

OBITUARY OF CAROLINE GLYN WRITTEN BY ROBERT TEMPLE IN 1980 FOR THE LONDON TIMES BUT UNPUBLISHED BECAUSE OF OBJECTIONS BY HER FAMILY

CAROLINE GLYN

The novelist Caroline Glyn has died suddenly at the age of 33. Apart from her family, few people knew her. She entered an Anglican closed order in September, 1967, just after her 20th birthday, and became Sister Caroline Mary, C.S.Cl. Before this, Caroline was one of the most exuberant, good-humoured, unconventional, and utterly fascinating people it would be possible to meet. And I never knew her to have a selfish or malicious thought. After she entered the convent she wrote to say: "having lost my life I've now found it ... I'm aware of having tapped a vein of creativity so powerful I hardly know how to use it all."

Her public career began when she published a best-selling novel at the age of 15, entitled DON'T KNOCK THE CORNERS OFF (meaning the corners of one's personality). TIME Magazine said of it at the time: "It can be said confidently that Caroline's 256-page tale of English school life is the best novel by a 15-year-old ever written; more important, it is one of the best school stories to emerge from any age group." The New York TIMES called it "A delight to read", and it was.

Caroline was an extreme individualist who was not on easy terms with the world. Her second novel, LOVE AND JOY IN THE MABILION, published when she was 17, chronicled her devastating loneliness as an art student in Paris. She told me she made herself into a coloured boy in the book because people would take a sad boy more seriously than a sad girl, and being coloured helped explain his isolation. But her most remarkable novel, published at 18, was probably THE UNICORN GIRL, set in Jane Austen's village of Chawton, Hampshire. Caroline fully believed herself to be "a unicorn girl" like the heroine. This meant two things: one, no man could ever touch her, and two, the world was not for her. She wrote to me once: "I mistrust emotion," and on another occasion spoke of "that sense of something asked of me, involving the dedication of my whole self and body, which has nagged at me since I was thirteen ... I think I was always a contemplative." Her only physical passion that I know of was shown towards trees. She really would run out wildly into the forests at night when there was no moon and hug the trees for hours. If it were pouring with rain, so much the better. She was a nature mystic who became a religious mystic.

Caroline was a highly talented artist, and designed the covers of all her books. She developed a horror of curved lines, and her art took on the appearance of stained glass windows, composed entirely of straight lines. When she lived alone on a tiny houseboat on the River Cam at Fen Ditton, I remember she painted a 9 foot high picture of John the Baptist dancing in the wilderness which was too large to unroll in her boat; it had to be viewed feet first, then the knees, etc. Caroline's great-grandmother Elinor Glyn was a renowned writer

and brilliant eccentric, and Caroline was doubly descended from her, as her parents are first cousins. As a girl, Caroline was called Caroline Davson, but she changed her name by deed poll along with her father, Sir Anthony Glyn, Bart., in 1957.

Caroline's entry into a convent was a natural progression in her deep spiritual quest, and she continued to produce novels reflecting this in which she wrote of religious awe in a profoundly introspective fashion, as in *THE TOWER AND THE RISING TIDE*, or in her last novel *THE PEACEMAKERS* which she described as being about "a very difficult theme: innocence and forgiveness". Caroline's stylistic development as a writer was seriously hampered by her early success, as she was wont to admit. If we are to draw a lesson from her life it would be to discourage parents from allowing their children who write brilliant things from actually publishing them while still in their teens. Caroline would have been the first to advise against "too much too soon". She later rebelled violently against the overwhelming worldwide publicity she had endured, which she called "those crazy years of my glamour career which feel sterile to me". The personal impression which Caroline made as an individual was so thoroughly extraordinary that it is a major tragedy that so few people experienced it. But her books convey much of her strange, wild nature.

NOTICE WRITTEN FOR THE LONDON SUNDAY TIMES on May 12, 1987, for the issue of May 17, 1987, by ROBERT TEMPLE

Today (i.e. the 17th) a memorial will be unveiled at Chawton church in Hampshire to the village's "other writer" besides Jane Austen, the novelist Caroline Glyn. She was probably the world's leading literary prodigy in our century, and published a number-one bestseller at the age of 15, *DON'T KNOCK THE CORNERS OFF* in 1963. *TIME* Magazine said of it at the time "It can be said confidently that it is the best novel by a 15-year-old ever written." By the age of 21 she had notched up a total of five novels. Pursued relentlessly by the world's press and media during her teenage years, she found peace as a nun in an Anglican closed order. In September, 1967, just after her 20th birthday, she became Sister Caroline Mary, C.S.Cl., and continued to write until her death at the age of 33 in 1980. Chawton was Caroline's home as a girl, and the setting of her third novel, *THE UNICORN GIRL*. Children from Eggars School, described in her original novel, will form the choir at the memorial service. Caroline's increasingly mystical writings were the antithesis to those of her great-grandmother Elinor Glyn, who brought sex to the literature of Edwardian England and "discovered" Rudolph Valentino in Hollywood.

NOTE SENT TO ROBERT TEMPLE ON FRIDAY 5 JUNE 1980 BY LADY CAROLINE RHYS WILLIAMS, CAROLINE GLYN'S AUNT:

I am sorry to say that the Convent at Freeland only gave us a few hours notice that the service for Caroline was to be included in their 8am service this morning. None of us have been able to go. Caroline Rhys Williams

LETTER TO ROBERT TEMPLE FROM CAROLINE GLYN'S AUNT ELSPETH, 22
JUNE 1981

Dear Bob,

Very many thanks for your understanding letter - I know just what you mean when you say Caroline seemed only 75% incarnated! But after she went into the convent she learnt everything she needed to about the world, I think. You may think it's a funny place to learn it, but that was what seemed to happen!

When I went to see her she was always full of absurd jokes, of a happy kind, and I keep feeling she is laughing now, so I have stopped feeling miserable. You are right that she has gone further in to the heart of things. I can see that it would make one laugh to be able to compare the world with the truth.

What we should try to do instead of missing her is to pick up anything she wants us to know or to see, I think.

Thank you again for what you said.

Yours ever,

Elsbeth

LETTER TO ROBERT TEMPLE FROM ELSPETH, 25 March 1987

Dear Bob,

To my horror, I can't find "Mountain at the End of the Night" anywhere - I must have lent it to someone. I will try to get it from Heywood Hill.

It got a wonderful review in one paper - I think it was the Telegraph.

I hope to be able to send you the manuscript of the children's book after the 17th May, when Susan will be in England. I think you will enjoy that too.

With best wishes,

Yours ever,

Elsbeth

P.S. I enclose two of the dreams I copied out of Caroline's dream notebook when she lent it to me.

P.S. I have found "The Dancing of Senora Lola" too, which you might like.

(Enclosures: two dreams, "Walt Disney's Last Creation" and "Underground Prayer"; story "The Dancing of Senora Lola"; review in the London Daily Telegraph by Tim Heald of A MOUNTAIN AT THE END OF NIGHT, 7 July 1977.)