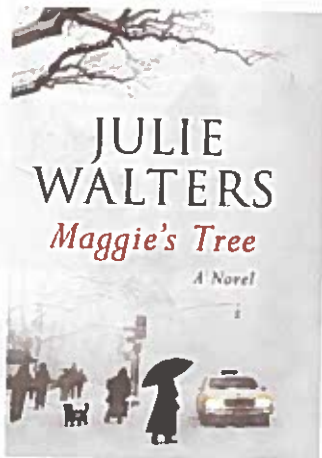


"I couldn't let Alan *read* it at first – I had to read it to him, down the phone, because I thought if he saw the printed word he might not *get* it"



It's reassuring, though not at all surprising, to discover that Julie Walters is exactly as you imagine her to be. Within a few moments of meeting her, you feel you're chatting to an old friend, not witnessing a performance. Unscripted, she's as amusing as the characters Victoria Wood has created for her and, in appearance and manner, unstagey and totally down to earth. A combination of Alan Bennett and the late Thora Hird, whose long career – like Walters' own – ran the gamut. The memoirs, signed a few months back by her long-time publisher Alan Samson for a reputedly eye-popping sum, should be a good read indeed. "There's no pressure, no pressure," she jokes, "and hopefully I'll write it a lot quicker than the novel, which was like a hobby."

That novel, *Maggie's Tree*, is a project that's kept Walters occupied, on and off, for a decade and, with it, she followed Samson from Little, Brown to Weidenfeld. "Alan would say, 'have you written any more' and I'd say 'yeah, yeah – I'll send it to you next week'. It was a bit like that, but I thoroughly enjoyed writing it... Actually, I couldn't let Alan *read* it at first – I had to read it to him, down the phone, because I thought if he saw the printed word he might not *get* it."

She did it for two years before she broached the idea of a career on stage. "My Mum wasn't very happy about me becoming an actress: 'You've been watching too much television'," Walters pantomimes, in her late mother's Mayo accent. "My brothers protected me – they stood between her and me while I told her. They thought I should give it a go, and my Dad did too. I can understand her worries – she thought it was what other people did. But she came to the premiere of *Educating Rita* and she said to the policeman outside, 'that's my daughter'. She was great once I got a pension: 'No good working if you have no pension.'" So Walters went to Manchester Polytechnic to study English and Drama, also taking a teaching certificate so that her mother might sleep easier in her bed.

In fact, her mother needn't have worried, for success came quickly as part of Liverpool's celebrated Everyman company, where she worked with Alan Bleasdale, himself still a drama teacher, and Willy Russell, whose aforementioned play transferred first to London and then to the big screen. "The Everyman was fantastic and I loved Liverpool. They're proper audiences that you don't get anywhere else – not just middle-class people. And everyone there has this extraordinary sense of humour." In the years since, she's

## Truly Julie

This autumn, the ever-versatile Julie Walters takes the stage as a novelist. Liz Thomson caught up with her for a predictably entertaining afternoon tea

Walters: the novel was like a hobby

Set in New York, *Maggie's Tree* is a surprisingly bleak and unsettling novel to come from Walters' pen. Maggie is an actress and has been taken by her old friend Cissie, a comedienne and something of a national treasure, to see their mutual friend Helena's moment of Broadway triumph. The only problem is that Maggie is teetering on the edge of breakdown and scarcely have they hit town when she goes missing, thus throwing her friends – including Luke, Helena's needy and judgmental husband, into a crisis. Added to which it transpires that Cissie is on the run from the tabloids, leaving the folks back home to face the music. "Who knows where it came from," Walters reflects. "I've come across a few people with mental illness and I've always found it rather alarming, because they're out of control and unpredictable... I wanted to write about it in order to try and sort it out... I had all the characters and I wanted them to go to New York and for the crisis to occur while they're away, because it's always worse. But I didn't know where to start, so Alan suggested I pick a key scene and plunge in." Which she did. By way of research, she visited a police station in Brooklyn. "There were people in cages, just like in *NYPD*," she exclaims, eyes wide behind her bifocals. She also went to Bellvue, the Downtown hospital where Maggie, like many an uninsured nutter, ends up, and talked with "two exhausted nurses. A lot of screaming was going on."

Nursing is something Walters knows a bit about, for that was the career she chose, or rather her Irish-Catholic mother chose for her. "I thought it was an easy way out of being expelled! There was a part of me that enjoyed it, the actress in me I suppose. I liked entertaining the patients. When the senior nurses had gone, I'd say 'right you 'orrible lot. Get yer grapes out. I want to see what yer wives have brought you this week'. They liked that."

participated in a diverse range of projects, from Alan Bennett to Tennessee Williams, *Macbeth* to *Calendar Girls*, *Personal Services* to *Billy Elliot*. All the while, her stage and TV partnership with Victoria Wood was winning her a committed audience. "We were working together at the Bush and eating at this café we went to every day – liverboil and chips – and she said we'd met before. And then I remembered this little person with glasses throwing up into a bucket because she was so nervous. *She didn't get in!*" Walters continues, her tone outraged.

So, plenty for the memoirs. She will take time out from acting to write them, repairing to Sussex and the organic farm run by husband Grant. "We've a herd of cattle, sheep, pigs, chickens... It's a serious business. I'm not involved in the actual farming myself, though I did pack the eggs the other night. *No pretensions!*", she declares, in a voice belonging to Lady Bracknell. "Actually, I loved it." She's also particularly fond of one of their Sussex cows. "I've told Grant he can't send her to slaughter. She was hand-reared because her mother couldn't feed her and she comes up and rubs her great big head on you."

Anyway, the memoirs. "I've read Brando's, which I thought were dull and didn't always believe. Olivier skated round everything that was interesting," she muses. "I want to make a few connections and work out where I am now from what happened... I don't want it to be a timeline, but I'm going to start with my birth, because my mother described it very graphically every year of my life, so I'll have to start there. It was fairly traumatic and awful, apparently. For her. The priest was got in – and my mother ate a big fish dinner, so I won't go any further."

*Maggie's Tree* is published by Weidenfeld on 12 October, price £16.99

