

DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY
2024/25 SEASON



TYPIST ARTIST PIRATE KING
(Language: English)

Director: Carol Morley

UK Release: 2023

Running time: 108 minutes

Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 12 February 2025

“With natural sympathy and warmth, film-maker Carol Morley has created this likable, generous, imaginative response to the work of the neglected English artist Audrey Amiss, played here with beady-eyed gusto by Monica Dolan. And if the movie finally has a bit of a soft centre, then this is partly because of Morley’s refusal to fetishise the supposedly transfigurative pain of mental illness.

Sunderland-born Amiss trained as a painter at the Royal Academy in the 1950s, had a breakdown and was in and out of institutions for the rest of her life, finally taking a secretarial job but restlessly creating unsold and unseen art, in the form of raw impressionistic sketches of her daily existence and an autofictional collage-journal of found objects – packaging, flyers, leaflets – to which she added stream-of-consciousness diary entries, a continuously updated real-time manuscript record of a hidden life. It is held in an archive at the Wellcome Collection in London, which Morley was the first to examine (biographers will surely come later). She discovered Amiss’s passport with its scribbled entry under Occupation: “Typist Artist Pirate King.”

In some ways, this is like Morley’s 2011 documentary *Dreams of a Life*, which sought to reconstruct the life of a mysterious forgotten woman who left no direct testimony after her tragic death. Here, Morley has a huge amount of archive material to draw on, but has chosen instead to springboard an imagined narrative from just a few telling details: an old-fashioned road movie.

Dolan plays Amiss in a chaotic London flat, twitching and flinching with a kind of hypervigilant defiant unhappiness, always suspecting conspiracies against her, brooding over the past. Kelly Macdonald plays an imaginary social worker Sandra who comes once a fortnight to endure a nonstop barrage of abuse from Amiss. Cantankerous and impossible and entirely ungrateful, Amiss demands that Sandra drive her to a “local” art gallery advertised in the paper where she is sure she can finally get exhibited. Against her better judgment, Sandra agrees, with Audrey revealing no address but airily assuring Sandra that she will give directions. It is only after they have been on the road awhile that Audrey reveals she means “local” in the sense of local to where was born: they are driving to

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Sunderland for a great reckoning with her childhood and her sister Dorothy (Gina McKee). Sandra has no choice but to agree and to add insult to injury, Audrey nicknames her Sandra Panza.

From here, Audrey hallucinates and misinterprets almost everything that is presented to her senses, but never neglects to assemble it all in her bulging scrapbook. Without Dolan's boisterous performance, and without the intelligent sensitivity of Macdonald to counterbalance it, this might have been less than the sum of its parts. The casting works with the writing and the black comic and tragicomic nature of their ordeal is often hilarious. Dolan's Amiss is almost unbearable in her incessant gabbling: she never stops talking, never stops denouncing and self-justifying, no matter how much she disgraces herself in public. When she insists on driving for a while and naturally crashes into a tree, she rhapsodises into her deployed airbag about the artistic qualities of the tree and attacks Sandra for failing to appreciate it.

Like many road movies, perhaps, this is heading one way – towards epiphany and catharsis of the sort that Amiss perhaps never knew in her lifetime. But it is tremendously shot by Agnès Godard and the compassion of the film is palpable. Now we need a real exhibition of Amiss's work.”

Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*, 8 March 2023

“Cinema has an enduring fascination with troubled creatives. Films such as *The Electrical Life of Louis Wain* and *SérAPHINE* draw us into the overheated imaginations of their artist subjects; Alex Ross Perry's jarring *Her Smell* probes the battle-scarred psyche of a drug-addled rock musician by placing us, uncomfortably, in her head. But Carol Morley's fictionalised portrait of real-life outsider artist Audrey Amiss (Monica Dolan) takes a different approach. Rather than actively attempt to evoke the inside of Amiss's mind, the film is more passive and observational. Like the artist's hapless former psychiatric nurse Sandra Panza (an underpowered Kelly Macdonald), we follow dutifully in the trail of chaos left by Amiss's quixotic interactions with the world, real and imagined.

