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My Green Redoubt

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My Green Redoubt

All around the very top of the hill ran a high wall of green turf. Inside the wall, trees were growing. Their branches hung over the wall; their leaves showed not only green but also blue and silver when the wind stirred them. When the travellers reached the top they walked nearly all the way round it outside the green wall before they found the gates: high gates of gold, fast shut, facing due east. . . . You never saw a place that was so obviously private. You could see at a glance that it belonged to someone else. Only a fool would dream of going in unless he had been sent there on very special business.

—C.S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew*

Seventeen years ago, I cracked open the gates to my imagination, hoping someone interesting would come along. It wasn't long before an entire family arrived, a widowed father, his four daughters, and their dog. For a while they called themselves the Pendergasts, and one of the girls was Lindsay. But the dog was always Hound, and the rest got themselves straightened out soon enough, taking on the name Penderwick and setting up home inside my head, like Borrowers under the floorboards but without the threat of a ferret. Over the years the family has grown. Mr. Penderwick married the widow next door, who brought along with her a young boy and a cat, and later this marriage produced a new baby, another girl, the only Penderwick to be related by blood to all the others.

I write books for children about this family. Four have been published; the fifth—and last—is in the throes of becoming. Writing the books gives me an excuse to spend my time with the Penderwicks. Or, to put it another way, the books are the outcome of my spending time with the family. I've learned that I need them more than they need me. While they seem to be happy enough in between books, living on their own in some distant ether, without them I'm miserable and anxious. Because I can't be with them unless I'm alone and quiet, I've learned to protect my time and privacy, to be a tiger guarding the lair of my imagination.

Which makes it a mark of either irony or insensitivity that the first—and only, thank goodness—author whose privacy I tried to invade explained this need for protection far better than I can. Here is John

Fowles in his third novel, *Daniel Martin*, writing in the voice of a screenwriter who is working on a script about Robin Hood. The name of the chapter in which this appears, not incidentally, is “The Sacred Combe.”

The desire to create imaginary worlds...has always been strongly linked, at least in my own experience, with the notion of retreat, in both the religious and the military sense; of the secret place that is also a redoubt.

And again:

a place outside the normal world, intensely private and enclosed, intensely green and fertile, numinous, haunted and haunting, dominated by a sense of magic that is also a sense of a mysterious yet profound parity of all existence.

Not so widely read now, Fowles was a major English novelist in the sixties and seventies. I discovered him at fifteen, reading his second novel *The Magus*. Looking back, I was probably first drawn in by his title—I was studying Latin and would have understood the intimation that here be magic. Although the magic turned out not to be literal, it was there nonetheless. In particular, Fowles’s obsession with the secret green place—the sacred combe—gave me a link back to the retreats of childhood books and stories¹: Narnia, Neverland, Sherwood Forest, and, in particular, that quintessential green redoubt, Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *Secret Garden*:

It was the sweetest, most mysterious-looking place anyone could imagine. The high walls which shut it in were covered with the leafless stems of climbing roses, which were so thick that they were matted together.... [O]ne of the things that made the place look strangest and loveliest was that climbing roses had run all over [the trees] and swung down long tendrils which made light swaying curtains, and here and there they had

1. A link I’ve never stopped looking for. My most successful find to date is *Fairy Tale* by Alice Thomas Ellis.

caught at each other or at a far-reaching branch and had crept from one tree to another and made lovely bridges of themselves.

Fowles himself seemed to be aware of his debt to Burnett's book. In his journal, he calls himself "a writer of the secret-garden kind."² His first fictional secret garden was in *The Magus*, the Greek island of Phraxos, "floating under Venus like a majestic black whale in an amethyst evening sea." But it was in his next novel, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, that Fowles gave his characters a green redoubt bordering on the Edenic—the Undercliff at Lyme Regis (an actual place, and one near Fowles's home)—"the mile-long slope caused by the erosion of the ancient vertical cliff face... [with] its wild arbutus and ilex and other trees rarely seen growing in England; its enormous ashes and beeches; its green Brazilian chasms choked with ivy and the liana of wild clematis; its bracken that grows seven, eight feet tall; its flowers that bloom a month earlier than anywhere else in the district."

