

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Vintage Living Texts: Louis de Bernières

Jonathan Noakes and Margaret Reynolds

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About the Book

In Vintage Living Texts teachers and students will find the essential guide to the works of Louis de Bernières. This guide will deal with his themes, genre and narrative technique, and a close reading of the texts will be accompanied by likely exam questions, and contexts and comparisons – as well as providing a rich source of ideas for intelligent and inventive ways of approaching the novels.

Also available in Vintage Living Texts

Margaret Atwood

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Bluebeard's Egg and Other Stories

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Vintage Living Texts: Louis de Bernières

The Essential Guide to Contemporary
Literature

Jonathan Noakes and Margaret Reynolds

Captain Corelli's Mandolin
The War of Don Emmanuel's Nether Parts
Señor Vivo and the Coca Lord
The Troublesome Offspring of Cardinal Guzman



VINTAGE LIVING TEXTS

Preface

About this series

VINTAGE LIVING TEXTS: The Essential Guide to Contemporary Literature is a new concept in reading guides. Our aim is to provide readers of all kinds with an intelligent and accessible introduction to key works of contemporary literature. Each guide suggests techniques for reading important contemporary novels, and offers a variety of back-up materials that will give you ways into the text – without ever telling you what to think.

Content

All the books reproduce an extensive interview with the author, conducted exclusively for this series. This is not to say that we believe that the author's word is law. Of course it isn't. Once his or her book has gone out into the world he or she becomes simply yet another – if singularly competent – reader. This series recognises that an author's contribution may be valuable, and intriguing, but it puts the reader in control.

Every title in the series is author-focused and covers at least three of their novels, along with relevant biographical, bibliographical, contextual and comparative material.

How to use this series

In the reading activities that make up the core of each book you will see that you are asked to do two things. One comes from the text; that is, we suggest what you should focus on, whether it's a theme, the language or the narrative method. The other concentrates on your own response. We want you to think about how you are reading, and what skills you are bringing to bear in doing that reading. So this part is very much about you, the reader.

The point is that there are many ways of responding to a text. You could concentrate on the methods you might use to compare this text with others. In that case, look for the sections headed 'Compare'. Or you might want to do something more individual, and analyse how you are reacting to a text and what it means to you, in which case, pick out the approaches labelled 'Imagine' or 'Ask Yourself'.

Of course, it may well be that you are reading these texts for an exam. In that case you will have to go for the more traditional methods of literary criticism and look for the responses that tell you to 'Discuss' or 'Analyse'. Whichever level you (or your students) are at, you will find that there is something here for everyone. However, we're not suggesting that you stick solely to the approaches we offer, nor that you tackle all of the exercises laid out here. Choose whatever most interests you, or whatever best suits your purposes.

Who are these books for?

Students will find that these guides are like a good teacher. They introduce the life and work of the author, set each novel in its context, explain key ideas and literary critical terms as they arise, suggest comparative exercises in a number of media, and ask focused questions to encourage a

well-informed, analytical approach to reading the novels in a way that is rigorous, but still entertaining.

Teachers will find in this series a rich source of ideas for teaching contemporary novels and their contexts, particularly at AS, A and undergraduate level. The exercises on each text have been tailored to meet the various assessment objectives laid down in the subject criteria for GCE AS and GCE A Level English Literature, and are explained in such a way that they can easily be selected and fitted into a lesson plan. Given the diversity of ways in which the awarding bodies have devised their specifications to meet these assessment objectives, a wide range of exercises is offered. We've had fun devising the plans, and we hope that they'll be fun for you when you come to teach and learn with them.

And if you are neither a teacher nor a student of contemporary literature, but someone reading for your own pleasure? Well, if you've ever wanted someone to introduce you to a novelist's work in a way that will let you trust your own judgement and read more confidently, then this guide is also for you.

Whoever you are, we hope that you will enjoy using these books and that they will send you back to the novels to find new pleasures.

All page references in this text refer to the Vintage edition.

