



the PARIS REVIEW

THE ART OF FICTION NO. 98 ANITA BROOKNER

Anita Brookner works in an office at the Courtauld Institute filled with books and pictures of French paintings, a desk strewn with papers, and an old typewriter. She also works in her Chelsea home, where this interview took place. She lives in a small but sunny and quiet apartment, furnished in light colors and overlooking a large, pleasant communal garden. When asked how it felt to work in the male-dominated atmosphere of Cambridge University in the sixties, she answered, “Nobody looked all that male and I didn’t look all that female.” In fact, though, she does look very feminine: petite, slim, and casually but most elegantly dressed. Reddish well-cut hair frames her pale, striking face, which is dominated by large beautiful blue eyes. Her exquisite manners disarm and put visitors at ease, and at the same time secure a reasonable distance. She speaks in a deep, gentle voice, with fluency and deliberation in equal measure, and sometimes in “short, military sentences,” as she once said of Stendhal. Occasionally she smokes a very slim cigarette.

—*Shusha Guppy, 1987*

INTERVIEWER

Let us start at the beginning. Did anything in your background lead you to believe that one day you would become a scholar and a novelist?

ANITA BROOKNER

Oh no! Anything but! I was brought up to look after my parents. My family were Polish Jews and we lived with my grandmother, with uncles and aunts and cousins all around, and I thought everybody lived like that. They were transplanted and fragile people, an unhappy brood, and I felt that I had to protect them. Indeed that is what they expected. As a result I became an adult too soon and paradoxically never grew up. My mother had been a concert singer but had given up to marry. She was inclined to melancholy and when she sang at home my father used to get angry, with good reason—it was only in her singing that she showed passion. I would start to cry and be taken out of the room by the nanny. She, not I, should have been the liberated woman. My father, who didn't really understand the English, loved Dickens; he thought Dickens gave a true picture of England, where right always triumphed. I still read a Dickens novel every year and I am still looking for a *Nicholas Nickleby*!

INTERVIEWER

Is that why all your heroines have a “displaced person” quality, and the family backgrounds are very Jewish, even though not explicitly? Were you brought up Jewish?

BROOKNER

Yes, very much so. I never learnt Hebrew because my health was fragile and it was thought that learning Hebrew would be an added burden. I regret it, because I would like to be able to join in fully. Not that I am a believer, but I would like to be. As for the “displaced person” aspect, perhaps it is because although I was born and raised here I have never been at home, completely. Peo-

ple say that I am always serious and depressing, but it seems to me that the English are *never* serious—they are flippant, complacent, ineffable, but never serious, which is sometimes maddening.

INTERVIEWER

The foreignness of your heroines is emphasized by the contrast between them and the very solidly English, Protestant men they are attracted to.

BROOKNER

I think the contrast is more between damaged people and those who are undamaged.

INTERVIEWER

Your first books were on artists and art history. What made you decide to try your hand at the novel?

BROOKNER

It was literally trying my hand, as you put it. I wondered how it was done and the only way to find out seemed to be to try and do it.

INTERVIEWER

You took the title, *A Start in Life*, from an obscure novel by Balzac, *Un Début dans la vie*. Was it autobiographical?

BROOKNER

It was. I wrote it in a moment of sadness and desperation. My life seemed to be drifting in predictable channels and I wanted to know how I deserved such a fate. I thought if I could write about it I would be able to impose some structure on my experience. It gave me a feeling of being at least in control. It was an exercise in self-analysis, and I tried to make it as objective as possible—no self-pity and no self-justification. But what is interesting about self-analysis is that it leads nowhere—it is an art form in itself.

INTERVIEWER

In your two subsequent novels you give different reasons for wanting to write. In *Look At Me* you say that writing is your penance for not being lucky.

BROOKNER

I meant that writing is a very lonely activity. You go for days without seeing or talking to anyone. And all the time out there people are living happy, fulfilled lives—or you think they are. If I were happy, married with six children, I wouldn't be writing. And I doubt if I should want to. But since I wrote that sentence I have changed. Now I write because I enjoy it. Writing has freed me from the despair of living. I feel well when I am writing; I even put on a little weight!

