

## FICTION BOOK REVIEW

### The Children's Book

A S Byatt. London, UK: Random House, 2010.  
ISBN-13: 978-0-099-53545-4. Price: £7.99.  
Pages: 617 (paperback)

This is A S Byatt's first published novel for 7 years. Like the Booker Prize-winning *Possession: a True Romance*, *The Children's Book* sets the personal history of an entangled set of semi-fictional characters within an intricate portrait of a historical era.

*The Children's Book* is a fantastic read: a modern day saga describing the fortunes of a number of interlinked families growing up in the years between the end of the Victorian era and the beginning of the Great War. This is a neglected period in fiction writing, and the author provides an impeccably researched insight into this time. Important threads running through the book include human morality, sexuality, family life and parenting, politics and violence: rich seams, many of which are evocative of the industrial heritage which runs through the book as a 'sidescape'. The novel is obsessed with visualisation and rich in description, with its underworld of fairytales, puppetry and pottery. Byatt charts the rise of the Fabian and Suffragette movements and plots the political and literary contexts of the day, contextualising this with references to Oscar Wilde, Rupert Brooke and Virginia Woolf. Many of her characters are clearly rooted in their fictional creative forerunners: Eric Gill, E M Nesbit, J M Barrie, Rudyard Kipling and, more recently, Philip Pullman. At times the book seems like a modern-day pastiche of these familiar plots, memorable from childhood but translated into darker, more adult themes.

The book begins memorably, in the depths of the South Kensington museum (the forerunner of the V & A), with the discovery of a creative stowaway. Philip Warren has run away from his restrictive vacuum of poverty and pottery, to realise his desire to "make something". Olive Wellwood, a successful authoress of children's magical tales and a central character in the book, has herself successfully escaped from her background of trauma and poverty to marry a wealthy, if reluctant, city banker. She is visiting the museum's curator in search of inspiration for her tales. Philip is whisked back to her country home, 'Todefright', a rambling farmhouse near the Kentish seaside. There Philip is introduced to Olive's apparently happy but somewhat unusual family life, an unconventional swarm of children who are allowed to run free and speak for themselves, watched over by Olive's unmarried sister, Violet. Todefright's inhabitants all pride themselves on their progressive and humane principles, emergent from the Victorian strictures of their forbears. The illusion of harmony and freedom is accentuated by the lyrical descriptions of midsummer picnics and antics, celebrating beauty and bounty in equal measure. Beneath the surface, though, secrets simmer: infidelity, dishonesty, sexuality and the terrifying incompetence of the adults as parents.

Olive writes a book, or tale, for each of her children, into which she decants the essence of her five children. These thread through the book as the author introduces new characters sequentially. The tale of Tom, her favourite child, searching for his lost shadow ('Tom Underground'), charts and mirrors his withdrawal from chaotic family life into the wildness and nature of his setting, and ultimately his betrayal and demise.

Benedict Fludd, a brilliant but unstable potter, who lives nearby, eventually takes in Philip as his apprentice. Philip attempts to survive amidst the creative chaos of the ghastly Purchase House, inhabited by Fludd's suppressed wife, traumatised daughters and angry son. This makeshift household provides the exact mirror to that of Todefright: outwardly crazy yet frighteningly productive. Both Olive and Fludd somehow maintain their creative outputs amidst a heightening sense of imminent disaster, superbly described in the nightmare drama of the creatively betrayed Tom's trek from a London theatre to the seashore of Dungeness.

Sexuality and the troublesome nature of identity pervade the childrens' passage from this 'Golden Age': plausible men prey on gullible women; sexuality is challenged, entanglements form between the hopelessly blighted youth. The children discover terrible secrets while the adults pride themselves on their reasoned, adult parenting. Behind this stage-set of art, finance, politics and sex, a terrible and bloody war looms. The book closes with the arbitrary culling of so many of its key characters through this war: emphasising its terrifying random impact on families and communities, but offering a faint and tantalising glimpse of future reconstructions and mended relationships.

We are reminded that children's authors do not always make perfect parents: Byatt demonstrates how the creative genius so often depends on never actually growing up. And fairy tales, like families, have their dark side.

Reviewed by **Imogen Stephens**

Consultant in Public Health Medicine,  
DHSE & Clinical Director, CMACE, London, UK

*J Fam Plann Reprod Health Care* 2011;**37**:16.  
doi:10.1136/jfprhc.2010.0022