

Jonathan Coe is resolved to expect the unexpected. Aside from his resigned dismay at the shrunken stature of his 'tall' latte following its transferral to a takeaway cup, he is also less than surprised that critics have received his latest novel, *The Rain Before it Falls*, as evidence of a new direction. As far as he's concerned, it is anything but. Yet he is patient by nature. "I can never be bothered to complain about things like that," he says. He is talking about the coffee, but one gets the impression that this generous, unassuming man takes a similar attitude to critical misunderstandings.

The 46-year-old writer is acutely aware that he is best known for 'big' political novels like the biting satire on the Thatcher years that made his name. "A lot of people think that *What a Carve Up!* was my first book," he observes, sounding as though he can't bring himself to hold this against them. Perhaps he sealed his own fate by following it up with two further popular successes; *The Rotters' Club*, an autobiographically-charged portrait of a group of teenagers growing up in turbulent 1970s Birmingham, and *The Closed Circle*, which catches up with the same characters as adults in Blair's Britain.

Unlike these, *The Rain Before it Falls* does not concern itself with political climate, or with capturing a zeitgeist - its story spans four generations and approximately sixty years. Its cast of characters is almost exclusively female and, by Coe's standards, tiny.

The novel, which was released this September, begins with the death of Rosamond, whose last act is to record descriptions of twenty family photographs - descriptions that reconstruct a dark family history. These are intended for Imogen, a blind relative who was adopted out of the family as a toddler, and who Rosamond has not seen for more than twenty years. But when their search for Imogen draws a blank, it is Rosamond's niece, Gill, and her daughters, Catharine and Elizabeth, who listen to the tapes.

One can see, then, why *The Rain Before it Falls* might be a surprise, coming from this particular writer. But Coe explains that writing it felt more like a return than a departure.

He suggests that the book has more continuity with the early novels - *The Accidental Woman*, *A Touch of Love* and *The Dwarves of Death*- that won him acclaim as an emerging 'experimental' novelist, but did not have quite the jet-propeller effect of *What a Carve Up!*

"It was conceived around the same time as those, in the late eighties. The pivotal ideas came from things I encountered then, but I put it on hold. *What a Carve Up!* was demanding to be written, and *The Rain Before it Falls* required an approach that I wasn't yet capable of. I tucked it away at the back of my mind for two decades, until I felt it was the right time."

The encounters that inspired the novel were with the kind of things that typically influence Coe - books, films, music, and a chance meeting with someone who piqued his curiosity.

While the dons at Cambridge, and then Warwick, where he completed a Ph.D. on Henry Fielding, were guiding Coe through the 'canon' of English Literature, he made a new literary discovery - the works of women writers including May Sinclair, Dorothy Richardson, and Rosamond Lehmann, re-issued in the eighties as Virago 'Modern Classics'.

"I wanted to write an economical novel as an expression of my love and admiration for these writers. It's easy to impress people if you are being complex, as I was in my most successful books. But I admire and am moved by books like Lehmann's, which achieve their effects through economy. I wanted to try to move the reader as much in 70,000 words as 140,000."

One can't help but notice as he talks that, for Coe, writing seems simply to be part of being human. The compassion and humanity he invests in his characters sets him apart as a novelist, and his sincerity is what strikes you as he talks about writing. Each answer seems to be tested for honesty before he offers it, and he leans into the conversation, blue eyes flicking across occasionally to check that he has made himself clear. He has said before that a lot of what he does - his 'working out' - doesn't look much like writing to other people, that in fact sometimes it looks more like doing the dishes. What he means becomes clearer as he describes the encounter that crystallised the idea for *The Rain Before it Falls*.

"I met a seven-year-old blind girl with blond hair at a family party in 1988, and her presence made a great impression on me. I wanted to write about her, to explain in fiction who she was, why she was there, and why she seemed to be both part of the family and not quite part of the family."

Shortly before this, Coe had seen the re-released Michael Powell film *Gone to Earth*, which he says "felt like the best memories from my childhood had been put on film." It is set in Shropshire, where he often visited his maternal grandparents as a child. He explains that for a young boy from the suburbs of Birmingham, these trips were a real treat. Even better were excursions to his great aunt and uncle's Victorian farmhouse nearby – the house that inspired the Warden Farm of the novel.

"It was the most romantic, mysterious and extraordinary house I had ever been to. The grounds went on forever, there were attics and cellars.... For an imaginative child, as I was, it was a very inspiring place, and I always wanted to invent a family to put in it, and to make that the basis of a novel."

Four decades later, he did just that. More than half of the photographs Rosamond describes – all of which are based on real pictures – are shots from the author's own family albums, many of which were taken at the house.

The last of the crucial late-eighties encounters was with a piece of music that also features in the story—*Bailero*, from Canteloube's *Songs of the Auvergne*: "A very beautiful love song that has been one of my favourites ever since."

Indeed, music is everywhere in *The Rain Before it Falls*. The novel shares its title with a Michael Gibbs song that surfaced on Coe's Ipod when he set it to shuffle, and begins with an acknowledgment to Theo Travis, whose flute compositions inspired a passage in which Catharine evokes through music the haunting power of her great aunt's story. Coe receives with chagrin the observation that music seems to be one of the hallmarks of his writing.

"Yes, I'm quite cross with myself for having written another book where so much of the emotional resonance is conveyed through music. The idea was to achieve emotional effects purely by describing pictures. I guess I'm just not a very visual person. Music is far more important to me than pictures, and I suppose in the end you can't fight against your own nature."

It would seem, then, that the novelist does not consider himself to have strayed so far from familiar ground. But in one respect, at least, Coe and the critics are united. With *The Rain Before it Falls*, neither has got quite what they bargained for.

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