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WEEKEND: THE SATURDAY INTERVIEW - CAROLINE GRAHAM - DISSATISFACTION MUST BE GUARANTEED

BYLINE: CAROLINE FOULKES Caroline Graham, creator of Midsomer Murders. Inset, John Nettles, who plays Detective Chief Inspector Barnaby in the TV series

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Dissatisfaction is the greatest gift you can have.

If you are satisfied, totally satisfied, with everything, every aspect of your life, then you never strive for anything more. You never know how much life could be. You know only the little that your life is, played out within its narrow confines. Caroline Graham is a dissatisfied woman.

If she weren't, she wouldn't be where she is today. If she weren't, her life would have been very different.

Caroline was born into a working class family in Nuneaton. At the age of 14 she left school and went to work in Courtaulds Mill as a wefter.

And really, that should have been it. Back then, in 1944, marriage, children and grandchildren should have been the only other expectations she had, had she been satisfied, accepting of her lot.

But she wasn't.

The last 18 months of Caroline's schooling were beyond what she, with her background, could have expected.

She won a scholarship to Nuneaton High School for Girls. Until then she had just attended a standard state school.

'We called them council schools back then,' she says.

'And they taught you all the basics: reading, writing, maths. Then it was woodwork and metalwork for the boys and washing and making jam tarts for the girls.

'So going to the High School was a revelation for me, it was wonderful. I had the most marvellous English teacher there who got me interested in Shakespeare and all these authors I'd never heard of.

'George Eliot's birthplace was two miles down the road from where I lived and until I was 12 I thought she was a bloke.'

It didn't change her life. Not immediately, anyway. She still went to the factory, 'because that was one of the expectations of working class children. I never expected anything else.'

But it did make a difference. 'It changed the way I thought about myself. It made me want to be a writer, which was unheard of for a child like me in the 40s. I might as well have said I wanted to be Joan Crawford.

'So I left school and went where I was expected to go. But I never expected to stay.'

She didn't. Aged 18, she ran away to be a writer. But it was more than 20 years before she became one, and another 18 more before she wrote the book that made her a household name.

With a background like hers, you'd expect her to have written some Catherine Cookson-style sweeping epic of romance, hardship and betrayal -you know the drill.

But Caroline is the creator of one of television's foremost detectives, and also of the 'murder capital of Britain', Midsomer, the stomping ground of Detective Chief Inspector Barnaby.

To date, according to one website set up by an avid viewer, there have been 104 murders (ten of which are historical), six suicides and eight accidental deaths in Midsomer and its numerous quaint villages.

'Ooh, get a life!' snorts Caroline, when she hears someone has actually taken the trouble to tot up the death rate. 'There have been about 25 episodes on television so if you look at it like that, there has to be at least two dead bodies per episode. People get cheesed off if there's only one, and start wondering where the others are. I think most of them have more than one body per episode -Frost, Dalziel and Pascoe, they all have at least a couple.' Although Caroline created Midsomer, not all the episodes are based on her books. And although she says she is 'thrilled' with the way her work was bought to the small screen, thanks to a chance meeting between one of her friends and renowned script editor Betty **Willingale**, she believes her novels are a lot darker than the Midsomer we see on television.

Her latest, *A Ghost In the Machine*, is a case in point. Just check out the jacket blurb.

'All men should have a hobby; it keeps them out from under their wives' feet. A bit of DIY, gardening, bowls or snooker, mysterious activities in the gardening shed -fine. Dennis Brinkley's hobby, though, was killing machines. No wonder the village of Forbes Abbot was uneasy.'

'I don't know why I write dark things,' she says. 'I just do. If you lift the lid on an English village, all human life is there, just as it is in a street in Deptford or an office block in Canary Wharf.'

'And you have less to do in a village. Why should people there be less venal and unkind just because of where they live? The setting doesn't automatically reflect on the people.'

It's not just the books that are darker. It's the characters, too. Remember Barnaby's sidekick, that nice, pleasant Troy fella?

'He's xenophobic, homophobic, misogynistic . . .' says Caroline, reeling off her character's finer points.

'He's really a foil to the straight, decent, middle-of-the-road, uncomplicated Barnaby. His only saving grace is that he longs to be well thought of, and that's what makes him vulnerable. But he's not a pleasant man at all.'

'What they did on television and they were quite right to do so, was turn him into an amiable character to play opposite John Nettles, who I was thrilled was chosen as Barnaby, because he's such a wonderful actor.'

Barnaby, Troy and Midsomer itself all began life on pieces of card, which Caroline constantly moved about her writing room to try to work out where that first novel, *The Killings at Badger's Drift*, was going. It was a far cry from her first job as a writer, the one she ran away for. That wasn't a job on a paper, or even as a copywriter. It was a job in the Navy.

'I was seduced into the navy in a recruitment office,' she says.

'I only went in for a look around. I looked at all these different things you could do if you became a Wren. And right at the end it said 'writer'.'

'I was so excited when I saw that, I signed up. I thought I would be keeping a diary of what happened, or writing letters. It turned out writer was just another word for clerk -I had to keep a list of items in the victuals store.'

She hated it. And never more so than when she was on parade and nearly lost a vital part of equipment: her knickers.

'It was a huge parade and all the top brass were there. The Wrens had to march in a phalanx that was three deep and eight long. Half way through, the elastic went on my knickers, and they were these big navy things we used to call passion killers. I could feel them coming down, and we had to raise our left hands and salute. I thought 'how am I going to do that?'. Luckily, I was in the middle, so I did the whole thing holding my knees together.'

