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Matthew Dennison

My Life in Houses

Margaret Forster

Chatto & Windus, 272pp, £14.99

Inevitably Margaret Forster's account of the houses where she has lived serves as an alternative memoir. The 76-year-old novelist and biographer is suffering from metastatic cancer, so there is a valedictory quality to aspects of her book. She quotes Leonard Woolf: "Looking back on my life, I tend to see it divided into sections which are determined by the houses in which I have lived." In Forster's case, these sections resonate with happenings, feelings and people, but the houses remain central.

At one point she appears impatient of her deep-seated habit of regarding her home as an active player in her life: she describes this impulse as "pushing emotion on to what was just a pile of bricks and mortar". Were she proof against such a tendency, with its suggestions of anthropomorphism and pathetic fallacy, she would not be the writer she is and this book could not exist. Her admission, partway through her account, that "surroundings had always mattered to me", is entirely superfluous.

Such close engagement with a house is, she acknowledges, a particularly writerly preoccupation. To illustrate, she cites authors whom she herself has examined as biographical subjects, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Daphne du Maurier. For all three women, a house is a universe in miniature, ideally ordered to suit its occupant – like an item of bespoke clothing, as Forster describes it. It reflects and reassures the writer at her (housebound) desk. Its qualities are affirmative; it offers solace, inspiration.

Forster's focus on the spaces she has inhabited over eight decades, and the extent to which they in turn inhabit her, is consistent. She resists any conventional autobiographical impulse. Her husband (Hunter Davies) and her children are sketchily drawn; she does not reflect at length on her highly successful career as a writer, her books or what her writing means to her, nor are we often reminded that Forster's homes have been cradles not only to her own writing but that of her husband, too. Instead, she explores a very personal emotional and imaginative bond with her living spaces, some of them permanent, others – including holiday homes in Britain and abroad – temporary or little used. *My Life in Houses* is exactly that;

and as a result, perhaps, it is simultaneously less moving but more universal than it might have been. Forster's spaces are specific to her and in this very specificity lies their value to her. Few of us have not felt at some time the womb-like tug of a favourite room.

Margaret Forster was born in 1938 in a newly built council house on a model estate put up by Carlisle County Borough Council on an expanse of poor-quality grassland to the west of the town, 12 houses to the acre, green spaces remaining. There were two bedrooms to the Forster home in Orton Road but no indoor loo or basin, and rudimentary heating in the form of a black iron range that required assiduous attention. Looking back, Forster describes herself as "a lucky girl", an assessment intended as much for her younger self as the reader.

She lived there with her parents and siblings until she was 14. By the age of seven she had already begun to dream of a different home, a different aspect; she wanted distance from the rowdy corner pub, flowers in place of potatoes in the garden, and a view of garish colours rather than the predominant grey of outhouses, coal sheds, dank privies. Her childish cravings were for space, quiet, prettiness and, like writers before and since, a room of her own. She

Forster's homes have been cradles to her writing

explains this reaction as not "any rejection of my own family, just a natural desire to have the chance not to be forced to be with others all the time": that is to say, not snobbery, but the bookish child's longing for a desk and the possibility of reading undisturbed. As Forster recounts it, that desire, natural or otherwise, became a significant dynamic of her life. Until her purchase in 1963, with Davies, of the house in Boscastle Road, London NW5, which remains her home today, Forster was a woman constantly – perhaps unusually – focused on settling satisfactorily the question of her living arrangements.

Since 1987 Forster and Davies have divided their year between Boscastle Road and a house in the Lake District. Now, given her illness, she anticipates a final move, to a hospice. That threatened severance spices her love for her home of 50 years. In truth, this sensitive and inspiring writer has always been passionately attached to the homes where she has lived. ●

Matthew Dennison's latest book is "Behind the Mask: the Life of Vita Sackville-West" (William Collins)