It's a humane and warm-hearted little road movie, which takes a generous and accepting stance on Amiss's rather abrasive character traits. But it's also slightly flat and disjointed as a piece of film-making, failing to reflect the untrammelled, eclectic creative output of its unpredictable subject.

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A prolific artist and collector of ephemera (junk food boxes and lollipop sticks found particular favour), Amiss was unknown during her lifetime and spent considerable stints in psychiatric institutions. Morley discovered a cache of her art, writing and diaries in the archives of the Wellcome Institute after she was awarded a screenwriting fellowship by the organisation. In one of the film's more successful devices, Amiss's actual drawings are interspersed throughout the film, a playful dialogue between the real Amiss and the fictional one. But the energy of her frenetic drawing style is not matched by the storytelling. Spending time with Amiss is draining. The film, like everyone who comes into contact with her, seems utterly exhausted by the experience."

Wendy Ide, *The Guardian*, 28 October 2023

"Audrey Amiss was the talented daughter of Sunderland shopkeepers who made a splash in the press by winning a place at the Royal Academy's schools in London. In her final term, she was hospitalised for the first of many mental breakdowns, after which she disappeared for 30 years into a job as a shorthand typist in the civil service. But unknown to anyone except those who tried to care for her, Amiss never gave up on her art. "I was once in the tradition of social realism, also called the kitchen sink school of painting," she wrote. "But I am now avant garde and misunderstood."

Film-maker Carol Morley had never heard of Amiss until she was awarded a screenwriting fellowship at the Wellcome Foundation medical charity. "Somebody said, 'We've got the archive of a woman who saved the wrappers of everything she ate every day.'" The Audrey Amiss collection, to which these wrappers belonged, had yet to be catalogued. "It was almost like a myth," says Morley. "I was given two hours in a room with it – and I was there all day. I had to find out more." Among the treasures she unearthed was Amiss's passport, in which she described her occupation as: "Typist, Artist, Pirate, King."

Those four words gave Morley the title of the riotously quirky road movie she went on to make. In it, we meet Amiss tenderly helping a beetle back on to its feet, as a mouse scuttles through all the rubbish littering her squalid flat. This idea arose from a phonecall Morley had with the actor who plays Amiss, Monica Dolan, whose murderous turn as Rose West in ITV's *Appropriate Adult* won her a Bafta. Morley recalls: "Monica said, 'Wouldn't it be nice to see Audrey doing something very tender early on, like maybe turning a beetle over."

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And I'm like, 'Ah, that's brilliant – because of Carl Jung who had a thing about the scarab beetle.'”

When the script arrived, Dolan was astonished. “I didn't mean a beetle, I just meant something like a beetle,” she says. “You must have said it unconsciously,” Morley replies. “And it came with this amazing handler who could get it to do things,” adds Dolan. “Yes, and she had the mouse as well,” says Morley. “Whoever would have thought there was such a thing as a mouse and scarab beetle wrangler?” muses Dolan.

Amiss, who died in 2013 at the age of 79, would undoubtedly have enjoyed this exchange, which is happening in a sombre hotel room cluttered with camera equipment and makeup bags. Morley is handing out Typist Artist Pirate King badges like sweets, and is wearing an eye-popping jacket printed with a neon yellow car. It's a tribute to the jalopy Amiss inveigles her longsuffering psychiatric nurse Sandra into, for an impromptu road trip from London to Sunderland. Sandra – or Sandra Panza, as Amiss dubs her – is played by Kelly Macdonald, who has joined us today from her home in Glasgow.

Typist Artist Pirate King is entirely dependent on the rapport between its two stars. Even when exploding in frustration, Macdonald's Sandra is the faithful squire to Dolan's quixotic Amiss, who spies friends and enemies at every junction, crashing a yoga class that she is convinced is being run by her old headmistress, and squirting ketchup over an astonished couple in a roadside cafe who once, she is certain, did her a grievous wrong. At first Sandra is in the driving seat, with Amiss in the back, sketching everything she sees, but gradually the power balance changes as it emerges that Sandra is herself a lost soul, in need of a forceful spirit like Amiss's.

