

# Barbara Pym

## Quartet in Autumn

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## Quartet in Autumn Barbara Pym

Combining an acute eye for the eccentricities of everyday life with her unique talent for illuminating human frailties, Barbara Pym has created a world which is both extraordinary and totally familiar

## Quartet in Autumn Details

Date : Published August 20th 2004 by Pan Macmillan (first published September 1st 1977)

ISBN : 9780330326483

Author : Barbara Pym

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## From Reader Review Quartet in Autumn for online ebook

### Ruthiella says

Quartet in Autumn is about two men and two women in their early sixties, solitary but not necessarily lonely Londoners, who work in the same office in the mid-1970s. The reader never finds out exactly what it is they do for a living, “*The activities of their department seemed to be shrouded in mystery-something to do with records or filing, it was thought, nobody knew for certain, but it was evidently ‘women’s work’, the kind of thing that could easily be replaced by a computer.*”. When the two women, Marcia and Letty, retire, the equilibrium of each member of the foursome, which other than the 8 hours a day they spend together at work have absolutely no connection or relationship to one another, is shaken in unforeseen ways.

Typical Pym: subtle humor, sharp observation with at least one character who is an enthusiastic Anglican. Points for one character who has cauliflower au gratin for lunch which is surly a variation on cauliflower cheese?

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### Skye says

I enjoyed this story that was more of a character study of four elderly office workers that lived quiet lives in London during the 1970's. Each character had their own unique quirks but ultimately their rigidness turned into a tale of loneliness.

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### Sandy says

Realistic but sad portrayal of four retirement-age people who work together in one office but are not really friends. They are all quirky and lonely people who over time, and because of the death of one of them, seem to become aware that all they have is each other. The end is very optimistic and hopeful, but the book is rather a drudgery of humdrum daily lives. Perhaps because I am at that stage of life, the message hits too close to home. Barbara Pym has the reputation of being a wonderful author, so I will give her a second chance!

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### Jana says

The 4 characters in this tale are in their 60s, but you'd think they were decades beyond that! I can't tell if Barbara Pym was writing this tongue in cheek or if the 1970s were really so different from today.

I really enjoyed the book despite the comments above. In my view, the characters are the reason to read Barbara Pym. But the story is also interesting; the writing is wonderful. This book was short-listed for the Booker Prize in 1977.

I've found these recurrent themes in the 3 books I've read by her. And I really hope to read them all eventually.

\* A very nondescript office situation. Almost humorous how these people work, yet what do they do? Does anyone know? When they retire, no one even needs to fill their job.

\* The local Anglican church with its pastor, jumble sale, and social events for all occasions

\* Loneliness. And this is especially strong in Quartet in Autumn. Ouch.

\* Relationships. Men and women. Men vs women. The role of both. Society's view of both. Friendships are key in her books. According to wikipedia, she was "was also one of the first popular novelists to write sympathetically about unambiguously gay characters" (referring specifically to A GLASS OF BLESSINGS)

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## **Zombie Kitten says**

Although I can't totally relate with the stage of life that the characters are in, I did find them interesting, sympathetic, and I liked how it showed the different ways in which each character handled life changes and how they approached getting older.

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## **Tony says**

QUARTET IN AUTUMN. (1978). Barbara Pym. \*\*\*\*\*.

This was Ms. Pym's first book after being ignored for sixteen years by English publishing houses. She was resurrected after an article appeared in the TLS written by two critics in answer to the question: "Who was the most neglected writer of the past fifty years?" (or words to that effect). They both named Pym. This novel was published soon after that article, and was short-listed for the Booker Prize that year. It is the story of four elderly people who all work together in the same office by day. They had been working together for several years now, and had formed a very loose relationship with each other. It is never made clear what they did in that office, exactly, but that is probably irrelevant. There is even a section where their boss, on the retirement of one of them, admits that he doesn't even know what it is they do there. The four people are Edwin, a widower who is peripherally active in a variety of local churches; Norman, a single man, who has no apparent hobbies and lives in a bed-sit; Letty, a spinster who lives alone, like Norman, in a bed-sit; and Marcia, a spinster who lives in her own house, and whose most significant event has been her recent mastectomy. The story is set in the early 1970s. Each of these elderly people is lonely in his/her own way, but has learned to cope. In their minds they try and reach out to each other, but can never seem to actually do it, until the death of one of them brings the remaining three as close together as they are likely to get. They are all faced with observing the codes that they were brought up under, and haven't learned how to interact with the rest of society in the manor that the current mores now approve. As the two women move towards retirement, and ultimately do so, they are faced with new challenges. They no longer have something to occupy themselves during the day. They none have close family or, even, friends. The story is poignant with touches of quiet humor. "Out of the tragic material of old age, Barbara Pym has made a beautifully constructed, almost musically perfect tale, told in revolving order from four points of view. It is the story of the subtle triumph of human dignity over the threats of solitude and death." Highly recommended.

