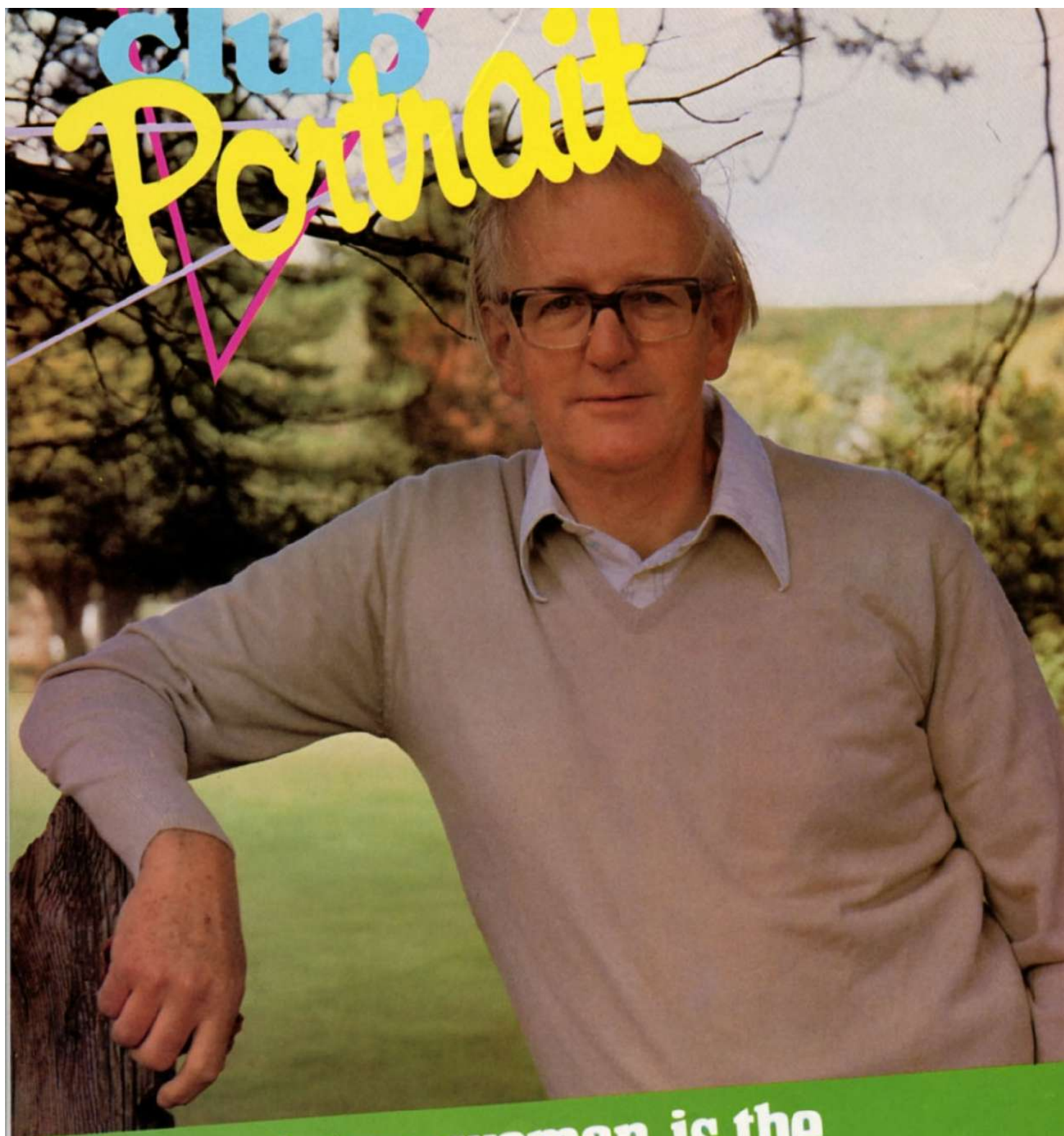




'The predatory woman is the stereotype which did happen to correspond to my own experiences...'

