FOREWORD

Everyone knows that writers need understanding agents and editors at the beginning of their careers. I suspect they almost equally require understanding booksellers. I was lucky in that respect, since I ran across Mr. Francis Norman and his antiquarian bookshop in Hampstead, London, and learned a great deal more about literature there than I ever did at Oxford.

Let me hazard a definition of what this kind of bookshop should be like. It must be run by a person of humor, learning, and curiosity, to whom nothing in book form is alien, who will show you an Elzevir title page one moment and read you a passage from a sci-fi paperback the next. It should be kept in a permanent state of apparent chaos—always too many books for the shelf space, always piles and boxes of new-bought lots awaiting inspection. Above all, it must be catholic in its offerings, because its prime function for young writers is to help them realize their tastes—even to the extreme of convincing them that they don't like old books at all.

What we learn at university is to appreciate the prescribed masterpieces; we never have time to explore that vast bulk of the iceberg beneath the examination surface.

I left Oxford in a state of total confusion as to my real (as opposed to my acquired) tastes in literature. And it wasn't until I began to frequent Mr. Norman's and its presiding spirit—now both dead, alas—that I discovered what I was as a bookman. It was partly the choice, the gamble, the delight of the unexpected; the realization that there were other ways of loving and being erudite about books than the academic; perhaps it was above all, in those days, never having very much money to spend. The rich may suit their smallest fancies. The poor get to know what they really like.

I regret bitterly the general disappearance of such shops from the Britain (and, I am told, the America) of the 1990s. It is partly, of course, a matter of inflation and scarcity. Not even my friend Mr. Norman could now leave minor seventeenth- and eighteenth-century volumes, coverless and dog-eared, lying about for sale at giveaway prices to whoever unearths them. The great country-house sources have dried up, the demands and funds of university librarians the world over seem endless. But I was the other day in one of the largest secondhand bookstores in Britain: a colossal stock, all neatly shelved, cataloged and unbargainably high-priced, briskly efficient assistants at every turn. Such establishments may be a librarian's, a research scholar's dream. I could only weep for those two dusty, overcrowded rooms in Hampstead, where nothing could ever be found at once and somehow everything turned up in the end. The one place makes bibliophily seem a coldly calculated science; the other, a love affair.

My particular affair with the strange little novel that follows began some thirty-two years ago in Mr. Norman's.

Ourika, said the title page. *Paris, 1824*. There was no indication of author, I had never heard of the book, the copy was badly foxed, and I didn't anticipate much reward for the five shillings, then one dollar, I paid for it. If I paid even that it was simply on the strength of a glance at the opening sentence. One of the things I learned in that shop is that I adore narrative, real or imagined. It has become for me the quintessence of the novelist's art—and I liked the feel of the immediate bald plunge into story of *Ourika*. But I thought I would be disappointed, that I had lumbered myself with one more insipid nouvelle in the Marmontel tradition—some piece of didactic morality tinged with a dilute Romanticism, and a wasted buy even to someone with my inveterately magpie attitude to book collecting. I took the little octavo, green marbled-paper covers, quarter-bound in worn black calf, home and sat down to prove my fear right. Long before I had finished, I knew I had stumbled on a minor masterpiece.

I reread it almost at once and have done so a number of times again over the years. If anything, my admiration for *Ourika* has grown, and grown more than I realized. I chose the name of the hero in my own novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* quite freely—or so I thought at the time. It came as a shock, months after my typescript had gone to the printers, to pick up *Ourika* one day and to recall that Charles was the name of the principal male figure there also. That set me thinking. And though I could have sworn I had never had the African figure of Ourika herself in mind during the writing of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, I am now certain in retrospect that she was very active in my unconscious.

Oddly enough I had been more than normally self-aware of the origins of my own novel during the course of its writing, since I had promised to contribute to an anthology called *Afterwords* (Harper and Row, 1969), in which a number of us were to try to explain how we came to write our books. I explained in my own contribution how the seed of mine had come in a half-waking dream and consisted of an image of a woman standing with her back to me. She was in black, and her stance had a disturbing mixture of both rejection and accusation. Another characteristic of this image had been its refusal to "move" into the present. I was clear that I wanted to write about a woman who had been unfairly exiled from society. But I've never liked historical novels and had no desire to write one. It took me some months to accept that this ghostly presence adamantly refused to become contemporary. Today I do not understand how I can have been so stupid as not to see who that woman really was. I'm afraid it has revealed to me a remnant of color prejudice, since something in my unconscious cheated on the essential clue. The woman in my mind who would not turn had black clothes but a white face.

However, the last thing I want to do is to offer this present translation as a footnote to my own work. Englishing it has been a labor of love, no labor at all, and publishing it is an act of homage to a forgotten writer.

I should like to say one other thing about this first serious attempt by a white novelist to enter a black mind. I suppose a certain kind of contemporary black extremist might dismiss Ourika's story with a sneer—given the basic inauthenticity of her position, she deserves everything that comes to her. Such a sneer is, of course, histor-

ically ridiculous. By such standards, we should have to blame Columbus for taking so long to cross the Atlantic, when he could have done it by air in a few hours. There were only two choices, in the Europe of 1780–1805, the period *Ourika* spans, for an African *woman*: she could be an ignorant slave or she could be a social leper.

Ourika may cut a poor figure as an early Black Panther; but she is convincing as an intelligent human being, intolerably torn between her *négritude* and her European-educated mind. Many African writers, both French- and English-speaking, have since analyzed that particular predicament, and the countless black American fictional and biographical treatments of the problem need no mention here. Yet I doubt if the essence of the situation, the basic tragic equation, has ever been put more neatly and simply than in this little book. An added virtue, at least in my eyes, is that it universalizes the particular racial context, goes just as well for any intelligent member of a despised minority in a jealous and blind majority culture. Indeed it touches on one of the deepest chords in all art, the despair of ever attaining freedom in a determined and determining environment; and this is why if in one way *Ourika* has its roots in the French seventeenth century, in Racine, La Rochefoucauld, and Mme de Lafayette, in another it reaches forward to the age of Sartre and Camus. This is the case history of an outsider, of the eternal *étranger* in human society.

John Fowles, 1994