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Gone with the Windsors
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Q: Could you talk a bit about Maybell Brumby? How did her character come about?

A: There was only one way I wanted to tell this story; from the heart of the action and narrated by someone who reports it how it really is, even if inadvertently. A school friend was an obvious choice. Someone who knew the skinny on Wally's background. I gave Maybell her name and she developed from there.

Q: What inspired you to look at this event? Have you been interested in the Wallis and Wales affair for some time?

A: Three years ago, if asked, I'd have said I wasn't particularly interested in the Windsors although I was picking them up on the very edge of my radar screen. In Venice where I live, one meets people who remember their visits during the Fifties and Sixties, Wally powdered and tightly corseted however hot the sun, and the Duke scuttling behind her like one of her pug dogs, off to Harry's Bar with someone willing to stand them dinner.

But what got me started on the idea of writing about them was a photograph: a paparazzo shot of them in the back of their limo, she obviously giving him a telling off and he, the former King of England, looking like a chastised schoolboy. I'd always thought they were besotted with one another, but just a little research showed me that their "love story" was something much more complicated and precisely the kind of comedy of errors I love.

Q: While Maybell Brumby is obviously fictional, how much of the remainder is historically accurate? Did you find it difficult to work a fictional character into a very real and familiar piece of history?

A: Maybell is fictional but her diary hangs upon a firm framework of historical facts. If Maybell tells us they're cruising off the coast of Yugoslavia in August 1936, it's fact. When she reports they've had tea with Adolf Hitler, it's fact. In addition many of the important players are also real people: Windsor's equerry, Fruity Metcalfe; Perry Brownlow, the aide who accompanied Wally into exile; Sir Philip Sassoon, the wealthy and well-connected Member of Parliament.

The fictional characters are Maybell's friends and family, and many of the hangers-on who appear during the exile years, especially in France and Italy. I created them in order to tell the inside story and they are pure invention. However a Venetian who just finished reading the book said to me, "They're all still here, you know? The Fanulloni (roughly translated, the Drones), the Nasibruni (the Arse Lickers), Maxi Finto (Big Fake). They're all still here."

I love working fictional characters into a piece of history. It plays to my strengths, which are characterization and dialogue, and assists me in my admitted weakness, plot. I could never have come up with anything as bizarre as the Windsor relationship.

Q: While Maybell purports to have a large number of friendships, very few seem to have any real substance. Who do you feel are Maybell's true friends and allies?

A: Maybell is not an immediately likeable narrator. She's a snob, she's self-centered and she has the attention span of a gnat, but she turns out to have a big heart and it belongs chiefly to her family, especially her niece Flora and her nephew Rory. She turns out to be an unexpectedly good aunt.

The litmus test for many of the relationships in the book is the Abdication and later, the outbreak of war. There are friends who change sides, loyal courtiers who get left in the lurch, people who get through the war untouched by personal loss. Maybell is still daffy by the time we get to 1946, but she's a much nicer kind of daffy.

Q: Were there women in your life who inspired the fictional female characters in your book?

A: I've known a few Maybells in my time but I don't know that 'inspire' is quite the word. Let's say I'm a collector (mentally, not socially) of oddballs.

Q: In *Gone with the Windsors*, friendships and alliances were formed for very different reasons than what draws people together today. How are friendships between women different now from the friendships that are depicted in *Gone with the Windsors*?

A: Is it so very different? I think among the self-anointed Smart Set nothing much has changed. Middle class women, a group totally unknown to Maybell and Wally, are the people who have changed. In the Thirties those women were isolated in the home. They had none of the opportunities for friendship that going out to work and pursuing leisure activities provide.

It has been said that writers often write about the year or time period in which they were born. Why do you think writers do this? Maybell's diary entries end near the time when you were conceived—is there any coincidence? An interesting idea: I never heard that before. Personally my interest in social history ends around 1959, by which time I was an adolescent. I've always attributed this to my particular sensibilities. I like formality and elegance and I'm fundamentally conservative. From 1960 on the world became more casual, squalid and radicalized. I didn't feel at home in it as a teenager and I certainly don't feel at home in it now.

Q: Why did you decide to write *Gone with the Windsors* in diary format? Was it a conscious decision or did it evolve that way?

A: I started writing the book as a straightforward first-person narrative but realized about 50 pages in that I wasn't achieving the sense of immediacy I wanted. I thought I'd try rewriting the same material in diary form and it took only a few pages for me to decide that was the way to do it. Diary entries seemed the perfect way to convey both the froth of Maybell's daily life and the excitement of being at the epicenter of history in the making.

Class and society play a pivotal role in the lives of the characters of the novel. Do you think class is as important in England today?

England has changed beyond recognition, of course. That world, pre-WW2, with big houses and servants set alongside the grinding poverty of the Depression, has disappeared. But class is still important in England, by which I mean, in England people can and do "place" you, by your accent, by who your family are and where you went to school, and having "placed" you, they then decide whether you are worthy of their attention.

I guess it's less important now the accent of choice is Estuary, but there are still social situations where I hear the click of the class Geiger-counter. Being married to an American, this is something I very much notice. In America no-one gives a pig's patootie what kind of accent you have or if they ever heard of your family.

Q: As a British writer, what unusual challenges, if any, did you encounter when writing about characters who were predominantly American?

A: I'm married to an American, and although we live in Europe I think of myself as an honorary American. I speak pretty fluent American, though I do so with a strong British accent, and I love America: The scale and the variety of it are astonishing to someone not born there, and I'm convinced that its energy and generosity have somehow rubbed off on me and affected my writing. For the better.