INTERVIEWER

You also said that you write to be hard, to remind people that you are there.

BROOKNER

I have changed my mind about that too. Far from making me hard, writing has made me softer, more understanding, more observant, and perhaps more passive in the sense that other people and their opinion of me seems to matter less.

INTERVIEWER

It seems that writers wish to find a reason for their activity: Paul Eluard called it *le dur désir de durer*. And lately E. M. Cioran said, “L'écriture est la revanche de l'homme contre une Creation baclée.” And you say, in *Providence*, that you write to tell the truth, what you call the Cassandra complex.

BROOKNER

I agree with Cioran, in so far as we all try to put some order into chaos. The truth I'm trying to convey is not a startling one, it

is simply a peeling away of affectation. I use whatever gift I have to get behind the facade. But I hope I am not an aggressive writer, and that I see through people with compassion and humor. My own life was disappointing—I was *mal partie*, started on the wrong footing; so I am trying to edit the whole thing. It was the need for order in my own life that made me start. And once the floodgates are open, you must go all the way.

INTERVIEWER

Your first three novels seem to be variations on the same theme. The basic argument is that we are deceived by literature into believing that virtue is rewarded, that good will win in the end, and that Cinderella will always get the prince. Whereas, in reality, honest, disciplined, and principled people lose to the beautiful and the selfish.

BROOKNER

Not selfish—plausible. My new novel goes further: I now feel that all good fortune is a gift of the gods, and that you don't win the favor of the ancient gods by being good, but by being *bold*.

INTERVIEWER

Sometimes the beautiful and the bold lose to lesser people because they don't use the right stratagems. For example, Anna Karenina—Tolstoy very cleverly shows that all around her people are having love affairs that everyone knows about and condones because it is all a game and does not threaten the accepted order. Anna, too honest, wants to go all the way and rock the boat—divorce her husband and marry her lover—she creates a scandal and so she is condemned.

BROOKNER

Anna loses because, for all her boldness, she can't commit herself morally to her actions. She feels guilty about her son and misjudges her Vronsky. She can't accept that men can't keep up the

same pitch of passion as women can—that they cool off. With men passion is all at the beginning and with women it is all along.

INTERVIEWER

In your fourth novel, *Hotel du Lac*, you expose the falsehood of another myth, “The Tortoise and the Hare,” and you say that in real life the hare wins every time, never the slow, patient tortoise.

BROOKNER

Every time! Look around you. It is my contention that Aesop was writing for the tortoise market. Anyway, hares have no time to read—they are too busy winning the game!

INTERVIEWER

All your heroines follow “an inexorable progress toward further loneliness,” as you say of Kitty Maule in *Providence*. It seems to me very deterministic. Is there nothing we can do to alter our fate?

BROOKNER

I think one’s character and predisposition determine one’s fate, I’m afraid. But *Providence* seems deterministic because it is a *novel*, and a novel follows its own organic structure.

INTERVIEWER

At the same time you say that existentialism is the only philosophy you can endorse. Now existentialism with its emphasis on personal freedom seems the opposite of determinism.

BROOKNER

I don’t believe that anyone is free. What I meant was that existentialism is about being a saint without God: being your own hero, without all the sanction and support of religion or society. Freedom in existentialist terms breeds anxiety, and you have to accept that anxiety as the price to pay. I think choice is a luxury

most people can't afford. I mean when you make a break for freedom you don't necessarily find company on the way, you find loneliness. Life is a pilgrimage and if you don't play by the rules you don't find the Road to Damascus, you find the Crown of Thorns. In *Hotel du Lac* the heroine, Edith Hope, twice nearly marries. She balks at the last minute and decides to stay in a hopeless relationship with a married man. As I wrote it I felt very sorry for her and at the same time very angry: she should have married one of them—they were interchangeable anyway—and at least gained some worldly success, some social respectability. I have a good mind to let her do it in some other novel and see how she will cope!

INTERVIEWER

You also said that existentialism is a romantic creed. How so?

