GORDONSTOUN
Plus Est En Vous

William Boyd CBE

Bruce, 1970

Recognised for services to literature, as a novelist, screenwriter and playwright

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William Boyd is a celebrated novelist, screenwriter and director who has amassed numerous credits across the creative arts throughout his career.

He was raised in Africa - where his father was a doctor of tropical medicine. Born in Ghana, he spent his early childhood both there and later in Nigeria. At the age of nine he was sent to begin his education in Scotland. William attended Wester Elchies, Aberlour and then Gordonstoun, where he took a keen interest in the arts, running the Literary Society, exploring art, painting and pottery and becoming renowned for his hair and makeup skills in the drama department.

His first career choice was to pursue painting, but after his father forbade him to go to art school, he took a year out and enrolled in the University of Nice where he began to think about writing. A degree in English & Philosophy followed at Glasgow, before he studied for a doctorate in English Literature at Jesus College, Oxford.

In the early 1980s he lectured in English Literature at St Hilda's College, Oxford but his first book, A Good Man in Africa was published in 1981, gaining recognition when it won the Whitbread First Novel Award and the Somerset Maugham Prize. A further 18 novels followed, including Brazzaville Beach (1990), Any Human Heart (2002), Restless (2006), a James Bond novel Solo (2013), and Love is Blind (2018). William has also adapted several of his own works, and others, for film and television - including two original TV films for Channel 4 based on his experiences at boarding school, directing The Trench (1999), and adapting Any Human Heart (2010) for Channel 4 which won a BAFTA for "Best Series".

He also writes for theatre and, in the late 90s, authored one of the world's most notorious hoaxes - Nat Tate: An American Artist 1928–1960. This apparent biography was invented, written and his works painted, by William, and the New York launch garnered the attention of global art critics, before being debunked by a journalist just a few days later.

He has been elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, honoured as Officier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres, and in 2005 was appointed CBE for services to literature. William met his wife at Glasgow University in 1975 and they now split their time between London and South-West France.

Africa shaped me - my childhood there left a lasting impression.

My parents were Scottish, but Africa was my home. Ghana was an extraordinary place in those days - there was no racism at all. I felt completely safe and totally at ease, everywhere, all of the time. The freedom was exhilarating. Then we moved to Nigeria and whilst that was similarly utopic, in the late 60s civil war broke out and suddenly life was both exotic and idyllic but also sometimes threatening and terrifying. This all provided a whole raft of experiences which I have gone on to use repeatedly in my work - I don't think I could have found these profound influences anywhere else.

Boarding school gave me an incredible sense of independence.

Being unable to pursue art was a turning point for me. Instead of rebelling, I just shifted focus from painting to literature. The trouble was, I hadn't a clue how to do it. The seeds of the idea set in at Gordonstoun, where I had led the Literary Society, but I didn't know any writers, publishers or literary agents so I had to educate myself. I started writing immediately then took a sort of gap year at the University of Nice. My parents were still in Africa and just let me get on with it, so I moved to France, found myself a room, enrolled at the university and set about making friends and learning the language. This was in the era of no credit cards and no mobile phones. I was on my own, but I had total confidence - nothing phased me after a decade in Scottish boarding schools.

Gordonstoun ignited for me a love of the arts, something that's never left me.

My art teacher, Bob Waddell, was a vitally important person at a vitally important time of my life. His classrooms - two Nissen huts and a pottery studio - were a sort of refuge for me. Not only was he a highly accomplished potter, but he introduced me to the appreciation of architecture and encouraged me to feel good enough for art school. His teaching was all about guiding you to see for yourself and I suppose that creating the illusion of self-discovery is at the root of the best teaching. It seems bizarre to realise now that many of the simple lessons I learned about art and its values at the age of seventeen still ring true to me today. Happily, we have stayed in close touch ever since and by chance have become neighbours. Bob is remarkably unchanged in every degree and, from time to time, I find I'm still learning from him.