

A.S. BYATT: CRITICAL STORYTELLING

Alexa Alfer and Amy J. Edwards de Campos

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The work of A.S. Byatt has already received much critical attention, especially since the Booker Prize for *Possession: A Romance* in 1990. Recent monographs focusing exclusively on Byatt's work include Lena Steveker's *Identity and Cultural Memory in the Fiction of A.S. Byatt: Knitting the Net of Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) and Louisa Hadley's *The Fiction of A.S. Byatt* (2008) in Palgrave Macmillan's Reader's Guides to Essential Criticism. It therefore does not come as a surprise that Alexa Alfer and Amy J. Edwards de Campos's *A.S. Byatt* (2010) is published as part of the Contemporary British Novelists series, which already includes monographs on J.G. Ballard, Pat Barker, Jim Crace, James Kelman, Iain Sinclair, Graham Swift, Irvine Welsh and Jeanette Winterson. Alfer and de Campos's book offers a comprehensive and lucid introduction to one of the most influential contemporary British writers, covering the whole range of Byatt's writing (novels, short stories and critical writing).

Adding to and extending existing scholarship on the writer, the authors consistently include readings of Byatt's critical work in their analyses of her fictional work and position her as a public figure whose engagement with society and academia is one of the cornerstones of her career. The introduction states accordingly that the authors' aim is "an intellectual charting of the development of A.S. Byatt's career as a writer" (2) which focuses on "major themes and aesthetic concerns" (2) as well as the cultural and critical contexts of Byatt's

work. The authors' rationale is to showcase Byatt as a 'critical storyteller', a writer who "does not separate the literary from the critical imagination, but rather aims at a thoughtful and deliberate commingling of these two ways of seeing and describing the world" (3-4).

Chapter 2, "Fathers, sisters and the anxiety of influence: *The Shadow of the Sun* and *The Game*", offers in-depth analyses of Byatt's first two novels, both of which "place writers [...] at the structural centre of their respective plots" (11) and focus on the Romantic legacy of (mid-)twentieth-century literature and the intersections of Byatt's early work with debates on the novel. Both *The Shadow of the Sun* (1964) and *The Game* (1967) accentuate the conflicted relation of 'life', 'reality' and 'art' (a recurrent topic in many of Byatt's works) and the search for (female) artistic identity. While criticism of the novels has so far had a tendency to dwell on possible biographical parallels between the women protagonists and Byatt herself, Alfer and de Campos prefer to treat them as an analysis of "the state of the novel at the beginning of the end of the twentieth century" (24), tinged by a nostalgia for the past and the search for a place for the novel form in the late twentieth century.

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The next two chapters are centred on Byatt's Quartet (*The Virgin in the Garden*, 1978; *Still Life*, 1985; *Babel Tower*, 1996; and *A Whistling Woman*, 2002), condition-of-England novels which depict the 1950s to the 1970s. In Chapter 3 —"Writing the contemporary: *The Virgin in the Garden* and *Still Life*"— the authors identify the tetralogy's overarching theme in the question, "Is reality ordered, or is the order we perceive in the world only a reflection of our own minds?" (76). The contrast between 'old (novelistic) realism' and 'new experiment' after World War II has become something of a critical truism, yet Byatt's interest in creating a productive relation of these two aspects adds a new twist to the discussion. *The Virgin in the Garden*, set in the 1950s, highlights the inaccessibility of the past and constructs reading as a creative process. The novel shows how "realism, far from being epistemologically naive, can be a profoundly self-conscious mode of storytelling" (52). *Still Life*, set in the same decade, concentrates on the impossibility of objectivity in fiction due to "the muddled, metaphorical nature" (54) of language.

Chapter 4, "Two cultures: *Babel Tower* and *A Whistling Woman*", covers the second half of Byatt's Quartet novels, and is especially interested in the breakdown and fragmentation of language in the 1960s and 1970s, and the impact of narratives of science on literary creation. In *Babel Tower*, the changed setting —the Swinging Sixties— is mirrored in a "multi-layered narrative that allows the provocative and feverishly experimental atmosphere of its 1960s setting to spill over strategically into the novel's own narrative structures" (65). As the title

implies, the novel is at least partly a depiction of the perceived breakdown and increasingly fragmentary nature of language and the concomitant postmodern sense of identity as equally multiple. The authors convincingly argue that *Babel Tower* creates a connection “between the failure of confidence in language and contemporary social upheavals” (68). The novel also sees Byatt incorporating her increasing fascination with science into her work: the chaos of language and discourse(s) is countered by genetics as a supposedly universal code. *A Whistling Woman* picks up these questions: while grand narratives have lost their ability to offer explanations, narrative remains as “a phenomenon that pervades all of human life and underpins people’s daily existence, their sense of self and their sense of reality” (81). As a conclusion to the Quartet, *A Whistling Woman* is analysed as a surprisingly inconclusive text, countering critics who had predicted the text would become a ‘portrait of the artist’ Frederica who, however, is not the central focus of this novel.

