

NEWSWALK

MARINA WARNER

'I DESPERATELY WANTED TO BE A SAINT'

The British author, scholar and winner of the 2015 Holberg Prize, for outstanding researchers in the arts, tells Nicholas Shakespeare about how her education in a Belgian convent sowed the 'seeds of disobedience' for a career spent examining and exploding myths, during which she has taken aim at female icons from the Virgin Mary to Joan of Arc

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DANNY NORTH FOR NEWSWEEK



NEWSWALKS

In his *Walking Essays* of 1912, a brilliant young English writer, AH Sidgwick, proposed that walking “lays a foundation of mutual respect more quickly and more surely” than any other activity. The environment of a walk was exactly right: “Familiar enough to create a sense of ease, and yet strange enough to throw the walkers back on themselves with the instinct of human solidarity.”

When Paddy Leigh Fermor and Bruce Chatwin strode, chatting, through the Peloponnesian landscape, they were enacting Diogenes’ solvitur ambulando – it is solved by walking.

With this in mind *Newsweek* has invited some of the world’s most interesting thinkers to go on a walk of their choice, while reflecting on their own lives, inspirations and ambitions.



stand in St Pancras station in London and look about for Marina Warner.

Dame, Fellow of All Souls, chair of the International Man Booker Prize and polymathic interpreter of myths, Warner has suggested we meet in this imposing red-brick building – designed to headquarter the Foreign Office and then rejected by its patriarchs – which today operates as Eurostar’s London terminal.

To avoid missing each other, I stand in the upstairs foyer between a gigantic bronze statue of two lovers gazing blind into one another’s eyes, and the Betjeman Arms, named for the poet and patron saint of railways who was a friend of Warner’s father.

At 1.15pm she lands before me like a bird, wrapped in a pair of scarves and a green coat, and on her arm a blue handbag. From it, she produces an A-Z in case we get lost.

“I did want to start here,” she says as we descend in the glass-fronted lift. “I love Eurostar.” On the first occasion she boarded the train, it was to hear a lecture in Paris that her friend Edward Said was giving on late Beethoven. “It was a tremendous adventure in the late 1990s to go to Paris and come back.”

Paris was a destination ever since Warner’s father, an English colonel/amateur historian/bookseller, strode with her, aged 17, around the Marais, telling stories about the streets, the people who had made and unmade them, and showing her the faded sign on the bricks of Place de la Concorde, reading Place Louis XIV. “I’ve walked all over Paris. I studied French at Oxford [where she was the first woman editor of *Isis* magazine]. I often thought I’d get a pied-à-terre there. It’s a place where Graeme [her partner, Australian mathematician Graeme Segal] and I feel happy. He

doesn’t like the sea. He likes going to Paris, and we wander about, up Rue Saint-Denis, Rue Saint-Martin, where every building is fascinating.”

It was on a walk along the Cambridge Backs that she and Graeme had met – “after a lecture I delivered on the symbolism of bananas”.

Our destination this afternoon lies on foot through the streets of London. We cross Euston Road and head up Judd Street in the hope of emulating London novelist Iain Sinclair: “Walking is the best way to explore and exploit the city ... tramping asphalted earth in alert reverie.”

By coincidence, Warner was just in Cairo to give the Edward Said Memorial Lecture. She seized the chance to look up her childhood home on Tahrir Square; also, her father’s bookshop – in 1952 called “Isis”, and now a wholesale garment storehouse “where all the women are veiled and no men are allowed in”. Our spatial memory, she says, lasts longer than our visual memory. As she climbed the stairs, Warner recalled the bend in the staircase, the big desk, the books in shelves below ... And vivid frame by vivid frame, her parents trembled back into focus.

The woman from *Vogue*

Warner has spent her writing career examining the intense ways in which myths (and by extension religions) affect our daily lives, women’s lives especially. Her investigations have flung soda on to hitherto largely tranquil waters. “What is a woman from *Vogue* doing taking on the church?” was one reaction to her study of the cult of the Virgin Mary. Another sacred cow to tilt her lance at was Joan of Arc. “I like stories that are not exemplary,” Warner says.

An accomplished novelist as well, she has gained a developing reputation as an authority on fairytales. She describes their function as twofold. “First, to tell the truth – to bypass hypocrisy and politeness and tell you how things happen. Second, to put a grinning monster at the door, so that other monsters will be frightened by it. Stories are like that – truth-telling to avert the truth happening.” It becomes obvious on our walk that what shaped Warner was her own narrative: that of a clumsy, plump, extremely rebellious girl growing up in a “patriarchally contaminated” world governed by the codes of her English father.

“When my mother died five years ago, I found two black and white films intertwined in a can and taken on my father’s Box Brownie – the two most important moments of his life.” The films were a portal into Warner’s personal fairytale.

