

Granta at 100

Looks like a book: A literary magazine considers its position?

The Observer, December 2007

A few minutes after lunching with Ian Jack, who departed as editor of Granta earlier this year after 12 years and 48 issues, I dropped into Quinto, the second-hand bookshop on Charing Cross Road. Granta was about to celebrate its 100th edition, and I wanted some early copies - those classic ones with writing by Richard Ford, John Berger, Martin Amis and Angela Carter. The man at the counter wasn't impressed. 'What's Granta?'

I could have given him the usual: about how it was a river in Cambridge, or the upper part of one, and its name spawned a student magazine that began in 1889 and was revived in the late 1970s. I could have said that this magazine became home to some of the best writing in the English language, and was edited for half its life by a man, Bill Buford, described to me as 'a crazy, inspiring, absolutely absurd lunatic'. But instead I said: 'It's a literary magazine, but it looks like a book.'

'Our literary magazines are in the far corner,' the man said, pointing. He was in his mid-twenties, with a week-old beard. He made me feel uncomfortable, as if I had asked for a spanking magazine. I went to the far corner, and there were several issues in fair condition, at £2 each. One was a reprint of Issue 1 from 1979, which carried a manifesto. Granta, its two editors William Buford and Peter de Bolla wrote, was to be 'devoted to the idea of the dialogue in prose about prose', which was enough to get the reader hurling their new purchase through a window. Was there ever a more deathly proposal? How could a magazine possibly get to 100 issues with this as its starting point? As it turned out, a browser in Quinto unfamiliar with the subsequent Granta pedigree would be amazed and delighted. Here is Issue 13, with stories by Milan Kundera and Doris Lessing, and here is number 17, with ruminations by Graham Greene. Here is Granta 5 from the early Eighties, with a prescient fate-of-the-earth scenario from Jonathan Schell. Next to it is Granta 12, dominated by Stanley Booth's account of his high and terrible times with the Rolling Stones at Altamont. And then there is a more recent one, number 80, with writers looking at old photographs and remembering old friends, and Granta 65, with Hanif Kureishi and Ian Parker writing knowingly and enticingly about London.

What distinguishes these random issues from the other magazines on the shelves around them? And what sets them apart from the Paris Review, Harvard Review, the London Magazine and all the other boutique stars in the literary firmament with their fictions, poetry, woodcuts, interviews and reviews? Consistency, surprise, self-belief, originality and, thankfully, the complete absence of a dialogue about prose in prose. But beyond that: Granta

is almost always an exciting and rewarding and illuminating thing to read. And beyond that: our world would be much the poorer without it.

I took the first issue to the counter, and on the journey home struggled with a long unbearable piece with no punctuation. And it could have been worse: 'Pete had thought about an issue called The Theory of the Subject,' Bill Buford tells me when I speak to him later. 'These were heady times.'

In truth, the first issue wasn't bad, with pieces from Joyce Carol Oates and Susan Sontag, and a superb foretaste of *The Tunnel* by William Gass. 'It was my way of discovering all these writers I hadn't read yet,' Buford says (he is American, and his first editorial wasted no time in dismissing all British writers in favour of his compatriots). 'I wrote to them all, basically promising them a whole issue of the magazine. My assumption was that no one would reply, and if anyone did I'd do anything, because we had nothing.'

Buford sounds calm and thoughtful, not at all the lunatic some writers had told me about. But the lunacy lay in the future. In the first weeks in which the two editors scrambled for material, others took to the streets in search of advertising. They got some: Woolworths, the Coffee Mill, Sweeney Todds restaurant, Laker Skytrain, Transalpino. One advert, from the Arts Cinema, listed film times: *Picnic at Hanging Rock* was playing on Sunday at 3pm.

The first issue had 208 pages, which was some improvement on the 32-page mimeographed journal that had previously been published sporadically and erratically by the University Society, and sold, in Buford's memory, 'to tourists by people wearing sandals'. Before its reinvention, *Granta* would often move as lazily as the river, but its 90-year history had been enriched by the thrusting young: Arthur Conan Doyle and AA Milne contributed, and in later years were joined by Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath, Michael Frayn and Stevie Smith. But the new *Granta* would not settle for juvenilia and the work of students; it wanted the best new writing in the English-speaking world.