“With Sandra,” says the director, “I was interested in how much mental health nurses have to hide what they think. And I think Kelly just has these depths.” Their first conversation took place over video link during the pandemic, with Macdonald later having no recollection of it, even though it resulted in her being offered the job. “What can I say?” she says. “It was a strange time.”

The trio only finally met up in 2021, the night before they began a gruelling 25-day shoot, travelling between Yorkshire and Sunderland. “On a couple of occasions,” recalls Dolan, “we were given the option: stay in Leeds and have a really long drive, or take one pair of knickers and a toothbrush and stay in Sunderland overnight. Our driver said he'd never known a job like it.”

Although they clearly bonded, Covid restrictions were still in place and they so rarely met out of character that when Dolan ran out of her trailer to say goodbye

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at the end of the shoot, Macdonald was taken aback. “I was like, ‘Back off lady. Who are you, with your dark hair, thinking you know me?’”

“I suppose you never saw me out of my wig,” says Dolan, who arrived on set straight from Portugal, where she had been filming the TV series *The Thief, the Wife and the Canoe*. She was initially sceptical about playing a septuagenarian when she was only just into her 50s. Later, she panicked because she was unable to take her usual approach to a character. “I had these pages of questions I usually ask myself – and they were blank. Then I realised that Audrey is wherever she sees herself to be. She’s a very strong personality who whips up her environment into herself.” Just as importantly, she adds, “the film is about the interface between mental health and art. So at any point, I could have been playing a mental health patient or an artist. It’s just her way of looking at the world.”

As well as Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, Audrey and Sandra are a slow-motion Thelma and Louise. “Well,” says Morley, “it would be remiss not to mention one of the greatest feminist road movies of all time.” Not only was the film led by women, the crew was predominantly female too. The result, the two actors agree, was an unusually harmonious set. “There was no shouting,” says Macdonald. “It’s like – you didn’t have to have a loud male voice to be heard. And that’s been something I’ve experienced from the get-go: a lot of shouting to get everybody in position.”

At the start of each day, Morley would join Dolan in the makeup truck to paint ink blotches on her hands because Amiss habitually drew with leaky felt-tips. “You don’t always feel like talking at that hour,” she says, “but you need to do a bit of bonding, don’t you?” It was a peaceful beginning to hectic 14-hour days. Dolan recalls begging for her scenes to be filmed last because she was still mugging up her lines. “Sometimes we would just have to move on to something else,” says Macdonald. “But I knew that if I looked at Carol and she said, ‘Don’t worry, we’ve got it’, then we’d got it.”

The biggest challenge, says Morley, was getting all the shooting done in daylight, because it’s a point of principle for her never to reshoot. In the case of the final roadside shot, looking up at Gateshead’s Angel of the North, “I literally had five minutes.” It was a rare instance when the actors were made aware of the pressure. “What was it she said?” laughs Dolan. “““You go to the toilet and we don’t get the shot!””

The film is dedicated to Amiss’s sister Dorothy, who read the script but sadly died during the edit. Morley recalls: ‘She said, “Thank you for giving me my Audrey back.” And I was incredibly moved by that, because here was a woman

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whose neighbours told me they would cross the road to avoid her. But what I love about Audrey is that, though there were difficulties and suffering in her life, there was nothing grim about her. She took great pleasure in things that ordinary people would pass by – like a Quavers packet or the wrapper from a takeaway meal.”

Just before I leave, the conversation turns to possible future collaborations. Both actors are busy. Dolan is about to appear the second series of the crime drama *Sherwood*, and her debut play *The B*east*s, which won a fringe first award, is now being translated into Spanish and Italian. Morley trumps her with news of a new project, a film about a time-travelling witch. “I’ve never written for specific actors before,” she says. “But you’re in it and you’re in it – and so’s Maxine Peake.”

“Ooh,” replies Macdonald delightedly. “I was born to be a witch.”

Claire Armistead, *The Guardian*, 25 October 2023

“Director Carol Morley says that owning DVDs and Blu-rays “makes archivists of us all”, as she expresses the filmmaker fear of their movie being deleted.