BROOKNER

Because romanticism doesn't make sense unless you realize that it grew out of the French Revolution in which human behavior sank to such terrible depths that it became obvious no supernatural power, if it existed, could possibly countenance it. For the first time Europeans felt that God was dead. Since then we have had Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, whose activities make the French Revolution seem like a picnic. The romantics tried to compensate the absence of God with furious creative activity. If you do not have the gift of faith, which wraps everything up in a foolproof system and which is predicated on the belief that there is a loving Father who will do the best for you, then, as Sartre said, you have to live out of that system completely, and become your own father. This is a terrible decision, and, as I said, in existential terms freedom is not desirable, it is a woeful curse. You have to live with absence. Nowadays I wonder if it is really possible to live without God, maybe we should dare to hope . . . I don't know. I'm not there yet.

INTERVIEWER

Perhaps this is the reason some people convert to religion at the last minute. Even Voltaire called a priest just before he died!

BROOKNER

Ah, but Voltaire accepted the priest on *his* terms: When the priest asked him, “Monsieur de Voltaire, do you believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ?” he replied, “Don’t talk to me about that *man!*” He rejected the divinity of Christ but accepted him as the Perfect Man. But not everyone is as brave as Voltaire.

INTERVIEWER

In your study of French art you started with the eighteenth century and switched to the nineteenth. It was the latter century that influenced you in your novels. What is the difference between the two, for you?

BROOKNER

I think the acquisition of greater experience and the loss of a certain innocence. The eighteenth century believed that reason could change things for the better, and that all would have the vote in the Republic of Virtue. After the revolution, people realized that reason could not change anything, that man is moved not by reason but by darker forces. Despotism, tyranny, even cannibalism—informing on one’s neighbors—became quite routine. After 1793 it was no longer possible to close one’s eyes to the base aspect of human nature—God really was dead. It opened the floodgates to self-examination. Where does it all come from? they asked. And it was discovered that once you no longer were constrained to be good, either by Christianity or by a secular philosophy, which for a time was even stronger, namely the Enlightenment, there was no limit to bad behavior. But also to inventive, creative, autobiographical behavior.

They, Zimberly, Alchely, Amilela, all the Kellersons, others and his Colonel, sits with a Chamberlain (seated to his chest). Zimberly on the other hand also often finds him in this position. Betty at such moments makes him a Cup of tea and reminds him that they have arranged to meet some people for dinner ^{tomorrow} & that when he has dinner has tea he had better take a shower & change. Fortunately Betty is not one of those wives who make a fuss. It would not seem to her to call a spade a spade & in this way she is preserved from an invalid's regimen, but will continue to lead his untempered & cynical & very thin sleep with laborious existence. He is grateful to his wife for not noticing that anything is amiss, grateful too that she is tough enough to take whatever may come, grateful that their love is not of the sentimental variety that makes such thoughts unnecessary.

When Betty finds Tony sitting on the bed, stamping feet upon at the wedding photographs, she tells him quite sharply that if he does not stop banging around in that unwholesome way they will soon be late. When he says that he does not feel like going out she reproaches him for being selfish. When, with a sigh, he gets up, in a hunching respect in the tolerance the very first opinion open to her, Betty exclaims, 'And about mine too'. When he slowly boggles forward Betty is at her dressing table, trying on a thin Cheshire Union pattern of stockings. In that way, when she looks in the mirror, she sees behind her reflection only absence.

INTERVIEWER

It produced alienation or separation anxiety, as they call it.

BROOKNER

Exactly. Because to find yourself in a world without beginning or end is a romantic discovery.

INTERVIEWER

Did you read the German romantics?

BROOKNER

Kleist, yes. He seems to be the really tragic figure. But I don't know them well.

INTERVIEWER

I asked the question because what you said tallies with what Isaiah Berlin says: that all the problems of our age can be traced back to romanticism, especially the Germans who were the true romantics and invented the whole thing, so to speak—nihilism, Marxism, existentialism, etcetera . . .

BROOKNER

He is absolutely right. It was hearing him lecture on the subject that impressed me so much and made me decide to take it up and teach it myself.

