

# CHOICE WORDS

Fay Weldon's journey from fact to fiction

## A Novel Career

Fay Weldon talks to Chris Granlund about the books that have shaped her world.

I remember shocking everyone when I was six by weeping all day about *The Snow Queen* and being outraged by *The Little Mermaid*. It was in New Zealand at the end of the war and very few books came into the country. Those that did were carefully selected as being worth transporting so I had a wide range of good books. I went through the contents of all the children's libraries in Christchurch, sometimes taking home three books a day and returning with them in the afternoon asking for more. They'd say I wasn't allowed to change them on the same day, that I hadn't read them properly. But I had.

My father used to make me memorise things. I adored Shakespeare's sonnets and remember them being bought at sixpence each. I came across them the other day and realised how many of them I still know, he seems to have chosen the best ones. I also memorised John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* which I keep trying to recall. I also read a lot of strange and powerful Victorian novels and then on and on into the 20th century. As I grew older I became more of a sociological reader and read all of Shaw and Wells and a touch of Aldous Huxley and that sort of esoteric nonsense.

Ours was a very disturbed and neurotic household. We had to keep moving from house to house because we kept spending and we were in debt. This used to upset my mother but everyone was intelligent and loquacious and believed in the power of ideas. I went to many schools as we moved around. That was very common in New Zealand. There was the convent school where I was terrorised, oppressed and subjugated by the Catholic Church. It was assumed that we would be taught manners there and learn that there was more to life than this wild colonial sea.

I read *The Lives Of The Saints*, in which there was a



great deal of torment and torture. It was a bit like *The Story Of O* without the sex. I remember sitting by a picture of St Anthony being tormented by devils. It was an extraordinary training for a little girl to become a masochist. So I had a very heavy dose of Catholicism. I suspect that it makes you believe in God but not in religion. You get the feeling that organised religion is the pits.

So I went off Catholicism which was fortunate because I was in rather severe decline and then I was sent to a school which was bright and light and they read to us. I must have been about nine or 10 and I thought it was just wonderful having people to read to you. I wasn't particularly enthusiastic about anything at school. You went to school to talk to your friends and the education was just a tax you had to pay.

One of the first jobs I had when I came out of university was working as a temporary assistant clerk at the

Foreign Office. It was the kind of work graduates were assumed to be good at. You wrote reports and you fed them through to the government departments and if you knew what they wanted to hear you could write anything, you could make it sound good or bad. Then I went into advertising and I worked for a newspaper for a bit and began to realise that truth is non-existent, except in fiction.

But this wasn't a 'career', you must get the idea of a career out of your mind. This wasn't the world in which women had careers unless they went into the civil service. A career is a wild race, isn't it? It's a very new usage of the word. People then had 'jobs', maybe they got a better job but there wasn't this sense of a way out that everybody expects now. At the time there was a sense with me and my friends of being desperate to get married, not to be left behind.

It was only once I was mar-

ried and had children that it was possible to start thinking about things. A few friends committed suicide and it became a matter of life and death. You could see the injustice of their plight and their misery. And at that time a lot of people began to think that this really wasn't necessary. This is back in the mid-60s and it's quite difficult to understand that the concept of 'sexism' didn't exist in the same way that it does now. But once you become aware of that concept you can fit all kinds of things into it.

It allows you to see yourself as the victim of social relations which are unreasonable and need to be changed. But of course, there is never only one answer, one way out. You can take up this or that position in certain instances and then at other times it turns out to be wrong. You can't remain faithful to one ideology through thick and thin.

Writing should never be read as universal truth. It is all just the words of a writer whether it be Marx or Jane Austen or *The Bible*. Sometimes things sound right but it's all just writers, writers, writers. I remember reading *The Second Sex* and not being able to make much sense of it. It was rather like reading a man's book, I couldn't see my experience of life in it at all. I also began to see that the books I had been reading had, on the whole, been written by men while piles of writing by women had been rejected.

The novel had become a kind of male fantasy in which there were heroes and subsidiary creatures called women who had a set of emotions and responses which seemed to have nothing to do with my mind or that of any of my friends. People were muttering about the death of the novel and it seemed very likely to me because there was no longer a relationship between novels and the real world. If I were asked to recommend one book it would have to be *The Bible* read from beginning to end. Not for its truth or religious content, but for the history.