

## Derek Jarman's one hundred and one beautiful books **Flowers And Silence**

Painter, theatre designer and film-maker Derek Jarman talks to Chris Granlund about the way reading has influenced his life.

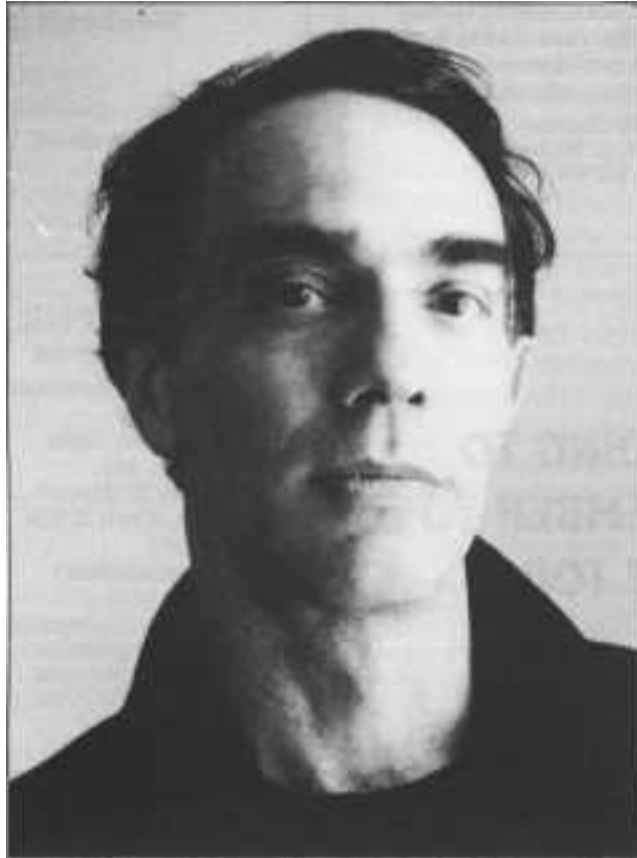
My parents gave me my first book when I was about four, *One Hundred And One Beautiful Flowers And How To Grow Them*. It was a large and beautiful Edwardian garden book which they found in Milan on April 20, 1946. I still have it, surprisingly enough. It's one of those things that somehow survived. It's very tatty now.

They followed that up with a rather famous leather-bound book about the artworks of Italy, all about Italian culture, really. I couldn't read at that time, I was a very late reader, but I used to scrawl in those first books and my father would get very angry at me.

My father was in the RAF so we were always moving and had hardly any books in the house because they are the worst things to move. But my mother belonged to a lending library. I remember her sitting upstairs reading, she was very well-read, although there were only ever about six books in the house. One of them was TE Lawrence's *Seven Pillars Of Wisdom*. I think that was partly because my father had met him. He told me that he was 'a peculiar man', they were his exact words.

There was a sort of Shangri-La in our family of my father before he became a bomber pilot. He had known a group of 30s' intellectuals and was actually quite artistic. He had made beautiful candlesticks and played the piano very beautifully. But all that had disappeared with the bombing in the war. Twice in my childhood, when there was a piano available, my father sat down and played. This rather shocked us all.

My parents sent me to boarding school and I remember having special extra reading classes because I was having difficulty. At school everything was very controlled. There were bells for lessons, for meals, for chapel, for inspection of polished shoes, for PT, for cadet training. How could all this



conceivably be thought of as a normal upbringing?

It's an absolute myth that boys' public schools are a kind of hive of gay sexuality. It just isn't true. It was ruled like a prison camp. To my knowledge there was one lad who wrote a love letter to another, it was intercepted by the masters and he was immediately expelled. I was incredibly naive at that time and that is the only expression of sexuality I remember at that school from the age of 13 to 18.

The 50s were so utterly controlled. It wasn't really until the 60s that this country began to catch up with what one might call the modern movement. It was only the elite who were able to find out anything, the schools were absolutely watertight. As far as I remember, there wasn't a single 20th-century novel on the curriculum, or even for A or O-levels in 1957. Hardy's *Return Of The Native* would be about as far as it went.

I suspect that if you had had a Cocteau book at that time, it would have been passed

under the table at school. There certainly wasn't any pornography around. The things that were passed under the table were the 78s of Elvis Presley and Buddy Holly. The school had Sibelius symphonies on some old 78s. My contribution was *Please Stay By Me Diana* by Paul Anka.

I came straight from school to King's College, London, where I did a general degree in English literature, history and art history. I was completely confused by it all. The main reason for this was my sexuality, which I didn't even know the name for at the age of 18.

At university, people came from a much wider social background, and there was the politics, although I never got involved. I was too insecure, coping with my sexuality and having a terrible inferiority complex intellectually. Then I met a tutor called Eric Mottram. He was a great influence. He said that I should read the work of Allen Ginsberg, all of the beat stuff, William Burroughs, Genet and Cocteau, of course. At that point they

weren't even generally available. And I fastened on to them because they were an affirmation of my sexuality at a time when there was nobody to talk to about it and no information whatsoever.

In 1964, I made a trip to America and I made the whole focus of my journey the City Lights Bookshop in San Francisco. I bought many, many books, and I still have them all here, starting with *San Francisco, New Poems* by Lawrence Ferlinghetti

I've had two moments of intense reading in my life. The first was in the early 60s when a lot of it was poetry and American writing. I read lots of plays and not many novels. Then in the 70s, when my painting had gone under as a strand and I was working in film design and my own little home-movies, I started to read vast amounts of Jung. I was particularly interested in psychology, particularly James Helman and Bachelard. As a painter you always read in images, in a way for which other people maybe do not have the training. So coming into Bachelard's psychoanalysis of fire is absolutely fantastic. It's not exactly mystical, it's more to do with identifying the cultural cross-references in things.

More recently, I've been reading all kinds of things, the metaphysical poets, the journals of Kilvert. It's a moment for re-capping. I take books that I really loved and re-read them. So I might read this marvellous country-life book called *Monet And His Garden*, quite gentle stuff. I'm not engaged in anything which might be called contemporary. I don't even go to the cinema any longer.

The input has been so enormous that I could spend the rest of my life just exploring what has already been taken in, without losing contact with people. On the other hand, it might be very good to lose contact, you might find yourself in a more interesting area. I've always thought that there is something to be said for a vow of silence in order to discover something that may be overlooked in the general noise.