INTERVIEWER

What about Goethe? He started life as a romantic and changed his heart: "Classicism is health, Romanticism is sickness," he said.

BROOKNER

He did turn his coat, didn't he? He precipitated the discovery of romanticism-as-sickness with *Werther*, where he appears to condone a romantic suicide. But *Elective Affinities* is a very diffi-

cult book. It has no moral center. It is about the mechanistic behavior of people in society and goes like clockwork. I find it an enigmatic, and rather a disgusting, book.

INTERVIEWER

You once said that Zola was your favorite writer when you were young. Do you think your determinism is due to Zola's influence?

BROOKNER

No. Zola's determinism is too crude and mechanistic. He is talking about heredity in genetic terms; for example, if your father was an alcoholic you will become one too. I don't believe that. When I said that Zola was my favorite writer, I meant that I loved his courage, his indignation. Like Dickens he was an angry writer—angry at the unfairness of things, and the burden transmitted by ancestors for which we are not responsible and to which we have to succumb.

INTERVIEWER

Apart from Zola and Dickens, who were your early influences?

BROOKNER

When I was studying French at the university I read an enormous number of French novelists. I never thought that one day I would write a novel myself, because I thought that these people were telling me something very important that could not be duplicated. My influences were Balzac, Stendhal, and to a much lesser degree Flaubert. I think Flaubert colludes too much—he *wants* his characters to be defeated. Stendhal was the one I loved most. He was the true romantic: "I walk in the street marvelling at the stars and I'm run over by a cab," he said. That sums it up! I also read English Victorian novels: Trollope for decent feelings, George Eliot for moral seriousness. And of course the great Russians.

INTERVIEWER

What about Proust?

BROOKNER

He is an exceptional case and very precious to me. He kept himself in a state of mind so hypnotic and dangerous that one approaches rereading him almost with fear. He remained always marginal, observing. The cost was too high, when all is said and done. The periods of remaining in that childlike state of receptivity are terrifying. The awful thing is that he got it *right all the time*. It is all true!

INTERVIEWER

In *A Start in Life* there is a critique of Balzac's *Eugénie Grandet* and in *Providence* one of Benjamin Constant's *Adolphe*. Did you mean that although literature can mislead one, it can also provide moral models?

BROOKNER

Yes, *Adolphe* is a deeply serious and moral novel; it asks what do you do when you are the author of a disaster? Ellénore in *Adolphe* and Kitty in *Providence* are victims of disasters because they misjudge their men.

INTERVIEWER

You seem to insist on great moral rectitude in your characters. Do you think all great novelists have been moralists, from Tolstoy to Camus?

BROOKNER

Indeed I do. And some lesser ones too. In my case it comes from a grounding in the nineteenth-century novel and because my own family were very strict in that respect. I have never unlearned the lesson. I would love to be more plausible, flattering, frivolous, but I am handicapped by my expectations. Isn't it sad?

INTERVIEWER

Hence your recent passion for Henry James and Edith Wharton, whom you said you would most wish to resemble.

BROOKNER

Henry James seems to me to have all the moral conscience that everybody should have. He writes basically about scruples, and his hesitations are so valid that they are the secular equivalent of religious obligations.

INTERVIEWER

Yet Henry James's duality—innocent American versus wily European—seems less relevant today, while Edith Wharton's overall complexity is more universal.

BROOKNER

That is true, and for that reason Wharton has worn better and reads more easily. Someone said that Edith Wharton's novels are what Henry James would have written if he had been a man! She is Henry James without the duality of innocence versus experience. But she does not have the lamb-to-the-slaughter quality that Henry James invests in his heroines, and which is almost Greek. It is a very potent theme in fiction—innocence betrayed. Isabel Archer in *Portrait of a Lady* is completely innocent of other people's plans. But I don't believe that past a certain age anyone is innocent, except in fiction! But no one can get near Lily Bart of Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, because she is innocent yet has no conscience. She wants someone to pay her way through life, but balks at the horrible men who are willing to do it for her. Of the two, Henry James is more of a giant, simply because Wharton didn't write as many great novels—perhaps four—while James's sheer bulk and Balzacian fecundity is overwhelming. I am now reading his short stories; there are hundreds of them and mostly wonderful.