Louis de Bernières

Introduction

AT THE END of *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* Iannis persuades Velisarios the strong man to lift the huge stone that covers the cachette in the ruins of what once was the doctor's house. He is looking for the mandolin which his grandmother Pelagia has said was hidden there, long ago. Velisarios has come to the house to fulfil a private ritual, placing a red rose on the grave of a long dead Italian soldier. He obliges Iannis and Spiro by displaying his legendary strength and raises the lid of the cachette: 'Did you know', says Iannis, 'that Cephallonia was the original place where the giants lived? It says so in Homer. That's what Grandma says.'

In these references – to Pelagia, to Velisarios, to Carlo, to the mandolin — we have the whole story of *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*. As we have it again in the treasures unearthed from the cachette: the wind-up gramophone, the crocheted wedding blanket, the bandoliers of bullets, the two manuscripts, one in Italian and one in Cyrillic, the Lee-Enfield rifle, and the mandolin. The contents of the cachette are a mnemonic. And because we have lived through the story, each fragment is weighted with a meaning that we understand. But the story we remember is itself a mnemonic for Greek history, for Greek legend, literature and myth, for the significance of Greek civilisation and its place in European memory and in the memory of the world.

Louis de Bernières likes a big canvas. That may be a strange thing to say about a book set largely on an island.

But islands in literature are often magic boxes. In the *Odyssey* of Homer each of the islands Ulysses visits presents him with new wonders, but also with new challenges that teach him about himself, whether it's the seductions of Circe's sophistication set against the simplicity of Nausicca's innocence, or the depredations of the Cyclops countered by a wiliness that exploits the monster's weakness, or the deadly pleasure of the Sirens song, attended to, but overcome through the discipline of a planned restraint. Homer's islands were among the first in literature to be used to tell that story of how you find out about who you are – not at home, but by going away from home. After that, there was Prospero's island in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, there was Robinson Crusoe's island in Daniel Defoe's eponymous novel, there was R. M. Ballantyne's *Coral Island*, and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and the unnamed island inhabited by Piggy and Ralph and all the other lost boys in William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies*.

Captain Corelli's Mandolin might look like a focussed story about one woman and her life in one place across a huge span of time. But look again. Pelagia is the centre of the novel, but the derivation of her name refers to a particular ocean current. Through the current of Pelagia's story run all those earlier stories set on islands, and, like them, this one is not so much about an individual person as it is about society and communication between people and the accidents of history that destroy those relations between people. It is a big canvas. And that's one reason why de Bernières likes to give himself a lot of space. The main action of *Captain Corelli* may take place over a few years, but the larger frame is the whole of Pelagia's and Corelli's long lives. Interestingly, in the 2001 film adaptation with a screenplay by Shawn Slovo, the decision was made to shorten the time span, so Corelli returns fairly soon after the war. It makes a 'happier' ending perhaps, but it also makes

a tidier one. The doctor is still alive, the joke about the pea in Stammatis's ear takes us back to the beginning. Of course it's easy to see why the filmmakers did this, just as it's easy to see why Pelagia – in the film – has to be allowed to qualify as a real doctor. But there is something too neat about this resolution that is entirely contrary to de Bernières's sprawling, fragmentary method. This is, after all, the writer who – as he tells us in the interview – had originally intended his Latin American trilogy to go on to extend to five books.

There is an organic quality to de Bernières's writing and three factors contribute to that. He prefers – as he explains – a first person narrative, but even when he uses the third person, the narrating voice has a personality that is distinctively ironic, dry, half amused, half shocked by the perversities of human behaviour. The use of this voice and the individual voices of the characters often make his works sound like a chorus or a range of dialogues rather than a novel. The episodic structure of his style is the second element that creates the organic character of his work. It is almost an haphazard process. De Bernières writes the individual chapters, then decides on their order: the novel happens as it grows. The third feature is de Bernières's typical slides between a realist mode and a magical, fantasy world. This is more obvious in the Latin American trilogy, but it's true too of *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, even if there it is used for different – perhaps more serious – purposes. In Chapter 19, 'L'Omosessuale (6)', for instance – two worlds jostle each other as Carlo tells a made up story of heroism and glory to Francesco's mother, even as he recalls the sordid truth of Francesco's last hours.

