

LETTERS TO MONSIEUR PRINTEMPS

THE UNPUBLISHED MEMOIRS OF TOM SHARPE

A patchwork life

Over the next few months, Catalonia Today has the privilege of publishing the **24 autobiographical letters that the comic writer wrote to an imaginary researcher**

DR. MONTSERRAT VERDAGUER



In 1997, Tom Sharpe was working on a novel about the ineffable assistant lecturer Henry Wilt. He had written 50,000 words and had enjoyed doing so, a sure sign that the book had legs. But it had now been months that work on WILT 4 (which would finally be published with the title "Wilt in Nowhere") had stalled. He couldn't get the plot right and he couldn't find the humorous situations that would move the story forward. He was, as a result, becoming frustrated and irate. He was so desperate that he went as far as to say, "I don't want anything more to do with Wilt. Wilt is dead!"

Each morning Tom tried to continue with his new novel, write some letters, or jot down some thoughts in his diary. He wanted to bring his memories together, to leave a record of the events that had shaped his life.

At the start of 1998, Tom began to write "Letters to Monsieur Printemps", an unfinished autobiographical text that has never been published. This led him to talk to Carmen Balcells, the owner of the literary agency that represented him: "Carmen Balcells likes me and, more amazingly, admires me. She still wants me to write my autobiography" (diary, January 28, 1998). Wanting to avoid a clichéd autobiography and inspired by a French expert on his work, Christian Dalzon, he created the figure of Eugene Printemps, who sent him a long question-

naire. Tom always enjoyed writing and receiving letters and so he decided to answer the questions by letter. In the course of 24 letters, he dealt with such matters as his books' plots, his literary influences, his first sexual experience, his time in South Africa and Cambridge, and his phobias.

Towards the end of that year, Tom woke up one night and began to write, inspired by a word fluttering in his head: patchwork. It was another autobiographical book: "A Patchwork Life". Again, it was an unsystematic autobiography: a life made up of pieces, cuttings, and fragments. He would later make another attempt, which he barely started, called "A Stranger to Himself. Tom Sharpe's Autobiography". He combined these autobiographical texts with his diary: "One reason I write such boring diaries, apart from laziness and self-obsession, is I don't want to hurt friends or anyone I don't have a genuine grievance against" (January 30, 2001). These texts relaxed him when he couldn't make headway with his new book. They might also have been an escape or a pretext for exploring his inner self.

They were a way of exercising his memory and his thinking, and they sometimes helped him to reconcile himself with his past, although on other occasions they brought back painful recollections or raised questions that were impossible to answer.

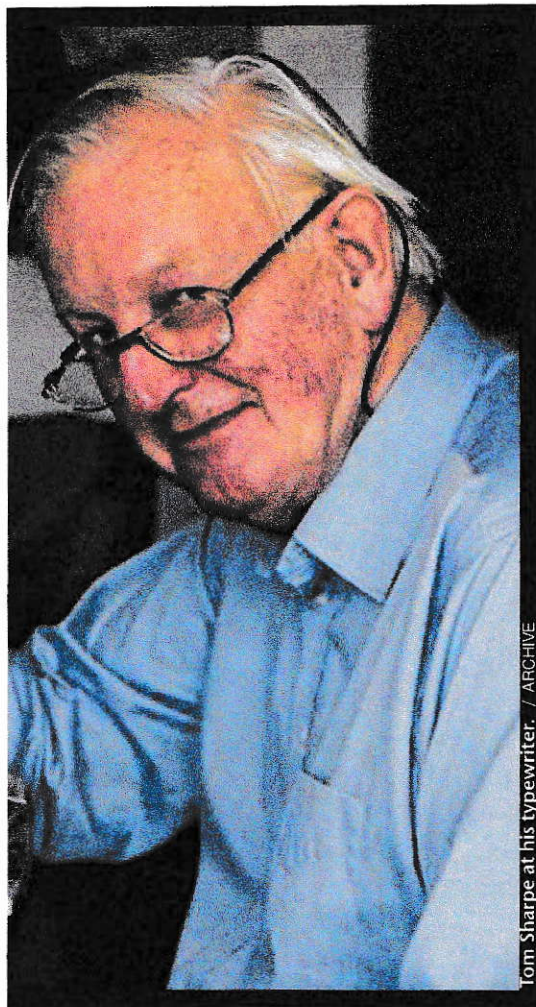
Tom wrote, "I have no intention of beginning with my birth and very early childhood because I have no memory of it. In any case, biographies and autobiographies which start



