



HIDDEN LIVES

As a teenager in the 1950s Margaret Forster fled her working class home on the Raffles council estate in Carlisle for Oxford University, desperate to avoid the crushing domestic fate endured by her maternal forebears. Now, four decades later, her recent trilogy of books - the autobiographical *Hidden Lives* and *Precious Lives* and the story of Carlisle's Carr's biscuit works *Rich Desserts* and *Captain's Thin* - have put her Cumbrian home town on the literary map. Writer *Alan Air* visited the reclusive novelist and biographer at her summer home near Loweswater to find out what makes her tick.

MARGARET Forster greets me on the driveway leading up to her modest Lakeland cottage at Loweswater and briskly ushers me through the garden, conservatory, study and into the kitchen of the house. She offers me tea and it arrives quickly, in a mug, proper down-to-earth tea, Tetley's or PG Tips (certainly nothing as fancy as Earl Grey or Lapsang), served with too much milk but very little ceremony.

You can tell a lot about people in the time it takes them to make you tea and serve it. So when Margaret sits down to face the music (the other way round as it turns out) I have already jumped to all sorts of conclusions: that she's bossy, easily bored and sharp-tongued. There's to be no taming of this shrew, methinks. My, my, all this from a simple cup of tea. But after an hour spent listening to her slightly shrill, domineering voice, enduring her interruptions to my questions, watching her restless hand tapping and staring into her not unattractive but impenetrable cloudy blue eyes I'm pretty happy to go with my initial impression.

Don't get me wrong, I don't dislike her exactly, (I greatly admire her free-flowing, virile, vigorous prose) but Margaret Forster is the first to admit that she's not someone you cuddle up to for an easy-going crack over a cuppa. When I venture that her aggressive writing style is a pretty accurate reflection of the character behind it she positively delights in confirming the observation.

"I hope so! By nature I am aggressive and extremely critical," she laughs, concurring that she will go to her grave arguing the toss with somebody about something or other. At first there are no discernible chinks in her conversational armour, no openings to peer through and

find out whether underneath it all she's just a big softie (very doubtful).

But just as I'm running out of questions she admits to being frightened of disease and poignantly describes a close relative's living hell from advanced multiple sclerosis. "He literally can't move a finger, out of clear blue skies come these blows, so anyone who says they are not afraid ... well, being afraid is part of being alive, being afraid of the random cruelty you see everywhere," she says, her voice softening slightly. But only slightly and the admission comes too late to alter my impression of her as a pretty tough cookie.

Physically, she's straight up and down, wiry almost, and her carelessly styled and probably dyed black mop of hair doesn't really soften rather hard facial features that as a young girl once graced the Raffles' council estate in Carlisle. In conversation she's a bit too strident, a bit too Thatcherite in tone, a bit too punchingly feminist for comfort. Even though I find myself nodding at her leftish intellectual pronouncements (she's a paid-up member of the Labour Party) the words bounce off me, like those small, rock hard rubber powerballs that children flung against school walls in the 1970s. I'm sure I wouldn't have liked to have been in her gang. I'm sure I would have tired quickly or got headaches.

Even Margaret's reply to my first question regarding her age sounds imperious. Instead of simply answering '61' she states precisely: "I was born on the 25th of May 1938," - which at least reveals her to be a Gemini. How wonderfully pertinent, the star sign of wordsmiths and critics.

As a hopeless fan of her work and having just re-read (for the third time) her gripping and vivid autobiographical novel, *Hidden Lives*, that traces her ▶





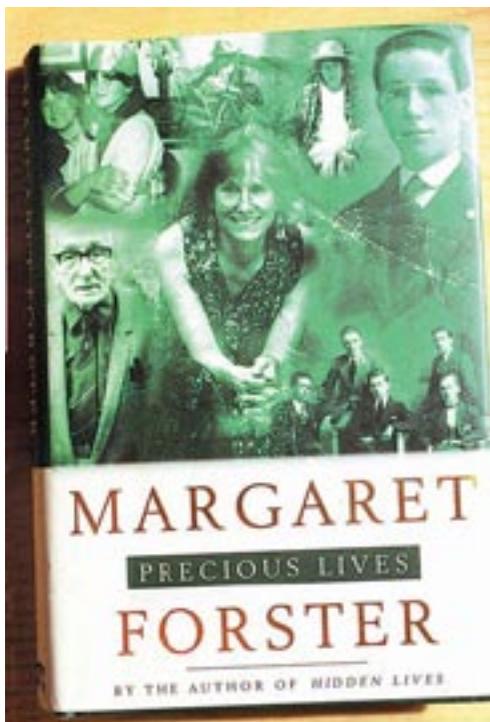
HIDDEN LIVES ...Continued

► maternal family tree back to the height of the Victorian era in Carlisle, I wonder whether it was an exercise in personal exorcism or whether...?