Buford, who is 53, is now a staff writer on the *New Yorker*, where he must conform to house-styles and age-old constrictions, but at *Granta* in 1979 it was like a playground. The first issues took over Buford's Cambridge rooms, where he was studying for a second degree in English (he soon established himself as the dominant and bullish force in the editorial partnership). He remembers sheets of film on every surface, and a final editing process that involved scissors and tape. The design - not as clean or well-spaced as it is now but nonetheless sturdy and readable - was based on an American academic quarterly. Buford intended to return to America after the first issue but when it sold out its run of 800 copies and a subsequent reprint, he thought, 'Maybe there's something here...'

The cost of a subscription was set at £3.50, although it wasn't specified how many issues a reader would receive for this investment (which was, it turned out, one of the best omissions Buford ever made). The magazine moved to premises above an art gallery, and then above a hairdresser. 'For the third issue,' Buford says, 'I got a manuscript sent to me by Tom Maschler from this new guy that everyone was excited about called Salman Rushdie.' This issue,

Granta proclaimed in its portentous and painful way, 'collects work from writers and critics which suggests it might be the end of the English novel, but also the beginning of British fiction'. Clearly something was changing. Martin Amis and Ian McEwan came to Cambridge to read work in progress, and admission fees helped pay the rent. Buford recalls a later conversation with Amis in which the novelist said: 'If you were a literary fiction writer and you were a kid, your horizon was empty, there was really nothing else going on. People weren't writing fiction or talking about it - everyone wanted to work for the BBC.'

When the Rushdie manuscript came in, later to be published as *Midnight's Children*, Buford says: 'It was everything you wanted a British writer to be doing - it had narrative flair and culture and history, and it was very aware. Everything then broke open.'

Buford then performed a clever trick. For Issue 7 he seized upon an initiative of the Book Marketing Council to promote the Best of Young British Novelists, and a whole new publishing gimmick was born. The list included Amis, McEwan, Julian Barnes, Kazuo Ishiguro and Pat Barker. This list was repeated a decade later in 1993 (Alan Hollinghurst, Hanif Kureishi and Esther Freud) and 2003 (Zadie Smith, Nicola Barker and David Mitchell), and worked for young American writers as well. To be on this first roster in 1983 promised a certain amount of attention, not least as it was the first Granta to be distributed by Penguin. Adam Mars-Jones, who holds the unique position of being on the list in 1983 and 1993 despite never producing a novel, believes it kept his literary ambitions alive. 'It certainly helped me stay marginally above freezing point,' he says. 'It extended your sell-by date.'

But for all the noise surrounding the BOYBN list in 1983, it was the subsequent issues that defined new tastes. 'Dirty Realism' was a phrase that no American writer recognised until Buford invented it as another marketing ploy, grouping a previously unrelated group of writers - for issue 8 - under this meaningless title. Richard Ford recently acknowledged its importance in bringing him and other contributors - including Raymond Carver and Tobias Wolff - an eager new readership. The next issue, with John Berger and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, was hailed by the Guardian as 'a cause for congratulation,' and another cause followed a few months later - the first issue devoted to travel writing. This featured almost all the names we now regard as the masters of the genre, most of them in some absurd and compelling situation of their own making: Redmond O'Hanlon, Bruce Chatwin, James Fenton, Jonathan Raban, Martha Gellhorn, Paul Theroux and Norman Lewis. Buford regards this edition as the culmination of all he was striving for in the first three years. Or as he puts it: 'Finally I fucking did it.'

What he did was shift Granta on to the axis we recognise today, as a home for long-form narrative non-fiction. The influence of the travel writing issue far exceeded its sales, which remained in the low thousands in the first few years, and only took off when Buford grasped the value of selling the magazine in the United States (although to some extent Granta's influence on both readers and writers has remained greater than its commercial success; it has always tended to sell to an influential literary elite, less snobbish than the maligned Hampstead set but perhaps no less self-contained). One mail-shot had an

immediate impact. Those who received it remember an envelope with the words, 'Interested in a small magazine about writers and writing? Then throw away this envelope! Because Granta is a magazine that hates literature...'

