

Wider Reading - Cider with Rosie and Cranford

Cider with Rosie is an autobiography, it is not fiction like a novel but an account of a person's own life. Unlike a novel, it does not have the thread of a story with interacting characters connecting all its parts. It has a different pattern with which we are all familiar.

It is about childhood and growing up. We all have our own special early childhood memories and Laurie Lee seems to highlight the things we all have in common. The book starts with early childhood, early memories of people, an animal and places which then seemed strange and sometimes frightening. It goes on to describe going to school and branches out to tell us about members of his family, neighbours, tales about the neighbourhood and how the changing seasons of the year changed people's habits and activities. Laurie Lee writes about the illnesses which brought him close to death. He writes about the entertainment to be had in those days, his first girlfriends and the book ends in his teens with the first of his family about to leave home to get married.

The book is set in the village of Slad which still exists, not far from Stroud in Gloucestershire, however Laurie Lee is writing about the village as it was fifty or sixty years ago. We are reading about a past that has changed almost out of recognition.

Laurie Lee uses language in an attempt to make his memories come alive, vividly and colourfully. He may use a single word:

"Peas come in long shells of green pearls"

Or a comparison:

"The sun hit me smartly on the face like a bully"

Or a very descriptive and poetic sentence:

"All day she trotted to and fro, flushed and garrulous, pouring flowers into every pot and jug she could find on the kitchen floor."

All of these words, phrases, comparisons and rhythm of sentences are chosen to add spring and sparkle into what is being described.

Cider with Rosie is a youthful biography set in the colourful world of over half a century ago, it is about those occasions that occur in most of our lives. This is what makes the book such an enjoyable read.

Cranford is the work of Elizabeth Gaskell on the surface it appears as a quaint picture of provincial life, we are told in the first sentence it is a society of "Amazons". However as you get deeper into the book a somewhat ironic distance from society is maintained. Throughout the book there seems to be a tender, delicate mocking of lifestyles and values which invites us to marvel and sympathize with the eccentricity of the characters. Unlike Cider with Rosie, Cranford is a novel, studying the

aspects of change in the world. However like Laurie Lee, Elizabeth Gaskell writes about the people she had known in her childhood. It must also be taken into consideration that Cranford is set one hundred and fifty years ago, about one hundred years before *Cider with Rosie*.

Cider with Rosie and *Cranford* are both similar and different in many ways. Both books seem to be made up of short stories rather than a novel. In fact some chapters first appear as single articles in a magazine. In *Cranford* this is rather like the germs of stories which are found in the letters Miss Matty has kept tied into bundles which she reads with Mary.

Cranford is a series of linked sketches of life among the ladies in a quiet country village in the 1830's, it is based on Knutsford in Cheshire where Elizabeth Gaskell spent her childhood. The novel revolves around Miss Deborah Jenkyns and her gentle sister Miss Matty, daughters of the former rector. Elements of drama are provided by the death of Captain Brown whilst trying to save the life of a child, the surprising marriage of the widowed Lady Glenmire to the vulgar Mr. Hoggins, the failure of a bank which ruins Miss Matty and her rescue by the fortunate return from India of her long lost brother Peter. In my opinion the reason why *Cranford* is such an enjoyable read is its amusing but loving portrayal of the old fashioned customs and 'elegant economy' of a group of middle aged figures in society.

Women in *Cranford* are very set upon keeping up their appearances and this can make them seem somewhat fierce, never openly admitting to straightened circumstances. They would rather practice 'elegant economy' and observe the smallest rules of etiquette. At the tea table they would wear appropriate headgear while keeping to the well-understood patterns of social visiting. To gain self-respect you had to keep your feelings hidden this was as important as status. Due to this fact Mary learns more about the great sadness in her friend Miss Matty's life through the details she fails to tell her than through the details she reveals.

In the book *Cider with Rosie* the narrator, Laurie Lee, actually lives in the village and sees and takes part in all village activities. Whereas in *Cranford* the narrator, Mary Smith, is an outsider and only hears of the goings on in the village from her friend Miss Matty.