Louis de Bernières is a story teller. That's why he likes to re-tell other stories: Homer's *Odyssey* is behind *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*; the Exodus from Egypt and the journey to the Promised Land from the Bible is behind the Latin American trilogy. Then there are his own stories in the

shapes of his novels. Antonio Corelli's mandolin is called Antonia, because it is the female part of himself; the strings of the mandolin stitch his wounds and stay in his body for the rest of his life; Pelagia's foundling child is named Antonia, and it is the fact of her presence that keeps Antonio away for so many years. It's just one small story within his many larger stories, but it grows, as his novels grow, as all his stories grow.

In de Bernières's own introduction to the published version of his radio play *Sunday Morning at the Centre of the World* (2001) he speaks of how the work happened. It came, he says, out of a particular experience of living and working in Earlsfield in South West London. But then he says that everything that happened to him – and led to the play – was accidental, contingent, unplanned. He lost the job he'd gone there for, he acquired a cat, he started to write. We don't have to believe in this literally of course – it is, as much as anything, another one of his stories. But then he says, 'There is in fact almost nothing fictional in the anecdotes and stories told here, and all the voices have their real counterparts'. Like so much of his work, *Sunday Morning at the Centre of the World* comes out of listening to real voices, then letting those voices speak for themselves so that they take the story wherever it goes, and the story itself takes the lead.

It is for this reason that de Bernières's stories don't really end. They come to a resolution certainly, but there's a sense of there being yet another story just beyond, just around the corner, still to be told. Parlanchina beckons at the end of *The War of Don Emmanuel's Nether Parts*, the vision of three girls on a moped seduces at the end of *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*. The novel stops, but the story carries on.

Interview with Louis de Bernières

Norfolk: 4 September 2001

CAPTAIN CORELLI'S MANDOLIN

MR: Why did the moment come when you changed your scene from an imaginary South America to Greece?

LdeB: I was going to do five Latin-American books, including one about a dictator. But by the time that came along, Latin America had democratised completely, apart from Cuba, so the book would have been out of date – there was no one left. The Argentine junta had gone, Pinochet had gone from Chile, and Noriega had gone; there was really no one left apart from Castro. So that would have become an anachronism. And the other thing was that by the end of the third novel I realised that I was spending much too much time recapitulating what happened in the first two novels in case the reader hadn't read them. And I thought, my God, if I get to number five, it'll be entirely about what happened in the other books. And so I just stopped. In the meantime, I had written a novel about Yugoslavia which hasn't been published, so I wasn't in any case all the time in South America. And then I had a girlfriend at the time who was really sick of going on summer holiday to France all the time. We used to take my Morris Minor over the Channel and drive around France. She said, 'Please can we go somewhere else?' So I said, 'OK, you arrange the holiday,' and she choose Greece and this particular island, and when we went there the story of Captain Corelli just fell into my lap.

MR: How? The idea just came to you?

LdeB: Well, as soon as you get into the tourist coach, the tourist guide says, 'After the earthquake in 1953,' and you think, 'What earthquake? I haven't heard of this.' That's what got me interested. And then I heard stories about the Italian occupation and the massacres by the Nazis, and I heard that the Greeks and the Italians on the island had got on reasonably well, so it seemed an obvious idea really to have a romance across the national boundary lines.

MR: You mention the earthquake, the occupation and the massacres. Did you do a lot of research for this?

LdeB: I did. Much of that holiday was taken up with riding around on a motorbike, getting the feel of the place and spotting things, and when I got home I wrote to the librarian of the cultural and historical museum in Argostoli, which is the capital of Cephallonia, and she sent me a reading list, and really, it all started from there. And then fortunate things happened, such as a man turning up at my neighbour's who'd been in the earthquake. I had to write to the Greek ambassador and all sorts to get information. It's amazing what you have to try and find out. I mean, when was the Orthodox Easter Day in 1943 - that kind of thing. I just did masses of reading and masses of talking to people. Much of the book is based on *The Odyssey* - it's absolutely stuffed with references to Homer - that's just a clue for readers.

MR: I was intrigued by all the allusions to the Greek legends. You do it incredibly lightly. But you just sew them in as little allusions, don't you, and leave it at that?

