

ANNA MORPURGO DAVIES, 10 YEARS ON

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Memories: Aditi Lahiri

As time passes, I realise that although there have been many people I have looked up to, revered and venerated, and even attempted to model myself on, very few became close friends. During the last four years of her life, Anna Morpurgo Davies had become part of my everyday existence. The warmth, understanding, intellectual stimulation and the aura of contentment that surrounded her company are difficult to forget. No problem of mine was too small or too big for her to solve. I always left her company with a hug and a deep sense of well-being.

Food, wine, mystery novels, the garden, and of course the library were a fundamental part of our lives in those years. Perhaps what I miss most are the superlative evenings beginning with nibbles and a glass of something in the garden, followed by long dinners of exquisite Italian cuisine. These were always accompanied by animated arguments about proper ingredients, relevance of tradition, newly discovered old mystery novels with devious clues but little violence, alongside the state of linguistics, elimination of administration and looking forward to the future. Her cooking was authentic old-style, not what you would get at your English Italian local. I will never forget the strict instruction *'do not add tomatoes to a Bolognese sauce'*! To this day, my husband Henning Reetz continues to keep a close eye on the ingredients when I attempt to make the sauce like Anna. All friends and relatives who came through my doors were warmly entertained by Anna. Frans Plank was a regular visitor. Paul Kiparsky, Larry Hyman, Elan Dresher, my nieces and nephews, cousins, were all welcomed with the individual attention that was so typical of Anna.

At the onset, given the task of launching a new Faculty (which only happened because Anna had made it possible for Oxford to establish an independent Committee for Comparative Philology and Linguistics to supervise graduate degrees), I plied her with questions about issues I perceived to be unresolvable. Or perhaps a better way of putting it would be that Anna addressed concerns which I had not even thought of. Her solutions very often made my eyes widen, but were of course invariably successful. Her maxim *'read the rules carefully and only then will you find the loopholes'* is engraved in my brain. I can feel her hovering over my shoulder whenever I have difficult meetings to chair. Never will I forget being told before a particularly crucial meeting *'do not grab the tiger's dinner before entering the tiger's cave'*!

Everyone knows that Anna's garden was spectacular and played a huge role in her life. I could not believe that before she retired, she had only a cursory interest in gardening. As a true scholar, she put her mind to the science of gardening and lo and behold, she had an outstanding organisation of rockeries, shrubs, kitchen garden, and fruit trees. Sadly, this was one domain where I failed her miserably. Although I was a sympathetic listener, she was fully aware of my abysmal horticultural ignorance. One day, a bad mistake on her part, I was allowed to help her weed. Her comment after 30 mins of my hard labour was that I had an ineradicable habit of pulling out the plants and leaving the weeds! We did not discuss this matter further and in future, my only contribution to any gardening was limited to the destruction of slugs. Anna's complaint on this count was that talking to me was like talking to a garden gnome!

How can I forget the wisdom of cats in general and Anna's in particular? Anna's cat, Tawi, bore the name of a Hittite queen and we were duly instructed on our proper behaviour with her. She certainly had her own personality and could be quite standoffish – very appropriate for her stature. She was very particular about her diet, and graciously accepted (and probably preferred) Anna's own cooking to the standard cat food.

Our homes, on Yarnells Hill and Cunnor Hill, were about a mile apart. However, since both houses were on hills, bringing out our cars when visiting each other was felt to be justified. Who did the driving was a very sensitive issue. Henning preferred that we drove because Anna's driving was too exciting for our nerves. When she had friends in the back seat, she maintained an animated conversation facing them. She was the first to admit that her car had 'many bumps'. One morning I nearly succumbed to a nervous breakdown when she called me up to say that she had hit someone (!), but all was well, and could I please pick her up? When I did get her home, she was entirely calm and pointed out the various other bumps the car had which is why she had decided that there was no point in getting a new one! Anna rarely drove above 15mph, and hardly ever shifted to third gear, often simply staying on first till the car stalled. Her nephews and Henning extolled the virtues of an automatic but of course with little success. No, she was going to stick to her battered Volkswagen Golf and she did! Thus, it came as a great surprise when Anna once got a speeding ticket, and on the Botley Road! How Anna managed to speed on this road, which, when open, suffers from traffic jams daily, was a topic much discussed amongst us and we came to the conclusion that the camera must have been faulty! Nonetheless, Anna happily took the Speed Awareness Course the police were recommending in such circumstances (perhaps tongue in cheek, in this case).

I would have never survived my initial days at the British Academy without Anna. She made sure we went on the train together (I drove to the station). And we went through the multitude of papers we used to have in those days. Most British institutions were a mystery to me but initially the British Academy was like a dense fog. Anna would go over the papers, pointing out the bits I needed to pay attention to but reminding me that the other bits needed to be read and mentally filed for future use. Without her minute instructions, I would have miserably failed trying to decode clipped English voices in an echoey magnificent Georgian room. I doubt if I ever spoke a single word the first year, but if Anna had not been there, I would have stayed home.

It was after a British Academy Section meeting that we got the first bad news. We were waiting at Paddington and Anna asked me to find a quiet space. Amazingly there was a corner in a pub which was empty, when the phone call came through. Not that I was of much help, but I was glad to be there. Two years followed of her fighting the cancer. There were still very happy times, both intellectual and fun. Among her doctors was an Italian professor, whose pomposity was the constant target of her jokes.

Anna had faith only in Henning when it came to anything remotely 'technical' whether it was candles on a Christmas tree (yes, she did have a beautiful one from the German *Erzgebirge* which turn with the heat of the flames) or her computer. All computers, the boiler, the stove were under Henning's supervision. He was considered particularly invaluable when discussions with the telephone men became excessively heated. What with an Italian dialect, combined with a German turn of phrase, not to mention an Indian looking on helplessly, the BT people did not stand a chance. But Anna was convinced that Henning's knowledge about telephones

was far superior to theirs when it came to having a working line when she was under the weather, and I think she was right! He only failed trying to persuade her to get a dishwasher!

She refused to have us visit while in hospital but we did sneak into the nursing home, Henning being the most welcome visitor. I had a long list of instructions particularly focused on finding some brand-new author which she hadn't heard of. This was a superhuman task but when I succeeded against the odds, her gratitude was the best reward I have ever received.

It is still so hard for me to accept she is no longer there.

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