

## **Carmen Callil – a Woman who changed the World**

By Angela Neustatter (Henry Handel Richardson's great-niece)  
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It was Henry who forged the friendship between Carmen Callil and me. As I began researching the book I am writing on Henry and her sister Lil, I knew it would add a valuable insight if I could interview Carmen Callil. Why, I wanted to know, had she declared *Maurice Guest* her favourite book, and chosen to publish it - an Australian book by an author unknown in the UK - in the Modern Classics section of her British Virago feminist publishing company?

It was odds-on I thought, that she would not have time or inclination to talk with me, but it seems she was intrigued by my blood link to Henry. Carmen invited me for lunch and was a glorious host serving up delicious food and feeding me succulent chunks of gossip and the latest shenanigans in the publishing world. As well, we talked about politics, characters we knew in common, jokes we could scream with laughter over. And of course, why *Maurice Guest* was so important for her.

“Darling - She called everyone Darling - in my years when passionately in love with men I hated being in love.... I was always miserable...the masochist in me, chose men who made me suffer. That is why *Maurice Guest* rang a bell with me. It was so like my own experience. It resonated for me. It was the book that helped me make sense of my love life.”

She explained how the writer Antonia White had given her the book in 1978. Then, rushing from the room to an enormous bookshelf, she returned with a large dusty volume of *Maurice Guest* explaining this was the one Antonia White had given to her, telling Carmen it needed to be better known. Carmen read *Maurice Guest* and was captivated.

“*Maurice Guest* is a realistic novel in the great tradition. It is many novels in one, encompassing worlds of emotion, thought and feeling. A great novel, one that, once it grasps your imagination, is impossible to put down for more than a moment, leading every reader into a dreamtime remembrance of the terrible pain the human heart is heir to.”

She added, shortly before she died aged 84, this year, that “I loved it and I still love it.”

I had come across Carmen when I was working on the women's page of the Guardian newspaper and she had just launched Virago with an all-women team to much feminist excitement and a good deal of controversy. The writer Anthony Burgess wanted to know why "chauvinist sows" were publishing women's books. Her answer "to demonstrate that women had a history of their own"

I would bump into Carmen at literary events but she was always surrounded by the significant bookerati and I, a humble journalist, did not dare disturb her universe. I did however know her reputation for giving enormous support and help to staff and authors, I also had heard tell of her ferocious fury when aggravated or roused. The amount of crying in the toilets at Virago was legendary. In the toilet of Carmen's home was a cartoon of our late Queen Elizabeth II visibly quaking saying "I hear I have to meet Carmen Callil."

The more I understood the enormity of what Carmen had done by making Virago a reality, the more I wished I could know her better. That unexpected lunch was the springboard for a lovely friendship that followed. We ate together regularly chewing the cud over life and times and inveighed against the horrors of UK politics, the destructive power of social media and lots more. We emailed plenty and from time to time she would ask what we could or should do about the state of things. Other times it was an email with gossipy snippets.

On several occasions as we sat in her pretty West London terraced house, chatting animatedly and she told how one of the impulses to have a career and show that women could have power and influence in the world, was to vindicate the life in which she saw her mother, trapped like a fly in a bell jar.

"I couldn't be in same room as mother. I couldn't bear the life she had being utterly subservient to my father, never considering there might be anything for her to do outside the home." Carmen talks of her mother's whole personality being shoved out of shape by being a woman...

"And she is only one. You see them everywhere. I couldn't bear it for her. Women didn't have power. Others had it over them."

Carmen was eight when her father died: during his long illness she had been sent to a convent boarding school. She was "miserable and lonely", the nuns "sapping all the joy from life and instilling in young minds a fear of sin and hell." Even in adult life, Callil felt that "God is after me with a scythe" should she disagree with him. She could detect no interest in intellectual achievement, the educational emphasis was on being a lady. "I can think of no worse way of passing your life – a frightful waste." When, years later, she read Antonia White's *Frost in May*, she related immediately to the story of a nine-year-old closeted in a convent.

When, in time, Carmen read *The Getting of Wisdom*, Henry's thinly disguised savage and sardonic autobiography of her time at PLC in Melbourne, she identified closely with the tormented Laura Ramsbotham. But it was *Maurice Guest* that opened her eyes to the quality of work women could do, the passion they could bring to careers and the tormenting passions wreaked by relationships so often labelled as "love".

The idea for the feminist publishing company Virago came to Carmen Callil "like the switching on of a lightbulb". When asked why she did it Carmen replied: "I always wanted to change the world. It simply wasn't good enough."

Virago, launched 1973, aimed to provide a mass-market publisher for 52% of the population – women – at a time when they were permitted neither mortgages nor bank loans. Its impact on publishing was monumental. Women's books began to be taken more seriously, prestigious writers wanted to publish with Virago, other women's publishing houses started up although none was ever as successful as Virago.

in 1978 Carmen invented a series of Virago Modern Classics (VMC) to challenge Penguin's then predominantly male line. "If founding Virago was my first lightbulb moment, dreaming up Classics was my second," Callil reflected years later, of the series now as revered and recognisable as any in publishing.

In October Carmen died after a short illness, aged 84. Next week, as simply a friend, I shall attend her cremation which will undoubtedly be full of the illustrious of the literary world and beyond, celebrating the life of someone who stamped women's writing so firmly on her world.