LdeB: Well, sewing is a good word because, for example, Pelagia is trying to sew a waistcoat or a wedding blanket or something which she keeps unpicking – just like Penelope, waiting for Odysseus to come back.

MR: Of course the Greek legends aren't the only set of allusions you use. There are the songs, the poems, the philosophical writers like Bertrand Russell that keep coming in – so you just feel that this is a body of reference that you can use and resort to all the time?

LdeB: I think because I have so many and so diverse interests, and I've travelled a lot and picked up bits and pieces from all over the place, I've got a large, but rather weird bank to draw on.

MR: Obviously, one of the things that you are drawing on in *Captain Corelli* is opera. What is your interest in opera?

LdeB: I'm not as interested in opera as you might think. My father loves opera. But it's just that if you have to find out about something, you do. You can't write a novel on an epic scale and expect to be lazy, you have to do the work. And it's a mistake to assume that everything that's in a book is actually connected with what the writer likes, or does. For example, Captain Corelli hates Wagner, right – and he tells his German friend that you get shot if you like Wagner. Actually, though, I do like Wagner. But when it comes to opera I'm really just the sort of person who likes listening to the highlights, you know, the choruses and the arias. I get very, very, very cheesed off with all the recitative.

MR: Something that struck me immediately at the beginning of *Captain Corelli* is the doctor's intriguing interest in long words. You like words, don't you, because in the Latin-

American scenes we get all these different dialects and words from different languages.

LdeB: Well, Greek doctors are notorious for trying to impress you with long words and complicated explanations, so it was a joke about Greek doctors. For some reason, a lot of them are interested in history as well. It is true that I am very enamoured of language in general. It's something I get a great deal from Latin-American writers. Some one like Gabriel García Márquez is happy to use words like 'prodigious', you know '*marvillosa*', lovely words, and I'm rather the same. I don't belong to that Anglo-Saxon and American school of writing where it's very simple and very clear, which I associate with Hemingway. You know. 'He stood up. He left.' I like to sort of wallow . . .

MR: And you're drawing on lots of different languages in order to do that.

LdeB: Yes, I do draw a lot on foreign languages, and I even invent words as well. There was a word in *Captain Corelli* which I invented, and I had a thank-you letter from a doctor afterwards. The word was 'iatric', meaning 'of or pertaining to a doctor'. It comes from the Greek '*iatros*'. Funnily enough, having invented it and published it and received thank-you letters from doctors, saying 'thank you for this word, which we needed', I then looked it up in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and it actually already existed. Which is sad, isn't it? There's a lovely Greek word '*megalopsiki*', which means 'magnanimous'. And I would love to one day put that in a story - have somebody being 'megalopsical'. And let people puzzle that one out.

MR: Connected to this language question, there's a phrase, 'And thus it was that', or 'So it happened that', as though

you are conscious of using a fairy-tale technique. Could you comment on that?

LdeB: Yes, my style is in many ways very old-fashioned. I grew up reading writers like Walter Scott. I am conscious of being part of this tradition of storytelling which goes back a long time, and I'm quite happy to use old-fashioned tropes. For example, just look at the long chapter headings – 'In which so and so does so and so and such a thing happens'. Which I think is fun, I like it. It's eighteenth century in flavour, like much of my narrating.

I feel very, very fortunate that I had to learn Latin from a very early age and so I have all the Latin grammatical constructions in my mind which of course people don't use any more, but I still remember them and they come to me perfectly naturally.

MR: And it actually gives you layers of tenses in your verbs then, doesn't it? Rather like the layers of resonance in your choice of characters' names in *Captain Corelli*.

LdeB: I often choose names for Kratylic reasons. Kratylus was an ancient Greek who thought that names were actually intimately connected with objects. That a table was called a table because it was a particularly tabley thing. So Pelagia, it means 'ocean', and a pelagic current is one that goes in a huge circle and comes back to where it starts, so that's why I chose the name for her.

MR: And Iannis, and Mandras?

LdeB: Iannis is just 'John' in Greek. And Mandras . . . I found that name in a novel and it's been very puzzling to Greeks because they'd never heard of it, but it certainly exists now!