The idea of social order and solidarity is most strongly seen in *Cranford* when Miss Matty loses all her money. The other ladies of *Cranford* contribute all they can to set her up as a tea-seller and sweetshop keeper even though these kind and commercial practices would not enable her to survive elsewhere. As Mary comments:

'My father says: "such simplicity might be very well in Cranford, but would never do in the world"'

Cranford's marketing may not be responding adequately to change but social forms show otherwise. Although Cranford ladies stress the importance of class distinctions, it is in fact Miss Matty's loyal servant Betty and her new, labourer husband who offer her a home. This arrangement however does not need to be put to the test because Peter returns from India with enough money to bail out his sister. Peter's return brings up another illusion the ladies in Cranford hold; the fact that they can manage without men. Elizabeth Gaskell can be seen as being somewhat tongue in cheek about the self-protective, socializing characteristics of the unmarried women. But on the other hand, Elizabeth Gaskell seems to be experimenting with what might be thought of as women's narrative. Mary comments that:

"I had often occasion to notice the use that was made of fragments and small opportunities in Cranford; the rose-leaves that were gathered ere they fell, to make the pot-pourri for someone who had no garden; the little bundles of lavender-flowers sent to strew the drawers of some town-dweller, or to burn in the chamber of some invalid."

Similarly, Cranford is made up of 'fragments and small opportunities',

The letters, which Miss Matty reads with Mary, carried with them:

"A vivid and intense sense of the present time, which seemed so strong and full, as if it could never pass away."

These letters symbolized, as they are dropped one by one into the fire, a passing of a changing world. The world around Cranford is changing but the women seem to be set in their ways. They prefer to ignore the vast economic and social changes taking place in England at that time. However they cannot remain unaffected.

Cranford is made up of a collection of ageing women who although want to stay as they have always done are now becoming unable to do so. Throughout the book new influences keep on creeping their way in. These begin with the arrival of Captain Brown and continue with the closeness of the railway.

Cranford is a town in a world of its own but its snobbishness and old-fashioned ways must make way for the more vital energetic forces of the new age. Never the less Cranford did have some good points. The motivation of Miss Matty and her friends was based on true kindness and generosity the very qualities the industrial new age lack.

In the village of Slad in Cider with Rosie, everyone was poor. It was an extremely rural dwelling. There was a church, a chapel, post office, two pubs - the Star and the Woolpack - and the Hut for penny dancers. There

would have been one woman in the village who acted as midwife and another who would lay out the dead. Villagers bottled fruit, kept pigs and hens, trapped pigeons, collected kindling, fermented flowery wines and bartered home grown vegetables, eggs, rabbits and game. There was a heroic village cricket team. Life was intensely communal, with choir outings, concerts and harvest festivals. Otherwise they just amused themselves.

However the village was not all 'fields of poppies and blue skies'. There were tramps and children dying of perfectly ordinary diseases like whooping cough. Then there was the murder of Vincent, the boastful villager who had returned from New Zealand, the escape of Jones's goat:

"Huge and hairy as a Shetland horse."

There was also the tale of the Browns' sad ending in the workhouse and the suicide of the beautiful Miss Flynn.

Walking was probably the main form of transport in Cider with Rosie along with cycling. The whole village went on many outings which mainly consisted of walking and picnics:

"Then sometimes there'd be a whole days outing, perhaps to Sheepscombe to visit relations - a four-mile walk, which to our short legs seemed further, so that we needed all day to do it."

Laurie Lee also took trips with his local choir. These outings were a great reward and had to be worked hard for. They may have ventured to places like Weston-Super-Mare or Bristol to see the docks.

"The first Choir Outing we ever had was a jaunt in a farm wagon to Gloucester."

A farm wagon was probably the most common form of transport for this kind of outing up until:

"The coming of the horse-brake and charabanc"

Man and horse power were the only power ever known to Laurie Lee in the village of Slad, with the horse being the most powerful. You could only travel at speeds of up to eight miles an hour, which really limited where you could go, as it says in the chapter 'Last Days':

"That eight miles an hour was life and death, the size of our world, our prison."

As Laurie Lee grew older he noticed changes occurring in the village transport which he had always known and been familiar with. There was the introduction of 'The brass-lamped motor-car', 'the clamorous charabanc', and 'scarlet motor-bikes.' Everything began to change as new technology began to take over.

Cranford is almost the complete opposite to Cider with Rosie. In Cider with Rosie walking was common and thought of as the norm but in

Cranford walking was almost unheard of especially among the upper class members of society. Miss Jamieson comments:

"Don't you find it very unpleasant walking?"

Miss Jamieson says this as if she looks down upon those who wish to walk. Or maybe it is just that she likes to draw attention to herself and the fact that she has 'her own carriage in the coach house' and her very own sedan chair which she always went out in even if it was to cover the shortest of distances.

