

TLC Showcase

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Introduction to My Sweet Enemy

I need to write a few paragraphs about my novel "My Sweet Enemy" but I find this hard because it is quite a big book. I do not mean that it has a big number of pages. I mean that it covers a lot of ground.

The two main subjects are (1) alcoholism and (2) mental illness in a family. Most of the action takes place in a small unit for alcoholics which is part of an old NHS hospital for psychiatric patients. This is a dark and realistic story but I tried to add colour, contrast and humour.

To help me start this summary and at the risk of sounding pompous I would say that certain words or thoughts were always in my mind while I was writing the book ... *balance ... shape ... structure ... sequence ... movement ... action ... contrast*. I wanted the heavy shadow of the big old hospital to be always present, a world apart, a world on its own. I wanted the reader to feel that all the people who appear at the start of the book have a past, that their lives started long before the book started. They were not made just for a book. We begin to learn about the main character Peterson almost from the first page. There are references to his dead wife and to her strange behaviour. I tried to make the introductions to this place and to these people casual and easy. I wanted all such introductions to seem natural and not artificial. During the first parts of the book a lot of space is given to describe a number of characters or to let them describe themselves or each other.

Then I wanted movement in the novel, shape, development, progress. In fact the titles of the five sections of the novel are intended to draw attention to movement and development – 1. The Infirmary – 2. the newcomers – 3. the Actuary's story – 4. Christmas – 5. a new year. I am a fan of Chaucer (that amusing, clever, chatty, humorous man) and my characters tell their own Life Stories in a way which loosely follows the pattern of tales told by his pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales*. Much of the narrative in my book is carried by the dialogue and that is a method which I like very much. By that method characters reveal events, explain themselves and each other, need far fewer formal third person commentaries from the author. I wanted the characters to continue to grow and reveal more of themselves throughout the entire book.

I was able to describe schizophrenia so accurately because the story of Ruth in the novel was a true story. In fact much of the book was based on real people, real places and real events. I was fortunate to have powerful motives when wrote the book because I am sure that books may benefit a lot if their authors have powerful motives. Throughout the book Peterson is bewildered by his wife's condition and he felt helpless. When writing the book I too was trying to understand her condition. I still remain bewildered but that does not matter. Novels should ask questions. Novels do not have to answer those questions. The readers can be left to look for the answers.

Someone has described this novel as being "dense". Yes, I wanted it to be dense. If you enter a room full of people you will have hundreds of impressions. To my mind a lot of details help to provide realism. I wanted the book to feel very realistic and I wanted readers to say "This writer seems deeply to know what he is writing about. He must have seen all that. His novel has a feeling of authority. He must have been there. You couldn't just make it all up." I wanted realism. Personally I like a lot of details because for me details seem to fill out mere impressions. I'll leave impressionism to painters. Words are not the same as paint.

I wanted the whole book and its progress and movement to feel very easy and natural. I wanted readers to feel that after the book ends the surviving characters continue to live, but are now merely unseen.

My Sweet Enemy, by Alan Evans

Peterson did not see his friend John for several weeks because he had less free time as he settled into his work and became busier and busier with the demands of his new life. He redecorated the bathroom in his new flat and sometimes spent whole evenings organizing his customers' paperwork. On Saturdays he bought furniture and furnishings in secondhand shops in Portsmouth. He did not want new furniture and his flat became a comfortable hodgepodge of old stuff.

In the kitchen of the new flat were a coffee pot, a pepper mill and brown pottery cereal bowls which Ruth had collected. They and a tray and trivet matched a scheme of kitchen colours which she had chosen. They were sometimes comforting but sometimes they were unsettling. For a while he would forget their history but once or twice they cried out to him. To throw them away seemed senseless but he was aware that to keep them might appear mawkish and maudlin. But he was now the only person who knew whose they had been. To throw them away would feel insensitive and cynical. As time passed they became more and more familiar in his small kitchen and sometimes he tended to forget their existence and forget their history. Then he was ashamed because he felt that you should not carelessly dismiss the dead. There seems to be a duty to remember them and especially when they gave themselves to you. His actions when he placed those items on a shelf or worktop said "I am not one of those ice cold people who quickly forget. I should be ashamed if I forgot you." His actions said also "I don't just discard you. You live perhaps only as long as I do. I am your only anchor to the world. Of course you are not unimportant. To discard you like rubbish would be shameful and cruel. Why should I throw your possessions in the bin? Why should I not throw them in the bin?"