She hated it so much she ran away, meeting up with the airforce penpal who was later to become her husband, Graham Cameron. They married, but the navy were still chasing her.

'They can't take you back in the Wrens,' she says. 'I made sure of that when I joined. So they sent this woman to see me, and she threatened me with various things. And the last thing she said to me was, 'If you don't return you won't get your ration book'. So I said 'Well ma'am, I'll just starve then.'

Caroline then moved to France, living in a mews house at Versailles where her husband was stationed as part of his work for the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers in Europe (SHAPE).

For three years, she attended ballet classes. By the time she returned to England, the creative dreams she'd secretly harboured since her time at Nuneaton High School had come well and truly to the fore.

'I so wanted to do something -singing or dancing or writing, anything like that,' she says. 'So I decided to become an actress.'

'We lived in Lincoln and I had to spend three days a week in London at drama school. Bearing in mind this was the 50s, my husband was very understanding. He bought me this great big tape machine so I could listen to tapes and try and get rid of my Nuneaton accent.'

'There was nothing wrong with it, but unless you could 'Tork layke thayt', she says, enunciating in perfect 50s newsreader tones, 'you just couldn't get a job, darrling.'

A series of acting and production jobs followed, taking her all over the country. Then one night, while acting as stage manager on the Bath leg of touring production of *The Knack* starring Rita Tushingham, she got a phone call to say her husband had been taken ill.

'So I rushed home to Cambridge, which was where we lived then, and never worked in the theatre again.'

Over the next few years she took a series of odd jobs, from X-ray clerk to shop assistant, just to make ends meet. When she and Graham, whose name she now uses as her writing name, later split up, she moved to London, where she ended up running a marriage bureau.

'In the offices opposite there was an escort service run by a lovely lady called Liz Fraser. We used to mind each other's phones when the other went out. So when she answered my phone she'd try and persuade the men at the other end they wanted a good time rather than a settled home life, and when I answered her phone I'd do the opposite.'

'Around this time I met a new partner and eventually became pregnant. When I stood up from behind the reception desk and people coming to the agency saw I was pregnant, they were delighted, because they thought it meant the agency worked.'

After the birth of her son, David, Caroline began to concentrate on her long-term dream of writing. Through her writing tutor, she managed to get a play broadcast on radio. Work as a reviewer followed.

Then, when David was five, Caroline and her partner split. She went to live in Suffolk.

'And that was the end of the radio work. I had a little boy, a bicycle and no money. So I thought 'this is when I begin to write'.'

Enrolling in an Open University course, Caroline began her first novel, a Celtic-gothic novel called *The Queen of the May*, after studying a course on Victorian literature.

'No-one wanted it, but someone at Fontana liked it enough to commission me. She asked me to write a book for a series called *Nightshades: the darkerside of love*. The synopsis was that there was this girl who falls in love with a dummy but it doesn't work out.'

'I was tearing my hair out, wondering what to do, and David said, 'Don't worry mum, it could be worse'. I said to him, 'How could it possibly be worse?' and he said, 'Well, she could have fallen in love with the dummy and it worked out!'

A few more failed attempts followed, including writing for Crossroads, a soap she never even watched.

'Someone in the village suggested it to me, so I wrote off saying how much I loved the series and were they looking for writers.

'To my horror they wrote back and invited me up to Birmingham for lunch, so I had to run round the village trying to find out what was happening in this thing I never watched.'

She was given a six month contract, but before she could sign it the show was axed.

'So that was that. I wrote another radio play instead.'

Then in 1986, she decided to write a novel. After rejecting all the other genres, she settled on crime. 'There's such a wide range with crime: classic crime, hard-boiled stuff, psychological. So I wrote *The Killings At Badger's Drift*.' The book was published in 1988, when Caroline was 57. It received rave reviews, won a Best First Mystery Novel in the US and was listed in the 100 best crime novels of all time.

Another Barnaby novel, *Death of a Hollow Man*, followed in 1989. Yet despite being a successful published author, Caroline was still dissatisfied. There was another dream she wanted to fulfil.

'Like a lot of children who left school early, I always wanted to go to university, but I only ever dreamed about it. Then I heard about this MA Theatre Studies course that David Edgar was running at the University of Birmingham.

'I thought it looked wonderful, but there was no way someone like me could do it. After much encouragement I eventually plucked up the courage to ring up and ask. I ended up speaking to David Edgar himself. He asked if I had a degree, and I said no, but then he asked if I had any experience of writing, so I told him what I'd done.

'He asked me to send me what I thought was my best play, so I sent him one I'd written about myself when I was 15.'

She was accepted onto the course and spent time living in a small flat in Selly Oak. To her delight, her final piece was judged to be so good by the adjudicator, Terry Johnson, he suggested that the Orange Tree theatre in Richmond might like to perform it. They did.

The icing on the cake for Caroline came when *Midsomer Murders* was commissioned for television in 1997, nearly ten years after Barnaby had first 'drawn breath'.

But for her, all these successes spring from one point: the 18 months she spent at Nuneaton High School, and the seed of dissatisfaction it sowed within her.

'I always dreamed,' she says.

'I was always singing or dancing. I'd be on Pop Idol like a shot. But they didn't have anything like that back then, and until I went to the High School they were just dreams.

'The High School gave me a sense of what creative writing, was. And I thought, 'I can learn from this'. It put the belief in my mind that I could do these things.

'It gave me the gift of dissatisfaction.'

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