"No! No! No! Much more practical," she interrupts, spoiling the flow of my sympathetically posed question. "It was actually a publisher's idea. A book called *Wild Swans* about three generations of Chinese woman had done phenomenally well and they were looking for a kind of British version showing whether things had got better for women over the last 100 years. I said I could do my own family but it wouldn't be much of a story because it would all be very ordinary. That's how it began. It wasn't my own idea." Well, now we know.

Maybe because it wasn't her brainchild Margaret confesses to utter surprise that *Hidden Lives* was so well-received and that it sold so well. "It's amazing really, it was just a quiet little book. I'm the sort of author who gets steady fan mail but not great numbers. But with *Hidden Lives* I got an absolute deluge, amazing letters with stories far more interesting and involved than what I had written about," she reveals.

I suspect a key factor in the book's success is its



searing honesty about the familial experience - a universal social phenomenon. The author's penetrating, dispassionate assessment of her own mother's disposition and her ready description of other family members' personal trials and idiosyncrasies are so eager, so burning! Yet my reasonable enough enquiry as to whether she felt any conflict between her role as daughter (and the natural urge to respect family privacy) and her role as biographer (and the intellectual urge to tell it as it is) meets with a look of consternation and a squeal of exasperation.

"I can't think of anything in *Hidden Lives* that is in the least embarrassing or intimate," she asserts, almost mockingly.

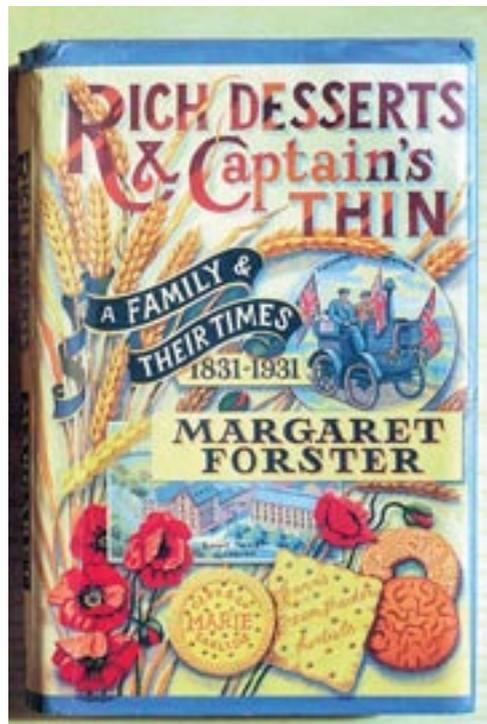
So she never worries what Carlisle people, who remember her family, might think about her for immortalising them in print, warts and all?

"I never think what people will think full stop,"

she says abruptly. "Never enters my head. I never write for any kind of public. Which might sound like a contradiction - I mean, what's the point of having a book published for people to buy if you don't think about them - but I don't. Ever."

So what motivates her to keep dashing out book after book - now that she doesn't need the money and hasn't needed the money for many years. "Pleasure drives me. Pleasure, it gives me enormous pleasure," she says slightly theatrically, rolling the word around her tongue, savouring it. "I'm not in the angst school of writing where it's blood, sweat and tears and 'Oh my God! It's so Lonely! Those blanks sheets of paper!' I can't get there quick enough, I delight in it! The words come too easily. They would probably be better words if they came harder, I think."

And there, just there, comes the first glimpse of a heap of subsequent conversational evidence that confirms she isn't an aloof big head at all, that she isn't deliberately cruel about the people she left



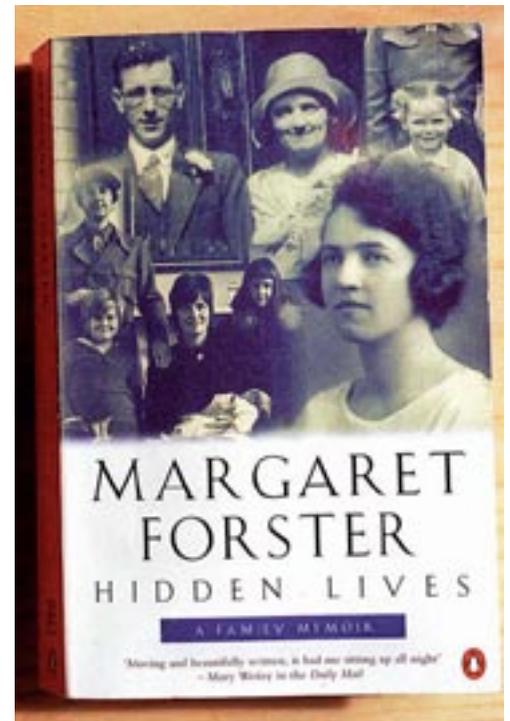
behind, or full of her own self-worth - an impression she is apt to generate. Talk to Carlisle people of Margaret Forster's generation (particularly women) and they speak of her with a mixture of pride and resentment; pride that she is one of their peers and a product of the city (although she's more a product of her own intellect and determination and her birthplace is probably irrelevant) and resentment that she appears to disparage so much of what she - and they - came from. But I suspect it's not so much what she says, but how she says it that gives off the erroneous impression that she's a dreadful snob.