INTERVIEWER

One original and interesting aspect of Edith Wharton is that in her great novels the moral option is nearly always taken by the women; just as the men are about to succumb to temptation and cause havoc, the women pull them back from the brink.

BROOKNER

Yes, they are much braver and less divided than the men. I am afraid my heroines do the same, according to their own, contemporary, light.

INTERVIEWER

Do you read contemporary novelists?

BROOKNER

Constantly! And everything that comes out. At present I am rereading Philip Roth, and I *adore* him! I buy hardback books, which I am told is rather extravagant, but I feel I owe it to my fellow writers.

INTERVIEWER

What about women novelists?

BROOKNER

The women novelists I admire in the English tradition are Rosamond Lehmann, Elizabeth Taylor, and Storm Jameson. Much less Ivy Compton-Burnett—she is brilliantly clever but too cruel. I admire Jean Rhys, especially *Wide Sargasso Sea*, but she is too limited by her pathology. Outside the English tradition the Czech novelist Edith Templeton, who writes in impeccable English, is marvelously restrained. She tells strong stories about life in old-style Central Europe, with recognizable passions and follies. The Canadians Mavis Gallant and Edith de Born I very much enjoy too. These are all much more stoical and less sentimental than English writers.

INTERVIEWER

In *Hotel du Lac* Edith Hope is a writer of “romance” novels, of the Barbara Cartland, Mills & Boon type. She says, “I believe every word I write.” What is the difference between that kind of romantic novel and the genuine article? Is it just the invariably happy ending? Or simply the quality of writing and the mind behind it?

BROOKNER

Both. Romance novels are formula novels. I have read some and they seem to be writing about a different species. The true romantic novel is about delayed happiness; the pilgrimage you go through to get that imagined happiness. In the genuine romantic novel there is confrontation with truth and in the “romance” novel a similar confrontation with a surrogate, plastic version of the truth. Romantic writers are characterized by absolute longing—perhaps for something that is not there and cannot be there. And they go along with all the hurt and embarrassment of identifying the real thing and wanting it. In that sense Edith Hope is not a twentieth-century heroine, she belongs to the nineteenth century. What I can’t understand is the radical inauthenticity of some women’s novels that are written to a formula: From the peatbogs of Killarney to the penthouses of Manhattan, orgasms all the way! Pornography for ladies. It is not only impure artistically, it is untrue and unfeminine. To remain pure a novel has to cast a moral puzzle. Anything else is mere negotiation.

INTERVIEWER

In *Hotel du Lac* you say that you prefer the company of men to that of women. Which brings me to ask you about your relation to feminism.

BROOKNER

I prefer the company of men because they teach me things I don’t know.

INTERVIEWER

One might say, to paraphrase Sartre, *l'homme c'est l'autre*?

BROOKNER

Exactly. It is the otherness that fascinates me. As for feminism, I think it is good for women to earn their living and thereby control their own destinies to some extent. They pay a heavy price for independence though. I marvel at the energy of women who combine husbands, children, and a profession. Anyone who thinks she will fulfill herself in that way can't be realistic. The self-fulfilled woman is far from reality—it is a sort of Shavian fantasy that you can be a complete woman. Besides, a complete woman is probably not a very admirable creature. She is manipulative, uses other people to get her own way, and works within whatever system she is in. The *ideal* woman, on the other hand, is quite different: She lives according to a set of principles and is somehow very rare and always has been. As for the radical feminism of today, the rejection of the male, I find it absurd. It leads to sterility. They say it is a reasoned alternative, but an alternative to what? To continuity?

INTERVIEWER

But if feminism has not succeeded in dispelling mistrust between men and women, or in making their relationship any easier, it seems to have enhanced friendship between women. Don't you think so?

BROOKNER

I believe that is true. There was a time when if a woman went to the theater with a girlfriend it was considered an admission of failure. Not so anymore. Sometimes one prefers going with a friend, because it is less of a production. It is casual and relaxed, an evening's entertainment, not a prelude to something else.

