

Grief, hallucinations, and *Poldark*:

an interview with Jack Farthing

Jack Farthing plays George Warleggan in *Poldark*. Aficionados of Winston Graham's rollicking adventure series, set in Cornwall at the turn of the century — 18th that is — will need no explanation, but the uninitiated need to know that George is Captain Ross Poldark's nemesis in love, business, and politics, a banker and an all-round bad egg. At the end of the last series, when it began to look as though George might have it all, his wife Elizabeth died, shockingly, from puerperal sepsis. As you may have seen, in the early episodes of the current, and final, series of *Poldark*, George descended into and, eventually, emerged from the depths of grief.

GRIEF

Initial denial was followed by episodes of hallucinations accompanied by thoughts of self-destruction. Warleggan initially suppressed his grief, ordering portraits of Elizabeth to be taken down and forbidding any mention of her. No doubt encouraged by his even less likeable uncle Cary Warleggan, George threw himself back into work, and it was only after an encounter with his son Valentine that his buried emotions burst to the surface and he began to have increasingly intense and prolonged hallucinations of his dead wife. He sees her in the servant girl at the bank when she comes to his desk, glimpses her in the rooms of their country house, Trenwith, and eventually finds himself sitting with her in conversation.

DELUSIONS AND HALLUCINATIONS

I talked to Jack Farthing, whose previous roles have included a young man with terminal pancreatic cancer in *Burn Burn Burn*, and the Hon. Freddie Threepwood in *Blandings*, in Café Caritas at the RCGP. He is charming, thoughtful, and self-effacing — nothing like George Warleggan. In approaching this challenging role he was determined to do justice to the realities



Jack Farthing as George Warleggan. Credit: BBC.

of complicated bereavement, and we discussed his approach to the work and the information that he discovered and used to add authenticity and accuracy to the drama. He obtained advice and information from two psychiatrists and a researcher looking specifically at complicated grief. He was surprised, as was I, at the reported frequency of delusions and hallucinations of the deceased spouse, with up to 80% of bereaved older people reporting these events following bereavement.¹ The bereaved themselves feel that they may be losing their minds, and need reassurance that this can be a normal part of the grief reaction.

TALK THERAPY

Jack was particularly interested in the two polar opposite 19th-century approaches to treatment. The dreadful Dr Penrose, engaged by uncle Cary, considered George to be possessed by animal spirits

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and subjected him to bleeding, blistering, cupping, sedation, restraint, and iced baths. George ended up wandering the Cornish countryside in his nightshirt and came close to suicide. He was saved by the wise and gentle Dr Dwight Enys, who has already graced the pages of the *BJGP*,² and whose compassionate 'talk therapy' — 19th-century CBT — enabled George to gradually recover his normal self. Enys's therapeutic approach involved taking Warleggan to his wife's grave, and into the bedroom where she died. His 'no locked doors' policy has echoes of radical liberal approaches to the care of psychotic patients in the 1970s. His therapeutic success with George Warleggan, along with his outspoken views about criminality and mental illness, gave this quiet country doctor a national reputation, and he was later called on to advise on the madness of King George III.

One particular acting challenge was to present a sufficiently nuanced account of these complex events, in the context and constraints of fast-paced modern-day moviemaking, where time is of the essence.

I was impressed and moved by the care in which Jack had approached his work, recognising the potential that popular TV has for both good and harm. We will be seeing a lot more of him: *Official Secrets* premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in January and is released this October, and *Poldark* series 5 returned to our screens on the BBC in July.

Roger Jones,

Editor, *BJGP*.

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