A pupil of the Carlisle and County High School for Girls she writes in *Hidden Lives*: "Miss Wynne, my English teacher, gave me booklets about Oxford and Cambridge and I was spellbound by the photographs - they looked literally like fairy-tale places to me, so beautiful, so utterly desirable, so worth having no boyfriends for. It was tantalising how escape from home and my mother's life suddenly

seemed - all I had to do was work hard and do well in examinations and I could go off to this amazing place called university. It could be felt, it was solid, this route out of Carlisle, it wasn't a vague dream any more."

And then, later: "I didn't want my mother's life, but I didn't want life as a working woman in the laundry or even in Marks & Spencer. I didn't want to be condemned to a routine, dull job. Ambition was still fuelled by what I saw around me and I couldn't understand why everyone else at school didn't feel the same...they saw no need for the kind of panic to escape that I was in."

So often her critique - especially when it involves powerful emotions - comes across as awfully factual, ball-achingly blunt, unnecessarily cold. You long



to hear a bit of soft heart when all you seem to hear is hard head, particularly when she mocks herself as a "very minor novelist of the present day" - an unconvincing self portrait that intriguingly suggests she fears being accused of having delusions of grandeur, the ultimate working class sin.

"I certainly don't look at anything I've written as any kind of life's work," she asserts sharply. "I mean, for goodness sake, if one thing being Cumbrian gives you it's keeping your feet on the ground and getting things in context. In Carlisle we used to say that people were lost if they fancied themselves. I don't think I could ever get lost or fancy myself."

Yet what she has done since the publication of her first novels in the 1960s is to carve out an enviable life for herself. It includes a house in London, a cottage in the Lake District, successful grown-up children, a month's holiday in the Caribbean every January and the freedom to lead a maverick lifestyle. While she can't tell me is how rich she is - her husband handles that side of things (what an admission for a feminist) - she doesn't underestimate the importance of personal wealth.

"I was interested in money until I started to

have some and if I didn't have any I would be out there with both elbows trying to get it because a lot depends on money. You can't have a lovely solitary life in these circumstances without it," she says, motioning to the lovely Lakeland surroundings. "I have never undervalued money. People who say money doesn't matter or bring you happiness are talking rubbish! It brings you ENORMOUS happiness!"

Which in her case involves a lot of time on her own, writing, giving herself pleasure the best way she knows how. She eschews parties and socialising of any kind and doesn't go anywhere or do anything other than write her books, she says. Why? "Because I don't like it. It's a waste of time. I'm happier on my own with a book."

Even her various publishers must bow to the demands of the recluse. "These days publishers require an awful lot of an author because it's such a cut-throat business. The publisher has the author as a performing animal and they know I can do it because I'm not exactly a shrinking violet but I won't do it," she states flatly. "I don't do tours, or literary lunches, or book signing sessions - I've got that written into my contract. I don't know how public-spirited people like Melvyn (Bragg) manage it. I'm a solitary sort of person, and I'm not public spirited so I just stay in the house wherever I am."

But could raging professional rivalry with husband and fellow author Hunter Davies ever disturb the cool, cool sanctuary of her secluded study, I wonder? "Never. We write completely different kinds of books and we are completely different types of people," she says emphatically. "Because of his personality he likes to share everything he's doing so I read all his stuff as he goes along. At the moment he's doing a biography of Dwight Yorke the Manchester United footballer (see page 126), so getting interested in Dwight and all the Man U games is quite challenging intellectually! But I never show anybody - including Hunter - anything I'm writing until it's completely finished. I don't expect him to read it. I don't particularly want him to."

Thankfully, she does interviews - as long as the interviewers come to her - because she is damned good at them, has so many fine things to say, so many powerful arguments to get across. But future interviewers reading this article, heed a warning. Wear battle dress. When I ask Margaret to confirm that she is a feminist she almost bites my head off. "Of course I'm a feminist! The fact that you need to ask enrages me," she shrieks, seething and laughing furiously at the same time, banging her lap with her hands.

What sort of feminist? "Somebody who believes that gender shouldn't get in the way of anything you want to do. Mine is the most basic type of feminism, it's not about hating men. Many a man's a feminist. If I wasn't married to a feminist life would have been very difficult. So yes, how many times over am I a feminist?"