Director Carol Morley has made an impassioned defence of physical media – and cited the importance of actual disc releases for a director’s films – as her latest feature *Typist Artist Pirate King* is released on a joint Blu-ray and DVD edition.

The director told industry newsletter *The Raygun* that having her films removed from a streaming service after leaving one of her films in its hands was her “worst fear”.

Her passionate defence of DVD and Blu-ray formats comes as the creative community and many directors voice concerns over films vanishing without warning from streaming services. That’s even before some studios can finish films before they’re even released.

In a lengthy missive supporting the release of her film, she said that “the idea for the screenplay for *Typist Artist Pirate King* was conceived in an archive, and I’m convinced that my compulsion to make a film about Audrey Amiss would not have happened if all the materials she left behind, all the artworks and diaries and letters, were digital and on a drive or in the cloud.

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‘There is something wonderful about the weight of things, holding something in your hand, physically engaging with it. With a DVD/ Blu-ray at your fingertips, you can appreciate the cover artwork, hold the weight of the disc in your hands, knowing that it’s yours to watch whenever you like, for as many times as you like, without the fear of it vanishing.

‘While streaming has revolutionised how we watch film and TV, both in terms of access and range, owning physical media gives you utter control over what you get to see and when you get to see it. You are not at the mercy of a streamer removing a film from their platform, which as a filmmaker is my worst fear – both for my own films and for other films I want to watch.’

She added that ‘I suppose you could argue that in some cases (but not all...) if you own a digital download then you will have it forever, but I’m not sure that much is known about a download and its stability and longevity. For me, I’m only truly certain about things I can physically hold close.’

She concluded, arguing that ‘I wouldn’t want to own everything. I’m happy to watch something once, at a cinema (always my favourite way!) or on a streaming site, or TV, or legally on YouTube – but collecting Blu-rays/ DVDs, makes us all curators, and is a fantastic way of building a personal library of films and television programmes, and that take on a momentum as a collection, and that we can return to at any time.

‘And owning physical media also makes archivists of us all, we are literally holding on to something, preserving and conserving it for future generations. As a filmmaker I want my films to reach the widest possible audience they can. We are living at a time when the route for a film release may end with a streamer, and not necessarily have a physical home movie release, so I’m delighted that *Typist Artist Pirate King* is going to exist as a Blu-ray/ DVD. It enables it to be collected by those that have already seen it, and wish to own it, but also it makes me happy that it will be accessible to a whole new audience who will discover the film for the first time.’”

Tim Murray, *Film Stories*, January 31, 2024

Background material on *Typist Artist Pirate King*

“Film-maker Carol Morley uncovered a huge archive about a promising Royal Academy student whose life was changed by a mental breakdown. She describes her journey into Audrey Amiss’s world.

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‘As I entered the rare materials room, a shaft of lamplight struck the bold wording: “Warning – this box is heavy when full.” Without even lifting it, I sensed the weight of the life inside. Audrey Amiss’s archive totals 80 boxes and includes 50,000 sketches as well as her paintings and diaries. As I delved in I felt like a detective looking for clues. I found a receipt for a Cornetto and a glue stick, Audrey’s last purchases before her death, aged 79. In her passport, she wrote as her occupation: “Typist, Artist, Pirate, King.”

Here was a woman who had written thousands of letters, about a multitude of subjects, to people ranging from the Queen to Mother Teresa to McDonald’s customer services. Amiss also made scrapbooks with the packaging from all the food and drink she consumed and noted her thoughts about the designs on the wrappers. She wrote that a bowl of Kellogg’s *Frosties* “resembles a storm in a tea cup”, that the illustration on a *Quavers* packet “suggests a haircut”.

Piecing together Amiss’s life, I was conscious of how it contrasted with the research I did into Joyce Vincent for my film *Dreams of a Life*. Vincent, who died in her bedsit at the age of 38 and wasn’t discovered for nearly three years, left nothing physical behind: the contents of her home were destroyed by the authorities due to contamination. Amiss left so much. It seemed like a gift.

Last November, I was awarded a Wellcome screenwriting fellowship, and it was in the archives of the charity that I discovered the uncatalogued collection of Audrey Amiss.

