

**If you liked *My Policeman*, try these books:**

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### **Author Biography**



Bethan Roberts was born in Abingdon. Her first novel *The Pools* was published in 2007 and won a Jerwood/Arvon Young Writers' Award. Her second novel *The Good Plain Cook*, published in 2008, was serialized on BBC Radio 4's *Book at Bedtime* and was chosen as one of *Time Out's* books of the year. *My Policeman*, the story of a 1950s policeman, his wife, and his male lover, followed in 2012, and was chosen as that year's *City Read for Brighton*. *Mother Island* (2014) was the recipient of a Jerwood Fiction Uncovered prize. She also writes short fiction (she has won the Society of Authors' Olive Cook Prize and the RA Pin Drop Award), and drama for BBC Radio 4. Her

new novel, *Graceland*, which tells the story of Elvis Presley and his mother, will be published by Chatto in 2019. Bethan has worked in television documentary, and has taught Creative Writing at Chichester University and Goldsmiths College, London. She lives in Brighton with her family.

## Discussion Questions

1. Every author has a unique voice when writing, what did you think of Roberts's storytelling? What did you like best? What did you like least?

2. The story jumps between Patrick's journal through the years, and Marion's confessions in a letter she writes in 1999 while she cares for Patrick. Does this structure of the book help or hinder the readability?

3. *My Policeman* has an interesting cast of characters. Did you relate to any of the characters? If comfortable, discuss how you related to their story. OR who was your favorite character? Why?

4. This novel is based off the relationship between novelist E.M. Forster and Bob Buckingham in the 1930s (see 2012 article written by Roberts from *The Guardian* included at the end of discussion questions). Would you say Roberts successfully portrayed Forster, the Buckingham, and their relationship in her novel? What parts of the novel and its inspiration differed?

5. *My Policeman* transports you to the 1950s, a time when old values were the most prevalent, and homosexuality was viewed as a sin. As many as 1,000 men were locked up in Britain's prisons every year amid a widespread police clampdown on homosexual offences. Undercover officers acting as "agents provocateurs" would pose as gay men soliciting in public places.

How does Roberts show the danger of Tom and Patrick pursuing their relationship, especially with Tom being a policeman in the midst of the virulently anti-homosexual political atmosphere?

6. While Tom is in the center of this story, you only hear from the perspectives of Marion and Patrick. Discuss the different situations in the book and think about them in Tom's perspective. For example: What do you think Tom was thinking after Patrick was arrested? What do you think Tom truly thought about Marion?

7. How do the characters' young decisions affect their adult life? Such as how Tom and Patrick's relationship when they were younger affect the lives of all three of them when they were in old age.

8. Do you feel Marion and Sylvie are still friends in the end? Why or why not?

9. What situations do you wish the story elaborated more on?

10. *My Policeman* will be made into a motion picture in Fall 2022 starring Harry Styles and Emma Corrin. How do you feel about the casting choices by director Michael Grandage? Do you feel these actors can portray the character's thoughts and feelings accurately?

## **EM Forster and his 'wondrous muddle'**, by Bethan Roberts

*Friday, February 17 2012 via theguardian.com*

For 40 years, EM Forster and the policeman Bob Buckingham were in a loving relationship. Buckingham was 28, Forster 51, when the two met. They shared holidays, friends, interests, and – on many weekends – a domestic and sexual life in Forster's Brunswick Square flat. But this was a relationship in which there were three people. In his memoir *My Father and Myself*, Forster's great friend JR Ackerley wrote that the problem of the girlfriend was "all too liable to be found in the lives of normal boys ... Since women could not be excluded they had to be admitted ... the Ideal Friend could have a girl or wife if he wished, so long as she did not interfere with me. No wife ever failed to interfere with me." The same was true for Forster, but the wife who "interfered" in his life – Buckingham's wife, May – also became his friend and nursemaid. Perhaps this is not so surprising for the writer who valued personal relationships above all else, and for whom the motto "only connect" applied as much to his private life as to his novels. Who else but Forster could end up becoming firm friends with his lover's wife, and godparent to her child?

It's easy to see why Buckingham's vigour and toughness were attractive qualities for Forster. As a child, he was cast in the role of the "delicate" boy, always wrapped up and fussed over by his mother Lily, and always with half an eye on the farm boys next door. At Tonbridge Prep School, where the motto was "Perish every laggard, and let us all be men", Forster was, predictably, badly bullied. Even at Cambridge, where he discovered real camaraderie and love between men, Lytton Strachey christened him "the Taupe". A "real" man, bluff, beefy and beautiful, was evidently irresistible to this mole, both as lover and protector.

His relationship with Buckingham was not his first with a policeman: he'd already enjoyed a brief dalliance with Harry Daley, who was, for the Bloomsbury set of the 1920s and 30s, something of a celebrity young tough. Daley regularly entertained Ackerley, Duncan Grant and Forster at the Hammersmith Section House, treating them to bacon and eggs and boxing matches. Forster also had a fling with a bus driver named Arthur, which ended after Arthur's wife kicked up a stink. Forster wrote to Ackerley: "It is not my policy, even were it within my power, to break up homes." Of the affair, he noted in his diary: "Coarseness and tenderness have kissed one another, but imaginative passion, love, doesn't exist with the lower classes."

So when the novelist met Buckingham at a party given by Ackerley on the day of the 1930 Oxford v Cambridge boat race, he already had his ideal of the working-class boy firmly in place. Influenced by Edward Carpenter's ideas, he'd long fantasised about living in a rural idyll "looked after by the robust and grateful lower classes". It was a fantasy in which he, as an educated, moneyed novelist, had the upper hand. But his relationship with Buckingham was to challenge his assumptions in more ways than one.

