

**Reviewed Work: Pamela Hansford Johnson: A Writing Life  
by Deirdre David**

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*Pamela Hansford Johnson: a Writing Life*. By Deirdre David. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2017. xi + 336 pp. £27.18. ISBN 978-0-19-872961-7.

Pamela Hansford Johnson was a widely-read writer who was frequently (sometimes controversially) in the public eye between the publication of her first novel, *This Bed Thy Centre*, in 1930, until the publication of her last novel, *A Bonfire*, in 1981. In between came a further twenty-five novels, numerous short stories, and non-fiction pieces. Yet after this fifty year career, spanning the variously characterised literary decades of the thirties, forties, fifties, sixties and seventies, and quite quickly after her death in 1981, Hansford Johnson became invisible in the Anglo-phone literary memory, both public and academic. She is not alone in being subject to sometimes random-seeming, sometimes more systematic-seeming acts of cultural forgetfulness, and of course one of the purposes of Deirdre David's literary biography is to try to reverse that forgetfulness and restore 'Johnson's work to the critical distinction it received when it was published' (inside dust-wrapper description). With the (quite large) exception of Wendy Pollard's *Pamela Hansford Johnson: Her Life, Work and Times* (Shepherd-Walwyn, London, 2014) – of which more later – this biography represents the only recent substantial critical attention paid to Johnson.

David had invaluable access to Hansford Johnson's diaries, which the author wrote assiduously between 1929 and 1980, as well as to many other private papers. Pamela Hansford Johnson was best known for novels essentially in the realist tradition and which observed a changing British society. David argues that Johnson was very conscious that she championed this tradition and opposed herself to the avant-garde, without abandoning literary ambition:

Pamela's bequest to her readers is considerable. Believing that sterile High Modernism had leached the English novel of its admirable traditions of social and psychological realism, lucid

narration and accessible form, and political engagement with injustice, she never shied from a forthright expression of her views (p.291).

David points out that this stance sometimes led to Johnson being 'dismissed as a "middlebrow" novelist who happily catered to her undemanding readers' (p.291) – but defends her from the accusation by arguing that in fact 'she regularly disrupts "middlebrow" expectations', especially in her treatment of female sexuality (p.10) (though of course there has been a good deal of recent critical work – lightly referred to here – on positively revaluing fiction thus classified).

Though certainly a very independent woman, Johnson had two important and productive personal and literary relationships with male writers which David carefully portrays. Early on and for a relatively brief period there was Dylan Thomas, who suggested that her first novel (published in 1930) should be titled not *Nursery Rhyme*, but *This Bed Thy Centre*. The novel was actually about the sexual frustration of young people who were (in theory) prohibited by social convention from sex before marriage, so Thomas's suggestion was meant to contain some irony in that beds are precisely not mainly the centre of sexual activity in the book. Many reviewers did denounce the book as sexually obsessed and Johnson wrote that she had been firmly given to understand by newspapers and family alike that she had 'disgraced herself ... and Clapham Common' (where she lived and where the novel was set, p. 34). Later – and for a much longer period between 1945 and his death in 1980 – was her relationship with C.P Snow (then very prominent, now also much less frequently read). Other people (but not Snow himself) sometimes treated Johnson quite inappropriately (she noted in her diary how very annoyed she was in the late fifties to be asked as 'Lady Snow' if she had 'ever written?' – p. 173). However, in fact the two read each other's fiction in draft and managed together their rich and mutually beneficial literary careers.

David's biography is a thorough, clearly structured, chronological account of Johnson's career, works and reception, which does indeed restore to us fully both her writing and detailed contexts.

However, one thing does puzzle me: Wendy Pollard's similar project was published three years earlier and I would have expected that this second biography would at some point or points engage in dialogue with Pollard to compare and distinguish their views and approaches to Johnson, but this it does not do. I am more than happy to have two equally substantial literary biographies of this unjustly neglected writer, but dialogue between them could only have been enriching.

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