But definitely not a Greenham Common type of feminist, a soaraway Sun type of feminist, a nudge, nudge, wink, wink type of feminist. Margaret picks up the innuendo and runs with it. "There's a popular tabloid perception that feminism means butch women with shaven heads and boiler suits," she says, shaking her head at the crudity of the equation. "When someone asks 'Are you a feminist?' it is quite likely that what they are really asking is 'Are you a lesbian?' I did

a feminist history once called *Significant Sisters* and the percentage of lesbians among feminists was tiny. Even if feminism had been intertwined with lesbianism - which it wasn't and isn't - it wouldn't have put me off."

Curiously, for such an outspoken and strong-headed woman, Margaret admits to marrying Hunter not because she felt any desire to do so, but so as not to upset her mother and father. "I only became a wife because it was so hurtful to parents in the late 50s not to be married. I would be a partner today. What is the point of being married unless you are religious? It's ludicrous."

But she didn't compromise about children and refused to have any until she was 25 - fairly old in the 1960s - and a career of sorts was underway. Had she fell pregnant while still a teenager in

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Carlisle - Margaret's great nightmare back then - she believes she would have coped because the first rule of all wives and mothers is that they cope. "But I would have been miserable to be so trapped. That would have been terrible. It would have been a disaster," she says. "Becoming a mother is the most responsible thing you ever do so I was always very anti-motherhood because I saw only too clearly how it changed women. I put it off for a long time and sort of struggled against admitting that I wanted children. Obviously it changes everything - you don't feel as ambitious for a while because so much of that drive goes into the children - so I don't go along with the feminist line that rubbishes all the biological stuff.

She doesn't go along with the spiritual aspect of her Christian upbringing either. As a child she went to church three times on a Sunday but she is now 100 per cent, absolutely an atheist - too aware of life as a cruel lottery to accept the notion of a loving God in Heaven. "I do not believe in a God or any kind of after life," she readily confirms. While it takes a strong, confident, well-balanced person to dismiss the emotional security that belief in life after death can offer, there is no doubting the strength of her assertion regarding the finite nature of human existence - or what she herself might do if infirmity or

illness make it all too much to bear - a genuine fear at her time of life.

In *Precious Lives* Margaret documented the terrible decline of her sister-in-law Marion as she bravely battled cancer. While she admits to holding back 75 per cent of the truth about those terrible days (to protect the feelings of those involved who are still very much alive) it led her to ponder the notion of suicide should the going get too tough. She willingly chews it over now. "I don't see suicide as a terrible thing. Actually, I'm quite surprised that more people don't commit suicide," she says, laughing heartily. "And I'm surprised more elderly people don't do it." She reminds me of the couple in their 80s who entered into a drug-induced suicide pact on a sleeper train because they had had such a wonderful life together, and simply, perfectly, painlessly wanted to avoid the misery of terminal decline in later years.

"That, I think, is admirable," she says, "when you've got to the stage where you've had a great life and you suddenly see the future is not going to be so great, that little by little things will wear away."

And herself? Could she willingly pull the plug on her own life?

"I would never ask anyone else to do it for me, that's a terrible thing, and it's naive to imagine how anyone knows how they would react in that situation," she says. "I imagine that I would if I was in great pain and I just couldn't bear what the terminal part was going to be. But you can't be sure until you are in that position. You might find that every moment, no matter what your state, is precious. I don't think I would but then the awful thing is that dying people get beyond the stage when they are able to take their own lives."

I feel quite sure Margaret Forster has many years of life ahead of her. Which is welcome news of course, not just for herself and the people who love her, but for all the people who admire her writing and eagerly anticipate each new book (even though she claims not to give a toss what they think about her work).

Despite recently becoming a grandmother (and a bona fide state pensioner) there is no sign of her life force diminishing, of her going soft, slowing down, donning carpet slippers and shawl, swapping her keyboard for knitting needles and platitudes about the weather. The furious fires of creativity still burn brightly inside the head of this thoroughly modern Millie. So what can we expect next?

Having so successfully explored the perils of 19th and 20th century working class domesticity in *Hidden Lives*, Margaret returns to the institution of marriage for her next book, *Good Wives*. The self-explanatory title examines the notion of what the role of wife used to be, what it became and what it is now.

She is using her own experience as one case study and other examples include Mary Livingstone, the explorer's wife; Fanny Stevenson, partner of writer Robert Louis and Jenny Lee who married Labour politician Nye Bevan. Margaret is fascinated by the changing role of the wife.

"Once upon a time to say someone was a good wife was the highest compliment you could pay. Today, if you say someone is a good wife it's the biggest insult you can offer. You are inferring that she is nothing else," she says.

An accusation that no-one in their right mind or not wearing a bullet-proof vest would ever hurl at Margaret Forster.