The Children’s Book
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 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 the 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 random impact of identity pervade the children’s 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

doi:10.1136/jfprhc.2010.0022