

A JAR OF WILD FLOWERS

**A JAR OF
WILD FLOWERS**
ESSAYS IN CELEBRATION
OF JOHN BERGER

**EDITED BY YASMIN GUNARATNAM
WITH AMARJIT CHANDAN**

ZED

Zed Books
LONDON

A Jar of Wild Flowers: Essays in Celebration of John Berger
was first published in 2016 by Zed Books Ltd, The Foundry,
17 Oval Way, London SE11 5RR, UK.

www.zedbooks.net

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Typeset in Haarlemmer by seagulls.net

Cover design by Michael Oswell

Cover illustration by Mélina Berger

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-78360-880-5 hb

ISBN 978-1-78360-879-9 pb

ISBN 978-1-78360-881-2 pdf

ISBN 978-1-78360-882-9 epub

ISBN 978-1-78360-883-6 mobi

For all exiles.
Welcome.

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OIL
ON A MOTORBIKE TO

TESSA MCWATT

For two centuries we've believed in history as a highway which was taking us to a future such as nobody had ever known before. We thought we were exempt. When we walked through the galleries of the old palaces and saw all those massacres and last rites and decapitated heads on platters, all painted and framed on the walls, we told ourselves we had come a long way – not so far that we couldn't still feel for them, of course, but far enough to know that we'd been spared. Now people live to be much older. There are anaesthetics. We've landed on the moon. There are no more slaves. We apply reason to everything. Even to Salome dancing. We forgave the past its terrors because they occurred in the Dark Ages. Now, suddenly we find ourselves far from any highway, perched like puffins on a cliff ledge in the dark.

This speech, from the taxi driver in John Berger's novel *To the Wedding*,¹ gives us Berger the man, the voice, the storyteller. Here we have the two key elements of his alchemy: the guidance of history; and the imperative of the ordinary. In one paragraph he guides our gaze to our past predicaments, through art, while

grounding us in an ordinary moment in a coach, as a group of people travel towards their individual futures. Zdena, to whom the taxi driver is speaking, responds like this:

I can't fly.

Well, nor can I. Perched like puffins on a cliff ledge in the dark – yes, I see us there. Now. But when I read Berger, I come as close as I ever might to feeling that I might be able one day to lift off. To see clearly. To hope. Even possibly to fly.

My relationship with Berger, the work and the man, began through *To the Wedding*. This single book and my ongoing endeavour to develop a film based on it are touchstones to his influence more broadly. Berger uncovers angles in the world that broaden it. He draws us not only to ways of seeing, but also to ways of being, by example. John is all about motion. His verbs: to listen, to see, to share. And specifically, in the case of *To the Wedding*: to journey.

‘The most important thing to pay attention to’, Berger has said about the title of the novel, ‘is the preposition – to.’ His commitment to action is manifest in that imperative. We are all travelling *to*— where we’re going is of minor consequence. The journey is what counts. Action and motion: these make life bearable.

The motorbike with its headlights zigzags up the mountain. From time to time it disappears behind escarpments and rocks and all the while it is climbing and becoming smaller. Now its

light is flickering like the flame of a small votive candle against an immense face of stone.

To the Wedding the film was sparked by a *coup de foudre* (a phrase used by many to describe first encounters with Berger) in 1995 when the book first appeared. I distinctly remember reaching the end of the novel with the hairs rising up along my neck in response to the image of Ninon standing before Gino in her wedding dress, which is *soiled like a flag after a battle*. This arrival would be enough in itself – a moment possible only through Gino’s persistent love for Ninon, who would soon die of AIDS. But we arrive at the wedding already changed. Jean and Zdena travel towards one another after many years, to the wedding of their dying daughter, and it is this journey through loss and reconciliation that has us agreeing with Zdena: *Let these days never end, let them be long like centuries!* Through fragments, voices, and a defiance of linearity, the story unfolds like a secret. With the Berlin Wall down, the borders open, we travel through more than just territories. The changed and changing face of a continent is explored through encounters with its inhabitants, and through the lens of a generation of activists. Walls are down between the young and the old. Between life and death. The final cadence is so elemental that it’s devastating: *Her skin glistens*. A simple gesture ends the novel, as Gino undoes a single braid of Ninon’s hair.

A rush of air. An overwhelming lightness. My fate was sealed.

Many years later, I, like the novel’s blind narrator, still *cling to words or phrases which seem to ring true*. The narrator

is a tama seller whose wares give comfort to those in peril like Jean, who buys one for the daughter who is suffering everywhere. A tama provides that *in exchange for a promise made, people hope for a blessing or a deliverance*. My promise has been to the film adaptation, and the deliverance has been a deepening relationship to aesthetics and authenticity.

Up there in the sky there's no need for aesthetics. Here on earth people seek the beautiful because it vaguely reminds them of the good. This is the only reason for aesthetics. They're the reminder of something that has gone.

I first met John Berger in 2000. It had been his book that I had held up to my producer friend when he'd asked me if there were any stories I'd loved so much that I wanted them brought to a wider audience through film. 'This one,' I said, waving it, stealing Michael Ondaatje's back cover quote: 'Wherever I go in the world I will have this book with me.'

