of women's psychology were Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig, authors of the immensely readable but often unsympathetic study of girls' fiction *You're a Brick, Angela!* They dismiss Madam in *The Abbey Girls Go Back to School* as a 'stop-gap love object' for Cicely, for whom 'a more potentially satisfying relationship' in the person of her future husband is subsequently provided. They seize upon the many instances in which EJO's heroines share a bed as evidence that the women's intimacy is (however unconsciously) not 'healthy' or 'normal'.

In the 1960s 'sleeping together' became a synonym for sexual activity, but it is a misreading of history to impose this idea on the social mores of the 1920s. For EJO and her public, sharing a bed with a girlfriend was but one way of showing affection

and a perfectly acceptable one at that. In *The New Abbey Girls* (1923) Jen (aged 18) establishes this point when she suggests to Joy (aged 21) how she could make shy 14 year old Maidlin feel she is welcome in the Abbey household:

Why don't you have her to sleep with you, at Jack's? [Jack is Jacqueline, a former school chum of Jen, whom she refers to as 'husband'.] You know Jacky-boy said she'd get a bed ready for the heiress! You could tell her not to and Maidlin could go in with you, and I'd tuck in with my husband. You know she always wants me to! (p.175)

What this reveals is not unconscious perversion but a very conscious love for women, which in 1923 was fine and after 1928 became abnormal and unhealthy. It represented a level of intimacy which was too threatening to be allowed to continue. Censorship was inevitable.

From the late 1950s to the early 1970s a handful of Abbey books were reprinted in cheap condensed editions. EJO's often tautologous prose can take a bit of blue-pencilling, but it is significant that the portions excised were frequently the passionate and, to post-Freudian eyes, sexually suggestive scenes between women. In the bowdlerised version of *The New Abbey Girls* (1959), for instance, Jen no longer suggests that Joy sleep with Maidlin.

Elsie Oxenham died in 1960. By the mid-seventies her Abbey books, along with virtually all schoolgirl stories, had disappeared from the publishers' lists. Readers were told that there was 'no demand'. The truth was that the critics had condemned them to death; the later books for being appallingly written (which they were), the early ones for their lack of 'relevance' and 'social realism'. It would be more truthful to say that the destruction of the schoolgirl story is a major piece of evidence of the imposition of compulsory heterosexuality in 20th century Britain.

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Note

1. All the Abbey books mentioned in this chapter were published by Collins.