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Seeing the light

Literature don Rebecca Stott was brought up in a sect that abhors books. She tells Celia Dodd how her upbringing illuminates her writing

Kate Confrey

A fundamentalist religious sect that frowned on books and banned university education seems hardly the ideal childhood for a Cambridge professor of English literature. Yet Rebecca Stott claims that her extraordinary upbringing in the Exclusive Taylorite Brethren in the 1960s served her well. After all, not all little girls get to see angels and devils in their bedrooms, or to spend hours fulminating about male domination.

Stott was raised in a branch of the Plymouth Brethren, the Exclusive Brethren, which practises separation from the rest of the world: television, radio and newspapers are banned as “conduits of evil” and women are subservient, wear long hair and headscarves. It was a radical form of “spirituality”. And, after her family left the Brethren when she was a teenager, Stott reacted: she became a single parent at 19, an ardent feminist, and wrote a book about Charles Darwin, a man she had been raised to believe was an instrument of Satan.

Stott, 42, lectures at Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge and is an affiliated scholar at the Cambridge History and Philosophy of Science Department, with several nonfiction books under her belt. She still looks a bit puritan, with her black empire-line frock and air of calm, despite her chatty enthusiasm. She has just published her first novel, *Ghostwalk*, a thriller that interweaves 17th-century mysteries surrounding Isaac Newton’s early career with dark dealings in 21st-century Cambridge. It has a touch of the *Don’t Look Now*’s, full of presences glimpsed out of the corner of the eye, strange coincidences and tricks of time.

On the surface the novel seems far removed from the Brethren, yet it is steeped in the big questions of Stott’s religious upbringing. It is also full of hauntings; whether they are real or imagined is left to the reader to decide. As an academic, Stott is somewhat sceptical about the supernatural. When she visited a psychic for research purposes she found it highly implausible. But, as a young child, Stott saw angels and devils in her bedroom and lived in fear that the world was about to end. She also believed that because she wasn’t “good enough” she would be left to face Armageddon while her parents would be saved.

She recalls: “My imagination grew up on the *Book of Revelation* and the Horsemen of the Apocalypse and the great angels in Babylon and falling stars and floods. Looking back, my more rational side would say I saw and heard strange things because I had a strong imagination and it was being fed strange ideas. But, as an adult, I have also had experiences that make no sense in any rational frame. I have felt presences and sensed things; coincidences perhaps, but not easily explainable.

“In Cambridge, conversations are so resolutely rational. Yet the city is full of ghosts and presences and the weight of history. That’s why it was the perfect setting for my novel, to conjure preoccupations about where the rational ends and the irrational begins, and where the natural and the supernatural meet.”

Stott became intrigued by Newton when she discovered that he shared her own childhood obsession with sin: “Newton kept a list of his sins in a notebook. That really moved me because I recognised that impulse and his palpable desire that it could all be wiped clean. As a child I spent a lot of time thinking about and calculating my sin, just because of the way we were raised to believe that we were wicked and would be purified by God.”

Surprisingly, Stott describes her early childhood as ordinary, happy and secure, with a strong family life and endless games. Yet she and her four siblings weren’t allowed to mix with the other children at their local school and had to stay out of many English, science and religious education. So she spent hours working by herself in the well-stocked library. There she found books that offered a more complex view of the world and she seized the opportunity to taste forbidden fruit. Enid Blyton and *Anne of Green Gables* were a far cry from Brethren-approved tales such as *Mary Jones and her Bible*.

Sundays were spent sitting still for hours in prayer meetings while the men held forth, followed by visits to Brethren families in suburban Sussex. Stott says: “Even as a young child I thought angry thoughts about how unfair and wrong it was that God spoke only through men, when the women I knew seemed to be just as wise. I thought, ‘Have I really got to grow up into this?’ Sometimes I wonder whether that’s one of the reasons I became a lecturer.”

Ironically, life got worse when the family left the Open Brethren when Stott was 12. Five years earlier they had been part of the mass exodus from the Exclusive Brethren which was triggered by a scandal involving their American leader. They joined the more relaxed Open Brethren for a few years, until her father lost his faith. He just gradually lost trust in the whole system and instead put his faith in Shakespeare and great poetry. He had always loved literature but had been forced to give it up in the intense Brethren years.

Until their final departure they lived in a rather grand house in the suburbs of Brighton, where her father ran the family wholesale grocery business. Leaving the Brethren meant severing all contact with the sect — including many relatives — and the family was catapulted into the real world. Suddenly a huge TV set and radio arrived and they were off to see *Gone with the Wind*.

Stott recalls: “There was a sharp intake of breath as we stepped into the cinema: Satan’s world. Coming out of the Brethren was rocky for us children because nobody explained that it was now all right to enter this world which for years and years we’d been taught was full of Satanic teaching. But in the long term it has given me a healthy scepticism about what is and isn’t true, and about people in authority.”

Once she got to university, the old ghosts caught up with her: “I had a delayed reaction to all sorts of things that happened after we left the Brethren, when so many of the certainties collapsed and my parents’ marriage broke up. Leaving home was the last straw and I had a bit of a collapse. I was a lost soul for a while.” She became pregnant in the first year at university and was taken in by an academic couple who ran their house as a kind of commune, which enabled her to finish her degree. She later married and, as

well as her son Jake, 22, has two daughters, Hannah, 14, and Kezia, 12. Since her divorce the girls spend two months with each parent.

The Brethren's legacy has inevitably been hard to shake off, although Stott insists that her upbringing did no lasting damage. She says: "I don't think you ever totally get rid of it, and I'm not sure I want to. There is still a side of me that wants to ask metaphysical questions about death and God. I still have apocalyptic dreams. When the sky is particularly black it gives me that sense of panic I often had as a child. It's so deep in my imagination.

"But in lots of ways literature has kicked out of me the paranoid, black-and-white view of the world I grew up with. Literature has made me certain that the world is so much more complicated and entangled. My own novel is about how nobody is either good or evil; they are both in all of us."

In the beginning was the word...

Jeanette Winterson, 47, the author of *Oranges are not the Only Fruit* (1985) Trained by her Pentecostal mother for missionary work, Winterson was preaching on street corners at the age of 12. But she was denounced by her parents when she fell in love with a girl. Winterson says of her mother that she "would gladly have put Semtex in her boots if she thought it would bring about the Second Coming".

Edmund Gosse, 1849-1928, poet, critic and author of an autobiography *Father and Son* (1907) A member of the Plymouth Brethren, Gosse was raised by his strict evangelical father, an oppressive religious fanatic who believed the biblical account of creation to be literally true. His childhood memories of religious fervour include his father abominating a Christmas pudding as "flesh offered to idols".

James Wood, 41, author of *The Book Against God* (2003) Raised in a home where church attendance was compulsory, the atmosphere in Wood's family was "scriptural, austere and not worldly". Exposed to a more relaxed style of worship at Durham Cathedral, where he was a chorister, he turned against religion in his teens, eventually leaving the Church.

Ghostwalk (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, £12.99) is available for £11.69, p&p free, from timesonline.co.uk/booksfirstbuy; 0870 1608080