Born in Sunderland in 1933, to shopkeepers Arthur and Belle Amiss, Audrey developed a talent for drawing and painting at a young age. Her headmistress once wrote to her: “I think you will become one of the greatest painters of the age.” After attending Bede grammar school for girls and studying at Sunderland School of Art, Amiss won a place at the prestigious Royal Academy Schools in London, which made a proud splash in the local paper. In 1958, in her final term at the academy, Audrey had what she referred to as her “original breakdown” and ended up in Wallingham Park hospital, formerly Croydon mental hospital.

Amiss later came to believe that her breakdown was a conspiracy designed to ruin her, while family members wondered if the impact of the death of her father when she was a teenager had contributed. After hospital, Amiss did not return to her studies, but instead trained as a shorthand typist and spent the next 30 years working for the civil service. Up to her death in 2013, she was admitted to psychiatric wards on dozens of occasions, her diagnoses including bipolar disorder and paranoid schizophrenia.

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Intrepid, with a passion for travel, Amiss went on trips to India, Syria, South America and Russia. She wrote about a tour of China she took in the mid 1980s, describing how she wore a chairman Mao hat with origami hidden underneath, wilfully took over the tour bus commentary and, after running amok in a local village, found herself tied up in a Chinese asylum: “I didn’t blame them,” she wrote, “I can be a bit much.”

In other boxes, I discovered record books, detailing the daily letters Audrey posted. There was a four-page letter to the Salvation Army, “explaining in all the detail I can think of the infection of thrush I have had for years”. She wrote to the Sherlock Holmes Society about her missing sock. In a letter to the Lancet, which she signed “AJ Amiss (Miss), Mental Health Survivor”, she wrote of how she was “subjected to the indignity of an American-style arrest in Arding and Hobbs [department store] just before Easter”. To her sister, Dorothy, she wrote: “My good friend Brian likened me to Don Quixote, the crazy old knight. I see his point now... At times a bit batty, but method in my madness.”

About her life as an artist, Amiss said: “I was once in the tradition of social realism, also called the kitchen sink school of painting. But I am now avant garde and misunderstood.” Like all art, the quality of Amiss’s work is in the eyes of the viewer. For me, it resonates strongly and I consider she was a true artist: original and constantly seeking and looking: “We are still discovering truths about the planet we live on,” she wrote. I also admire her tenacity to keep going with her art: “I have been floored a couple of times about my talent but I pick myself up and continue.”

Amiss’s diaries, which she referred to as her logbooks, are erudite, perceptive, sometimes disturbing and often funny. She wrote of going to a London cafe called the Picasso to sketch: “Bob Geldof was sitting outside. King’s Road is not what it used to be.” Of arriving at a locked psychiatric ward, she wrote: “I may have looked like a reincarnation of Jesus Christ. At times, I felt I was Jesus. This is quite common amongst psychiatric in-patients in these psychiatric institutions of ours.”

As my interest in Amiss and her life and work grew, I asked the archive project managers to put me in touch with her niece and nephew, Kate Tunnicliff and Steve Weatherell, who donated her archive. I meet them in a busy restaurant overlooking King’s Cross, a place where Audrey liked to go and draw. They both talk of how surprised they were at the quantity of material she left behind, which was mostly hidden away in her home. “I thought of Audrey as my aunt the typist who was actually an artist,” Steve says, “but I never saw many of her pictures.” Kate nods: “I thought her lithographs were really good when I was little, but that might have been because they were the more approachable of her

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art. The whole modern art thing didn't touch our family, so Audrey's later paintings just seemed a bit mad really. It wasn't until more recently that I've looked at them in a different way."

Eager to put a voice to Amiss, I ask what she sounded like. Kate says: "She had a north-east accent and when she was talking it was in this very emphatic manner – sometimes out of the side of her mouth and sometimes in funny accents. There was this one time I was running a restaurant in Queen's Gate and I had a day off and went back the next day and they said, 'A woman with an American accent came to find you and said she had slung her horse up outside' and it was clearly Audrey." Steve adds: "She always said and did exactly what she wanted to." Kate says: "I do remember as a child, she'd be very quiet at the table and then really start shouting. I knew then she wasn't ordinary. She used to dress in nun-like, old-fashioned clothes, wore a crucifix and had bizarre haircuts." I tell them how Amiss had written in her diary that she'd left her hairdressers "with the appearance of Reggie Kray".