The offices moved to a backwater of Islington in 1990. 'It had a roof and river, and a pint was never more than a minute away,' Buford recalls. 'Life had never been so good.'

The magazine became part of the literary furniture, although issues often failed to appear when promised, and sometimes without the predicted content. Several times a new piece from Martin Amis was announced in the Penguin catalogues that never materialised. But each issue of Granta had a buzz about it, reflecting and amplifying the narrative renaissance that took place in Britain in the Eighties and Nineties.

It also helped that the book became a fashion accessory; well designed homes began to display rows of Granta spines alongside orange Penguins and green Viragos. In a short story by Ann Beattie a Granta subscription is given as a gift, and its recipient is thus conferred a certain status in the world. Granta was also a perfect front-table addition to the new coffee house brand of bookselling spearheaded by Waterstone's.

There were other factors in its favour: unusually for a literary magazine, it refused to be marginal, and it had a consistently indulgent and passionate owner, Rea Hederman, the publisher of the New York Review of Books, who sustained the loss-making enterprise for more than two decades.

Buford classifies his achievement as producing a New Journalism in the style of Tom Wolfe and Hunter S Thompson 'without the craziness and ego'. The craziness and ego, perhaps, were reserved for Buford alone. 'It would be quite hateful to me (and others) if [your] piece had too many jolly old anecdotes about daring old Billy B,' one former Granta employee informed me in an email, by which he meant a certain amount of drinking and womanising and a seat-of-the-pants work ethic that ultimately disappointed any subscribers patiently watching their letterbox.

Tim Adams, the Observer writer who worked as Buford's assistant for several years, has described scenes of almost self-destructive calamity at the magazine, with Buford carefully cultivating his image in fedora and shades, with whisky tumbler close but deadlines inexorably drifting: 'The only way of getting any release was to get him to read something or to edit something or to phone someone or to write something, and as each of these demanded telling him what to do, which was invariably a process of cajoling and apology and silence and procrastination, the tension mounted.'

The worst excess would sometimes be followed by the most extreme genuflections and guilt, with Buford begging writers to forgive him. No one, not even Martin Amis, was immune to Buford's caprices and passions. Adam Mars-Jones sums him up as 'clearly dynamic, extremely hard to deal with, and often infuriating. The problem was always to do with timing. If he wanted something it was an emergency, but if you wanted something then there was never any hurry. It was only partly perfectionism. And it is questionable

whether he had the right to take the title of Granta with him from Cambridge in the first place.'

For much of his editorship, Buford failed to produce a quarterly (between 1979 and 1995 he managed 50 issues, an average of three a year). But there is no doubting the value of Buford's erratic style of editing when the magazine did appear. 'I'm a person who gets energised by deadlines, even when I'm well past them,' he says, and his cavalier editing lost him friends. 'I remember I edited Denis Johnson, who has just won a National Book Award, and he grabbed the piece back and said, "this is what they do at Newsweek, they don't do this to a literary writer". And I never spoke to him again. And Shiva Naipaul I edited with a little aggression and got the same sort of reaction.' When Hanif Kureishi met Buford in the mid-Eighties after the success of *My Beautiful Laundrette*, he found him to be 'everything I thought literary people were like - this tough, hard-drinking, eccentric, charismatic, very talented man who knew everyone.' And of course, Kureishi suffered for his art along with the rest. 'Bill was a savage editor - he would come round to your house almost at random and start cutting into your stuff. Ed White rang me up one day and said he didn't realise he was a minimalist until he ran into Buford.' 'How was that experience?' I asked Kureishi. 'Was it humiliating, rewarding, enriching, infuriating?' 'Yes,' he replied. 'Write all those words down. I wouldn't stand for it now.'

One article Buford took apart concerned the Death on the Rock killings in Gibraltar in 1988, an investigation into the execution of three Provisional IRA members by the SAS. 'I ended up beating it up. I was up three nights in a row. I'm sure I restructured it and streamlined the sentences and used more aggression than now I would regard as necessary. I think of myself as an impatient reader, and that's what governs my editing. I have a not very indulgent view about "nice writing".'

