There is much in my early novels about marriage. I got married in June 1960, three weeks after my twenty-first birthday, and just after taking my Cambridge Finals. I married my first love. Then I sat down to write my first novel, *A Summer Bird-Cage*, while expecting my first baby. So the subject of marriage was much in my mind as I began my career in fiction.

The success of this novel depended largely upon its title, which I stole from John Webster’s *The White Devil*. The quotation goes thus: ‘’Tis just like a summer bird-cage in a garden: the birds that are without, despair to get in, and the birds that are within despair and are in a consumption for fear they shall never get out.’ All these years, I have been thinking that the subject of this quotation was marriage, but I now discover that I have remembered it quite wrongly. I have just looked it up, and I find that the subject is not marriage at all, but something much more louche. In fact, I’m not sure if I now really understand what the speaker in the play means, though I was sure that I did then. But that is irrelevant. I co-opted the image for my own purposes, and it has served well.

I was one of the last of the Early Marriage Generation. It is hard to believe now that so many of us married so innocently, so young. We should have known better. In those days, women still married to get away from their mothers, because a career was not considered
a good enough reason for leaving home. Careers were not taken seriously, whereas a marriage, however implausible, had to be respected.

My parents would probably have been surprised by the immense and probably irreversible changes in attitudes to marriage that we now take for granted, though my father, as a lawyer, was always a keen advocate of the right to divorce. He saw two of his three daughters through divorce and remarriage, but did not live long enough to know that five of his great-grandchildren would be born, most respectably, out of wedlock. I do not think this would have worried either of my parents in the slightest. My mother's sister, aged ninety-two, and less progressive in her ideas than my mother was, accepts the situation without any sign of concern. She has come to think it normal. As it is.

Why, I wonder, didn’t things change earlier? Why did the traditional form of marriage retain its stranglehold for so long, and find itself so little lamented when it weakened its grip? My parents would not have contemplated divorce for themselves, even though in principle they approved of it, as they approved of all legislation that improved the social conditions of women. I dimly remember divorce as a painful process best forgotten, and would like to think that it is easier and less painful now.

Marriage, I now think, should not be an expectation or an obligation. It is a rare condition, to be handled with care and quit when necessary. It does not suit everybody. The mere threat of it drives some people mad, as Thomas Hardy often pointed out – Sue Bridehead in *Jude the Obscure* was one of my earlier heroines. Marriage is for exceptional people. My second husband, Michael, is exceptional and eccentric. He invents things as he goes along. This is very liberating.

The extended family, one of the by-products of the decline of conventional marriage, is a great gain. Family parties are much more exciting now than they used to be, for they usually include a miscellaneous array of cousins legal and illegal, legitimate and illegitimate, and stepchildren and step-siblings from complicated liaisons the precise origins of which have been long forgotten. I didn’t foresee any of this when I started to write in 1960. Like the family, marriage isn’t what it was. It’s much less constraining, much less deadly,