



## Louis De Bernières (1954-)

Rob Spence (Edge Hill University)

Novelist.

Active 1974- in England

Of Huguenot descent, Louis de Bernières was born in 1954, and had a middle-class upbringing as the son of an army officer in Surrey. As a young man, de Bernières spent a disastrous four months at the British military academy, Sandhurst, which he left for work as a private tutor in Colombia, the inspiration for his early novels *The War of Don Emmanuel's Nether Parts*, *The Troublesome Offspring of Cardinal Guzman* and *Señor Vivo and the Coca Lord*. De Bernières has tended to use exotic locations for his novels, and to set his narratives against a backdrop of huge historical changes, none more so than the war settings of *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* and *Birds Without Wings*.

*The War of Don Emmanuel's Nether Parts*, published in 1990, won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the Best First Book (Eurasia Region) in 1991, and owes much to the magic realist tradition usually associated with such writers as Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Isabel Allende. Here, and in the subsequent novels of the trilogy, de Bernières adopts a narrative style combining realistic detail with exuberant flights of fantasy involving supernatural events.

Set in an unnamed South American country, *The War of Don Emmanuel's Nether Parts* concerns the farcical series of events set in train when Doña Constanza alarms local farmers by planning to divert a river in order to provide water for her swimming pool during a time of drought. The novel is reminiscent of a multi-stranded eighteenth-century episodic narrative, with short chapters bearing often quirky titles. Typical magic realist elements include a plague of cats and the resurrection of a dead man. The characters, who are involved in political intrigue, assassinations, kidnaps and utopianism, are largely ciphers, but the exuberant nature of the narrative, and its frequent switches between the comic and the serious, show that this early work had a maturity unexpected in a first novel. De Bernières continued in similar vein for his next two novels in the trilogy, *Señor Vivo and the Coca Lord* and *The Troublesome Offspring of Cardinal Guzman*.

The first of these novels, published in 1991, is in many respects a sequel to *The War of Don Emmanuel's Nether Parts*, and shares some characters with its predecessor. The central character is Dionisio, a student of philosophy at university. The author uses that element to introduce a number of intertextual references, and philosophical musings. Vivo's study of philosophy lends the narrative some of its particular flavour, and provides Vivo with the motive for his quest for justice in a corrupt society. Vivo – the surname is as significant as the Christian name – represents the hope of new life, a life based on the principles expounded in the works of philosophy he

holds so dear, and founded on principles of liberty and enlightenment. But, as is always the case in de Bernières's work, idealism is confronted by a harsher reality, and the reader is not spared the brutal details of the appalling actions of the drug baron and his confederates.

Unsettling as such scenes are, the novel also displays a playfulness with narrative characteristic of magic realist writers in general, and of de Bernières in his career in particular. The author once again evokes the conventions of the eighteenth century novel by using an epistolary format in places, as the reader is presented with the letters written by Vivo to the newspaper against the activities of the drug barons.

In the third volume of the trilogy, *The Troublesome Offspring of Cardinal Guzman*, the formula established in the first two volumes is to some extent repeated. The setting is once again the author's lightly disguised South American republic, and the tone varies from the farcical to the tragic. Again, the magic realist mode is employed, and this time the target is one which the South American magic realists frequently focused upon – religion. As the title suggests, the novel treats the Catholic Church as an inherently corrupt organisation, but the prospect of a high representative of the church having children is part of the carnivalesque atmosphere that pervades this novel more obviously than the other two in the trilogy.

The author once again does not shy away from an engagement with complex philosophical issues, offering the reader an insight into the nature of religious belief, the frailty of human nature, and the corruption at the heart of political life. This subject matter is presented in exuberant style, with frequent surreal digressions in what by now had become De Bernières's classic magic realist manner.

The completion of the trilogy marks the end of the first phase of De Bernières's career, and there is a conscious sense in his remarks on this work that he considered it to be, perhaps, apprentice work. His true voice was to emerge with the publication of *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* in 1994. As he put it in an interview, "magic realism can make the narrative too easy. It can make you lazy" (Rennison 41). Although there are certainly elements of the magic realist mode in *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, the approach owes much more to traditional realist writing than the South American trilogy.

*Captain Corelli's Mandolin* is an epic narrative, spanning much of the second half of the twentieth century, and focusing on the doomed love affair between an Italian army captain and the daughter of a doctor on the Greek island of Cephallonia during the Axis powers' occupation of Greece in the Second World War. The novel is, on one level, a conventional romance, but the backdrop of war, and in particular the description of the horrifying execution of Italian troops by the Germans, ensures that the reader is never comfortable. The complex and often brutal conflict between Greek communist partisans and the successive occupying forces of the Italian and German armies, form a factual historical counterpoint to the fictional story of the lovers. Acts of savagery are juxtaposed with acts of love as the novel's broad cast of characters see their lives defined by the war and its aftermath.

