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## In his own write: Stephen Benatar

**The author got his first rejection slip at the age of 12. Five decades and many glowing reviews later he was still a literary nobody. So he took to selling his books in person — to one reader at a time**

Cosmo Landesman

I first met Stephen Benatar in a Waterstone's bookstore in north London. This well-dressed man in a fedora came up to me and said very softly: "Hello, I'm signing copies of my novel. Would you be so kind as to take a look?" And before I could say, "No, bugger off!", he had slipped a copy of *Wish Her Safe at Home* into my hands and disappeared.

"Oh dear," I thought, "another one of Brit-lit's deluded losers!" I've met so many in my time — writers who have measured out their lives in rejection slips; writers who have written dozens of well-reviewed novels that sank without a trace. So I bought Benatar's book much in the same spirit as I would buy a copy of *The Big Issue*: it was a pity purchase.

It just goes to show that you should never judge an author by their hat or their hustle. For, on reading his book, I quickly discovered that Benatar is not one of the deluded; he is one of the talented. He writes wonderfully about failed lives, missed opportunities and the seductive dreams of second chances. Benatar's terrain, writes the academic Gillian Carey, is "the weird hinterland of ordinary life where eccentricity shades into the bizarre, battiness into delusion and dementia..."

*Wish Her Safe at Home* is a gripping and haunting story about a middle-aged, genteel woman called Rachel Waring who inherits a Georgian house in Bristol and slowly goes mad. Professor John Carey, an esteemed reviewer for *The Sunday Times*, has called it a "masterpiece". Carey tells me: "It really is one of the most disturbing books I've ever read. Benatar manages to hit a raw nerve in the reader and make us uncomfortable by suggesting — very subtly — that Rachel, the mad narrator, is more like us than we would like to think." Doris Lessing has praised it as "a most original and surprising novel". And various celebrities — Emma Thompson, Joan Bakewell and Joanna Lumley (who showed interest in it for a possible starring vehicle) — have declared themselves Benatar fans.

Now, after 30 years of obscurity, Benatar is on the brink of a literary breakthrough. He's not going to be the Next Big Thing, but he won't be Another Forgotten Thing either. The prestigious *New York Review of Books* has already published *Wish Her Safe at Home* in its Modern Classics series in America, and is now issuing a British edition. And yet Benatar is still engaged in his one-man crusade to find readers for his books, approaching strangers and asking them would they "care to look at this". Benatar is a neat, well-preserved man of 73. The whiff of old-world civility comes off him like cologne. He talks nicely in neat, tidy sentences. Talking to him is like taking tea with a vicar; you feel you had better not swear. But once he starts to tell me quite openly about the various "dalliances" he had with men during his marriage, I relax.

The odd thing about Benatar is that he has the shameless, steely determination of a hustler, but the courteous good manners of a gentleman. He is a former umbrella salesman, English teacher (at the university of Bordeaux) and successful rep for the "miracle" cleaning product *Swipe* — and he has been doing his own peculiar form of book signings for the past 25 years. And not just in bookstores either. He has approached strangers on buses and trains; he has knocked on the doors of neighbours, invaded pubs, betting shops, high-street estate agents and even the local undertaker.

So why does he do it? It's not for the money. He earns roughly £1 for each copy of a book he sells, and ploughs the proceeds back into publishing his books. He's not in it for the fame. "No, I have no desire to be recognised on the streets," he says. He does it for one simple reason: he wants to be read.

"I know some people might think that I'm shameless, a bit too pushy, but what are you supposed to do? Nobody knows who I am. If I didn't go out there and promote my books, they'd just... die. My greatest fear is that my life's work will just vanish. I want to be read in the future in the same way that I read Jane Austen today."

High hopes, dead novels, cruel rejection slips, good reviews and bad sales — Benatar has known the lot. All over Britain there are Benatars — hopeful men and women who, despite critical indifference and commercial failure, keep writing novels. (Last year there were 3,500 hardback works of full-length adult fiction published in the UK, and surely many times that number were sent by hopefuls to publishers.) The vast majority of working novelists in the UK can't make a living at it (the average income was £12,330 for the good year of 2004/5 — and we live in harder times). They will watch their careers and dreams crash and burn or just slowly crumble with age.