INTERVIEWER

I would like to talk about your style, which has rightly been praised as exceptionally elegant, lucid, and original. You explain it somewhat in *Providence* by saying, “A novel is not simply confession, it is about the author’s choice of words.” What does style mean to you?

BROOKNER

Very little. I am not conscious of having a style. I write quite easily, without thinking about the words much but rather about what they want to say. I do think that respect for form is absolutely necessary in any art form—painting, writing, anything. I try to write as lucidly as possible. You might say that lucidity is a conscious preoccupation. I am glad people seem to like it.

INTERVIEWER

Where do you write?

BROOKNER

Anywhere. In my flat, or in my office at the Courtauld. I have even written on a bus. When you live in a small flat you write on the edge of things—there is no great setup. I type what I have written at the office. I prefer working there because I like the interruptions—telephone calls, visitors. I am completely schizophrenic, as I can carry on a conversation in my head while another, apparently sensible conversation, is taking place with someone who has just come into the room. At home the isolation weighs on me. It is a terrible strain.

INTERVIEWER

Do you keep regular hours?

BROOKNER

I only write in the summer holidays when the Institute is closed. Each novel has been written during a summer, over three or

four months. Then I work every day all day and stop in the evening. I try to switch off completely and not think about it till the next day.

INTERVIEWER

What do you do when the day's work is finished?

BROOKNER

I go for very long walks and wind down. I am grateful for the life in the streets—the people, the shop windows . . .

INTERVIEWER

With success must have come a certain amount of lionization: invitations to parties, literary gatherings, lectures. Are you good at saying no?

BROOKNER

Very good! Much too good! I ration myself strictly with regard to social life. I try not to give offense and I am never brutal, but I do say no.

INTERVIEWER

Don't you feel lonely sometimes?

BROOKNER

Often. I have said that I am one of the loneliest women in London. People have resented it—it is not done to confess to loneliness, but there it is.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever rewrite what you have written?

BROOKNER

Never. It is always the first draft. I may alter the last chapter; I may lengthen it. Only because I get very tired at the end of a book

and tend to rush and go too quickly, so when I have finished it I go over the last chapter.

INTERVIEWER

Do you know exactly how a novel would develop and end when you start, or do you let its organic growth take over?

BROOKNER

The latter. I have an idea, but I don't know exactly what will happen. As I said, in *Hotel du Lac* I wanted to let Edith Hope marry Mr. Neville, but like her I balked at the last minute! I am not really an imaginative writer.

INTERVIEWER

What do you mean by that? And who do you think is an imaginative writer?

BROOKNER

I mean that I am not very inventive. Some contemporary American novelists are imaginative. Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor* is a marvelously imaginative novel. So is Yann Qu  ffelec's *Les Nocces barbares*, because it cannot be verified. Whereas I like to examine the behavior of characters, the possibilities: Why this way and not that way?

INTERVIEWER

So far all your novels have been the same length, around two hundred pages, with the same group of characters and more or less the same circumstances producing the same results. (Although *Family and Friends* has a bigger cast of characters.) Are you not afraid of being accused of writing to a formula, even though of your own creation?

BROOKNER

I have been so accused! But the latest book, *The Misalliance*,

is much longer and has a broader canvas. It is quite different from the others, not at all deterministic, and rather sentimental. It has had excellent notices in the States but here the reviews were mixed, ranging from good to hostile, even abusive.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think English critics thought it was not “fair” that you should go around collecting dithyrambs for every novel?

BROOKNER

No, I think they had made the initial mistake of identifying me with my female protagonists, so that the criticism that comes my way, particularly in *The Misalliance*, is a semipersonal kind that does not rank as real criticism: I can’t learn from it, I can only feel hurt by it. Also it wasn’t a very good book, but it wasn’t *that* bad either. I have written it off. I didn’t like it even as I was writing it.

INTERVIEWER

Was it because the heroine, Blanche Vernon, is somewhat irritating, even boring?