There was also the railway which although everyone hated as it showed the change taking place in the outside world, was still a means of transport.

The main means of education in Cider with Rosie is the small village school to which all the children attend. The school was made up of only two classes which you stayed in up until the age of fourteen. School was where you met the other village children and made friends. You didn't learn much at school, you left with:

"Nothing in his head more burdensome than a few mnemonics, a jumbled list of wars and a dreary image of the world's geography. It seemed enough to get by with."

School was more of a place to learn manners and prepare yourself for when you left and had to work in a field or factory.

Unlike Slad there was no village school in Cranford, children would have been sent away to a boarding school or a private tutor would be hired. Peter was sent away to Shrewsbury boarding school and was to go to Cambridge but he did not do very well. His father could not afford to hire him a private tutor and so taught him to read and write himself.

In Cider with Rosie Laurie Lee talks a lot about his first girlfriends. The relationships are mainly those of a young boy whereas in Cranford there is talk of marriage and settling down.

In Cider with Rosie there was young Jo, a thin girl with brushed back hair a 'cool face' and 'speechless grace'. She was the first girl Laurie was ever interested in. Laurie would wait for her after school when they would go and play a game together. The game was:

"Formal and grave in character, its ritual was rigidly patterned."

It was almost like a game of doctors, Jo would be the patient lying on the grass and Laurie would be the doctor moving his hands across her, exploring her body. They played this game every night until they were caught and even then they were just laughed at, Laurie comments:

"There were no magistrates to define us obscene."

Then there was Rosie Burdock, a devious girl who had 'sharp salts of wickedness about her' and looked at you with the 'sly glittering eyes of

her mother.' The events between Laurie and Rosie are what give the book its title. Rosie was provocative. Laurie had gone to the farm to help with the haymaking when he stumbled upon Rosie behind a haycock. She had a bottle of cider and offered it to Laurie and so he had:

"His first long secret drink of golden fire."

It was at this time under the hay wagon that Laurie had his first kiss:

"We kissed, once only, so dry and shy, it was like two leaves colliding in air."

These images of romance in *Cider with Rosie* are very innocent, those of a young boy learning more and more about the world each day as he becomes adolescent.

Cranford is a society of women who think they can live without men. It was unheard of for women in this period to tell a man that they were interested in them.

It was not like today where it is perfectly acceptable for a woman to ask a man out in those times the women had to wait to be asked by the man.

In the chapter 'A love affair of long ago' we hear of Miss Pole's cousin Mr. Holbrook who offered to Miss Matty long ago. From then on the whole chapter revolves around the ladies gossiping about why Miss Matty did not accept his offer. Also within this chapter we can see another example of class-consciousness:

"They did not like Miss Matty to marry below her rank."

This gives the impression that Mr. Holbrook was not looked upon as good enough for Miss Matty.

When anyone in Cranford got married it made all the other ladies look to themselves and wonder if their turn would ever come. For this reason they would dress up smartly perhaps to impress the men or perhaps simply to make themselves feel better.

Contact between people in *Cider with Rosie* is mainly by word of mouth. As the village is so small everyone hears about each other's business. Everyone hears about the death of Miss Flynn and the murder of Vincent the New Zealander. The good thing about this is the fact that everyone knows each other and however bad the crime committed they are not about to go and tell the police. To this day it is still unknown as to who committed the murder. Of course letters were written but as education was poor many people in Slad could not read or write, which made letter writing difficult.

In Cranford contact was also spread by word of mouth and gossiping between the ladies but the main point of contact was through letters. Mary Smith keeps in contact with Miss Matty through letters, it is the

sorting through of old letters which prompt Miss Matty to unearth the story of her younger brother, Peter.

In the beginning of the book the only contact that Mary has with the village is from her occasional visits to Miss Matty. However, as the book progresses she becomes increasingly active in shaping the town she records. It is she who initiates the scheme to set Miss Matty up in her teashop and she who sends off the letter which recalls Peter.

The older generations in the village of Slad in Cider with Rosie seem to make more of an effort to dress up formally than those who are younger. Laurie Lee's two Grannies, Granny Wallon and Granny Trill included. They wore:

"High laced boots and long muslin dresses, beaded chokers and candlewick shawls, crowned by tall poke bonnets tied with trailing ribbons and smothered with inky sequins."

