

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Vintage Living Texts: Sebastian Faulks

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 Sebastian Faulks. This guide will deal with his themes, genre and narrative technique, and a close reading of the texts will be accompanied with 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.

About the Authors

Jonathan Noakes has taught English in secondary schools in Britain and Australia for fifteen years. For six years he ran A-level English studies at Eton College where he is a house-master.

Margaret Reynolds is Reader in English at Queen Mary, University of London, and the presenter of BBC Radio 4's *Adventures in Poetry*. Her publications include *The Sappho Companion* and (with Angela Leighton) *Victorian Women Poets*.

Also available in Vintage Living Texts

Margaret Atwood

Focusing on

The Handmaid's Tale

The Blind Assassin

Bluebeard's Egg and Other Stories

Louis de Bernières

Focusing on

Captain Corelli's Mandolin

The War of Don Emmanuel's Nether Parts

Señor Vivo and the Coca Lord

The Troublesome Offspring of Cardinal Guzman

Ian McEwan

Focusing on

The Child in Time

Enduring Love

Atonement

Vintage Living Texts: Sebastian Faulks

The Essential Guide to Contemporary
Literature

Jonathan Noakes and Margaret Reynolds

Birdsong

Charlotte Gray

The Girl at the Lion d'Or



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. But we're not suggesting that you stick solely to the approaches we offer, or 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 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.

Sebastian Faulks

Introduction

WHEN WE INTERVIEWED Sebastian Faulks for this book we asked him a question about letters. Why was it that so many letters in his novels were misdirected, misdelivered, failed to reach the right person, were not read by the right person and – in some cases – were only imagined, so that they never even got written in the first place? As you'll see if you look this question up, Faulks was not even sure what we were talking about. He hadn't noticed all these lost letters.

Of course there are also many letters that do get sent and do get read. But these thwarted missives suggest something telling about the preoccupations in Faulks's novels and hint at a number of his themes. In one way it's not surprising that there are so many letters in Faulks, because the device of using letters in novels and inserting their text into the narrative is one that makes for solidity – a pretend concrete reality. This is what this character said to this other character, without the mediation of the narrating voice or the intervention of any other character's perspective. The author has created – made up – this letter, but we are willing temporarily to believe in its existence and its truth as an imaginative reality.

Many critics and reviewers have commented on Faulks's ability to create an imagined world that seems to have a solid existence. He does this by doing an extensive amount of historical research, as his 'Author's Note' to *Charlotte Gray* tells us. As a result, reviewers like to play the 'spot the error' game with Faulks's books. Sometimes they do find

tiny discrepancies. Sometimes they think they know more about the past that they imagine they remember, than they do about the past that Faulks has recovered through research. When he was writing *On Green Dolphin Street* (2001) his editor got very worried about the statement that there were banks of television screens on Pennsylvania Station in the 1960s. 'No,' said the editor, 'that's too early for television – you've made a mistake.' In fact, the screens were there, but Faulks did decide to take the detail out because it was clearly only going to become a continuing slur on his historical accuracy.

But it is the tiny details that do most of the work in creating Faulks's other worlds: details about food, details about houses, details about the weather and details about clothes. In the interview that follows, Faulks speaks intriguingly about how houses 'really really get me going', but to us it's the food and the clothes that dominate – especially, interestingly, the women's clothes. Given that Faulks is dealing with period settings in *The Girl at the Lion d'Or* (in this case, 1936), in *Birdsong* (1910-18 and 1978-9), in *Charlotte Gray* (1942-3) and in *On Green Dolphin Street* (1959-60), it is crucial that he should be able to convey the atmosphere of those worlds and it is through these details that he does so. It's an interesting method. The minutiae of this information works on us because we can draw on a shared experience; clothes and food are just as important to each one of us now as they are to characters in novels. But the difference in what we know in our lives about the clothes we wear and the food we eat, compared to those that appear in that strange world inhabited by these characters, creates a tension that sets the scene. In this way a connection is made between 'us' and 'them', but it's one that is slightly surreal, given that most of us never have and never will wear those kinds of clothes or eat quite that sort of food.

