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The Do-Gooder

In a first novel, a woman charged by devotion to Graham Greene sets off to right global wrongs.

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By WILLIAM BOYD

It's very easy to develop a healthy obsession with a favorite author -- I have a couple of lengthy trysts going on with Cyril Connolly and William Gerhardt, though my heart belongs to Nabokov -- and because the relationship between writer and reader is so unusually intimate (that voice you hear in your head is your own but the words are by somebody else) it's also very easy for that obsession to become a little unhinged.

Certainly, this is what has happened to Molly Benson, the central character in "Loving Graham Greene," Gloria Emerson's beguiling and memorable first novel. Molly has read everything Greene has written, but what drives her into near idolatry of the author is a chance encounter in Antibes. Molly happens to be dining in the same restaurant as Greene one evening. As he leaves he drops a piece of paper. Molly runs after him to return it. An invitation to drinks in his apartment follows, and then an intermittent correspondence ensues that ends on Greene's death.

But Greene's influence on Molly extends beyond the grave: all of Molly's actions and her view of life are determined and seen from a Greenian perspective; he becomes her moral guide and conscience. "Loving Graham Greene," says Molly's brother, Harry, "makes her want to see a world different from the one she knows, and find out new things about people."

Molly Benson is a tall, eccentric, middle aged, wealthy, passionately liberal-minded woman who lives in Princeton, N.J. She works one day a week in a bookstore. Her husband, Paul, is making an interminable film in Japan and Molly spends her time looking for worthy third-world causes to support -- financially and with whatever physical aid she can manifest. She has a best friend named Bertie Einhorn (a woman), who plays Sancho Panza to her Don Quixote.

The new cause that dominates the novel is the Algerian civil war (we are in the early 1990's). Molly gets it into her head that an ideal use for her excess money would be to offer it to beleaguered Algerian writers and journalists so that they can hire bodyguards to protect them from the ruthless fundamentalist hit squads that are targeting intellectuals. So with little ado she and Bertie and a stout young English graduate student named Toby Plunkett (a very Greenian trio) head off to Algiers armed with a wad of dollars and a few contact addresses.

And of course, once they get there, nothing works. For all the zeal and goodwill they display, Molly, Bertie and Toby seem only to excite derision, suspicion and mistrust in the people they encounter. They offer money and it is accepted, but that's as far as things go. They befriend a taxi driver, Ahmed, who shepherds them about town from appointment to appointment. One day he takes them into the Casbah, where they are attacked by thugs and badly knocked about. Some time later Molly recognizes one of their attackers as Ahmed's younger brother, Saadi, a new recruit for a fundamentalist movement. In an epiphanic gesture she apologizes to him and resolves not to turn him in. But Toby, who's had his arm broken in the attack, also recognizes the boy and covertly does otherwise, writing to the police and giving Saadi's address. So the trio leave Algiers, sadder and no wiser, having achieved nothing and, indeed, having inadvertently left a trail of damage and misery behind them.

Molly is left with little consolation. She had seen, Emerson writes, "the absurdity of her life before, that was nothing new, but now there was no reason to ever believe in her own usefulness again, and it was this pretense which she so needed. Algeria had banished all hope."

Such a summary of this short novel appears to endow it with some narrative order and clarity, but this is somewhat misleading. Much of the book's genuine charm resides in its narrative meanderings and eccentricities -- mirroring Molly Benson's own rickety life and personality. The point of view is omniscient (a rarer and rarer device these days) and we jump jerkily, swiftly, from one character's mind to another, with many flashbacks and asides, so that the picture of Molly that emerges is truly multifaceted, running the gamut from the affectionate (her brother) to the exasperated (her mother) and the intensely irritated (Bertie's husband). At first this fractured disorder seems a kind of artlessness -- well-handled omniscient narration is a real authorial skill -- but gradually the artfulness in the method reveals itself and Molly's world, her life and desperate aspirations begin to cohere and captivate.

Gloria Emerson is best known as a journalist, the author of "Winners & Losers," a long and deeply felt exploration of the scars the Vietnam War left on the American people, which won a National Book Award in 1978. More than two decades later, "Loving Graham Greene" can be seen, among other things, as a kind of coda to the trauma that the war provoked. Molly -- like the author, I would assume -- was intellectually, politically and emotionally formed during the Vietnam War and in the years of protest the war generated. In her middle age Molly is still defiantly *engagée*, but time has moved on. In the complacent and self-obsessed 1990's, her urge to help the poor and downtrodden is seen as quaint and ingenuous.

Among its deeper themes, "Loving Graham Greene" is a meditation on the powerlessness of those who simply want to do good in the world. What makes Molly love Greene is "his compassion for the poor and the tormented and the lonely." It's not so much Greene's qualities as a writer that inspire her, more the personality of the author as it appears to emerge from his novels and stories. Greene represents a form of unswerving liberal conscience that Molly aspires to, but all her efforts to live out his philosophy are thwarted and doomed. T. S. Eliot reminded us that there is a wide gulf between the man who suffers and the mind that creates, and Molly Benson's fashioning of her "Graham Greene" is facile and wrongheaded (Greene was a hugely complex and elusive man). But for all that, Molly's absolute need to help is its own best justification. Emerson is too worldly an author not to recognize her protagonist's naïveté (and the novel is full of wry and delightful worldliness), but Molly's fond dreams and painful disappointments are universal and will be understood by all decent people, not just those of the Vietnam War generation. In this story of Molly's longing to be useful -- and her deep frustration -- Emerson has produced a funny, moving and strangely profound novel. I think Graham Greene would have been pleased.

William Boyd's latest novel is "Armadillo." He has recently written and directed a feature film, "The Trench," which opens in New York next month.

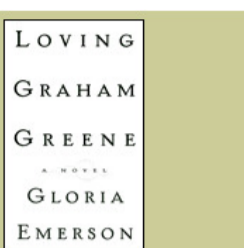
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By Gloria Emerson.

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