As Amiss's writing often revolves around her neighbours, I arrange to meet Jenny Rhodes, who lived in the maisonette above Amiss as a child and who, as a student, moved next door, where she still lives. But first, as I arrive at her address in Clapham, south London, one summer evening, I look at Amiss's maisonette, where she lived for 50 years, 30 of those with her mother, Belle, who sold the family home-cum-shop in Sunderland to be with her. Inside these walls, every day, and long into the night, she would listen to her radio, once writing about how she had discovered Mark Radcliffe and Stuart Maconie on BBC 6 Music: "I have decided that they must be some kind of off-beat psychiatrists... They help give relief to people under siege."

Eventually, I knock on Rhodes's door and she gives me a welcoming hug. She is in her mid-30s, with a tumble of blond hair, and speaks softly. "When I came back in the late 90s, Audrey would come round and say she could feel something from the microwave and ask for it to be turned off. I do remember an incident when Audrey beat up the butcher across the road. I used to see her a lot in Poynders Road, string around her neck with her keys on. Walking and talking. When she was out she always looked to be on a mission. I did see her with a small placard once. It said: 'Justice for Lunatics.'"

Amiss wrote: "I think the civil service as a whole is unpopular and that is a reason why I am unpopular. I was a very minor civil servant but nevertheless, a civil servant." She worked for the Ministry of Labour before being transferred to Stockwell unemployment benefit office, where Gill Tayleur became her manager in 1985. Eight years ago, Gill became a reverend and when I meet her at her home in south London, I am slightly disappointed that she isn't wearing

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her dog collar. She laughs and says when she was ordained she sent a photograph to Amiss, who wrote back saying: “Oh my word! Look at you!” She adds that while Amiss had a deep belief in God, “the ways she expressed it in worship were very varied”.

We talk over a pot of tea, around a homely table, and I wonder if I’m sitting where Amiss had once sat. Tayleur confirms this. “We’d sit here, just like this, she’d plonk herself down with slightly odd bags. Her outfits were always extraordinary, with bizarre badges and earrings that didn’t match.” Tayleur talks of being fast-tracked through the civil service. “There I was, aged 23, with a large staff and one of them was Audrey Amiss the typist. I always liked her. I used to call her my funny friend Audrey.”

Recalling one of the hospitals Amiss was in, Tayleur says: “It was horrible. An old former asylum. Dark, tiny windows with bars. I remember coming out of there and bursting into tears... My father had psychiatric problems when I was a teenager and I was treated badly over it; my best friend’s mother told me she could never speak to me again because my dad was in a ‘loony bin’. So the first time I knew Audrey had gone into a psychiatric hospital I went to visit her and I kept visiting her over the years. She was always very sedated and adamant in her mind that it was wicked that she’d been sectioned.”

Tayleur shows me two letters from Amiss that she kept. “I had so many. Most I threw away – probably because they were often incomprehensible ramblings and rantings, bless her – but she wrote to me about being diagnosed with schizophrenia. Though she never accepted it or certainly didn’t accept she needed medication for it.”

Pointing to Audrey’s 1950s lithograph of Venice hanging prominently on her wall, Tayleur says: “I’m so glad she gave it to me. I’m not artistic, and a lot of her work is lost on me, but that I had framed. I don’t move among artists. If anyone asks me if I have any artist friends, I think, ‘Oh, hold on, Audrey Amiss was!’ She was a breath of fresh air. She showed me things about the world I wouldn’t have seen.”