In spite of all those lost letters, there are other ways in which Faulks makes connections. In the novels of the French trilogy there are a number of characters who come back into stories that are not – strictly speaking – their own. Charles Hartmann appears in all three novels. Levi appears in *Birdsong* and *Charlotte Gray*. William Gray appears in *Birdsong*, and becomes quite an important character in *Charlotte Gray*. The other way round, Stephen Wraysford, the hero of *Birdsong*, is mentioned briefly in *Charlotte Gray*.

It is, as Faulks says, a good game for the reader, but it is more than that. The interweaving of the novels, the crossing over of characters, helps to remind us that human beings are never alone. The actions of one individual can rebound on another, and the consequences of those actions can carry on down the years, to come out in quite another, and unexpected, place. This is – to some extent – the point of the 1970s' 'Elizabeth' episodes that punctuate *Birdsong*. More than that, the larger actions of a society, or a government, can (and do) affect the lives of millions, and dictate the events of people's experiences, generation after generation. It is a sobering aspect of the history of the twentieth century that this is the case. The effect of the First World War on Faulks's fictional characters is great. But he is reflecting an important truth about history, and about the degree to which we are all – still – affected by that history. In *Birdsong* Stephen writes in his journal, 'No child or future generation will ever know what this was like. They will never understand' (p. 422). Maybe they won't, maybe they never can if they have not lived through it, but Faulks's method and his message suggest that it is our responsibility to try.

Connection and memory are two key themes in Faulks's novels. But this memory is not always something that can be told precisely. For all the concrete details, for all the solid houses and meals, there is always something just out of reach in the memory of his characters. It's a delicate technique. Sebastian Faulks speaks of being interested in

memory that is 'just outside my power to recall', just beyond the grasp of consciousness or reason. There is a 'feeling' or 'instinctive' tone in many of these novels – a tone that some critics have identified as 'feminine'. It's true that Faulks does often focus on women: think of Isabelle and Jeanne, Anne and Charlotte. But it's also true that his work focuses on the subtle and fluctuating relationships between parents and children, as well as on the relations between lovers – men and women – and between comrades in arms, whether Stephen and Weir, or Charlotte and Julien. Nothing lasts because everything changes. But that *is* what lasts: that everything changes. And while this is the case, there can be no hard rules, universal truths, or whole explanations. There can only be an attention to consciousness in the moment, and an attempt to understand in the moment.

'Disappearing' is an important word in Faulks's *Charlotte Gray*. It is a word that goes with other instances where things are being lost or undone. As Levade expires, death is a 'rapid, sweet unravelling'. Charlotte – and Isabelle and Stephen in *Birdsong* – experience a loss of self in physical passion, which becomes, paradoxically, the centre of their identity. In an important passage in *Birdsong*, Stephen, boating down the Somme with Isabelle and her family, is assaulted by desire, and the knowing narrative, and the knowing reader, understand the allusion, the reference to what is to come:

Stephen tried to drag his mind from the vision of decay the river had induced. The pressure of Madame Azaire's foot against his leg slowly increased until most of her calf rested against him. The simple frisson this touch had earlier given to his charged senses now seemed complicated; the sensation of desire seemed indistinguishable from an impulse towards death. (p. 45)

Dissolution and disappearance are the themes of Faulks's novels. Set against this is only the self-consciousness of the examined life, and the recording of that life having been

lived – in memorials, in art, in novels. These continue to be major themes. Faulks published the last volume of his French trilogy in 1998. He says that he might go back to France. However, for now, he has transposed these same themes into a more recent past, and a different place. *On Green Dolphin Street* is set in America and England in the late 1950s and early 1960s, but Faulks's readers will recognise his anxieties and his strengths. In *On Green Dolphin Street* it's 1959 and Mary is living in Washington:

She took a table in the corner, and looked out of the window, towards the river and the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial. Few cities in the world could have had so many memorials in proportion to such a relatively short lifetime, she thought. Without thinking too hard, she could list the lapidary reminders of Lincoln, Jefferson, Roosevelt; the George Washington Memorial Parkway, the George Mason Memorial Bridge, the Arlington Memorial Bridge leading to the Iwo Jima Marine Corps Memorial . . . What were they so scared of forgetting? (p. 41)

The answer must be: forgetfulness itself. Only through memory and memorials can the effects of the past be explained in the present. And the connection must be made if there is to be any responsibility.

