

Alexa Alfer and Amy J. Edwards de Campos 2010: *A. S. Byatt: Critical Storytelling*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press. xiv + 194pp. ISBN 978-0-7190-6652-8

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A. S. Byatt: Critical Storytelling is the tenth in the Manchester University Press series 'Contemporary British Novelists' and here, Byatt is in the company of authors who have made an impact on the novel in the late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century, such as Ian McEwan, Graham Swift, Julian Barnes and Jeanette Winterson. As the series editor, Daniel Lea, says in the preface "The title of the series is deliberately provocative, recognising each of the three defining elements as contentious identifications of a cultural framework that must be continuously remade and renamed. The contemporary British novel defies easy categorisation ..." (vii). That A. S. Byatt is both contemporary and British (born in Sheffield in 1936) is obviously not open to question, but the state of the novel at the beginning of the twenty-first century and the exact nature and relevance of her contribution to it, dating from the middle of the twentieth century up to her latest novel, *The Children's Book* (2009), are issues that provide much to mull over.

The authors, Alexa Alfer (Senior Lecturer in the Department of Modern and Applied Linguistics at the University of Westminster) and Amy J. Edwards de Campos (author of a PhD thesis on Byatt at Worcester College, Oxford, and currently working at the University of East London), start with Byatt's concern with how to write well, a concern encapsulated from the beginning in her earliest novels and expressed in her 1987 story 'Sugar' from the collection with the eponymous title:

Taking its cue from 'Sugar', the present book, while including a biographical timeline for reference purposes, aims at an intellectual charting of the development of A. S. Byatt's career as a writer. Retracing major themes and aesthetic concerns from Byatt's earliest works through to her latest and increasingly experimental fictional offerings, this book not only introduces the reader to a body of work that has gradually come to be regarded as one of the most diverse and imaginative in late twentieth and early twenty-first British writing but also explores the wider cultural and critical contexts with which Byatt's work grapples, engages and indeed intersects. (2)

In their Introduction, Alfer and Edwards de Campos explain that Byatt has a double life in her writing: again from the very beginning, she has been both a creative writer and a critic. Indeed, as Wallhead shows, the confection of sugar sweets is an apt metaphor for the creative process (2007: 23-41). The authors have subtitled their study 'Critical Storytelling', and they formulate what they mean by this rubric when they refer to "Byatt's life long project of 'critical storytelling', a practice of storytelling, that is, which 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).

By *critical storytelling*, they mean the creation of invented stories in tandem with an inherent criticism of how these stories are or should be told, yet one could nitpick and

point out that while *literary imagination* is readily comprehensible, one ventures to wonder exactly what is encompassed in the potentially oxymoronic combination *critical imagination*.

The authors find that this “commitment to the mutually informative discourses of fiction and literary criticism” (4) is what places Byatt’s novels and stories on a higher plane, in the category of serious and thought-provoking self-conscious fiction. But equally, this dialogue makes them difficult and can be so demanding of the readers that some find it prohibitive. Such a negative attitude can be found in the opinions of some reviewers (see Edwards de Campos 2005: 3) and this leads the authors to call the relations between press-reviewers and Byatt “love-or-hate affairs” (14, see also Edwards de Campos 2005: 1).

Both Alfer and Edwards de Campos are thoroughly familiar with Byatt criticism: Alexa Alfer has written frequently on Byatt, not least as co-editor with Michael J. Noble of *Essays on the Fiction of A. S. Byatt: Imagining the Real* (2001) and, more importantly in terms of criticism, as compiler with Noble and others of the A. S. Byatt web page; while Amy Edwards de Campos has published on *Possession* (see Parini 2004: 247-66) and her doctoral thesis (2005) was dedicated to this particular aspect of Byatt. Of the 194 pages of *A. S. Byatt: Critical Storytelling*, fully thirty-four are dedicated to bibliography, which contrasts very favourably with the seven and a half pages of bibliography (163-71) of a similar book, Louisa Hadley’s *The Fiction of A. S. Byatt: A Reader’s Guide to Essential Criticism* (2008). No doubt Edwards’s doctoral work (over forty pages of bibliography) and Alfer’s work on the web page have been fundamental in the compilation, and the Bibliography is thus an invaluable tool for all those who wish to study Byatt’s work. While the novels and short story collections are readily available, before these publications not all scholars had easy access to Byatt’s uncollected non-fiction or her journalism, criticism and media broadcasts (161-65). They compile the reviews on her fiction book by book (167-74), which is also helpful, and another necessary tool is the Biographical outline of Byatt’s life up to 2009 at the beginning of the book (xii-xiii).