BROOKNER

Well, she was a very aseptic character. The book has quite an interesting theme, which is that even good behavior can go wrong if it is based on a fallacy or a misconception, that you can’t take anything for granted, and that you are walking on eggshells every time you make a choice.

INTERVIEWER

But what emerged was that here was yet another “good woman,” who behaves honorably but gets abandoned for some one more frivolous and jolly.

BROOKNER

There is a personal dislike directed against Blanche Vernon,

because you can't blame her for anything, except perhaps for being a prig. Now that is a very minor vice in my book. The point is that there are a lot of women like her: nice, innocent, but boring. Nobody likes them and as a result they lead very miserable lives. They are not fun to be with and in England you've got to be *fun*; you must be a *fun* person, having fun all the time! It is very superficial, but there it is. The bad reviews were partly a dislike of Blanche, and of me since I'm supposed to be all these women I create. In America they liked it because they thought it was Jamesian, which I would not have dared to presume. Yet it *is* about a moral problem; so is the next one, which is coming out in the autumn and is called *A Friend from England*. It is a very old-fashioned moral tale.

INTERVIEWER

Can you tell me a bit about it—without giving it away?

BROOKNER

It is about an extremely emancipated young woman—whom they will *not* be able to think is me!—who is drawn into a family of blameless innocence whom she feels called upon to protect, but by whose innocence she finds herself finally vanquished. She can't measure up to it. It is quite complicated, not only because it has a larger cast but because it is about men.

INTERVIEWER

Is it difficult because a woman can't get into the skin of a man, to understand what makes him tick?

BROOKNER

I am finding it surprisingly easy!

INTERVIEWER

It is often said that the greatest female heroines have been created by male novelists—Anna Karenina, Madame Bovary, et al.—

but that the reverse has not yet happened. The only exceptions might be a couple of George Eliot's heroes.

BROOKNER

I was thinking of George Eliot too. I think it can be done, but only at the end of a very long process. When you start to write a novel you have to learn to internalize your characters, not to describe them from the outside—that doesn't work. And this process of internalizing goes on through life. In the case of a male protagonist gradually you begin to internalize him too—if you are lucky—and this is more difficult for a woman and takes longer. Somehow it is more difficult for a woman to get inside a man than for a man to get inside a woman. Men are better at this, let us face it. I think women have an inborn fear of men, which of course they could never confess to. Instinctively they will cower from a man if he shows some kind of energy or violence. So to reconcile your instinct as a woman with a man's instinct takes a long time. A long time. But I'm trying!

INTERVIEWER

You review books for *The Spectator* and before writing novels you wrote excellent art history books. Your book on David is considered a model of the genre, combining as it does biography, history, and criticism. Do you see a radical difference between the two genres—criticism versus creative writing? I ask this because some distinguished critics have found it difficult, if not impossible, to write fiction. I am thinking of Edmund Wilson and George Steiner, to mention but two who have tried.

BROOKNER

Wilson's novel is a very good and disturbing book. But I know what they mean: perhaps because in fiction you give too much away while in criticism you can hide behind another writer's personality and work. For me both are ways of working through a problem. I liken the whole process to writing an examination

paper—you have a certain amount of time and space and you have to do your best. It is nerve-racking but not particularly difficult.

INTERVIEWER

What about teaching? Are you leaving the Courtauld Institute because you can now make a living as a writer?

BROOKNER

Not really, because I have loved teaching, and I've loved my students. Indeed, I'm having the happiest year of my teaching life—perhaps because it is the last! It is just that I have taught for twenty-five years and the thought of having to go through the syllabus for the twenty-sixth year was more than I could take.

INTERVIEWER

Will you ever write on art history again?

BROOKNER

No. That particular career is over. Once you have let it go you can't go back. I shall not give up studying, but I might do it with words rather than pictures, although pictures will come into it. At present I am working on a new novel and doing it more slowly than before.

INTERVIEWER

Despite their subtlety and variations, all your books so far have been basically about love. Do you think you will go on writing about love?

BROOKNER

What else is there? All the rest is mere literature!