Pale riders

Edith Hall

The Amazons: Lives and Legends of Warrior Women Across the Ancient World

Adrienne Mayor

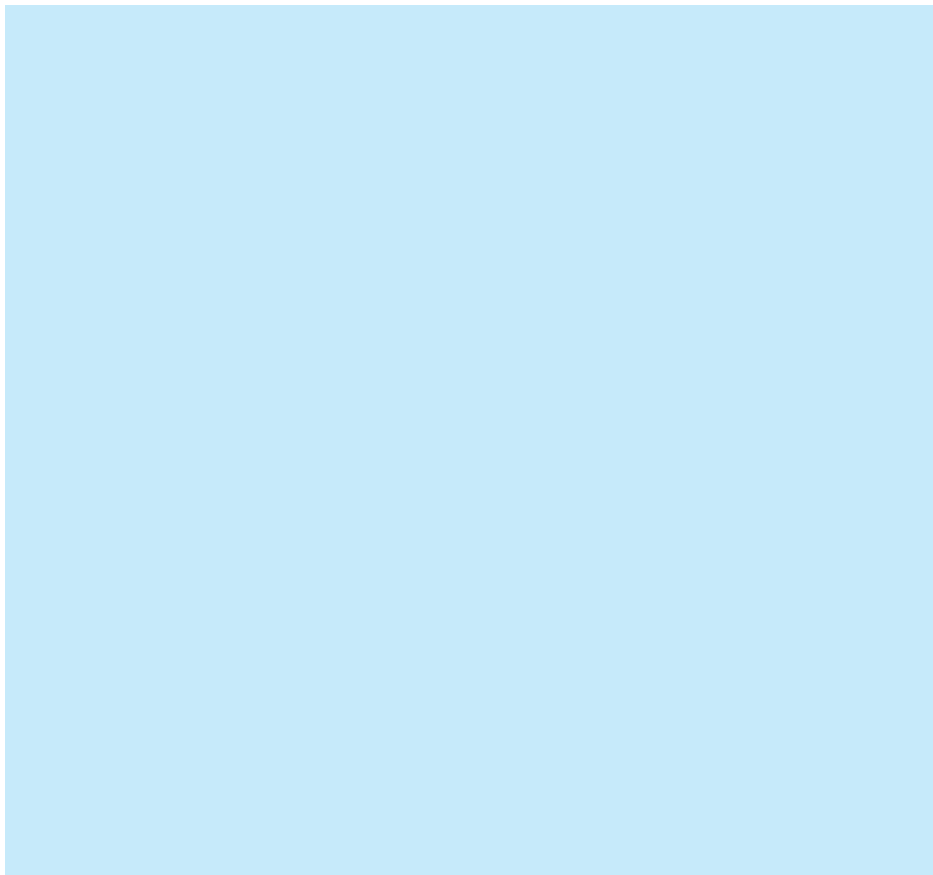
Princeton University Press, 536pp, £19.95

The Amazon of classical mythology retains a powerful presence in contemporary culture. As a warrior woman, skilled in archery and equestrianism, who rejects patriarchy and lives free from male control, the Amazonian archetype has inspired and provided a point of comparison with countless powerful or unconventional females, from Elizabeth I and Catherine the Great to Wonder Woman and Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games*.

These mythological warrior women were also among the most omnipresent figures in the art and literature of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Scarcely a classical temple did not feature a sculpted scene of battling Amazons, dressed in patterned leggings and felt caps with ear-flaps. Amazons feature in almost every account of ancient war, both mythical and historical, from the plains of Troy to the Athenian Areopagus, from the Trojan Aeneas's struggle to conquer Italy and found Rome to Alexander the Great's farthest eastern campaigns.

Ancient historians tell elaborate stories about the Amazons, especially those in Scythia. Sometimes they are presented as living apart from men in matriarchal communities that routinely killed off most baby boys; at other times they were said to fall in love with their neighbours the Scythians, or to have been tamed into submission by hypermasculine Greek heroes. But they were not imagined to be lesbians, and one other prevalent modern notion about the Amazons has little foundation in reliable ancient sources: that they cut off one breast to aid their archery. This idea originated in a false etymology of "Amazon" from a Greek word for breast (*mastos* or *mazos*); in fact, the name *Amazon* originated in a non-Greek ethnic label – perhaps Scythian or Iranian – of great antiquity.