By the time I wrote to Fowles in 1976, I had read and many times reread both *The Magus* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, and had also fallen for "The Ebony Tower," the titular story in his collection of short tales, with its Manoir de Coëtminais "islanded and sundrenched in its clearing among the sea of huge oaks and beeches." In short, I was a fan, smitten with Fowles's books, his green worlds, the psychosexual dramas he let take place in them—there had been none of *that* in Narnia—and I wanted to meet him. Why? What was I thinking would happen? Who knows—it was long ago and I was young and ardent. Perhaps I believed that being with Fowles would give me immediate and richer access to his worlds, as though he himself were those places, or the wardrobe that led into them (just as now, I can pretend that meeting Bruce Springsteen would be a wardrobe back to the summer of 1966 at the Jersey shore, where I made out in the sand with Dave from Bridgeton. Alas and alas for lost youth).

I sent my letter in care of Fowles's American publisher, Little Brown. No copy of this letter exists, for which I am grateful, but I do remember writing that I was planning a trip to England for the following May and would be grateful if he would let me visit him in Lyme Regis. I believe I also said something about my life having taken on the flavor of his books, or some such rot. I'm sure I was an ass, and, as it turns out,

2. John Fowles, *The Journals, Volume Two: 1966–1990*, ed. Charles Drazin (New York: Knopf, 2006), 67.

I wasn't even a unique ass. Fowles's wife, Elizabeth, wrote to friends about "the endless flow of letters that come into this house from women who have read JF...filled with life histories, thanking [him] for his insight into their lives and the joy his works had given them, suggesting meetings." She even specifically calls out "the mad American ladies, too numerous to mention."³

At any rate, he said no. The no didn't surprise me and was probably a relief—I knew well enough that meeting this god of mine would have been terrifying. It had been the attempt that was necessary so that I would never have to look back and wonder. No, what surprised—astonished, thrilled—me was that he'd written at all. Here is the text of his message, handwritten on a plain white postcard:

23⁴ . xi . 76

Though touched by your letter, I'm afraid I treasure my own privacy; have to have solitude to write. In any case, I expect to be abroad in May.

Writers' real selves are in their books, you know; much more interesting than their daily selves.

Best wishes,
John Fowles

I loved this note and cherished it—I have it still—and took it at face value, proud of the part about his being touched by my letter. Maybe that was true—who knows—but it's hard now to forget those "mad American ladies, too numerous to mention." And, too, from my current viewpoint of a writer protecting her own privacy, I'm amused at his giving me not one but three reasons why I couldn't visit. He needed his privacy to write, he wasn't all that interesting, and just in case that wasn't enough to discourage me, he wasn't going to be home. Sounds to me like he was making sure I wouldn't make a run at him without permission. Perhaps others had; they certainly did later. According to Elizabeth

3. Eileen Warburton, *John Fowles: A Life in Two Worlds* (New York: Viking, 2004), 373.

4. I can only approximate the date as the twenty-third. He'd crossed out the first number he wrote and wrote over it, maybe twice. Looks like there could be a 27 and maybe a 22 in there also. This charms me, as I never know the date either. A connection! Only connect! John, there's hope for us yet! (Except that you died in 2005.)

Fowles, “After the release of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* film, the invasion grew worse. People simply arrive and knock the door.”⁵

It was another decade and a half before I dared dream of becoming an author, and almost that long again before my first book was launched into the world, *The Penderwicks: A Summer Tale of Four Sisters, Two Rabbits, and a Very Interesting Boy*. Because the book was a quiet one, no one expected that my privacy would be in need of protection, and I gave little thought to avoiding the limelight. On the contrary, I indulged in fantasies of letting the book be made into a film, cast John Cusack as Mr. Penderwick so that he would have coffee with me one day (maybe Springsteen could come, too), planned my cameo—less Hitchcock than Rob Reiner’s mom in *When Harry Met Sally*—and wondered if one could get away with wearing blue jeans on the red carpet.

