



Faces of the Pimpernel (from left): on a 1930s book jacket and as portrayed by Leslie Howard, David Niven, Sid James and Richard E. Grant

That damned pervasive Pimpernel

What is it about the drawling fop with the maddening titter that still excites our imagination? **Will Gatti**, a lifetime fan, seeks here and there for answers

WITH HIS SILK STOCKINGS, satin jacket, and stupid laugh, Baroness Orczy's Scarlet Pimpernel is surely ready to go to that great recycling bin in the sky where all heroes of pulp fiction eventually get mulched. What do her stories about a supposedly gormless, aristocratic fop who ponces about in 18th-century society making up rhymes — well, one rhyme — have for us? Why should we like this man who adds to the country's store of useless aristocrats by rescuing good "Frenchies" from bad "Frenchies" (the revolutionary lot) and smuggling them back into England, where they can complain about our cuisine and weather? As a hero he scores about as many points as the UK in the Eurovision Song Contest.

The trouble is, he won't go away. The Pimpernel — aka Sir Percy Blakeney — has sauntered into countless movies (played by David Niven and Richard E. Grant, among others), through plays, television series and musicals. He has appeared in *Blackadder*, been parodied by the *Carry On* team. The word has slipped into the vernacular as shorthand for a master of disguise or escape (Nelson Mandela, when hiding from the South African police, was "the Black Pimpernel"); and now Sir Percy's great-great-grandson has dropped

into a novel for children that I have just written, *The Geek, the Greek and the Pimpernel*.

It doesn't seem to matter if a Pimpernel story is historically inaccurate or politically incorrect — those rescued aristos had probably been bleeding their peasants dry for centuries. But it's possible that the baroness had a thing about revolting peasants. Her parents fled their Hungarian estates in 1868 fearing a revolution, so, when the young and newly married Emmuska Orczy, strapped for cash, turned to writing, perhaps it's not surprising she plumped for an aristocratic hero battling loathsome *sans-culottes*. She did well, too. After more than a dozen sequels to her first Pimpernel story she replaced the Hungarian estate with one in Monte Carlo.

However, none of that explains why her creation still hasn't given up the ghost. It can't be because of his name. Sir Percy doesn't quite carry the punch of the big comic-book heroes: Superman, Batman and the Silver Surfer bellow out hero credentials; Zorro has an inbuilt sword-slashing finesse. A scarlet pimpernel, on the other hand, is just a weed (though scarlet is a good, racy colour). Sapper, whose stories perhaps owe something to Orczy, called his hero Bulldog Drummond. That has a kind of testo-

sterone-pumping edge suitable for a crimebuster, but while Sapper's neo-fascist sleuth languishes in obscurity, the Pimpernel, in his own quiet, creaky way, keeps going.

Maybe it's how and when you first come across him that's important. My mother read the stories to us when I was about 8. She loved melodrama: her Chauvelin was a hissing viper, while Percy oozed a kind of daft, languid charm that was utterly brilliant, although it was the way she did his "inane" laugh that sealed him as a special hero for me. She'd tip her head slightly to one side, lift a hand to her cheek (she was RADA-trained) and conjured a high-pitched, bell-like titter that was just a little to the left of insane. It had us spellbound.

Another truth is that some stories shape-shift. They have an archetypal quality that becomes the base for other stories. Percy, with his dual identity, is the direct forerunner of heroes such as Superman, driven to save the world without letting the world see who they really are. Most of us love the idea that nobody really sees us as we are, or as we imagine we are. People may think we are just the bat-eared geek in the second desk from the back, or that hapless parent trapped on the umpteenth school run, when in fact we are, of course: spy, rock'n'roll star, laconic wit, spell-binding orator, or maybe just... Clint Eastwood? It doesn't matter: the secret hero becomes a torchbearer for our dreams — or, if you want to be less fanciful, they give us licence to pretend.

I can't argue that the *Pimpernel* novels are "must-reads" for everyone.



'Baroness Orczy had a thing about revolting peasants'

Some stories continue to live because when you first encounter them they hit you with a power that a rereading may only diminish. I loved the tales in that passionate and uncritical way that young readers do when they find something that speaks directly to them. I didn't give a button for the *sans-culottes*. For me, France was a place of perpetual darkness and rough, threatening mobs, with the looming guillotine and bloody basket of aristocratic heads at its heart. Into this darkness sauntered the Pimpernel and his league of like-minded followers. They were clever, casually brave and, in the case of Percy Blakeney himself, a master of disguise. I loved that he could whistle hapless

victims from beneath the blade of the guillotine itself and bluff his way out through the city gates disguised as a pipe-smoking crone. At least, that is how I remember it.

The stories that impress themselves on a receptive mind become the cloak we trail behind us; its more vibrant colours come from the scenes that randomly replay in our imaginations: for me, the moustachioed Gauls in their winged helmets scaling the Capitol in Rome only to be thwarted by the geese penned up on the rampart (I've disliked geese ever since); the hopeless Mr Toots from *Dombey and Son* forever backing out of a room saying "it's of no consequence" (I know, a very unlikely hero, but that's the way it goes); and the Pimpernel himself, who became my Percy Blake, descendant of the first Sir Percy, because I suddenly realised that every school needs someone to champion the nerds. A gormless airbrain who can take on the bullies and muggers who rule the corridors. A master of disguise, of course, and a tiny league of geeky heroes to help him out.

Heroes? Unfashionable lot. Kicked into touch by the punk era that told us there were "no more heroes any more". Pshaw and probably gadzooks too. Don't mention it to Sharpe — he would probably have your guts for garters. Percy, on the other hand, would merely laugh.

Will Gatti's *The Geek, the Greek and the Pimpernel* is published by Orchard at £5.99, offer £5.69 inc p&p from 0870 1608080 or timesonline.co.uk/booksfirst