Laurie was enthralled by their attire. He would imagine many, many grannies all dressed up parading in front of him, as he puts it:

"Rank upon rank of hobbling boots, nodding bonnets, flying shawls and furious chewing faces."

There is talk in the chapter 'Outings and Festivals' of Peace in 1919.

Everyone was to go in fancy dress. Laurie watched every one change. He watched as his sister Marge transformed herself into Queen Elizabeth with his other sister Phyllis as her lady in waiting. Marge wore:

"A gown of ermine, a brocaded bodice, and a black cap studded with pearls."

Laurie sees his sister in a new light. She is beautiful and graceful, Laurie is awestruck.

Phyllis is also looking beautiful, she is wearing:

"A long chequered dress of black and white velvet, and a hat full of feathers and moths."

Ladies in Cranford weren't too fussy about what they wore. They didn't follow fashion but what they did wear made them look respectful and admirable, as it was the expected rules of dress. They observe:

"What does it signify how we dress at Cranford, where everybody knows us?"

When they visited other towns or villages their explanation for dress was:

"What does it signify how we dress here, where nobody knows us?"
So the women in Cranford stuck to clothing that was in general 'good and plain'.

There are many interesting characters in Cider with Rosie but perhaps the most amusing are the grannies. Their constant bickering and unusual

habits make you feel warmth towards them. They are two very different characters. Granny Wallon was the more mysterious of the two, scurrying around never saying much about her past. She was very interested in the outside world collecting plants and taking walks in the garden:

"One saw her hobbling home in the evening, bearing her cargoes of crusted flowers, till she had buckets of cowslips, dandelions, elder-blossom crammed into every corner of the house."

Then there was simple Granny Trill who seemed to the children very strange. Her pattern of life was very different to others, Laurie says:

"She breakfasted, for instance at four in the morning, had dinner at ten, took tea at two-thirty, and was back in her bed at five."

Granny Trill seemed almost fierce. She was very religious and believed very much in fate, she also believed she knew what was going to happen in the future.

These two Grannies were ancient enemies but their lives revolved entirely around one another:

"Like cold twin stars, linked but divided, they survived by a mutual balance."

The Grannies died within two weeks of one another. Granny Trill was the first to go and once she was gone there was no further reason for Granny Wallon to live.

You can tell from the constant references throughout the book that Laurie Lee has a lot of respect for his mother. She has been through a lot. She was left to bring up many children on her own after her husband left to go to war. She lives in hope of his return and when the war ends she is really excited but he never returns and 'mother' is left to nurse a broken heart forever.

Cranford also has its fair share of interesting characters. There is 'The Honourable Mrs. Jamieson', all but Mary look upon her as the local oracle although she shows herself to be quite unworthy of her status. She doesn't seem interested in others and at house-parties when everyone else is chatting and playing cards it can be counted upon that Mrs. Jamieson would be found fast asleep or eating.

There is also Signor Brunoni who is a majestic figure revealed when the curtain rises on a much vaunted performance of magic in the assembly hall. He is an exotic touring conjurer who is not all he appears to be.

Of course there is also the dear and innocent Miss Matty who everyone knows and loves. Unfortunately she has led a sad life of lost opportunities. She admits:

"I dream sometimes that I have a little child... she comes to me when she is very sorry or very glad, and I have wakened with the clasp of her dear little arms round my neck."

Finally there is Mary Smith the narrator of the novel. She has much affection for the ladies in Cranford and provides a link between the old world and the new industrial one. She is practical and down to earth, able to sort out many of her neighbours' problems and on many occasions she has the last word.

I would now like to end by saying which of the two communities I would like to live in and why.

Cranford is very picturesque with its 'elegant economy' and rules of social etiquette. The people who live there are very interesting and amusing and have true qualities of kindness and generosity. If somebody gets into trouble they stick together and help each other. But Cranford is in a little world of its own. The world around them is changing but they are too determined to stick with their old fashioned traditions that they will not move with the times. For this reason I can say I would prefer to live in Slad with Laurie Lee. I like the fact that everyone knows each other and are willing to stick up for one another. Everyone one treats each other equally and they aren't as class conscious and so quick to pass judgement as those in Cranford. Slad is a more rural community where everyone chips in. There seems to be more freedom and although the education isn't brilliant at least you get to stay with your family. If you have a problem you don't have to go through it on your own, everyone will be there to support you and won't judge you for it. As far as I am concerned, Slad, the rural village of the 1940's would offer me a more fulfilling existence.