Faced with such failure, some writers turn to drink, while others — such as John Kennedy Toole, the author of the posthumously published, Pulitzer-prize-winning *A Confederacy of Dunces* — choose suicide. But not Benatar. This is a man who for over a quarter of a century looked literary failure in the face — and then one day decided to fight back. He got his first rejection in 1949 at the age of 12 when he sent a short story to the *Evening Standard*. At 19 he had his first novel, *A Beacon In the Mist*, rejected.

Over the next two decades Benatar wrote 11 novels. He sent them in to publishers, and they sent them back with a curt "Thank you, but..." or "Not one for us".

By 1980, Benatar, who was by then married with four children and teaching English to support his family, decided that if he couldn't find a publisher for his latest novel, *The Man on the Bridge*, he would pack it in. It was set in London in the 1950s and tells the story of an ambitious young man on the make who realises that he is gay and has an affair with a rich and fashionable gay painter.

Without an agent to assist him, Benatar's family all prayed to God to find a publisher for Dad's novel. Well, He must truly move in a mysterious way, because that's what happened. It was plucked from a slush pile — a kind of compost heap of unsolicited manuscripts — at Harvester, who decided to publish a novel many publishers wouldn't touch because of its gay theme. What's more, they gave him the legendary Catharine Carver, who was Saul Bellow's editor, to help him get the book in shape. By now Benatar was 44. "It was so exciting," he remembers. "When I got the news, I went weak at the knees. I really believed that my career was about to take off. I even sent a copy of the book to Clint Eastwood for him to make into a film. He would have been perfect as the gay painter, but for some reason I never heard from him."

So what happened next?

"Oh, not much. A few good reviews, but it didn't sell well. But by then I'd already finished my next novel, *Wish Her Safe at Home*."

With its publication in 1982 by The Bodley Head, it really did seem that this time Benatar was on his way. *Wish Her Safe at Home* received wonderful reviews and was the runner-up for the prestigious James Tait Black Memorial Prize, whose former winners include Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene.

And then, once again, nothing. Poor sales. The phone stopped ringing. The family stopped praying. The rejection slips kept coming. By the end of the 1980s Benatar had written 15 novels — but only four were published. Then he wrote a novel called *Such Men Are Dangerous*, and nobody wanted it, so he did something quite extraordinary: he managed to persuade his local council — Scunthorpe — to publish it. A local Tory councillor protested: “It’s the duty of the council to dispose of rubbish — not publish it!”

I ask Benatar if he was downhearted during this period. “No, I never felt downhearted about the failure of any of my books. I have wondered why they haven’t been taken up by readers and why does nobody know me? The thing is, I love to write.” For decades he has had to watch many writers with far less ability than his own rise effortlessly to the top. Yet he shows no trace of resentment. “No, I don’t feel any bitterness or envy of successful authors. Honest. People like Ian McEwan, I don’t envy him because I don’t rate his work.”

The 1990s proved a tough time for Benatar. His marriage of 29 years to Eileen ended when he decided to come out as gay — though he insists that he had told his wife of his gayness before they were married. She has a different version of events: “I think there was something of a misunderstanding. I was rather naive and thought he had a few schoolboy crushes on men. I didn’t think he was fully gay.”

Benatar insists there were other important factors for the marital break-up. “It hadn’t been easy being married to a man who all he ever wanted to do was to lock himself away on the weekend and write. Although she was very supportive of me, I think she found my lack of success, my inability to make more money and enjoy a higher lifestyle, rather hard to take.”

Then, in 2007, Benatar tried to get *Wish Her Safe at Home* — which many fans consider his greatest novel — republished as a Penguin Classic. They were interested but worried that Benatar wasn’t a big enough name, and asked if he could get someone famous to write an introduction. So Benatar got John Carey to write a glowing introduction — yet still Penguin turned him down and so did 36 other publishers.

It is at this point that most writers would just quit. But Benatar decided to set up his own imprint — Welbeck Classics — to republish all his books, and to take on the task of selling them himself. In 2007 he produced a print run of 4,000 copies of *Wish Her Safe at Home* and has sold them all personally. So far he has published six of his own titles and each print run has sold.

It was a technique that he began in the mid-1980s when a friend of his daughter’s, who was a bookstore manager in Harrogate, invited him to come and have a go. Benatar sold a few copies and was hooked. “I met with a lot of resistance at first,” he says. “I remember one manager at a bookstore in Kingston saying,

‘I’ll eat my hat if you sell any copies here. My clientele aren’t the type to go in for this sort of thing.’ I sold a hundred copies that day.”