Neil Gaiman talks to Tom Sharpe

In the world as seen in the books of Tom Sharpe, anything which could possibly go wrong will go wrong. And not just slightly wrong, but horrendously, awfully, terribly wrong.

Which was why I'd been standing in the rain for three hours. Or, to be a little more precise, my train to Cambridge had been cancelled at the last minute (staff shortages); on arriving in Cambridge, an hour late, I had to get the taxi driven by a voluble driver of interesting views ('... of course I hate violence ... never laid a finger on anyone ... and children? How could anyone hurt children ... so what I say is that Hitler had the right idea we should cut their fucking balls off and make them suffer, bring back hanging and the lash ...'); and then, in the deluge, I found an empty house, and no Tom Sharpe.

Three hours later, as I pushed a final note through the door, saying I'd been and gone, and could he 'phone me to arrange a new interview, the door opened, to reveal Tom Sharpe himself. Looking puzzled, I told him who I was, and his face fell. He had just moved house from Devon to Cambridge, his diary had migrated to the bottom of an unidentified tea-chest – he had forgotten. He apologized a lot. He wrote a note for my editor, stating:

'This is to certify that Neil Gaiman Esq has been put to considerable expense and no little discomfort through getting soaked for the simple reason that I have been moving home with my wife, three children, one dog, three cats and five removal men for the past five days and entirely forgot my appointment.'

He made the coffee. I dried out and cheered up. And, reflecting on the things that would have happened to a typical Sharpe character in my predicament by now (... been arrested; been mistaken for a mass murderer; been blown up; been assaulted by a fat lady intent on the conquest of my meagre body ...), I decided I'd probably come out of it rather well.

Sharpe is responsible for some of the funniest books ever written (*Riotous Assembly*, *Indecent Exposure*, *Wilt*, *Blott on the Landscape*), and a number of duds as well. So it was a relief to see that his latest book, *Wilt On High*, was a return to form. As with the best of Sharpe, there's a serious message there as well – in this case the spectacle of The Bomb. He obviously doesn't like it.

'I don't like violence. I loathe violence. You're a nice young bloke, born after the holocaust. I'm 57 and I was born before it. And I think our generation was scarred by a gentleman named Adolf Hitler, and Stalin on the rampage, and it was out of that that I went to South Africa and *shit* – I walked straight into it again. I was out there doing all this work with people who were dying of TB. When they were black, the doctors would tell them it was terminal and send them home to die. So during the day I was taking people home from hospital and visiting them to see if they were still alive.

'At one point the white girl who was training me in social work took me to see a guy who didn't have long to live. She said: "How are you doing?" and he said: "I've got a job! I'm working in the kitchen of a restaurant". She didn't turn a hair. She just said: "That's good news – which restaurant?" When we went downstairs, I said: "Shit – that guy can't work in a restaurant!" She said it was the only place he could live. He'd get spare food, a lot of food, and he might just make it, you never know. All she wanted to know was the name of the restaurant so she didn't have to go there, nor any of her friends.

Arrogant

'It was schizophrenic – I'd do that in the day, and in the evening I'd go down to one of the richest bloody suburbs in Jo'burg where you had six black waiters in white gloves and arrogant whites talking about vast sums of money – it seemed absolutely crazy.'

And it was out of this that *Riotous Assembly* came?

'What happened was I started writing this true story of an aunt of a friend of mine who lived next door to a cop shop. The noise of the torture was really horrible, and she knew if she complained it wouldn't do any good, so she wrote to the Kommandant, saying: "I'm a little old lady, I like my snooze after lunch, and I can't get to sleep because of the noises coming from your police station." The Kommandant was round like a shot, as

she was upper-class English. So I set off to write that as a short story, and I got up to that point when I thought: "What the hell would happen if she rang up to say she'd murdered her cook? They'd go into the drill of telling her she meant there had been an accident!"

The line from the book is: 'Killing a black cook comes under self-defence, justifiable homicide or garbage disposal ...'

Exactly. Psychopathic. And that's when it took off for me. You see, the cops out there are so thick you wouldn't believe it. English people can't believe it. They just want to kill kaffirs – that's their idea of what should happen.'