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### **•Karen• says**

[In 1977 the Times Literary Supplement polled a host of literary notables asking them to name the most underrated writer of the 20th century. Pym was the only author who received more than one vote; Larkin and Lord David Cecil both picked her. (hide spoiler)]

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### **Cynthia says**

“Quartet” is the first of her books written after a hiatus. It was also written after her own breast cancer surgery. It’s much darker than her earlier novels. Her trademark sly humor is still intact though there’s a gallows feel to it. The story is about four 60 something work colleagues, two men and two women, right on the cusp of their retirement. (Pym too had recently left her long time editing job due to ill health.) As always the characters are utterly unique. Norman is an angry man, barely able to contain his rage to expected levels. Edwin, a widower, is a church hopper structuring his time around the ecclesiastical calendar, always searching for the church with the best service. Letty is a gentle soul who’s never married but has one close female friend from her youth. Marcia is an anomaly. Lost, odd, obsessive, suffering from ill health. When Marcia and Letty retire the four are separated but events keep bringing them together and not always for happy events.

I love Pym’s subtly, the blind allies she leads us down, the insights you have to suss out for yourself, the unexpected out of place humor, the heart tugs that don’t spill over into schmaltz...but just barely. I think in “Quartet” she’s at her best though, if you’ve read her earlier books, it might jolt you with its darker tone.

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### **Josh Friedlander says**

There's something magnetic about Barbara Pym's prose and her prickly, very private, isolated protagonists. On the book's cover, each of the characters faces away from the centre; indeed, a very superficial reader might leave this book with the impression that the characters don't much like each other. But that would be to mistake their very British reserve for lack of compassion. On the contrary, there is so much compassion in the awkward way that the four retired protagonists connect. Their thoughts run unbidden to one another, the tiny echoes of past interactions, in the absence of pressing current concerns, dictate their inner (and outer) lives.

Pym's ability to write the quotidian rhythm of life without losing the reader is both artistic triumph and a reaction to the hegemony of the young. Away from the current of social change of 1970s England (though not unaware of it), away from the passion of youth and the caprice of narrative, *Quartet in Autumn* finds humanity and hope in quiet and unnoticed lives. "In life we are become death," thinks one of the characters, but this book's vitality reverses that, drawing the continued possibility of change and growth from some forgotten place between office drudgery and the grave.

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## **Jane says**

I just re-read this for the second time and , to my surprise, it ended on a more upbeat note than I had remembered. Each character is sensitively portrayed and the manner in which they relate to one another rings true. They both know and care more about each other than they realize.

How each person puts meaning into his or her life is written in the understated and clear-eyed Pym manner. There is pathos, tenderness, and humor here and Quartet in Autumn reigns supreme for me over all Pym's other novels.

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## **Gláucia Renata says**

Esse livro estava há anos nas minhas metas e tinha dois grandes motivos para lê-lo: foi indicação de minha amiga skooper Marta, grande leitora que sempre me apresenta livros e autores dos quais nunca ouvi falar. E a autora é uma das preferidas de meu queridinho McCall Smith; é sempre citada em seus livros.

A autora inglesa teve dificuldade em publicar seus livros (10 no total) e num suplemento literário foi considerada a escritora mais subestimada do século. Outros críticos compararam seu estilo ao de Jane Austen: pela visão, senso de humor e sensibilidade.

Esse livro, uma pequena joia, foi publicado em 1977 e tem como tema a velhice. Temos 4 protagonistas: Edwin, Norman, Letty e Marcia, solteiros e idosos que trabalham juntos no mesmo escritório. A solidão de suas vidas faz com que o trabalho seja o principal ponto de contato entre eles e a sociedade e tudo está prestes a mudar quando as duas mulheres se aposentam. A partir daí, com um senso de humor peculiar e refinado, a autora retrata as dificuldades de adaptação dessas pessoas, que a partir daí tem um grande problema pela frente: o que fazer com tanto tempo disponível?