But then the good reviews came, and the 2005 National Book Award for Young People’s Literature. Sales were healthy, the book was published abroad, and gradually I had to endure a certain amount of public life. Traveling and events wore me out, battering away at my imaginative life with the Penderwicks. As for letting the book be made into a film, I should have remembered John Fowles’s experiences before attempting to enter that world. The film made of *The Magus* was a nightmare—even I walked out in the middle, cursing its oblivion to all that was best in the book. As Fowles wrote in his journal, “It has turned out to be just as vulgar as we feared. . . . It’s really the appalling hollowness and shallowness of the finished product that disgusts me.”⁶ The film of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* took more than a decade to come into being. Scripts were written and discarded, casts collected and dismissed, and deals made and broken, including a phony one with a Saudi Arabian prince who was soon beheaded (*not* because of the phony deal). When the film was finally made, it was good—Meryl Streep starred—but underappre-

5. Warburton, 392. The following May, I went to England and, instead of going south to Lyme Regis, I headed north to Edinburgh, where I bought a tall stack of books on Prince Street, went back down to Carlisle to see the Roman Wall, then went farther south again to London, where I stared at the Tate’s Pre-Raphaelites and bought another stack of books at Foyles. And then back home, where that autumn *Daniel Martin* was published, brimful of Fowles’s green redoubts, his sacred combes.

6. Fowles, *The Journals, Volume Two*, 43.

ciated, and by then Fowles was already drifting away from Hollywood and, eventually, from commercialism of all kinds.

I never got so far as a finished film or even a signed contract. Partway through my first attempt at cooperating with Hollywood, I figured out what I should have known all along—that the movie people wouldn't just borrow my Penderwicks but would possess them forever, ruthlessly ravishing the safe universe I'd lovingly constructed. I ducked away and haven't looked back since.

Over the years, I've been learning to say no, not just to Hollywood, but to anyone who threatens my peace and productivity. No one can make me leave my home, and the children who read my books are not importunate—they may write letters, but they won't "simply arrive and knock the door." And, as I look around me now, I realize with great pleasure that I've created one of Fowles's green redoubts right here beside the house—a garden where I can write most of the year (until the New England winter forces me inside). It has an ash tree for shade; roses, hydrangeas, columbines, irises, phlox, and clematis for beauty; and a fence and privet hedge to make it a true secret garden. Stone animals carved by my husband dot the flower beds. Then there are the birds—mourning doves, chickadees, robins, cardinals, bluebirds, and once, terrifyingly, a hawk that swooped through on his way to somewhere else. Last spring, a catbird built her nest deep in my mock orange. She didn't seem to mind me much, although my Boston terrier made her nervous. And from where I'm sitting just now, I see the sun glisten off a spider web spun lovingly across the red climbing rose—one of Charlotte's descendants has come to watch over me.

Here in this garden, my imagination roams and dreams and creates green redoubts for the Penderwicks. I gave them Arundel, a Berkshires estate with sweeping gardens and only three occupants: a friendly gardener, a lonely boy, and the boy's selfish mother, who would have handed out Turkish delight to control the children if she'd been smart enough to study up on Narnia. On the coast of Maine, I gave the girls a pinewood: "It was another world in there—dark, with the thick branches blocking the faint light of dawn, the ground slippery with fallen needles, and the heady smell of a thousand Christmas trees." And the green place I'm proudest of is right at the end of the Penderwicks' street⁷—Quigley

7. Gardam Street, named in honor of Jane Gardam, another of my favorite English authors.

Woods, “a forty-acre slice of paradise, . . . a wild realm of trees, rocks and water, and a favorite refuge for all the Penderwicks.”

My husband and I plan to grow old and die here in this home, with this garden where I can be alone and write. Sometimes I wonder how I’ll handle the labor of gardening as I age, and weaken and stiffen. But I try not to dwell on it. If the garden has to shrink, I’ll still have the fence for privacy, the grass through which the friendly bugs march, the ash tree, and the mock orange for the birds. If need be, with enough imagination, a single rosebush can be Versailles, a lone delphinium a cottage garden in the Cotswolds, a clump of iris the pathway to a Buddhist temple.

Here, then, is my gratitude to John Fowles—his refusal to meet me was a marvelous gift, a way to teach me about writing and privacy, and how the one relies on the other. I’ll always have his words to help me keep the world at bay. “Please don’t visit. You wouldn’t enjoy it much if you did. Besides, ‘writers’ real selves are in their books, you know; much more interesting than their daily selves.”