Did you worry when you wrote the book that it might just be seen as a joke – that people wouldn't realize that it really was like that?

Quite honestly, I didn't know what I was doing anyway, in the two or three weeks it took me to get that story down – all I knew was that it was just hysterically funny, in a mad sort of horrible way. But I didn't write the bloody book. I don't know who did – I don't remember anything about those three weeks at all. Except I remember Kommandant van Heerden at the bottom of a staircase, and thinking "What happens now? What the hell's he going to see now?" And I had no idea.'

That was the rubber fetishism stuff, wasn't it? The rubber sheets and clothes?

Yes, I'd thought: "What the hell's the most bizarre perversion one could ever



Blott (David Suchet) prepares hot cocktails for his oppressors



Blott again, tying the knot with the widow (Geraldine James). Julia McKenzie can't be seen on the right

have in a hot climate?" It's got to be something in rubber. You know, when I wrote the book, I didn't want to portray blacks at all, because I wanted to portray the South African attitude to blacks, which is that they're objects. Like this desk or that chair. If you pump bullets into that chair it doesn't matter – nobody's going to say you're wrong. That's the way they think. I've seen a cop do it. So the point I'm making in the book is that we have a police Kommandant confronted with a woman he respects: and, despite the fact he regularly goes off and screws coloured whores, that she – the doyenne of society – could be going to bed with a 'fucking black man' is beyond his comprehension. He can never accept it. But she's out of her bloody mind anyway – treating another human being as though he's an object. The cook would never feel anything, wearing three contraceptives and with a novocaine injection in the privates, then blown to bits for no good reason. It's loopy.

Fat Women

Your next South African book, *Indecent Exposure*, was the first time we really got to meet one of your predatory fat women...

"Yes. I'm very fond of fat women. A lot of it stems from a real incident with the wife of a Major von Blimenstein. Now, under Dutch law (you may not be aware of this), if you're caught screwing anybody, and the spouse enters the room and finds you in bed with her, then – providing they don't go out of the room to get a gun, knife or other weapon – they're perfectly entitled to kill you both. If they've a weapon on them, they can kill you.

"Of course what they do is go and get a bloody great gun, then go into court and say: "Of course I didn't go and get a gun! I

just happened to be cleaning it in the next room when I heard my wife in bed with this lousy bastard Sharpe, and naturally I was overcome by a desire to blast the hell out of them both!" And they'll let you off, no problem.

"So anyway, there I was with Major von Blimenstein's wife. And I'm a congenital coward. I mean, no way am I going to get into bed with a very big, powerful Afrikaans lady who's married to a major in the police. I mean, you've got to be mad. But she had other thoughts in mind... I can still remember the bloody afternoon when I was locked in her flat. She took the key away. Now, I had a motor bike, and I was toggled up in the leather and crash helmet and everything else, and I wouldn't take it off. And every time I made for the door she'd just get in front of me. So I'd pick her up – she was a big woman (and I'm not small), big and muscular – carry her across to the sofa, and dump her on it. And she'd just bounce off, roaring with laughter. This went on for hours.

"The major rings up in the middle of it all – he was about ten feet tall, weighed 280lb, all muscle, and wore side-arms just to help. So, in the end, I said: "Okay, let's roll, baby", or words to that effect, "but first I'll need a drink and a pee". So I got out of all my Norton uniform, and I went into the bathroom, and while she was pouring the drinks I came out of the bathroom like the clappers, grabbed the key, opened the door and was out, which didn't exactly endear me to the woman.

"That's the origin of the large ladies. But most of us have it. It's the classic Thurber cartoon situation of the timid little man looking in terror at the predatory woman at the other end of the couch: a stereotype

which did happen to correspond to some of my own experiences."

It's a situation you use in most of the books.

"If you like, it's a bit of a formula. It's funny when you think about it, as society always assumes that all men are aggressors and potential rapists (actually all rapists are impotent anyway, as far as I can gather). "All men are predators". Even your magazine runs on that assumption."

