



Patrick Gale: 'I've heard others say my problem is lack of children' Photograph: Murdo Macleod for the Guardian

Patrick Gale: A Life More Orderly – Guardian 16 April 2012

I lead a life virtually without shape or discipline, living on my husband's beautiful farm, reliant on either neurotic obsession or tax bills for the motivation to work. Almost the only regular things in my average week are orchestra practice and dog-walking. And my "work" doesn't look like work at all, consisting as it frequently does of sitting on the grass or lying on a sofa and staring into space while I make things up. Because they're far more likely to find me gardening or baking than hunched over a manuscript, friends greet each new novel with surprise, as though I've written it on the sly. It would certainly surprise them to know how eagerly, if his husband died, say, their apparently dilettante neighbour could embrace the discipline of life in a monastic cell.

I once found myself sharing a book festival panel with distinguished novelist and academic Patricia Duncker, where an audience member asked us what, as readers, were our respective guilty pleasures. The expectation, perhaps, was that we'd say [Jilly Cooper](#) or [Dick Francis](#). Instead we found that Patricia's quiet vice was novels about men on submarines and mine was

ones about closed orders of nuns. I have no idea what influences were brought to bear on Patricia but in my case the blame probably lies only partly with watching *The Sound of Music* and *The Nun's Story* at an impressionable age. It was a succession of institutions that shaped my taste, starting with prison.

For the first four years of my life, my father was governor of HMP Wandsworth. In those days governors and their families were still provided with spacious, even gracious, housing within the prison perimeter wall. My earliest memories are institutional, trailing around my mother's rose garden (now a car park) fascinated by the trusties working there, talking to (less trusted) prisoners through their open windows, being spooked by my brothers in the succession of attic and basement rooms for which even a family of six had found neither use nor furniture. My mother, herself the daughter of a prison governor, did her best to make a home of a Munsters' mansion but, asked to draw houses in playgroup, I took for ever compared with the other Wandsworth children; even in a childish approximation of reality there were a lot of windows and a great many bars to fill in.

It's the nature of strange childhoods that, to the child experiencing them, they are entirely normal. Although I was the only one of us four children to be sent to boarding school, I blithely accepted it as the natural next stage, like losing teeth or progressing from Start-rites to black lace-ups from Clarks. (As the youngest, I had the habit of blind obedience.) So one institution was replaced with another. With hindsight I realise that money was short for two adults convinced that private schooling was a social and parental obligation and not a luxury. The completely unexpected scholarship I won to the choir school that educated the Quiristers for Winchester College's chapel must have carried the heady charge of a winning lottery ticket.

From eight to 21 I worked my way through the three stages of William of Wykeham's 600-year-old education plan, set up to train priests and clerks to repopulate a system crippled by the

black death – as a Quirister, then a Wykehamist and then at New College, Oxford. I was philosophically and socially blinkered, even by the standards of these venerable, eccentric establishments; my admissions tutors at Oxford denied me one of the "closed" scholarships then available at New College for applicants from Winchester, not because my essays on Jacobean tragedy and George Eliot were substandard but because my essays in the general paper had revealed "alarming political naivete".

I was in my 20s before I realised just how privileged, and distorted, the years of my education had been. And perceived how panicky I felt once I'd moved on. Quite apart from my foolish belief – fed by the ready applause of student productions – that my destiny was to become an actor, I had just enough self-awareness to know that if I applied to research for an MPhil and PhD, it would be less from a burning desire to write a thesis on Ivy Compton-Burnett and the tyranny of gender than from a craven wish to remain cloistered and unchallenged in a known world of libraries, quads, common rooms and tradition. To remain a small, unregarded part of a large and confident system. My father had lived and worked in institutions all his life – raised on the reassuring tenets of the Church of England, in which his father and grandfather were priests, sent to boarding school at six, then moving without pause from Oxford to the army to the prison service. His doubts gave me pause for thought. Why didn't I apply for what were then still lifetime careers in the civil service, the foreign office or – if I insisted on being artistic – the BBC? Instead I found myself living in a bedsit off Notting Hill Gate carving a largely accidental living as a writer. But even so the £25-a-week bedsit was in a kind of institution – a rambling house of 20 such with shared, distant bathrooms, a querulous French landlady guarding the hall in the manner of a Parisian concierge and wheezing visits from a emphysemic cleaner every weekday in the manner of an Oxford "scout". And I found myself gravitating for comfort to such institutions as could absorb me with no charge and warm me without my having to feed the gas meter – the British Library

reading room and the no less collegiate reference library at the bottom of Kensington Church Street. Novel writing paid extraordinarily poorly – I was rewarded with just £2,500 each for my first two novels and £3,000 each for the next two. In my darker, weaker hours, I wrote applications to teach English and drama in boarding schools or to research that Burnett MPhil after all, lured by the collegiate sirens.

What rescued me was a call from my agent offering the chance to spend nine months house-sitting for an eminent musicologist in a remote village between Albi and Toulouse. Utterly uprooted, given the chance to reinvent myself in French and obliged to hold my own socially among locals to whom none of my reference points – those place names that evoke a kneejerk response in the English – meant a thing, I finally saw that the hankering to belong to a college or school was a symptom of immature fearfulness. Within a year of leaving France, I moved to Cornwall, as far from the institutions of my childhood and, indeed, the friends who were their flesh and blood representatives, as I could move while staying in the country. So what is the appeal of institutional life? Security, certainly. Working as a freelancer can feel precarious at best and for those of us who have never possessed a permanent job and are correspondingly prone to fantasy, there is an enviable allure to working in an organisation, having a salary and knowing whatever money you are paid is yours to spend and doesn't have to be subdivided to meet income tax or VAT bills. But there's also the tyranny of daily choice; for those of us whose lives are anything but orderly, there's a powerful, starchy appeal in life in a world where everything has been decided – what you wear, what you eat, who you spend time with and your tasks for the day. (The appeal of such glorious nun novels as *This House of Brede*, *The Corner That Held Them* or *Black Narcissus* is the way they show women ironically only discovering their true natures and strengths of purpose once they have submitted their freedom, even their femininity, to the strictures of The Rule.) Some would say I need only re-embrace religion – that Christ, Allah or Buddha would have the same transformative effect. I've

heard others say that my problem is lack of children, that parenthood so ruthlessly deprives one of thinking time that the mind immediately puts whatever crumbs of spare time remain to the best possible use. (Not convinced by that one as I suspect the spare time is spent on sleep or eating carefully hidden chocolate, not penning deathless prose.)

Those of us who work from home and strive to live the life of the mind but find our precious days gnawed away by tedious, yet somehow urgent, displacement activities can easily fantasise that life in an institution might deprive one of Facebook, dog-walking and alphabetising the spice rack but might do so in return for blissful, uncluttered clarity of thought.