Much of the connection that goes on in Sebastian Faulks's novels is up to us – the readers – to supply. At the end of *On Green Dolphin Street* the lovers whose story it is, Frank and Mary, are on the verge of separation. In an extended episode Mary leaves, but then we see Frank change his mind and go after her. The traffic is terrible; he crawls along towards the airport watching the clock, cursing. Her plane is scheduled to take off at this time. The moment passes. She is gone. He weeps. Then we hear Mary's story. She leaves. We see her change her mind and decide to call him. The phone rings in the empty apartment. She keeps trying. Her flight is delayed – there is still time – she keeps trying. No answer. She gets on the plane. She weeps.

It's a story about a failure of connection, about loss and lost chances. But neither Mary nor Frank knows what we

know. That they both tried to find each other across that void. That the connection could have been made. Faulks is sterner than to give in to our wish for a happy ending, but in the mind of the reader the story is resolved.

Interview with Sebastian Faulks

London: 21 August 2001

BIRDSONG

JN: COULD YOU tell us what was the germ of the idea for *Birdsong*?

SF: It goes back to when I was a child at school, at the age of about eleven or twelve, the first time I really heard about the war. The schoolmaster who was teaching English also taught us pretty much everything else as well, and was a very knowledgeable man, we rather looked up to him. When it came to talking about the First World War, he was able to give us dates and facts, but he didn't seem able to put across what it was really like. He said things like 'It was simply indescribable' . . . 'You don't really want to know about it - we don't want to think about it'. And I remember thinking at that time: that's remarkable . . . and I just stored that at the back of my mind.

And at the same time, at the same school, on Remembrance Sunday some boy would read out the names of all the old boys of the school who had died in these two wars, and one year it was my turn to do it. I remember being enormously struck by the sheer number of names - it just went on and on and on, and it was a very small school, only eighty boys, I think. There probably would have been fewer than that at the relevant time. The list just seemed to go on for ever. So those two things stuck in the back of my mind.

Many years later, I was writing my second novel, *The Girl at the Lion d'Or*, which is set in 1936. It is about a young woman in a provincial town in France who had had a trauma in childhood, and because she was only about twenty at the time, and 1936 was a sort of given and I couldn't change that, it meant that her childhood would have been in and around the First World War and the end of it. And it was a sort of Pandora's box that I didn't particularly want to open, because there was a lot of background of France in the 'thirties and I didn't really want to go back into that First World War because it seemed too big a subject. But eventually I concluded that I had to a bit, and so I read a book by Alistair Home about Verdun, about the French experience of the First World War. I was immensely struck by the details, really, of the day-to-day life of the soldiers. And I took what I needed from it to use in *The Girl at the Lion d'Or*, but I thought . . . hmm, I want to know more about this.

Then in 1988, which was the seventieth anniversary of the Armistice, a great flood of books came out about it, and I read quite a few of those. There was one in particular I came across called *War Underground*, which was the story of the tunnellers who tunnelled underneath no-man's-land. I'd no idea that this tunnelling had taken place, and it seemed to me a very suggestive thing that beneath this inferno there was an even deeper, smaller, more horrific – in some ways a more horrific – world.

One of the problems of writing a novel set in the First World War was that although I felt that many people are quite ignorant about it, people of my generation had rather my view: 'Terrible thing, appalling thing, massive slaughters . . . when . . . you know . . .' but didn't really know much more than that. At the same time, it was a war that produced great literature – poetry particularly, but also memoirs and so on – and there were many people who were extremely well informed about it. So there was