O livro tem um tom bem melancólico, mas tudo é narrado com tanta delicadeza, tanta sutileza que é possível sentir um certo quentinho no coração apesar da situação meio deprimente e patética vivida por essa quatro pessoas.

É uma pena que essa autora tenha tão poucos leitores...

Histórico de leitura

03/03/2017

23% (45 de 195)

"- Ela é difícil. Pessoas assim parecem que não querem ser ajudadas. Mas algumas se mostram tão agradecidas... é tão maravilhoso... faz com que tudo valha a pena..."

3% (5 de 195)

"Naquele dia os quatro forma à biblioteca, embora em horários diferentes. O bibliotecário, se os tivesse notado, haveria de pensar que de alguma forma eram pessoas que pertenciam ao mesmo grupo."

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## **Teresa Proença says**

*"No meio da vida estamos no meio da morte..."*

Letty, Marcia, Edwin e Norman são quatro sexagenários - duas mulheres e dois homens - que trabalham na mesma empresa. Um é viúvo os outros são solteiros. Vivem sozinhos; dois numa casa própria e dois num quarto alugado. Reservados e solitários, a ligação entre eles é a usual entre colegas de trabalho, pouco conhecendo uns dos outros. Com o aproximar do momento da aposentação, surge a angústia do que fazer de tanto tempo livre, além de vaguear e esperar...

Docemente, sem nunca cair no melodrama, Barbara Pym envolveu-me serenamente no dia-a-dia daqueles seres tão comuns, que aceitam a velhice, a doença, a solidão, a perda como algo natural da vida e resgatam da adversidade um pouco de esperança ou ilusão.

*"... a vida ainda continha possibilidades de mudanças infinitas."*

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(Chicote CFC, *a day..., for a month..., of another year in the step by the life* - 2015)

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## **Thomas says**

As usual Pym is wonderful. This one is rather darker than most of her other novels. This is what Anita Brookner would be like if she had a sense of humor.

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## **Tiffany Reisz says**

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Such a lovely hopeful heartbreaking novel. I wish I'd read Barbara Pym before.

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## **Rebecca Foster says**

This was recommended to me by various bloggers and certainly lived up to their praise. Originally published in 1977, this was Pym's seventh novel out of nine; she died in 1980. It's about four London office workers, all sixty-somethings who are partnerless and don't have, or at least don't live with, any immediate family members. We never learn what they do in this office; in fact, Edwin, Norman, Letty and Marcia don't seem to be filling much of a need, especially given the fact that the two old girls aren't replaced when they retire midway through the novel.

For as long as they've been working together, the four haven't given in to the usual human impulse to know and be known. At first there doesn't seem to be much to know about them; with only one or two shorthand facts apiece it's a minor challenge to tell them apart. Widower Edwin's hobby is attending Anglican services; Norman lives off fried food and visits his brother-in-law in hospital; Letty lives in a boarding house and has a friend in the countryside; Marcia has had a mastectomy and hoards tinned food and empty milk bottles.

But for all of them a line applied to Letty holds true: “It was a comfortable enough life, if a little sterile, perhaps even deprived.” Especially after her retirement, Letty knows “she must never give the slightest hint of loneliness or boredom, the sense of time hanging heavy.”

From what I’d heard about Pym, I might have expected a lighthearted satire about country manners and Anglican vicars. Perhaps that’s a fair assessment of some of her earlier books? But this is much darker, and the humor always has a bitter edge:

When Marcia finds a plastic bag labeled “To avoid danger of suffocation keep this wrapper away from babies and children,” the narrator adds, “They could have said from middle-aged and elderly persons too, who might well have an irresistible urge to suffocate themselves.”

Offered the option of moving into a care home, Letty thinks “better to lie down in the wood under the beech leaves and bracken and wait quietly for death.”

Overall it’s quite a melancholy little book, a warning against letting your life become too small and private. Yet the last line, remarkably, is a sudden injection of optimism: “it made one realize that life still held infinite possibilities for change.” I’d recommend this to readers who have enjoyed *Mrs. Palfrey at the Claremont* by Elizabeth Taylor.

Originally published with images on my blog, Bookish Beck.

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### **Maria says**

Vintage, wonderful Pym, but too close for comfort, as I'm getting up there in years myself. But is 60 is the new 40? Her characters are beautifully drawn, and out of four isolated individuals Pym creates a sort of bittersweetly harmonic symphony with a note of optimism at the end.

