

Correspondence

A letter: Some thoughts on author Stan Barstow (1928-2011) and postwar British social realism

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The death of Stan Barstow on August 1, best known for his novel *A Kind of Loving* (1960), brings into focus the importance of a genre of writing which was part of the post-war social realism based in northern England. Barstow and fellow writers Keith Waterhouse (*Billy Liar*), John Braine (*Room at the Top*), Alan Sillitoe (*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*), David Storey (*This Sporting Life*) and others portrayed the lives they knew. Their novels reflected the era of the welfare state that succeeded the Depression years of the inter-war period during which they were born.

These stories were eagerly snapped up as material for the New Wave of British films. John Schlesinger directed the film version of *A Kind of Loving*, but Barstow felt too closely involved to write the screenplay, so Keith Waterhouse and Willis Hall took it on. All of the previously mentioned novels were translated into successful films, which blew a breath of fresh air through British cinema.

Their lead characters were not angry with life, unlike in John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, but they did not recognise their own potential and, because of the opportunities offered by better jobs and more money than their fathers could have dreamed about, simply got on with their lives. An unsentimental look at previously unseen parts of the British life—corner shops, pubs and factories—appeared on their pages, instead of drawing rooms and country houses.

This, Barstow said, reflected his own background, which he described as “the lace curtain” working class life, “poverty not squalor”. *A Kind of Loving* closely mirrored his own beginnings. The only child of a coal miner, he went to Ossett grammar school and then

entered the local draughtsman's office.

Barstow's stories feature social relationships in the communities and romantic relationships between young people, Vic Brown in *A Kind of Loving* works in a drawing office and is captivated by the blonde typist in the offices. He pursues her and finds she is shallow and ruled by the moral codes and false respectability of her mother. This theme is taken up in other writings, such as *A Season with Eros*, where a young couple marry and joyously explore their sexual freedom, only for things to be ruined by the moralising of the girl's mother who convinces the young wife to abandon such behaviour. Both the men in these relationships leave their wives and try to find a new life for themselves elsewhere.

When Barstow first tried to sell his stories, he aimed at the women's magazine market. “I sold nothing in that first phase because I was writing insincerely,” he said. Recognising this, he travelled on a moped around the industrial landscapes of West Yorkshire and collected material that was to reappear in his novels for many years.

Many of Barstow's 11 novels and three collections of short stories were based in West Yorkshire where he lived for the majority of his life, preferring to “hoe one's own row diligently, thus seeking out the universal in the particular, [which] brings more worthwhile satisfaction than the frantic pursuit of a largely jet age internationalism”.

Barstow's somewhat insular attitude found expression in his writings. He failed to address the new social tensions that emerged when those apparently successful times of better living conditions and wages

came crashing down in the Winter of Discontent of 1976. His books did, however, reflect the changing times of earlier years—youth for the first time having a wage to themselves after they’d paid their “board”, their own fashion and leisure activities that were not inextricably bound up with those of their parents.

A new wave of television was just starting, with *Coronation Street* (1960), set in a northern town following the daily lives of the working class, whilst comedies such as *The Likely Lads*, set in Newcastle, followed. The BBC’s *Wednesday Play* featured excellent social dramas throughout the mid-1960s, with *Cathy Come Home* (Ken Loach) probably the most famous. *Play for Today* in the 1970s followed this lead.

A Kind of Loving was the first in a trilogy by Barstow, followed by *The Watchers On the Shore*, in 1966, and *The Right True End*, in 1976. He also wrote *A Raging Calm* in 1976, which explored the respectable councillor Tom Simkins’s longstanding extra-marital love affair with a local woman, which was made into a successful television series. He also wrote television scripts and for the radio and theatre, adapting Howard Spring’s *My Son*, *My Son* for radio, Catherine Cookson’s *The Man Who Cried* for television, as well as many others.

This reflects only a small part of Barstow’s work. His influence and the effect of his writings on an audience starved of dramas, novels and television they could empathise with cannot be underestimated. Earlier novels depicting working class life, such as *Love on the Dole* (1933), concentrated on the “the tragedy of a lost generation who are denied consummation,” as that book’s author Walter Greenwood commented. Barstow’s novels brought to life the postwar joys, struggles and romances to an eager audience.

Eileen Hyland



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