

PREFACE

Nicola Headlam and Cara Courage

WHAT ARE THE WOMEN OF AMBRIDGE TELLING US?

Whilst *The Archers* is the butt of many a joke, whilst there is much comedy and in-jokes laced through the scripts and whilst we at Academic Archers pay close attention to the humour in and to be had from the lives of those in Ambridge, the women of Ambridge are our site of serious study. This book collects papers across a wide spectrum of social, political, economic and cultural issues through which we use *The Archers* lens to interrogate the lives of the women in the programme and how far their voices support or challenge tropes of feminist or post-feminist lives. Of course, *The Archers* is scripted and carefully plotted in order to reflect societal norms, and our authors herein take varied routes in questioning how far women are in charge of their own destinies in Ambridge and in comparison to what we see in the lives of women outside of Borsetshire. What then are the women of Ambridge telling us? What can they tell us of the prevailing structures of a society which has been structurally patriarchal? Of internalised

gendered socialisation and the roles thereof, and intersectional identity formation?¹

Informed by feminist, critical race theories and critical disability studies, we view *The Archers* as of huge and essentially contested sociocultural significance. In exploring the many threads of gender and feminist or anti-feminist themes in *The Archers*, in this book we call attention to how far individual identity and gendered roles and norms are presented in Ambridge. As is appropriate we focus in our second section on *Women's Talk*; it has been observed that the informal networks of women's talk and gossip networks have been sites of power and resistance when men are in charge of more formal arenas. In the third section, *Gendered Expectations: Within the Home*, we focus on the gendered implications of the home, where there are reproductive choices and decisions around love and marriage as well as the emotional labour of family life. The fourth, *Gendered Expectations: Beyond the Home*, focusses on gendered implications beyond the home as women participate in the workforce.

ATTENTION TO POWER DYNAMICS IN *THE ARCHERS*

Gendered tropes are not hard to find in *The Archers*. In his celebrated BBC Radio 4 *John Finnemore's Souvenir Programme*, the titular comedian creates a pastiche of Ambridgian gender characterisations that is recognisable to even the occasional listener of *The Archers*. The men 'always sound

¹ In broad terms, gender identity is how a person views themselves with respect to masculinity or femininity and how this view of the self leads to the enactment of, or resistance to, socially ascribed gender roles. Gender roles dictate what is considered acceptable for men and women in terms of behaviour, career, parenting, style of dress and so on (Chicago Unbound).

tired' from their hard work of farming business; the 'insufferably wry women' are the incidental makers of coffee, speak to move the plot along and are smugly tolerating of the menfolk ([BBC Radio 4a](#)).

The form of *The Archers* presents a more or less equal number of male and female characters, but there has been unease that the gender stereotyping on display is of an unhelpful kind. In her contribution to the Women of Ambridge Panel at the 2018 Academic Archers conference, Charlotte Martin (actor, Susan Carter) aka Dr Charlotte Connor (Research Psychologist, Warwick University) caused gasps from the auditorium by pointing out that there were no women writers of *The Archers* until 1975 coinciding with a period where the future of *The Archers* was far from certain as it made the transition from post-war farming propaganda towards contemporary drama in a rural setting (see Chapter 2). This is hard to imagine given the subsequent revered status of Vanessa Whitburn as the programme's long-running editor. Often accused of simultaneous 'Brooksidisation' of Ambridge (she had worked on the Channel 4 soap) and of shifting the focus to the lives of the women, hitherto 'farmers' wives', in a career retrospective, Whitburn admitted that she arrived as an ambitious editor, ready to make her mark with a controversial first storyline: Elizabeth Archer's abortion. She was stung by the early pejorative portrayal of her as a domineering, feminist editor with an eye only on the big stories. It is not hard to find outrage and opprobrium from those who feel that gendered agendas abound in *The Archers*, but it can also do no right. On the one hand, it is perceived by some to be written by those of the 'liberal metropolitan elite', admonished for being part of a 'political correctness gone mad'.

On the other hand, however, it simultaneously lacks feminist role models, and often pointedly, career women are conspicuous by their absence. Critics claim that Whitburn

turned a gentle, snoozy countryside tale into a soap (the term loaded with class derision) abundant with crime, sex, drugs, abortion, homosexuality, biracial marriage and families, wayward teenagers, adultery, single motherhood, donated sperm and IVF – in short, everything of everyday life through time that however upsets some listeners’ aspic-set bucolic image of rural life.

However, whilst the listeners might not be settled in a view on how far the women of Ambridge are feminist (or not) or of the veracity gender identities and roles available to them, there is an important point of method to explain. Ambridge is a socially constructed place – made by the scriptwriters and by the actors, and by us as listeners. We view *The Archers* as a ‘polysemic’ text, that being, one in which listeners can construct their own meanings instead of passively adopting the preferred or dominant, themes – and in doing so, assert their own power in the listener subject position. As the real-time backchannel of *The Archers* Tweetalong highlights, there are myriad interpretations of storylines, characterisations and actions, informed by the listeners’ own intersectional² lived experience, leading to divergent interpretations of the same thing. In the context of Ambridge too of course, multiple disadvantage collects around gender, socioeconomic status, housing status, and of either being childless or able to afford childcare. The intersection of these natal, social and politico-economic factors keeps Emma scraping glitter from her gussets (being unable to afford to replace clothes washed with a vial of glitter so having to make do until it would eventually wash out) whilst the middle-class characters thrive from their comparative wealth and consequent purchasing power of

² ‘The theory that the overlap of social identities contributes to the specific type of oppression and discrimination experienced by an individual’ ([Dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com)).

being able to afford replacement clothes if the same laundry day mishap happened to them.

WHAT ARE OUR AMBRIDGOLISTS TELLING US?