His feelings about the past were now unclear. Old certainties seemed to lose their strength. The past is not past. Clarity faded.

Facts are no more than speculations. So he felt. Truths are temporary, mere guesses.

He was tired. More than once he repeated "I used to be so conceited".

She had been the centre of his life for many years but now she did not exist. At first he had been convinced that they were made for each other, that no other couple could be more compatible but finally they had seemed incompatible and extremely so.

This semblance of complete compatibility at the beginning of a relationship and the semblance of total incompatibility during its decline were a riddle which he never understood and never expected to understand. He vaguely assumed that the paradox came somehow from willingness, from people willing to be compatible in the beginning, unwilling to be compatible at the end. He weakly sensed that there are delusions in every relationship.

He never solved the question of all the small household items which she had collected. When he was alone in the flat they became on occasions a solace but as often a disturbance. Whenever he noticed them he usually felt that he was helping her, that by protecting them he was protecting her. While these things remain your shadow moves behind this room.

He was shocked whenever he now began to ask himself whether he and his wife had been compatible. But he told himself that such questions must be nonsense. Once or twice he wondered whether the big upheavals within their marriage – those caused by paraphrenia – did not raise a curtain to reveal the truth that he and his wife were incompatible. Perhaps without the paraphrenia those two people would have drifted on never being made to see how incompatible they became? Was she too good for him? She loved chitchat and parties. Did his quiet ways and quiet interests spoil her life? Was she bored by him? Did he bore her? Before the arrival of her illness her devotion had been total, although tainted by jealousy. He had then never doubted her. Now his doubts worried him. He began to play with the disturbing idea that no one knows anyone. His opinions now tended to become cynical. He almost envied the total and unquestioning commitment of people like Ruth and his mother. Such people – when sane – do not question their commitments.

Even hindsight, which can make many big problems seem easy, did not help him. Many familiar people in his past now seemed unfamiliar. To doubt her now was heresy. What was hidden? Who was she? Who hid in the curtains of her mind?

But usually he relented and managed to dismiss these fresh doubts which surprised him, doubts about the marriage and about Ruth herself. He then moved from such morose thoughts back to bewilderment, to a feeling that he had been helpless and alone. The booze had helped him to feel detached. He had tried to look away or shut his eyes.

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When was the first time I saw you? You were a stranger standing at the top of a staircase, looking across the stairwell, a smiling woman. You looked at me and I wondered whether your eyes offered a message.

Many lovers have private symbols. They had met in an April when there were seas of wild poppies on wasteland east of Salisbury. He did not notice the irony that a poppy is a very ephemeral flower. He was always slow to recognize irony.

About the Writer

I have been asked to write a few words about myself but I find this difficult because I have so little to tell. My interest in books began when I was very young. I was an only child and my mother frequently bought me books to read. No, she did not give me books in the hope that they would improve my mind. She bought them to keep me quiet. I don't blame her. She herself had left school at the age of fourteen and I never saw her even once read a book. She came from a very poor family in old white working class Brixton and Stockwell.



But she was very good looking and married a wealthy man who was twenty four years older than she was. He was in effect – though not in law – a bigamist because he already had another partner, another home and another son. The only whole days which he spent with us were Thursdays!

So, books for me became a very big interest – or perhaps I should say substitute – and when I went to boarding school at the age of ten I found that I was always top in English and other subjects too thanks to all my books. As a child I bought them for a few pennies second hand from other children in our neighbourhood. As a young man I spent hours and hours at Foyles and other second hand bookshops. In due course an interest in novels gave way to a preference for biography.

My interest in reading books led me since about the age of twelve into a wish to write them and I have many times experimented with writing. At the moment for example I am revising a memoir which I wrote a few years ago for my three sons and I think it contains a lot of unusual material.

I never wanted to go to university and I am glad I decided not to go. Having had no father to give me ordinary male to male teaching – tacit or explicit – to help me enter the real world I was very keen to leave school in order to discover the world for myself. My background was odd and socially I had a lot of catching up to do. For many years my work has been the purchase and management of commercial

investment property but, although that work has sometimes been stimulating or even exciting, for me it has been just a way to earn a living. Language and literature have remained a big interest.

For the rest I leave my book, *My Sweet Enemy*, to speak for me.