How about the other recurring item, the condom, which crops up in a variety of (often lethal) roles?

"I don't know why I was born. I was an accident, I think. My sister, who is 75, told me that two months after I was conceived, my mother bought a skipping rope. Well, she damn near died when my brother was born, so I don't blame her. She was old.

"I think my mother had an obsession about condoms. My Uncle Harold was a doctor, and she came to him one lunchtime (I was there) and she said: "Harold, I want you to stop leaving those things about. It's really not nice at all. The charlady sees them". This was in 1949.

"He said: "What things?"

"She said: "You're leaving them on the dressing table" – he was having an affair at the time with the local coal merchant's widow – "and it's very, very embarrassing".

"He said: "What the hell are you on about?"

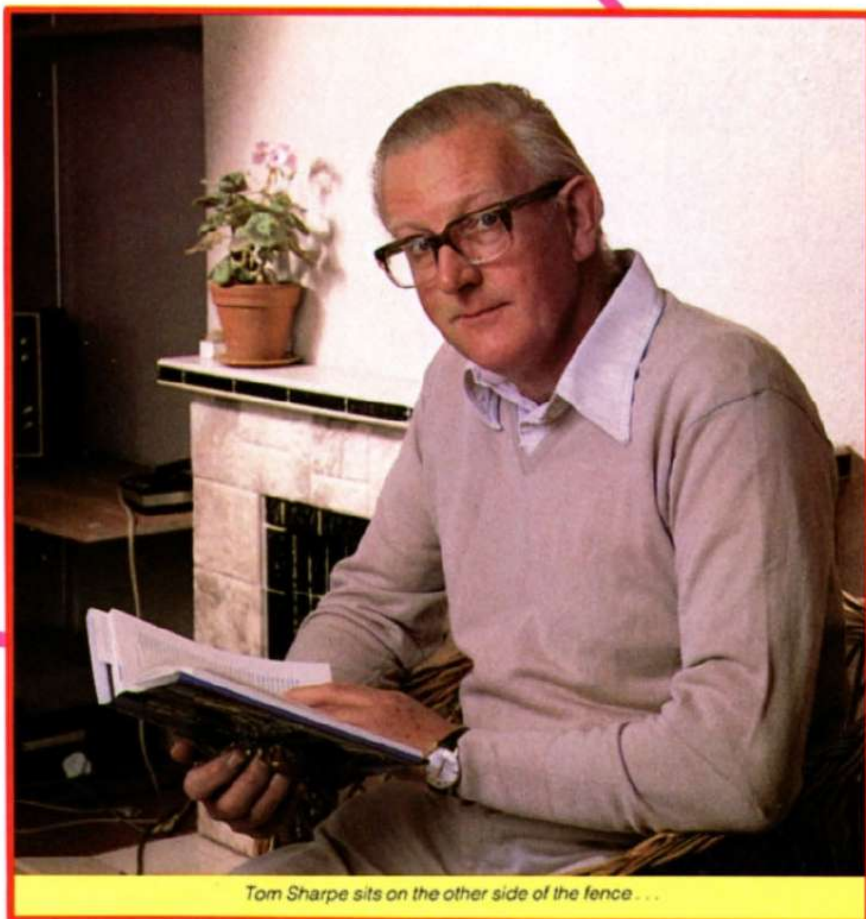
"She said, getting very red in the face: "You know perfectly well what I'm talking about!"

"He replied: "I don't know what on earth you're talking about – you'd better show me".

"So they went upstairs and there, lying on the dressing table, was this tiny fingerstool. And he looked at it, and said: "Woman, if you think I could get it into a thing like that, then you are insulting me!" My poor mother was the colour of that chair. Deep red.

"So, from an early age, there's been an interest in the various forms of contraception. I think they're loathsome things, condoms. When I was in the Marines – I didn't mean to go into the Marines, but I couldn't possibly have gone to Cambridge saying





Tom Sharpe sits on the other side of the fence...

I'd been a cook or sickroom attendant; I was a very snobby young man. Now I know that cooks made money and sickroom attendants just handed out French Letters – there were thousands of Marines on this ship, and thousands and thousands of French Letters floating around, so that was another eye-opener for me.