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### **kasia says**

I've decided to stop resisting the impulse to give Barbara Pym novels 5 stars, because let's face it, I love them. Despite her trademark lightness and wit, however, this is a fantastically grim and bleak novel. 4 friends -- or rather, colleagues, for they are barely friends -- approach retirement. Hilarious hijinx most decidedly do not ensue. They are difficult people; lonely, yet nervously hostile to foreigners and Black people, and mean-spirited towards each other; searching for intellectual and emotional satisfaction, but instead consumed in minutia. It is an amazing book.

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### **Ali says**

When I first read *Quartet in Autumn* I think I found it a little sad – veering towards depressing. Maybe this is the kind of book that one needs to be in the right frame of mind for. This time I found I really loved it. Although this novel does seem to be a bit different from other Barbara Pym novels, there are still plenty of

Pymisms to be found. This was the novel that was published in 1977 after Philip Larkin and Lord David Cecil had both separately and independently of each other, named Barbara Pym as the most under rated novelist. It was also the novel which found her nominated for the Booker Prize. There certainly is a more melancholic feeling to 'Quartet in Autumn' – focusing as it does, on four lonely people as they approach retirement from a dull unimportant office job.

"That day the four of them went to the library, though at different times. The library assistant, if he had noticed them at all, would have seen them as people who belonged together in some way"

Edwin, Marcia Norman and Letty – work together in an unspecified office. They have worked together for a number of years – and although they are a similar age – they don't socialise out of work or have any kind of personal relationship. Letty and Norman each live in bedsits – while Marcia and Edwin each live alone in what were family homes, Edwin in the home he shared with his wife, Marcia in the house she lived in with her parents. Edwin likes to visit churches in his lunch hour; Letty sometimes goes to the library. Marcia remembers with fond nostalgia her time in hospital, where she underwent 'major surgery' under the auspices of Mr Strong for whom she nurses tender feelings. In the shed in her over grown garden Marcia hoards empty milk bottles, just as she hoards tinned food – although barely eats anything. When Letty finds the house she lives in is sold to a new landlord, a pastor of an obscure African church, she is nervous of the noisy lively family he brings with him and with Edwin's help re-locates to a new room in the home of octogenarian Mrs Pole.

Marcia and Letty retire before Edwin and Norman (remember the days when women retired five years earlier than men?) – and while Marcia and Letty need to adjust and find ways of filling their days, Edwin and Norman occasionally wonder how "the girls" are getting on. Marcia is annoyed by a medical social worker who keeps trying to call, while Letty settles into a new routine with Mrs Pole.

"In Mrs Pole's house the telephone rang just as she and Letty were settling down to watch television. They quite often did this now, and although it had started by Mrs Pope suggesting that Letty might like to watch the news or some improving programme of cultural or scientific interest there was now hardly an evening when Letty did not come down to watch whatever happened to be on the box, whether it was worthy of attention or not."

The story of these quiet sad, lonely people are not entirely dispiriting though, while Marcia becomes more obsessive and secretive – Letty at least shows she is able to remain positive and move forward in her life, even beginning to reach out to the people around her by the end of the novel.

A novel of four ageing lonely people who have out lived their usefulness – whose jobs, when they retire will not be re-filled – is understandably poignant, but it is also shot through with Barbara Pym's sharp humour. In 'Quartet in Autumn' Barbara Pym seems in part to have been examining the fate of single elderly people, who is it that will look out for them? Whose responsibility is it to see that someone is taking the necessary care of themselves? The system (as Pym must have seen existing in the 1970's) is seen to fail Marcia – who seems to slip through the social care net.

These characters who I once found so sad, spoke to me in a completely different way this time. Barbara Pym's minute observations of people, are quite brilliant, the humour and pathos are handled deftly and saved this from being overwhelmingly sorrowful.

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### **SarahC says**

A more intense Pym work than ever. Reading Pym is like someone sitting eye to eye with you and talking very honestly about the private thoughts, faults, and wishes of people. No baloney, no highly-built plots, no messiness. Her characters are aggravating, just like people we know. They aren't always attractive or sexy. They age and make mistakes and sometimes cannot get outside of themselves. And they often miss the brass

ring, but are still ok in spite of it. And through these characters Barbara Pym wrote again and again about the beautiful sweet and sad mixture that is life. Excellent Novel.

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### **Leslie says**

A look at 4 unmarried people of retirement age in the 1970s, 2 men and 2 women who work together (before the women retire). As I am approaching this age myself, I found some aspects of this a little daunting but I take heart in the fact that I am *not* like Marcia!!

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