Bookstore managers who have seen Benatar in action are astounded by his success. Andrew Raymond from Waterstone's in Staines says: "He has a charismatic presence that people like. He sells around 50 books every time he comes in, which is a fantastic achievement for an unknown author." "My record is 128 books in one day," says Benatar proudly. "I actually outsold JK Rowling and John Grisham that day. But then, I was there, and they weren't."

It's curious that in the age of the internet and YouTube, where everyone now goes to market their books/records/whatever online, Benatar is having such success with his old-fashioned, face-to-face form of self-promotion. He has nothing against using the internet to sell books.

It's just that, he says: "I'm such a technophobe that I don't even know how to use email."

Central to Benatar's appeal is the fact that people feel that they have actually met the author, because he takes time to talk to them, not only about his book but about their lives, which most writers never do. Usually at signing sessions, you wait in a long queue, take your turn to have your book signed, exchange a few words with the Great One — and off you go. The whole meet-the-author encounter lasts for around 30 seconds. Benatar knows that to sell his book he has to sell himself, and it works. As one woman wrote on an online discussion of his work, "Last week I bought a book in Harrods and met the author — what a lovely man! Very charming and beautifully dressed — you have to admire a man in a neckerchief."

"I'm very careful not to offend or hassle anybody," he tells me. "I always give them my book and quickly walk away so they don't feel there's any pressure or they're being watched." Various celebrities — Elton John, Nick Hornby, John Snow, Clive Anderson, Zoë Wanamaker... — have been subject to the Benatar soft sell. He slipped his novel through the letterboxes of Emma Thompson ("she was terribly nice and wrote me a lovely note") and Doris Lessing ("so very kind with her praise"). Not all celebrity encounters have been so fruitful, however. "Peter Ustinov just rushed past me, which was a bit of a surprise, and Helen Mirren made a quick dash the other way when I approached."

Oh, and it is not just Benatar's books that some celebrities can't face, but his plays as well. You can find Benatar at the stage doors of London's theatres leaving copies of his various scripts for the likes of Judi Dench, Ian McKellen and John Hurt. So far he has had no luck — "Though Anthony Hopkins returned my play in person with a 'no thanks'." By 2009 life should have been perfect for Benatar. He had fallen in love with a young gay man — John Murphy, who is still his partner — and they lived together and worked on his books together. Then Benatar got some bad news: he had prostate cancer. He talks about his cancer as though it were just another rejection slip from a publisher: no big deal. "That was unfortunate, but I went and had treatment and I was given the all-clear last year. So there you are," he says with a shrug.

After his brush with cancer, Benatar finally got his lucky break. He had held a launch party at a bookshop for the relaunch of *Wish Her Safe at Home*. The next day he went back to the store to pick up some leftover wine. "As I was pushing a trolley of wine, a man came in the shop and I ran into him," he says. "So I apologised and said, 'Would you mind having a look at my book while you're here?'"

It turned out that the man Benatar had nearly run over was Edwin Franks, the managing editor of the publishing section of *The New York Review of Books*. He bought a copy of *Wish Her Safe at Home*. “It was a lucky accident that I ran into Benatar — or should I say he ran into me?” says Franks with a chuckle. “I read the book straight away and was knocked out. It’s not every day you find a neglected classic from an Englishman who is still alive. Everyone in the office read it and was just as excited as I was.”

A few weeks later, Benatar got the news for which he had been waiting for nearly two decades: a prestigious publisher wanted to publish his book both here and in America. Now *The New York Review of Books* has whisked Benatar off to New York to do readings and to try his brand of self-promotion on the Americans. His children — Adam (44), Prue (43), Piers (41) and Thea (39) — have been rather shocked by the news that after all this time Benatar has finally made it. Prue tells me: “I think we’re all delighted but rather surprised by Dad’s sudden success. We had to watch him all the time we were growing up, always writing and never getting anywhere. At the time we resented the fact that he wasn’t spending more time with us and wasn’t making enough money.” Eileen — with whom Benatar remains good friends — says: “I think it’s great that he’s at last being recognised. He has devoted his whole life to his books. I admit there were times when I thought he was wasting his time. He had the talent but not the luck. And now he’s been vindicated.”

Rachel Waring, the loopy heroine of *Wish Her Safe at Home*, says at one point: “Wouldn’t it be fine if we all had second chances?” Benatar’s work illustrates the poignancy of that impossible dream; but paradoxically his life teaches a very different lesson: don’t let your dream die. One day it might just come true.