The novel was a sensation, topping the bestseller charts, but also attracting admiration from serious critics. A.S. Byatt wrote that the author "is in the direct line that runs through Dickens and Evelyn Waugh... he has only to look into his world, one senses, for it to rush into reality, colours and touch and taste" (27). The novel won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best Novel in 1994. The popular acclaim for the novel also attracted some less welcome attention, as the survivors of the communist Greek resistance attacked De Bernières for his portrayal of them. Nevertheless, the popularity of the book led to a Hollywood film, which, predictably, softened the hard edges of the novel, and omitted much of the post-war action.

After a ten year hiatus following the publication of *Corelli*, during which de Bernières, though active, did not publish a major work, *Birds Without Wings* became his fifth substantial novel to be published. The success of *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* ensured that the 2004 publication was a major event in the literary world. In this

novel, de Bernières returned to the themes of his previous work, especially the effect of war upon ordinary people. The setting is Turkey rather than Greece, and the historical focus the First rather than the Second World War, but the parallels are striking. Again, an epic love affair is played out against scenes of brutality and casual violence. Arguably, though, *Birds Without Wings* is more ambitious than its immediate predecessor in that it takes on the history of the formation of modern Turkey, and, in a very contemporary resonance, examines the antagonism between Islam and the Western world. As with its predecessor, this novel is concerned with the destruction and havoc caused by war. If the representation of evil in *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* is crystallised in the brutality of the National Socialist and Communist systems, then it is nationalism which carries this burden in *Birds Without Wings*. In an interview on the novel's publication, the author affirms that he "hate[s] and despise[s] nationalism. What other people regard as liberation movements, I regard as really stupid and unnecessary interruptions of a peaceful life" (Tonkin 21-22).

The formation of the modern Turkish state out of the decadent remnants of the Ottoman Empire is the historical backdrop to *Birds Without Wings*, which covers the period from 1900 to 1923, the year of Turkish independence under Kemal Atatürk. Just as Dr Iannis, Corelli, Pelagia and the other characters find their lives overtaken by massive wartime events in *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, so the characters of this novel become overwhelmed by forces beyond their control. Again, just as the previous novel features a central love story involving representatives of opposing sides, so this novel revolves around the relationship between the goatherd Ibrahim and the Greek beauty Philothei. They inhabit a somewhat romanticised place, the Turkish village of Eskebahce, where Christians and Muslims have co-existed peaceably for centuries, and a degree of intermarriage has occurred. The enforced movement of Greek and Turkish populations, which took place as a consequence of the establishment of the borders of modern Turkey, is the occasion for the conflict at the heart of the novel. De Bernières once more shows the human cost of the actions of the state, just as he does in the South American trilogy and in *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*. People's lives are irrevocably changed, sometimes with devastating effect, as a result of the apparently whimsical actions of the modern state apparatus. In some respects, this novel might be seen as a "prequel" to *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, in that it shares (roughly) a geographical setting, and concerns ethnic and state conflicts intertwined with the lives of the ordinary and the influential.

De Bernières followed this publication with *The Partisan's Daughter* (2008), a novel set in the 1970s, but which also to some extent reflects on the events of the Second World War and its aftermath. The story is initially narrated in the first person by Chris, a medical salesman, who is reflecting in the present day on events in the strike-ridden "Winter of Discontent" in Britain at the end of the seventies. The partisan's daughter of the title is the Serb exile Roza, living in a squalid London house with a shifting population of itinerant drifters. She tells Chris the stories of her life, and particularly the history of her father, who was a member of the Chetniks, the Serbian nationalist guerrillas in the War, then a Communist partisan, and then a secret policeman in [Tito's](#) post-war Yugoslavia. Chris, forty years old and in a loveless marriage at the time, comes to rely on Roza's tales to provide his life with the colour and excitement it lacks. He compares her to the Ancient Mariner in the button-holing urgency of her tale-telling, and there is also something of Scheherazade about Roza, whose stories may or may not be true, but who withholds her most important narrative until the end.

*A Partisan's Daughter* does not have the broad historical sweep of the previous two novels, but is nonetheless informed by the vicissitudes of European conflicts of the late twentieth century. De Bernières returns to a persistent theme, presenting a very personal account through Roza of the ways in which the actions of the state affect the lives of ordinary people.

In addition to the six novels discussed above, De Bernières has published a novella, *Red Dog* (2001), based on the real-life adventures of an Australian sheep-dog; *Sunday Morning at the Centre of the World* (2001) a "play for voices" in the tradition of Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood*; *Notwithstanding* (2009), a collection of short stories all set in the fictional English village of the title; *Imagining Alexandria: Poems in Memory of Constantinos Cavafis* (2013); and some uncollected short stories.

It is likely that De Bernières's reputation will rest on *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, but he remains an active writer and has announced a major new publication for 2015, a novel entitled *The Dust That Falls From Dreams*.

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