I travel to Wetherby, near Leeds, to meet Dorothy and John Weatherell, described by their children Kate and Steve as “northern optimists”. Dorothy was four years younger than Amiss and her only sibling. I feel close to Dorothy and John as soon as I meet them, perhaps because I’ve read so much about them via Amiss. As John drives us to their home, I ask Dorothy what she remembers of Amiss’s original breakdown. “I remember going down on the train to London and even though it was summer my hands and my feet were cold because I

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didn't know what I was going to find down there. And how my mother managed I don't know... ”

We arrive at their flat and Dorothy and I sit on the terrace with a dramatic view over the river Wharfe. “Audrey and I both loved being near rivers,” Dorothy says. “Growing up, we had very much the same tastes. We used to listen to *The Goon Show*.” Dorothy's expression turns wistful. “But Audrey changed. We grew apart and we'd once had such fun together.”

Laid out on the table are photographs, including a black-and-white photo of Amiss as a girl with Shirley Temple looks. “My cousin in America tried to analyse what happened to Audrey,” Dorothy says. “She said she was a lovely little girl with curly hair, always happy, but as she came to teenage years her hair got greasy and she retired into her shell and art encouraged her to do that. We felt the Royal Academy gave her the more modern ideas because up until then everything had been about representation and so cleverly detailed. She sank deeper into rather incomprehensible paintings and drawings.”

Dorothy picks up a colour snapshot of Audrey in a cafe. “In her teenage years she wouldn't say boo to a goose, but as she got older she didn't like being sensible. We were always trying to dampen her down, which of course was very naughty of us as far as her artistic qualities are concerned. But I mean, we had to live as well... ” Dorothy smiles. “Oh, she was always getting into scrapes. Audrey laughed like a drain when she told me she'd kicked a security guard in the seat of his pants. I can laugh now, but I could hardly bear to listen to her telling me at the time.”

John joins us, his eyes scanning all the photos from the past. “What I find amazing,” he says, “is that you associate mental problems with depression, but that was not Audrey at all. She was interested in everything.” Dorothy agrees, adding: “The only time I ever saw her depressed was when she was on medication.” Amiss mentions medication a lot in her writings: “I don't need it and the doctors, social workers and police are a laughing stock for insisting I do. Quack quack... I think psychiatrists regard high spirits as a disorder and effectively stamp it out.”

I meet Tom Craig, professor of social and community psychiatry, at King's College, and talk to him about the medical side of psychiatry. He says: “People – certainly with the older drugs – would much rather there was some non-medical way, because intuitively they recognise their illness is manifested in some kind of problem with people and how they see themselves.” Although Amiss wrote how she had once proposed marriage to one of her psychiatrists, I feel I'm betraying her by meeting someone from the psychiatric profession, but

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when I ask Craig why he entered the field, I am reassured by his answer. He says: “The reason I came to psychiatry is down to personal healing. Healing people through talk, that was appealing. But I found it wasn’t as simple as that. The role has demands put upon us by society that we would rather not fulfil but we have to – to section people.”.

Drawn to see Amiss’s origins, I travel to Sunderland, where I visit her grammar school, her now boarded-up art college and the docks where her father had been laid off, remaining unemployed for five years before starting up the shop with Belle. I arrive outside Amiss’s childhood home. The side wall where the shop window and entrance were has been filled in with brick, but a different shade, so I can still see the traces of what it once was. I think of everything Amiss has left behind and how her whole adult life she fought to gain attention for her opinions and her art, including debating at Speakers’ Corner and putting on exhibitions of her work. I visualise her, in the 1940s, inside this neat, orderly, symmetrical house, creating a comic book called the *We Won’t Tell Club*, some of the pages invisible, with young Amiss writing: “When it is heated in front of the fire it becomes visible.” It seems fitting that this connects her to Henry Wellcome, who founded Wellcome, invisible ink being the first product he promoted at the start of his career.

I walk to the nearby seafront, to the Cat and Dog Steps that Amiss once sketched, and watch the waves crash against the rocks below. I reflect on the day I entered the revolving glass doors of the Wellcome building to begin the screenwriting fellowship. I never knew where it would lead or what I would find inside, among the vast treasures of knowledge, archives and possibilities that it holds. But I suddenly feel that rather than me having found Amiss, she has found me. And I know with certainty that I will do whatever it takes to bring her art and life into view, to work towards making a film about her and to make sure that Audrey Amiss will finally be heard and seen.”

Carol Morley, *The Observer*, 20 November 2016