The first roll showed Warner’s mother eating a tangerine on the balcony of the Hotel Palumbo in Ravello, on her honeymoon in 1944, aged 22. The man holding the camera, Warner’s father, was a Lieutenant-Colonel in the Coldstream Guards, 36, and nicknamed Plum after his father, the English cricket captain, Pelham Warner. “It was like being the child of Wayne Rooney – exotic and glamorous and the King inviting you to tea. My christening was very glitzy. Violet Trefusis was one of my godparents, Frank Longford another.”

Plum had led a charmed childhood, but with no money, and had never settled down. “He appears

as ‘person unknown’ in group photos of his famous Oxford contemporaries like Waugh and Greene.” When he encountered Elia Terzulli in the last months of the war in Italy, he was lost - the Germans having removed all signposts. He requested a guide to show him around.

The young woman who volunteered was an Italian orphan from Puglia, a great beauty who towered a foot above everyone else, owing - so she believed - to the hormones she had taken for TB as a child. “Five foot 10 made her a freak in Italy, but when she met the British she was found to be beautiful.” Plum tried to introduce Elia to suitable English officers, until one day she levelled her Sophia Loren eyes at him: “What about you?”

Warner says: “The story is sweet, but carrying the seeds of its own future unhappiness.”

Plum hadn’t considered marriage. He was so much older, and more interested in port and bridge than in women. “He was what we would call bisexual.” He had had girlfriends, like Penelope Chetwode - who later married John Betjeman, but actually preferred horses; or Hildegarde Loretta Sell, a blonde cabaret singer from Milwaukee best known for the song *Darling, Je Vous Aime Beaucoup*. “He’d shared a flat with her in Mayfair before the war, but it turned out she was gay all her life.” Plum and Elia were married in a private chapel in Bari by an army chaplain. “Dad tried to find a bilingual best man in the regiment. He didn’t know him well.”

Soon after, Plum was posted to India. He sent

Elia ahead to London to await his return. “With a cardboard box, three books, a pair of shoes and very little English, she went to the mansion flat in South Kensington of the cricketing hero, Sir Pelham Warner. He said, ‘We can’t communicate in English, so I’ll show you how to become English,’ and he came back with a cricket bat and taught her how to hold it. ‘This is how you stand, and if you can do this perfectly, we’ll accept you’.”

Forty years later, Plum was walking through Cambridge - “and lo and behold, he bumps into his best man. ‘You must come and see Elia!’ Mother opens the front door in twinset and brogues. ‘How delightful to see you, you’re just in time for some crumpets.’ This was the south Italian waif transformed into an English country gentlewoman.”

Smoke over the Nile

Warner consults her A-Z, then leads the way right, into Leigh Street, where she spots an antiquarian bookshop, Collinge & Clark. On a stall outside are boxes of old documents and prints. She leafs through them. “I grew up in bookshops.”

The second most important moment in Plum’s life after marriage to his Italian guide was the destruction of the bookshop he had opened in Cairo after the war. He had fought with the 8th Army in the desert when he first saw Cairo, and wanted to go back. On 26 January 1952, on an afternoon known as Black Saturday, anti-British rioters rampaged through the streets.

Curled inside the honeymoon film was footage

‘What is a woman from *Vogue* doing taking on the church?’ was one reaction to her study of the cult of the Virgin Mary



Up and almost away: Marina Warner looks at the ninth-floor room of University College Hospital where “at one time I nearly did die”



Shades of 7/7: “I wish to be tolerant, but that doesn’t mean we should concede the ground to others,” says Warner in Tavistock Square

Vietnamese village of Trang Bang that Warner tuTavrned her sceptical gaze on the cult of the Virgin Mary, a figure who doesn’t feature in the *New Testament*, but who in Vietnam inspired a cathedral dedicated to the Immaculate Conception.

Warner had accompanied her first husband, writer William Shawcross. “A peaceful day, water buffalo in the paddy fields - then ...” She watched, running out of the smoke, the naked nine-year-old girl, “The Girl in the Picture” who appeared in Kim Phuc’s infamous photo. “The camera isolated her with a long lens. What we saw were women rushing out holding babies who had been terribly burned, with skin coming off.” It was a defining moment. “I decided to do Mary - a mother with a baby.”

The cult of martyrdom

A crumpled Starbucks cup, a yellow rose in cellophane, a promise that “London will not forget them”. On the railings in Tavistock Square is a memorial to the bomb attack in July 2005 which killed 13 people. “Now we have the cult of the martyrdom of Islam,” says Warner. “I’m worried about its growth. I wish to be tolerant, but that doesn’t mean we should concede the ground to others. We should combat them.”

In the garden nearby of Gordon Square, Warner shows me the statue of a brave young Muslim woman - Noor Inayat Khan, codenamed Madeleine. This SOE agent is one more example, like Joan of Arc, of female independent-mindedness, courage



Female example: the statue of SOE agent Noor Inayat Khan, executed in Dachau after being tortured for 10 months without revealing anything

and adventurousness which stretched Warner's horizons beyond the dull observances of her convent education, and enabled her to reach the top-floor office in this same square - she points it out - after her recent appointment as Professor of English and creative writing at Birkbeck College. She reads aloud the words on the plaque, how Noor was executed in Dachau after being tortured for 10 months without revealing anything. "Her last word: 'Liberté'."