The article, one of Granta's finest, was by Ian Jack, who succeeded Buford as editor in 1995. 'I was gobsmacked when I got the piece back,' he recalled over lunch earlier this month. 'I was almost in tears and I thought, "I just can't bear it." Bill simplified the middle, which was a bit soggy, and he made it longer.'

There were other surprises for Jack. 'I was in Cambridge working on the piece, we had an expensive meal, and then I started worrying about the last train home. Bill said, "No we'll pay for a minicab," and that was from Cambridge to Highbury, and I thought Granta was an impoverished magazine.' Buford remembers that Ian Jack's piece 'absolutely rocked', and regrets there weren't more of them. 'The worst thing for a literary magazine is for it to be too literary and not to matter. At the end I was aware of working pretty hard and being proud of an issue and feeling that [when it appeared] it wasn't mattering enough.'

How did Jack's plans for the magazine differ from Buford's? Not hugely. They both valued a great read, and Jack realised quite soon how tricky this was to achieve. 'The style should be like a book, and reasonably timeless, but it's hard to find people who can do that at 10,000 words. And the piece must be complete in itself - you can't just take the first chapter of somebody's novel.'

When I took it over I had enough sense to see that these things are really tricks of the light. Why should Granta be there at all? A really difficult question to answer.'

Jack developed Granta's taste for memoir, publishing important pieces from Diana Athill and irrepressible diaries from Simon Gray, and with the help of associate editor Liz Jobey, produced some fine photo essays. He also came to an interesting conclusion regarding the veracity of all literature: 'Fiction is the only form that enables real honesty in writing - it is a world unto itself. Narrative non-fiction can never be as true as it would like to be, no matter who writes it.'

Jack maintained the trend for themed issues, and edited collections on globalisation and global warming before the topics went mainstream. He is particularly proud of Elena Lappin's exposure of the fake Holocaust memoirist Benjamin Wilkomirski, and the issue he produced in the wake of 9/11, 'What we Think of America', in which Orhan Pamuk, Harold Pinter, Ariel Dorfman and many others examined the role that the US had played in their lives for good or ill. But there were also some misjudgments, not least the cover story 'Confessions of A Middle-Aged Ecstasy Eater' by Anonymous ('I think I published it for the very worst reasons - I thought it might be somebody famous'), and there were missed opportunities that suggested a narrowness of interest. 'At times I was boring myself with my own taste,' Jack says. 'I remember when the deputy editor Sophie Harrison came to me with *Everything is Illuminated* by Jonathan Safran Foer long before it was published as a book. I read it, and I thought it was undergraduate nonsense. How wrong can you be? It may still be how I feel about it, but is that the best way to edit a magazine?'

'The worst thing is to commission a piece,' Jack says, 'and for it to come in after the writer has spent months on it, for it to be a long way short of the full shilling, so it goes back to the writer, and comes in again, and it's still not right, so it goes back for more work, and finally I have to say to the writer, "I'm really sorry, this doesn't work". It's absolutely defensible, but it's a soul-destroying thing for the writer.'

But if the bar is high, leaping over it can be immensely satisfying. A piece I wrote about a lifetime of obsessive collecting benefited considerably from Jack's input, and the reaction after publication helped me focus my attention for a forthcoming book. For others, Granta is still the only game in town. 'When I write a substantial short story without knowing how it will fit in a future book, the only hope it has of seeing the light of day meaningfully is Granta or the New Yorker,' Adam Mars-Jones told me. 'And it pays well. The existence of Granta makes certain sorts of writing financially possible, and as a writer one is grateful that there is a place of first resort, not last resort.'

Ian Jack left Granta in June, some 18 months after Rea Hederman sold the magazine to Sigrid Rausing, the London-based publisher and philanthropist, whose vast family fortune derives from the Tetra packaging industry. Like Hederman, Rausing is a voracious reader and supporter of new talent, but she has the advantage of deeper pockets. 'I think you can edit that magazine now and not worry about making money,' Jack told me, 'because Sigrid's definition

of success might be not losing too much.' (I asked Rausing if she would be happy for Granta to continue operating at a loss if the quality remains high, and she replied, 'Happy? I'd be happier if we had a profit. But we'll go on regardless.')