Collected works

In September 2015, Dr. Montserrat Verdaguer, the executor of Tom Sharpe's estate, donated approximately 1,200 books from the writer's personal library to the University of Girona, along with numerous original manuscripts and typescripts. These included letters, diaries and notebooks containing personal reflections, variants of several literary works and even some unpublished plays. The books were organised, and an initial cataloguing of the scattered materials was carried out by the 'Barri Vell' Library of the University, leading to the creation of the Tom Sharpe bibliographic collection within this institution. At present, the Tom Sharpe Chair of Literature is dedicated to cataloguing and organising this material to support researchers interested in exploring the life and works of the writer.

at the beginning and go on chronologically to some sort of end, either death or in the case of autobiographies, to some end chosen by the writer have always bored me. Instead, I want to create a patchwork quilt, as it were, of memories, of events, of portraits of people I have known and found interesting in some way or other. Perhaps it would be better to de-



Tom Sharpe at his typewriter. / ARCHIVE

scribe the process as that of creating a jigsaw puzzle without any clues as to the picture it will conjure up in the imaginations, any consistent picture at any rate of anyone sufficiently interested to read the book. I think this is the most honest way because my own view is confused and inconsistent and memory is often faulty. I will do my best to recall what really happened but I know all too well that what I visualise as the truth is based on hearsay or my tendency to exaggerate some stories unintentionally or at best to make them more interesting to my listeners or readers. I shall do my damndest to avoid that trap but I cannot promise it will succeed. Old men make good their forgetfulness by embroidering the past. I hope to steer clear of that tendency. Above all, I will try to do so." (December 15, 2002)



Where do I get my crazy plots?

Dear Monsieur Printemps, Thank you for writing. I must admit I was a bit taken aback by the compliments you let fly and completely bowled over by the questions you've asked but, being a modestly arrogant person or, possibly more correctly because modesty is the most extreme form of arrogance, an arrogantly modest man, I will try to answer them. Impossible to do in one letter because you've asked so many but you'll just have to be patient and I'll write and answer them all when I have time, though not necessarily in the order you've asked them. I'm certainly not going to start with Number 1. Let's go to Number 11: where do I get my crazy plots from?

Well, I question your use of the word 'crazy'. Read any newspaper, watch any news on TV, listen to the radio or to people talking in a bar or a bus, and you'll see. Life, Monsieur Printemps, from life. A guy comes home from work and beats his wife to pulp because he doesn't like his eggs sunny side up and reckons his wife knows he only likes scrambled eggs. Then, while she's repairing her face, he reads Chicken Little to his four year old daughter as a bed time story. Finally, when she's asleep, he dresses up as a Hefner Bunny girl and gets his wife to sodomize him with a wooden dildo he's made on a lathe in his workshop. And that isn't 'crazy'? Happens somewhere every day. Sure, it's horrible but it's real. Or something equally absurd. Yes, I know your existential philosophers invented the concept of absurdity but only as a concept. The real absurdities are what real people truly think and really do.

Take another example: the President of the most powerful country on earth, 'Blow Job' Billy, ie. President Clinton who can press a button and deluge the world with H bombs and radioactive fall-out and he gets his kicks having his penis sucked by bimbos and then lying through his teeth under oath when he knows he could lose his Presidency for perjury. And you reckon that isn't crazy? You can go from one end of the social spectrum to the other and you'll find everyone's crazy to some extent.

And even when people don't actually do things they have incredible fantasies.

Mind-blowing ones. Walk the streets of any city and consider what thoughts the people you pass have in the heads. All right, perhaps the majority are worried about what soap powder to buy or if they're going to keep their jobs or if their husbands have got a mistress, but there are some you will pass who have other far more bizarre and crazy thoughts. Religious sects that go in for mass suicide because they really do believe there's a spaceship riding the tail of a comet and they've got to die to get a ticket to heaven on it.

No, I write about the real world, not the idealistic, romantic and sentimental world where men and women have deep conversations about the meaning of life and whether they are suited to one another and.....blah, blah, blah. I'm not saying such relationships don't exist or

I WRITE ABOUT THE REAL WORLD NOT THE IDEALISTIC, ROMANTIC AND SENTIMENTAL WORLD WHERE MEN AND WOMEN HAVE DEEP CONVERSATIONS

that such books aren't admirable. You're asking me about my crazy plots and I'm giving you part of the answer. The second part is that I write in such a way that people, some people, burst out laughing involuntarily. One man kicked the door of the bathroom down because he thought his wife who was screaming her head off with laughter was having a heart attack or some sort of fit when all she was doing was reading *The Wilt Alternative*.

Finally I enjoy my own books, if they're good and make me laugh. If not I don't publish the damned things. Goodness only knows how many bad books I've written past the half way mark only to ditch them. I write and write and write, and if I get lift off into real craziness, I keep the verbal throttle at full bore and I stick with it until I've got a book. If it dies on me, I ditch. I hope that answers Question 11.