Then, in *Indecent Exposure* (page 139), there's a verbatim account of what happened to me in a chemists' shop I was helping out in in South Africa. A bloke came in and said: "I'll have a packet of Crêpe de Chine". I said: "No you don't, you want a haberdashers'. This is a chemists'". "No I don't", he said. He didn't know what a haberdashers' was any more than I knew the meaning of Crêpe de Chine. So I shouted across the shop, to the woman assistant: "Pat, we don't do Crêpe de Chine, do we?" All the women in the shop turned around, and the poor bugger turned red and shot out of the shop.

"I don't know what it's like nowadays, but I couldn't have gone into a shop and asked for contraceptives when I was an undergraduate. It's an embarrassment. And it becomes a hallmark, like the large ladies. A running joke. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't."

Your breakthrough into 'Bestselling Author' status was with *Wilt*. You must get asked this a great deal, but to what extent are you Henry Wilt?

"Wilt's not me. But I am the Wilts. Henry and Eva. I did all those things, like looking at the bases of pylons and wondering what

would happen if you stuffed a body down there; and I was teaching Meat One – first year butchers – and idling the afternoon away discussing *Shane* and them telling me more about sex than I ever knew.

"But I'm also Eva. She has all these enthusiasms, and she doesn't know who the hell she is from day to day. I'm like that – always enthusiastic about things like she is. You can see I've got a room full of gadgets here. And the compost heaps were real in *The Wilt Alternative*, although I never tried burning the methane. Probably a good thing – the house might have blown up."

Momentum

When you start a book do you know where it's going?

"No. I try to write a scenario, but... well, farce has to obey certain rules. If the plot doesn't work, if you cannot convince the reader that, no matter how barmy this all seems, it could happen, and it's got its own internal logic... it all depends on the plot. *Wilt on High*, for example, has four sets of cops in all – that's two sets too many. I don't like that. However, that book maintained its momentum.

"If the construction of the book is somehow wrong, I've still got to write the book. I don't earn money any other way, and I've got to keep the readers. You can't turn out shoddy, but you've got to get the books out."

Do you ever feel like pulling all the stops out and seeing how far you could possibly go?

"I don't know. Perhaps the first book you write is the only book you write. Or the best. I think the South African two really are the same book. The trouble is, South Africa is a schizo society, and this society isn't. It's a lot more homogenous. Writing about England is rather like punching cotton wool (except for Wilt, who's just an ordinary little bloke, who'd like to have power and knows damn well he never will). In South Africa, everything was small. You knew who the crooks were. Over here, the divisions are blurred."

Blott worked?

"Ah, yes. It was based on some of my own experiences in Shropshire. There's a homogeneity about that book, too. I got the tone right, and if you don't, you're up to maggots."

What was your reaction to the TV series?

"It worked, too. I was happy with it, because they altered the medium – verbal to visual – without messing it about. The cast was good, and the characters simply came to life, that's all."

We talk more about his books; the ones that worked, and the ones that didn't. One that was a failure is *The Great Pursuit*.

"It's 20,000 words too long. Now, some critics like me, and some loathe me. That's as it should be, I advise some people not to read my books – I mean, if you're a sensitive soul, for God's sake don't read them. It could really upset you! The critics said the stuff in the US was bananas, but it was for real. I was out there. I did meet a woman who'd had five maidenheads. Every time she got married she had surgery for a new hymen, and the reason she gave was: "All men want to marry virgins!" I went bonkers over that one, trying to work out how the hell a woman married five times could possibly be a virgin."

How about the sex in the books, normally used for its embarrassment factor?

"Well, anyone who thinks my stuff is even vaguely turning-on has got to be out of their mind. Da Vinci or someone once said that if the human race could see itself humping, it would never do it again. Stop dead. And I believe that. I've never understood the passion for mirrors."

Let alone the more recent practice of videoing oneself making love?

"Good lord' (aghast). 'I gave up golf because someone videoed me taking a swing, and I realized what a fool I looked..."

