



Elizabeth Jane Howard

The writer Elizabeth Jane Howard (1923-2014) spent much time during her formative years at her grandparents' houses near Battle, first at Home Place in Whatlington, then at The Beacon near Staplecross. She used Home Place as the setting for her best-selling "Cazalet Chronicles", a five-novel family saga spanning the period before, during, and after the Second World War. Battle, its station, shops, and surroundings, is highly recognisable; Howard was meticulously accurate in the details of her settings. This accuracy contributes to the charm and readability of her novels. Her readers feel drawn into a real place, inhabited by real people.

Howard's grandfather – "the Brig" in the novels – ran the family timber business. He renovated his Sussex houses using fine quality panelling and floors made of jarrah wood, a rare wood from Western Australia; some of these interiors survive. The family was comfortably off and traditional in its attitudes. Sons joined the family firm, daughters were educated mainly at home, by governesses. Jane, as Elizabeth Jane Howard was always known, lived in London with her father David, who was charming but "duplicitous and unsafe", and her mother Kit, daughter of the composer Sir Arthur Somervell.

Kit had given up a career with Diaghilev's Ballets Russes for an ultimately unhappy marriage to the philandering David. Jane, acutely aware of tensions which she would later examine in her fiction, took refuge in the warm, relaxed atmosphere of the extended family life in Sussex. "I spent the mornings up apple trees reading Captain Marryat and R.M. Ballantyne", she recalled. She explored the countryside, which she loved deeply, in company with her cousins.

A university place for the highly intelligent but sketchily educated Jane was not considered. She took cooking and secretarial courses, did some modelling, and spent a season acting in repertory in Devon; she played Kate to the young Paul Scofield's Petruchio in *The Taming of the Shrew*. These experiences, too, would be incorporated into her novels. Jane's striking beauty shaped her life. As one male employer put it, she was "so beautiful that continuous problems arose...Little in the way of completely normal business was possible or sensible when she was in the room".

In 1942, aged only 19, Jane made the first of three marriages. Her husband was Peter Scott, son of the doomed Polar explorer Robert Falcon Scott. Peter was in his thirties, a painter and ornithologist on active naval service. His powerful mother, the sculptor Kathleen Kennet, was very much the third person in the marriage; Jane brilliantly describes her influence in her novel *Confusion*. The marriage produced a daughter, Nicola, born during an air raid, who was to be Jane's only child. Jane and Peter separated in 1946, with Peter taking custody of Nicola.

Jane found herself alone and hard up, but at last free to explore her growing belief that she wanted to be a writer. Her first novel, *The Beautiful Visit*, was published in 1950. It was followed in 1956 by the critically-acclaimed *The Long View*. Male attention both helped and distracted her from her literary career. Her lovers included writers such as Laurie Lee, Cecil Day-Lewis and Arthur Koestler - the last refused to use contraception, but also refused any responsibility for the resulting pregnancy, which Jane decided to terminate, at a time when abortion was still illegal.



Elizabeth Jane Howard. From Wikipedia.

In 1958 here was a second, brief, marriage, to Jim Douglas-Henry, an Australian fellow writer. Then in 1965 Jane met Kingsley Amis while organising the Cheltenham Literary Festival. The couple moved to an elegant Georgian house in Barnet where Jane, an accomplished cook, entertained literary friends and did her best to be a good stepmother to Kingsley's three children. But life with the heavy-drinking novelist was not easy. Jane's writing took second place to Kingsley's. After eighteen turbulent years they divorced.

Jane did not marry again, but eventually retreated to Bungay, a Suffolk village, where she felt free to write and live life on her own terms. However, her lifelong desire to be loved was still alive, and led her, in old age, into the thrall of an emotional fraudster. She wrote about this experience with unflinching honesty in her 1998 book *Falling*.

Encouraged by her novelist stepson Martin Amis, in the 1990s Jane embarked on the "Cazalet Chronicles"; *The Light Years*, *Marking Time*, *Confusion*, and *Casting Off*. (The fifth and final volume, *All Change*, appeared in 2013; it would be her last book.) The novels were highly successful, and have been dramatised for television and radio. The Cazalets, based on the real-life Howards, are prosperous members of the English upper middle class who find themselves making huge adjustments as the Nazi threat becomes a reality. Other people's stories – friends, servants, lovers – are interwoven; a particularly memorable character is the elderly family governess Miss Milliment, who buried all hope of romance when her young man was killed in the First World War. Indeed, Howard is especially skilful at showing how the trauma of the first war has shaped the emotions and attitudes of its survivors, who now face a second global conflict.

Howard set the novels at Home Place, but combined her memories of it with elements of The Beacon - for instance the Babies' Hotel, the charity run by selfless Aunt Rachel, is based on a real-life enterprise housed in the converted barn and squash courts at The Beacon. Plenty of action takes place elsewhere, most notably in Blitz-torn London, but the Battle area lies at the heart of the Chronicles. Howard's evocation of period detail – food, clothes, transport – is flawless, and combines with her sympathetic delineation of character and skilful plotting to make these novels one of the most enjoyable ways of finding out about life in and around Battle during this fascinating period.

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