My friend gave me John's phone number the next day. 'Call him,' he said.

Spellbound by Berger the writer and the man, I didn't see how a cold call would be possible. I wrote to him, explained my intentions, described my passion, and a few days later he called me. His voice – with its unique, hybrid accent, its now familiar hesitations and qualifications that are the aperture to insight – told me that while he supported an adaptation, he wondered if one was necessary.

‘The story exists,’ he said. ‘It is there, for anyone who wants it.’ This angle on necessity levered open issues of commodification that have governed my approach to the adaptation. For John, only the possibility of a new work of art would make an adaptation necessary. Merely transcribing words from the page to images on the screen was not where art would reside. Adaptation, I would come to see, was not the same as translation. I assured him that the story would inspire the right artist. We arranged to meet the next time he was in London.

Lunch at a sleek, trendy restaurant was generously arranged by the film company. The food was good, the acoustics terrible. John kept looking up at the ceiling, as though to something lost, as we tried to talk over the din. His thinking seemed disturbed in a venue that had neglected the vastness of its guests. We declined dessert, and he led us to a nearby pub on a street next to the one where he grew up. Here the atmosphere allowed conversation. He talked of European filmmakers and artists with both delicate respect and criticism, framing shared themes, pointing out minuscule effects like the choice of a character’s socks. I held tight to my awe, and soon realised he wanted none of that. When he asked me to send him the novel I was writing, I felt like I’d betrayed my mission. I wondered what audacity I might have revealed that led to this offering. I would in time learn that this is another element of his alchemy. His critical and artistic practices are not separated from his social engagement. They are all part of the dialogue of his storytelling. His feedback on my manuscript would turn out to be just the beginning of his generosity. I regularly consult with him over the phone

about ideas and drafts, and he supports me at all stages. Before we hang up he sometimes says, ‘Now, I put my hand on your shoulder and turn you back to your work.’

The feeling of wings.

We discussed the novel’s relevance to the new millennium. I raised concerns about how a contemporary audience might engage with a story about AIDS now that life-sustaining drugs are available in rich countries, but inaccessible to many in African countries. I wanted to somehow acknowledge the non-European experience of HIV and AIDS and the devastation that was taking place in other parts of the world. He thought for a long time about this, as he does about everything put to him. His hesitations were audible. His agreement with my concerns was palpable, and his response had that feeling of a Polaroid image revealed. It would happen in an organic way through our consciousness of it, he said. Without forcing it, and by focusing on the truth in the story at hand, we would respect the parallel truth of stories outside of it.

And the thrush sings like a survivor – like a swimmer who swam for it through the water and made it to the safe side of the night and flew into the tree to shake the drops from his back and announce: I’m here!

Over the next few months, we exchanged ideas about filmmakers. He never forced an opinion. Soon in our exchanges

it became clear that the key blueprint to our shared principles for the film would be the screenplay. And as it had been so far my passion alone that had driven the project, John said, ‘Tessa, why don’t you write the script?’

You’ve never flown, even in dream?

Perhaps.

It’s a question of belief.

I am not a screenwriter by training or by inclination, but from him I took the suggestion seriously. That feeling of wings: a new vantage point that art makes possible. I considered his proposal. I knew that if I were to take the story on I would have to go to my own body. The only way I could imagine Ninon’s isolation and feeling of being outcast in Italy was to make her mixed-race, like me, to have her sense of belonging threatened not only by her diagnosis but by an intersectionality in a Europe that hadn’t yet – and arguably still hasn’t – come to terms with its colonial past. In order to make the script mine I would need Ninon’s journey to be one of greater displacement. That meant for me that Jean would have to be black, while Zdena would remain Caucasian of Slovakian origin.

Writing Ninon as mixed-race now meant that the characters’ predicaments, and the resonance around her contracting AIDS, would be more profound on the symbolic levels of genetics and hybridity. The border crossing in the story would now have reverberations that are even more compelling today than when I began. My projection of Jean, as he travels across

France and Italy on his motorbike – a black man in an altered Europe, where borders are open but where he is a visible reminder to Europeans of further change, indeed of the Africa I had been concerned about representing – brought unexpected ripples towards deeper interpretations of some of the passages in the novel.

In the hut on the riverbank where Jean Ferrero is sleeping, the Po is audible: it makes a noise like lips being licked because the mouth is too dry. Yet rivers never speak and their indifference is proverbial. The Alamana, the Po, the Rhine, the Danube, the Dnieper, the Sava, the Elbe, the Koca, where some lost soldiers of Alexander the Great fought stragglers of the Persian army in a skirmish of which there is no record – there's not a great river anywhere for which men have not died in battle, their blood washed away in a few minutes. And at night after the battles, the massacres begin.

Through this projection of race I had arrived at a new way of thinking about what authenticity was, how a story can adapt to the personal preoccupations of any given artist, how a single story will never speak only to a single experience. From that opening came greater challenges: how to adapt the language of prose to the language of film. How would a film be true to the novel's politics as well as its emotions? Authenticity is a tough master to serve.