We are honoured to open this book with an *Inside Ambridge* section, with contributions from two *Archers* heavyweights: an ‘in conversation’ with former acting editor, Alison Hindell, and a chapter from the most Academic Archer of us all, Dr Charlotte Connor, aka Charlotte Martin, actor, Susan Carter in BBC Radio 4 *The Archers*. Hindell is able to share her insights into the making of *The Archers* and the impact this has on the women of Ambridge and her thoughts on how some of the key storylines both developed and are developing. Connor spoke at the 2018 Academic Archers conference in reflection on the papers in the *Women in Ambridge* session, informed by her perspective as one of *The Archers* cast, her deep knowledge and love of her character and her academic specialism as a research psychologist. Her chapter goes deeper into these aspects and offers us listeners (and now readers) a consideration of the ambivalence often felt towards Susan, her power and agency in Ambridge located though her role as ‘the gossip’ and into the mental health and support networks in the village.

We move on in the second section, *Women’s Talk: Informal Information Networks that Sustain the Village*, the contributors reclaim women’s conversation as a core resource in a system where they may not have access to other forms of capital: agreeing with Connor preceding, Susan is not to be sidelined as a gossip, but rather her active interest in the lives of others gives her the function of the Greek chorus commentary on dramatic action. Starting with Claire Mortimer, *Neighbourhood Watch: Gossip, Power and the*

Working-Class Matriarch in The Archers. Louise Gillies continues with *In Praise of Gossip – Why Tongue-Wagging and the Rumour Mill Are Important in Ambridge*, asserting that gossip is in fact not just imperative for us listeners, as a means of communicating action to us (thank you Susan and Lynda), but how in small communities it can foster a sense of belonging, is a form of learning and maintains social order. Turning to the conversations that Ambridge women have with each other, Sarah Kate Merry, ‘*Almost Without Exception They Are Shown in Their Relation to Men*’: *Ambridge Women and Their Conversations*, takes a statistical approach to what women say and who they say it with to understand what this says of their power positions and dynamics. This section closes with a consideration of the woman we never heard from, but was a locus of village life and *The Archers* storylines, in *Foucault, Freda Fry and the Power of Silent Characters on the Radio*, from Rebecca Wood. Silent characters from literature and television are brought into our frame, and as with the use of music in *The Archers*, the non-verbal communication strategies are also used to transmit messages about the characters’ motivations and points of view.

The third section, *Gendered Expectations: Within the Home*, befits a drama which is centred on family homes and the emotional labour therein and the normative ‘hatch, match, dispatch’ domestic course of the female Ambridgian. At the time of writing, the volte force of Shula and her feelings towards estranged husband Alastair are a major storyline. Hannah Marije Altorf, in ‘*This Isn’t About Curry, Alistair*’: *Shula Hebden Lloyd and Iris Murdoch on Love*, uses Iris Murdoch’s philosophies on love to give an articulation to Shula’s position that the character has so far, failed to do. It has been commented on amongst the listenership that the birth rate in Ambridge is low. Carolynne Henshaw, in *Oh Baby!*

Unplanned Pregnancy and a Woman's Right to Choose, considers the actions of four Ambridge women when faced with an unexpected pregnancy and asks what we can extrapolate, if anything, from a comparison between Ambridge and UK statistical norms. Academic Archers co-founder/organiser, Nicola Headlam, continues her study (started in her chapter in Courage and Headlam, 2017) of who holds the power in Ambridge in *Women's Work?: Civil Society Networks for Social Stability or Social Change in Ambridge*, looking at Ambridgian women's identity and pressure politics, activism, voluntary and community work. Storylines and characters carry implicit and explicit messages around mental health, but how does this serve the women of Ambridge? This is the concern of Elizabeth Campion in *Strong or Silenced? The Under-Representation of Mental Health Problems in Ambridge's Women*, arguing that mental health issues in *The Archers* are unrepresentative, reduced to a plot device.

The fourth and final section, *Gendered Expectations: Beyond the Home*, turns our purview on women's lives in Ambridge to the wider world that lies past the front porch, into the village, and even as far as the Felpersham bypass can take us. Bill Pitt, in *Does The Archers Reflect Contemporary Values on Gender, and Sexuality?*, suggests that in order to reflect the wider society there could be more lesbian and trans characters portrayed in the programme, placing it in gender discourse and the gender politics movement from the 1960s to the present day. The careers, or lack thereof, of Ambridge women, is brought into a STEM spotlight by Jane Turner and Clare Warren in *Ambridge: Keeping the Pipeline of UK Female Scientists Flowing*: will the girls in Ambridge go on to choose science subjects, what determines who will go on to a career in engineering, can the current and future women of Ambridge flip the gender imbalance in non-arts learning and professions? From the science lab to the sports field, Katharine

Hoskyn, in *I Am Woman Hear Me Roar – And Now Watch Me Play Cricket*, considers the empowerment of Ambridge women (and correlating misogyny-busting) through their joining of the cricket team and puts this in a comparative context of cricket and sports in Britain. In *Sow's Ears and Silk Purses: Upcycling and The Archers*, Madeleine Lefebvre turns our attention to the entrepreneurial spirit found in the women of Ambridge and where and how this is located and extends the metaphor to spotlight the pressures felt by some to present a normative feminine form through their life stages and how this is internalised and acted upon.

REFERENCES

- BBC Radio 4(a). (2015, March 15). How The Archers sounds to people who do not listen to The Archers. *John Finmore's Souvenir Programme*. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02mlwdp>. Accessed on 26 August 2018.
- <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=http://www.law.columbia.edu/pt-br/news/2017/06/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality&httpsredir=1&article=1052&context=uclf>.
- Dictionary.com. *Intersectional*. Retrieved from <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/intersectional>. Accessed on 26 August 2018.