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Review

Beryl Bainbridge by Brendan King review - drink, sex and wonderful novels

This vivid biography details Bainbridge's complicated private life, out of which emerged some of the greatest works in English fiction



She never lost her taste for mischief ... Beryl Bainbridge in Paris in 1981. Photograph: Ulf Andersen/Getty Images

Beryl Bainbridge liked to claim that her unsettling novels were autobiographical: "The only reason I wrote was to make sense of what went on in my past." Many of her books revolve around her Liverpool childhood, the quarrels of her parents or her complicated sexual adventures as a young woman.

Ambiguities marked her life from the first. She was born in Liverpool in 1932 (not, as she claimed, in 1934, a fib which has caused much confusion among literary historians).

Beryl and her brother were not, however, brought up in poverty. There was a car, a telephone and regular holidays. The children were expensively educated, and Beryl attended Merchant Taylors' School.

This was a family project, not a teenage rebellion. Her mother had high hopes for Beryl, and worried that her involvement with what a friend termed "communist tripe" might get in the way of future triumphs.

have been still more anxious about her daughter's love life, which was already impressively active. Her first serious boyfriend was a Bavarian prisoner of war called Harry.

Harry was the first of many men to fall in love with her. In 1949, she compiled a meticulous list of her boyfriends to date, arriving at a total of 17 names.

King, who worked as Bainbridge's assistant throughout the last 23 years of her life, weaves a gripping narrative from the ups and downs of her entanglements with men.

her case it seems largely to have been true. She had an openness that exposed her to damage. In 1952, when she was 19, she took a fancy to a man she met coming out of the cinema ("such a beautifully modulated voice, and small white hands").

Her marriage to Austin Davies, an artist who was always in two minds about the distracting demands of domesticity, was unstable and short-lived.

Her first novel, Harriet Said..., describes two terrifyingly ruthless young girls, reflecting Bainbridge's sense of the cruelty of adolescence.

Though neither spoke of it publicly, Haycraft and Bainbridge had encountered each other nearly 20 years earlier. Anna Lindholm, as she was then called, had fallen pregnant by Davies and had undergone a traumatic abortion.

This did not mean that she had lost her taste for mischief. Before the troubled attachment to Colin took over, she started "going out proper" with a married friend ("So there we were at one in the morning with a bottle of scotch with Clive running after me - begging me to put me clothes on ... the exact desperation in his voice floating up Hampstead Heath - 'Do please pull yourself together, I'm a respectable solicitor'").

Her waywardness did not interfere with the continuing development of the novels. Among the thought-provoking connections to emerge from this rewarding biography is the association between Bainbridge's self-dramatisation and the steady discipline of her creativity.

To order Beryl Bainbridge: Love By All Sorts of Means for £20.50 (Bloomsbury, RRP £25) go to bookshop.theguardian.com or call 0330 333 6846.

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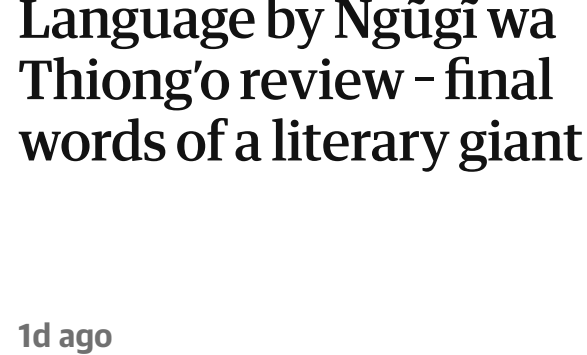
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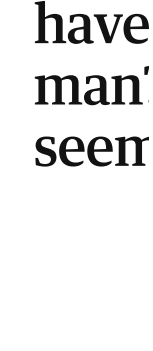
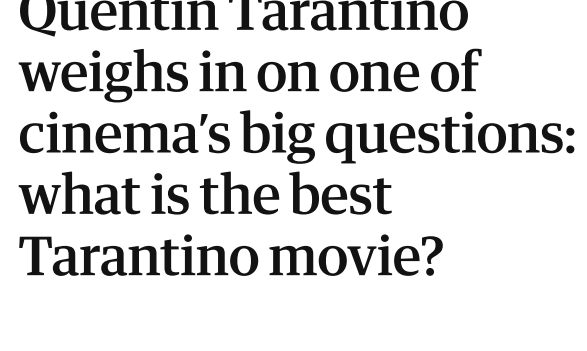
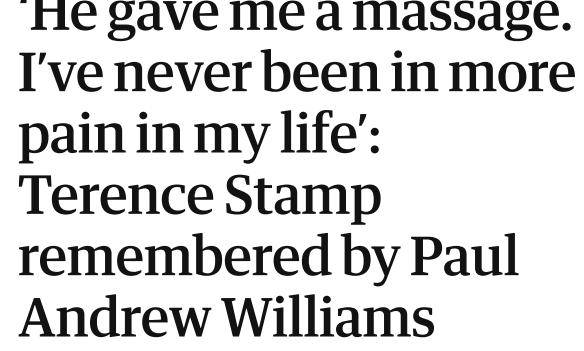
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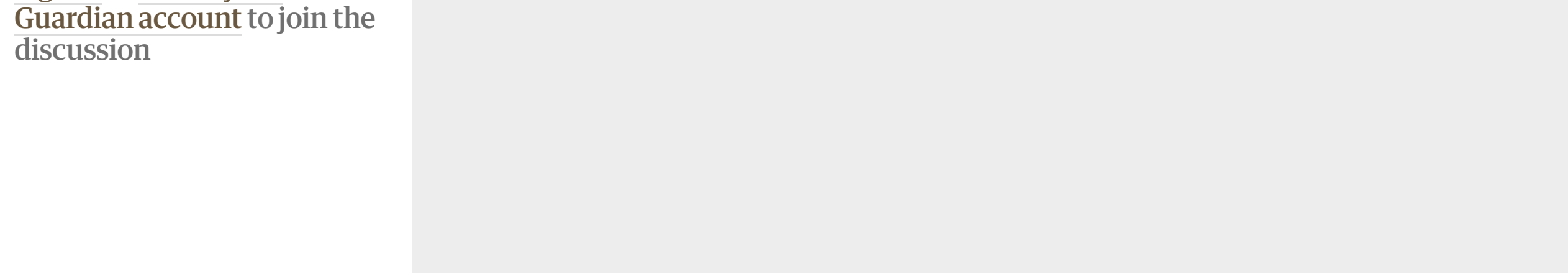
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