Around the corner is University College Hospital where, Warner says, "at one time I nearly did die". She looks up at a ninth-floor window. "I was ill 10 years ago [after an exploded ovary became septic] and I was the first patient in that hospital, which had just opened. I was alone on a palatial gleaming ward. The first time I could walk, I went to the window and saw, in the Wellcome Trust building opposite, a vision, an unexpected vision."

She was staring at a 29-metre glass statue - "galactic and entrancing" - by sculptor Thomas Heatherwick. "The world had narrowed down to ceiling and sheets and fever. This was very saving. I felt I'd been opened. It was a pause, a hope."

To better view the sculpture, we enter the Wellcome Trust HQ and walk over to the security desk. A call is swiftly put through to someone high up (Warner sits on one of the Trust's committees) and we are let in to see Heatherwick's massive 14-ton art installation. A curtain of glass threads with shapes inside, "Bleigiessen", Warner explains, is named for a German tradition. "On New Year's Eve, you take lead shot, melt it over a candle and pour it over the back of a spoon into water, and the shape it makes is an omen for the year to come." In the Salem trials, she says, they tried it with the yolk of an egg.

Before reaching our final destination, Warner is keen to show me a stuffed body. We go up the steps into University College London, and there at the end of a corridor, glowering in a glassed-in

wooden kiosk, is the clothed corpse of Jeremy Bentham, who founded UCL in 1826 as the first non-religious place of higher education in England. "He intended you to come here, whatever your religious persuasion. And he bequeathed his body as a defiance, a challenge in the face of Christianity. 'There is no life after death, this is the only life, so we might as well cherish it'."

It's dark when we arrive at the Warburg Institute. She gets me a reader's ticket and we walk in, beneath a sign in Latin which Warner translates as "Let nobody lazy pass this threshold". "This dear and wonderful library is my favourite in the world. I use it for all my books now." Rather like her father's bookshops in Cairo, Brussels and Cambridge, the Warburg library is a map of the mind, arranged according to association. "I wrote a piece on Degas's bathing nudes - the art books were next to a history of bathrooms and plumbing. The librarians do your thinking for you."

Warner has walked here this evening to attend a lecture on Maternal Infanticide Narratives.

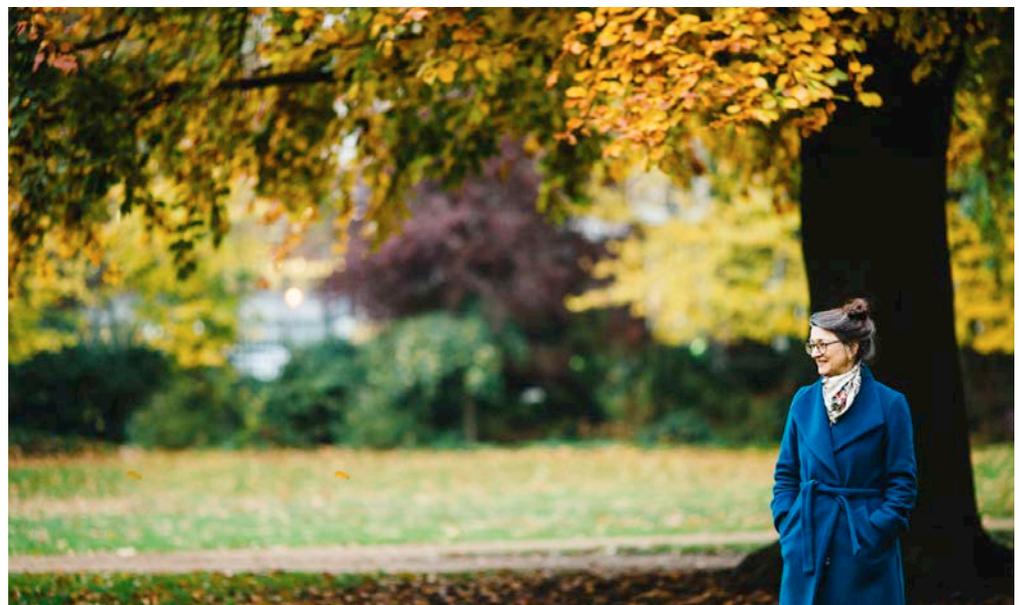
"What's your favourite story?" I ask her afterwards.

She considers. Probably a Persian romance by the 12th-century Sufi writer Nizami. About how Solomon and Sheba give birth to a deformed child - because they have not been truthful to each other.

"The child will be healed if they are. So they start to tell things previously not admitted, bad impulses, low motives, and to search their inner world. And as they share their weaknesses and moral inadequacies, they begin to love each other truthfully, rather than to love each other in image - and the child becomes well again." ■



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Top of the tree: in Gordon Square, which Warner now overlooks as Professor of English at Birkbeck College

By Nicholas Shakespeare



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