With chapters 4 and 5, the authors continue their focus on Byatt’s interest in narration and narrative form, but move from the novel form to a stronger focus on the appropriation of storytelling. Chapter 5, “Tradition and transformation: *Possession* and fairytales”, covers a range of Byatt’s writings from *Possession: A Romance* (1990) to short fiction in *Angels and Insects* (1992), *The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye* (1995), and *Little Black Book of Stories* (2003). *Possession* is introduced in terms of its postmodern qualities, but then depicted as offering a subtle and poignant critique of postmodernism. Alfer and de Campos argue that *Possession*, *Angels and Insects* and some of Byatt’s short fiction can be read “as twentieth-century intellectual responses to nineteenth-century fiction” (95). Many of the phenomena the authors diagnose in this chapter —such as the pleasure of immersion in the nineteenth century vs. a more analytical view of the Victorian past (as mirrored in the authors’ assessment that Byatt’s novel “invites readers temporarily to suspend their twentieth-century scepticism and imagine themselves into [the Victorian Age]”, 96)— have by now been recognised as staple features of neo-Victorianism, and this chapter might have profited from a brief discussion of this approach; the authors even reference Christian Gutleben’s *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel* (2001), a founding text of neo-Victorian studies, and point out the element of haunting in the novel —another concept which has become prominent in neo-Victorian fiction and criticism.¹ Byatt “is undoubtedly best known for her reimaginings of the Victorian Past” (6), the authors state in their “Introduction” —it would have been interesting to see them frame their discussion of these texts in terms of neo-Victorianism. It is only in the second half of the chapter that the authors eventually concentrate on Byatt’s increasing interest in the form of the fairy tale (especially in her short fiction), presenting tales and characters who

share a potential for empowerment and liberation. Unfortunately, this part is not as coherent as the other chapters, possibly due to the more thematic interest of the (sub)chapter which forces the authors to touch upon a variety of texts rather briefly. The chapter therefore feels slightly underdeveloped and lacks both a precise thesis and a conclusion.

Chapter 6: “The dark side of the tale: *The Children’s Book*, *The Biographer’s Tale* and *Angels and Insects*” forms a counterpoint to Chapter 5 in its focus on “the darker side of the storytelling imagination” (116). It offers a detailed reading of the most recent text discussed in this monograph, *The Children’s Book* (2009), in which Byatt explores the dangers of fiction—the authors depict Byatt’s novel as “a cautionary tale about storytelling itself” (121), thus adding another level to the writer’s constant negotiating of the relation of life and art. This ambivalence about the value of art and literature links *The Children’s Book* to the earlier *The Biographer’s Tale* (2000), which Alfer and de Campos evaluate in terms of Byatt’s discussion of the free (humanist) individual in a biological discourse. The analysis then turns (briefly) to the novella “Morpho Eugenia” (in *Angels and Insects*) and its focus on biological determination. The initial focus of the chapter on ‘the dark side of storytelling’ seems to get lost in these pages. However, its conclusion alleviates this impression, pointing out that all of the narratives covered “reveal glimpses of a decidedly un-novelistic and anti-individualistic ethos” (136) while at the same time highlighting that these issues can be related to one of the most pressing (and as yet unresolved) issues in Byatt’s work, the discussion of “the extent to which human fate is already written by biological *and* discursive forces, and the extent to which understanding these forces and plots may yet be capable of bringing freedom” (136).

The last chapter, “7 Critical storytelling: peopling the paper houses”, finally, turns to Byatt as a ‘public intellectual’. This is possibly the most important chapter of the present monograph because it focuses on Byatt as a writer of (literary) criticism and cultural commentary, an aspect that is often sadly neglected in criticism of her work. By way of an excellent introduction to Byatt’s non-fiction, the chapter supplies readers with a broad overview of Byatt’s diverse critical writings rather than concentrating on exemplary in-depth analyses. The authors point out various topics of Byatt’s critical writing, note the plurality of (theoretical) approaches that underpin her writing, and underline her scepticism about the overuse of theoretical discourse in the analysis of literary texts. Particular attention is paid to Byatt as a public figure who has done much to advance and celebrate contemporary British literature. This concluding chapter is ample proof that Byatt is a writer with facets that remain to be discovered and discussed—and this monograph is an excellent introduction for those who want to take up the challenge.

Note

¹. See, for example, Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham, eds., *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction*.

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