Buckingham was a large, good-humoured man, with a nose flattened in the boxing ring, a wide smile and a deep, loud laugh. On the day they met, he impressed Forster with his knowledge of the Thames and told him he was reading Dostoevsky. Forster invited Buckingham to his flat, and soon the two became close, with Forster taking over Buckingham's reading list, and Buckingham thrilled to become something of a highbrow. Soon Forster was in a position to write of Buckingham's falling "violently in liking" with him. To his friend Sebastian Sprott, Forster wrote with rather old-maidish coyness that the "spiritual feeling" between him and Buckingham had now "extended to my physique".

During these early years of their relationship, Forster seems to have at last found happiness. In his *Commonplace Book*, he reported that "From 51 to 53 I have been happy, and would like to remind others that their turn can come too." This was in spite of Buckingham finding a girlfriend – May Hockey, a nurse – not long after he'd met Forster. In 1932 Buckingham announced that he was to marry May; the register-office wedding took place in August, with Forster as witness. Once Buckingham was married, Forster's worst fears seemed to come true – Buckingham became rather unreliable about their meetings, and Forster panicked, calling his rival "domineering, sly and knowing" and wondering if he should break with his lover and go abroad to escape the situation. Buckingham, ever the voice of calm sense, wrote that the two of them simply had "to go without pleasure for a bit".

By December, Forster was visiting the Buckinghams at their flat in Shepherd's Bush, and becoming more involved in their life as a couple; this was the beginning of the triangular arrangement, which, like Forster's work, was at once quietly domestic and rather revolutionary. While living with May, Buckingham pledged his half days off, and other hours during the week, to Forster. May, although jealous and often difficult, refused to listen when Harry Daley warned her that Forster was about to break up her marriage. Perhaps she, like Buckingham, stood to gain from what Forster could offer: not only money (he often gave financial gifts), but also entrance into the life of the cultural elite. If this was not lost on Buckingham, it was actively appreciated by May, who later wrote of Forster, "To him I owe a great debt of gratitude. For his widening of horizons, by meeting his friends, but mostly by his talk."

In April 1933, Buckingham and May had a baby boy whom they named Robin Morgan; Forster was godfather. It took a serious illness, however, to really change his and May's relationship. In 1935, she became ill with TB and was sent to a sanatorium for a year. Forster made a kind of deal with her, no doubt thinking, initially at least, of his own needs. If she sent Robin to her sister, he would watch over Buckingham and report back to her regularly. He got what he wanted, and promptly took Buckingham off to Amsterdam, where they stayed with Isherwood and his lover Heinz.

After May recovered, a functioning triangular arrangement was firmly established, with the two of them sharing their beloved Buckingham; the long weekends were for May, the short ones for Forster. Such an arrangement may only have worked in conditions of complete silence about the true nature of Forster's relationship with Buckingham; but it did, at least, work.

Forster's mother also began a friendship with May. Forster wrote to Buckingham: "Although my mother has been intermittently tiresome for the last 30 years, cramped and warped my genius, hindered my career, blocked and bugged up my house, and boycotted my beloved, I have to admit she has provided a sort of rich subsoil where I have been able to rest and grow. That, rather than sex or wifiness, seems to be women's special gift to men." Possibly this is how he came to think of May too, particularly after Lily died in 1945. Indeed, May wrote that "when his mother died ... I feel that in some ways I took her place."

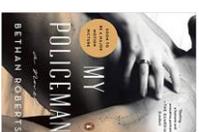
The years immediately following Lily's death were terrible for Forster; not only did he suffer intense grief, he also became worried that Buckingham was no longer interested in him. But by 1949 the two men were on good terms again and they visited New York together, where they were photographed by George Platt Lynes. The photographs are remarkable: Forster looks every inch the eminent writer, Buckingham looks handsome and relaxed. In one, a domestic portrait of the pair, they gaze directly at one another with great humour and warmth, Buckingham shining down on Forster. For two men not publicly "out" in any way, it is an extraordinarily revealing pose.

During his later years, May was often nursemaid to Forster. In the mid-1960s he suffered a series of strokes, and it was this which broke the silence. It seems his tongue was loosened in his weakened state, and he spoke to Buckingham frankly about his physical passion for him. A shocked Buckingham claimed to May that he'd known nothing of Forster's sexuality. He then began to behave strangely towards his lover, growing irritable and distant. It was May who reminded Buckingham that Forster was their friend and benefactor (he'd recently given them £10,000) and should be in their home; when Forster suffered a second stroke, she insisted on nursing him.

In these last years, May confided in Forster about her grief over the early death of Robin, who'd succumbed to Hodgkin's disease in 1962. These two people, novelist and nurse, lover and wife, comforted one another and their relationship became rather like that of a mother and her grown-up son: to Forster's biographer PN Furbank, May remembered Forster as a bad patient, getting under her feet and insisting on engaging her in conversation when all she wanted was to get on with the housework. It was this anecdote, more than anything else, which inspired me to investigate the story of this fascinating triangle and use it as the inspiration for my new novel, *My Policeman*.

Following his final stroke in May 1970, Forster was fetched from his rooms at King's College by the Buckinghams and put to bed at their Coventry house, where he died. For most of that morning, he held May's hand. After his death, May wrote: "I now know that he was in love with Robert and therefore critical and jealous of me and our early years were very stormy, mostly because he had not the faintest idea of the pattern of our lives and was determined that Robert should not be engulfed in domesticity. Over the years he changed us both and he and I came to love one another, able to share the joys and sorrows that came."

Nowhere was the talent that Forster had for approaching things slightly askew, for bringing together the things we expect to be opposite – personal and political, conventional and unconventional, friend and rival – more evident than in his relationship with Bob and May Buckingham. Theirs was, to use a Forsterian term, a quite wonderful muddle.



**My Policeman**  
by Bethan Roberts