One of Jack's most regrettable jobs was firing people towards the end of his tenure, on the advice of that dread thing, a publishing consultant. Jack caught himself telling Rausing, 'I wouldn't do that if I were you', which was 'irritating for her and boring for me'.

Rausing's interest in Granta began in the early Eighties, and one of her most challenging tasks was finding a new editor after Jack left to write books and a column on the Guardian. He left behind a more accessible magazine, and one which moved with the times. But it also seemed less vital than it was. In the new Issue 100, for example, which was guest edited by William Boyd, James Fenton is no longer witnessing the fall of Saigon but buying a clavichord. But elsewhere in the issue, alongside familiar appearances from Helen Simpson and Julian Barnes, there is already a sense of the magazine being rethought. There are love poems, including one from Harold Pinter. There are little interludes in which writers say pithy things about their craft. Certainly the magazine is no longer a hip thing, which may not necessarily be detrimental. 'Fashions never last for ever,' Jack says. 'I knew I could never retain that cult status.'

Sales may be more of a problem. Granta has never been eager to publicise its circulation but one reliable source suggests that when Jack took over in the mid-Nineties, the magazine was selling about 17,000 (combining subscription and bookshops sales). In the US, sales were almost 47,000. Earlier this year, circulation in the UK had apparently reached about 29,000 but in America had slumped to 12,000. One lapsed reader is Bill Buford. 'They stopped sending it to me,' he says, and he is yet to take out a subscription. (Granta sales staff dispute these numbers, and say recent marketing campaigns have already brought in many new subscriptions.)

The sales challenge now falls to new editor Jason Cowley, who arrived from the Observer Sport Monthly. His office in Granta's new home in an elegant wood-floored, white-walled town house in Holland Park is testament to the new owner's ambitions. It could almost be an art gallery, and the old-school have already joked that no good thinking can possibly emanate from such swish surroundings.

The new editor's plans are multimedia. He speaks of Granta having an invigorating presence online, of authors updating their stories and occasionally chatting to their readers, and the possibilities of Granta moderating an intellectual/literary salon, of a Granta prize and even a Granta festival. A vast archive of past articles should be available as soon as copyright issues are resolved. Cowley suggests he is there to shake things up. The magazine is being redesigned, and a new logo has been admired. Cowley is 41, and bought his first issue of Granta in 1990, about the New Europe. Since that time he has sensed that newspapers have lost 'confidence not only in words on paper, but also the long piece, in creative narrative

journalism. I don't want Granta to be a literary magazine in the pejorative sense - small, marginal, self-important, pompous. I want it to play a large part in the culture, and it has to be more exciting.'

His opinion has found an echo beyond Holland Park. 'The name still carries huge weight,' says Joel Rickett, deputy editor of publishing trade weekly, the Bookseller. 'It still means something to be a Granta author, and publishers like it when their authors are in there. But some of that comes from drawing on its history, rather than where it's been in the last few years. It's been coasting a bit, and it will necessarily have to go through another period of reinvention. It should become a must-read again, and make a bigger noise.'

Can one have too much of a good thing? In the UK a subscription now costs £27.95 for four issues but soon this may increase. Cowley talks of stepping up publication to five or six issues a year. He speaks of being more internationalist, embracing writers from Japan, India, Africa. 'Without wishing to sound like a New Labour spinmeister,' he says, 'there will be change within continuity. It's as if there has been a picket fence erected around the magazine - we don't publish writing about writing or we don't publish history. One should open it up to reflect whatever tastes interest you at the time. If someone sends me a brilliant literary essay, I'll publish it.' Cowley's admirable and ginger ambitions may yet take Granta back to 'The Theory of the Subject', but they are more likely to win new readers and stir new writers. Traditionalists may be appalled, but Granta has never been about tradition. Appealingly, at 100 issues old, it may never have been younger.