If Adrienne Mayor had merely applied her rigorous scholarship and poetic charm to documenting the shifting image of Amazons in classical, medieval and post-Renaissance European culture, she would have written an important contribution to ancient history. But she has achieved much more. By painstaking research into the literature, folklore and ancient traditions of the myriad peoples between Greece, Russia



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and China, especially the Kyrgyz, the Azerbaijanis and the Circassians of Caucasia, she has broken down the often impenetrable walls dividing western cultural history from its eastern equivalents. Mounted female heroes, fearless and at arms, feature in the stories of all these cultures, even though only a few, such as the Chinese lyrical heroine Mulan, have ever been introduced to the west. Armed women still ride with their menfolk all over the steppes; in Kazakhstan they engage in dangerous competitive races and games on horseback. Mayor documents the fascinating story of the early-modern travellers who saw such horsewomen and, sensibly enough, deduced that they were descendants of the celebrated Black Sea Amazons, of whom classical authors had so much to say.

In the 19th century, early anthropologists such as J J Bachofen used the Amazon myth as part of their evidence for the hypothesis that world patriarchy had been preceded by an Ur-matriarchy. Engels accepted this hypothesis in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) and it remained popular for some decades. But as Marxism ceded ground to Lévi-Straussian structuralism in the 1960s and 1970s, a new orthodoxy came to prevail in the classical establishment: the Amazons were a fiction, invented by the ancient

Greeks in order to help them define aspects of their own culture, which was ruled by men. Indeed, ancient Greek civilisation lay at the misogynist end of the patriarchal spectrum, because the Greeks defined marriage in terms of patrilinear succession, the physical transfer of women's bodies and their attached property between men of different households, and the policing of female sexual activity, out of an extreme concern for natal legitimacy.

Greek men imagined impaling Amazons on long spears

The Amazon, according to this view (which was happily adopted by most feminist classicists), was an emanation of the Greek male imagination which defined the behaviour of her antitype – the “proper” Greek woman, controlled by her husband, averse to fighting, and definitely not prone to roam open spaces, unsupervised and astride a swift horse. The existence of the story of the Amazons, whom Greek men liked to imagine personally impaling on long spears, or raping, encouraged these men to rein in any wives, sisters or daughters who exhibited Amazonian tendencies.

Yet in the past three decades an extraordinary series of archaeological discoveries has proved incontrovertibly that there were warrior women among the nomads of antiquity. They were indeed archers and they fought alongside their menfolk in battle. In the 5th century BC at Ak-Alakha, high in the Altai Mountains, the Pazyryk people buried, together, a man and a young woman as well as their weapons, horses and trousers. In 1984 at Sampula in north-western China, researchers discovered the skeletons of 133 male and female nomads in a mass grave of the 1st or 2nd century BC. They had been killed in combat and were wearing colourfully patterned trousers. One trouser leg was decorated with a centaur blowing a war trumpet that looks just like those blown by Amazons and Scythians in Greek art. The headgear of these nomads featured ear-flaps resembling those on the caps of classical Amazons. Such material, graphic and plentiful finds made it impossible for anyone ever to claim again that Amazons were a figment of any imagination.

The historical Amazons would have been encountered by the ancient Greeks who travelled and traded around the Black Sea and fought in Alexander's campaigns in Bactria. The discovery of “real” Amazons' graves, supplemented by anthropological fieldwork among the remaining nomadic peoples of the Caucasus and Eurasia, suggests that the Greeks were filtering eyewitness accounts through a myth-making lens, just like the bards of the Caucasian Nart sagas and Chinese epic narratives.

Mayor opens up new horizons in world storytelling and feminist iconography. Her implication is that we need more Amazons in our own storytelling. She describes how, in ancient Athens, young girls would be given an Amazon clay doll (there's a collection in the Louvre); she was brightly painted and wearing a war helmet, and her arms and legs were articulated so she could be dressed and undressed like a feminist Barbie. Another ancient doll, this one ten inches high, was found in eastern Turkey. She is dressed in the Amazon uniform of tunic and studded belt, with long curly hair, and she once held arms and armour. We even know the name of the doll-maker, Maecius, who was proud enough of his work to mark it with his signature. There may not be Amazon dolls in today's toyshops, but a good substitute would be to read this wonderful book with your children and show them its pictures, especially before sitting down with them to watch *The Hunger Games*. ●

Edith Hall is professor of classics at King's College London. Her new book, “Introducing the Ancient Greeks”, will be published by the Bodley Head in April