I am a novelist who deals with the themes of belonging and displacement, but the challenge of the screenplay, as a woman from a complex diasporic background (when people ask, I

ream off a list of 'bloodlines' and ethnicities: Scottish, African, English, Amerindian, French, Indian, Portuguese, Chinese, the order for which is suggested only in the context of British colonialism), became one that was vital to my development.

The central image of the story for me became the virus. Not as something pernicious, but as an instrument of change. Viruses engage in border crossing. Their survival demands it. A treacherous journey is involved. The destination 'host' becomes altered. Change is lasting.

The scene in which Jean meets the hackers also gained more resonance. These young, vibrant men are emblematic of the disenfranchised youth of the early internet, whose hero, Captain Crunch, was breaking into systems. Berger reminds us that the internet has its roots in resistance, in rebellion, in freedom.

We hack to stay alive! says Lunatic, we hack to stay on the planet.

And to show them they can't keep us out and never will ...

The hackers have *invented a virus too*, and Berger foreshadows groups like Hactivisimo, Cult of the Dead Cow and Anonymous – hackers who have taken their radical activism into cyberspace.

Within the frame of change and resistance, the wedding itself becomes a border crossing: the passage that pernicious despair makes towards hope. The story's border crossings involve countries, the past to the present, a generation of Europeans from behind a wall, and each of these is embodied in the characters. Sex transmits the HIV virus, and as such the

body becomes the site of ultimate danger and change. But Gino is not afraid, and it is his passion in the face of death that drives the narrative, his refusal to be separated from love. So the virus paradoxically leads to the healing of wounds.

I was pushing, says Gino, pushing and pushing with my feet against the planks – his laughter was all mixed up with the sunlight and with what he was saying – to lift you up and up and up and the wall of the house fell down!

Being mixed-race signifies many borders already crossed. The losses implicit in the crossings, along with the explicit newness that needs a voice – a chorus of voices – will be, in the film, the aesthetic shorthand to Berger’s prescience of the changes that were underway in 1990 and are culminating with urgency today.

‘As soon as we use the terms “us” and “them”,’ I once heard John say in an interview, ‘there is the potential for barbarism.’ His insistence on a social ‘we’ is underscored by the wedding. The celebration, the healing, the ordinary joy: the wedding scene is an affirmation of shared spirit.

It’s hard, he says. We’re living on the brink and it’s hard because we’ve lost the habit.

A script is only a map. The next crucial bridge to a film became finding the right director. Now, a couple of years into the process, the original producers were no longer

involved and I had no money to develop the project myself. The Canadian production company Screen Sirens contacted me independently, spurred by the passion of Helen du Toit, who, like me, had experienced a *coup de foudre* on first reading the novel. They attached the gifted director Keith Behrman to collaborate with me. The team worked in development for several years, until various circumstances changed and the project was stalled. Even so, the issues that arose in conversations between creative and financial partners brought more light to the complexities of an authentic portrayal. As the years passed, it became clear that we were now dealing with a period film and the challenges of representing a complex moment in history. Visual choices would produce different emotions. Making an adaptation was another border crossing, after all, and it was key in my evolution as an artist. Throughout all of this, John was humble, trusting, grateful. I learned patience and faith in art. I also learned about the restrictions of co-productions, the tyranny of commercialism, and the fickleness of passions, but these only served to strengthen my conviction that this slow road to making art might be the only reason to do anything.

We've lost the habit.

Of flying?

No, of living on a ledge.

Helen du Toit and I eventually decided to go it alone. We have a director, Andrea Pallaoro, whose response to the novel

matches ours. An Italian who is intimately familiar with the River Po, where *the waters change all the while and stay the same only on the map*, he has taken on the script to infuse it with the language of cinema and his own vision. The screenplay is no longer mine, but as a creative producer I am learning a different side of collective art making.

I dream of a film.

I dream of showing it to John. The barbarism of ‘us’ and ‘them’ dialogues proliferate around us.

You have to be frightened, he says.

Frightened I am.

Then you’ll fly.

At the end of the novel, the blind narrator slips into the future tense. He imagines rather than recounts the wedding, and this verb tense bears the pearl of Berger’s offering:

They will sit side by side at the large table, surrounded by thirty people, and she will notice everything which is happening. Nothing will escape her. Wedding feasts are the happiest because something new is beginning, and with the newness comes a reminder of appetite, even to the oldest guests.

And *here is where we meet* (to borrow another Berger title):² at the intersection of our bodies, our countries, and our losses. Ninon’s foreshadowed death reminds us that the dead are among us and that their spirit is unifying. If we forget them,

we forget ourselves. The eternal border crossing is from now towards the future, and the future is all about possibility.

This long journey towards a film adaptation feels like the slowness of awareness, of awakening – an evolution towards a collective authenticity. The years feel like nothing. And the novel is the perfect tama.

What shall we do before eternity?

Take our time.

NOTES

- ¹ Berger, J. (1995) *To the Wedding*, London: Bloomsbury. All italicised passages in my essay are taken from this novel.
- ² Berger, J. (2005) *Here Is Where We Meet*, London: Bloomsbury.