One of the most remarkable aspects of this work is its succinctness and compactness. The authors have absorbed a huge field of criticism and concentrated the most important points into seven dense chapters. The Introduction sets out their intentions and the methods they intend to deploy for the analysis of the narratives in relation to criticism of writing. Chapter 2, ‘Fathers, Sisters and the Anxiety of Influence: *The Shadow of the Sun* and *The Game*’, deals with Byatt’s first two novels, the early fiction antecedent to her life’s great work, the *Quartet*. The four parts of the *Quartet* appeared over twenty-four years, with the best-selling, Booker-Prize-winning *Possession: a Romance* in between. Parts three and four of the *Quartet* are different in many ways from the first two parts, thus it is not surprising that the authors decided not to deal with the *Quartet* together, but in two parts. Thus Chapter 3 is ‘Writing the Contemporary: *The Virgin in the Garden* and *Still Life*’, and chapter 4 is ‘Two Cultures: *Babel Tower* and *A Whistling Woman*’. In Chapter 5, ‘Tradition and Transformation: *Possession* and Fairytales’, they group *Possession*, which contains fairy tales, with Byatt’s other fairy and folk tales in collections like *Angels and Insects*, *The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye*, *Elementals* and *Little Black Book of Stories*, and this thematic grouping is much more coherent, economical and meaningful than if they had treated her works individually and in strict chronological order as some other critics do, for example, Hadley (2008), who dedicates two chapters to *Possession*, one on ‘Postmodernism vs. Realism’ and one on ‘The Presence of the Past’, and a final chapter to the fairy tales. Chapter 6, ‘The Dark Side of the Tale: *The Children’s Book*, *The Biographer’s Tale* and *Angels and Insects*’ focuses upon Byatt’s latest novel, *The Children’s Book*, but again, they group it with earlier work in order to pull together thematic parallels. Chapter 7, their final chapter, ‘Critical

Storytelling: Peopling the Paper House' (referencing her 1979 summary of contemporary fiction 'People in Paper Houses', later collected in *Passions of the Mind: Selected Writings* [1991]) deals more fully than in the Introduction with her non-fiction work, particularly her criticism, from the earliest monographs and collections: *Degrees of Freedom: The Novels of Iris Murdoch*; *Wordsworth and Coleridge in Their Time*; *Passions of the Mind*; *Imagining Characters: Six Conversations about Women Writers* (with Ignês Sodré); to her latest, *On Histories and Stories and Portraits in Fiction*.

In their Introduction (4), the authors stress the importance of Byatt's statement in *Passions of the Mind* that reading and writing are for her "points on a circle" (Byatt 1991: 1), activities that feed into each other. They add that voracious reading which compels one to write, and writing that leads on to further reading are obsessions with which she endows her literary-minded characters, that is, almost all her protagonists and some of the secondary characters, like Alexander Wedderburn of the *Quartet*. Also in *Passions of the Mind*, Byatt had written of the "problems of the 'real' in fiction and the adequacy of words to describe it" (Byatt 1991: 3-4). Byatt's first critical work was on an author whom she much admired: *Degrees of Freedom: The Novels of Iris Murdoch* (1965) and it is the thought-provoking nature of Murdoch's fictions, also their curiosity about techniques, with which Byatt identified. Thus the authors applaud Byatt's engagement with the dilemma of how to write real life, all the time knowing that even that can be textually constructed (5), and they reject accusations of donnish traditionalism or a resistance to 'theory', which have been levelled at her (see Edwards de Campos 2005: 1-2).

Over the two chapters on the *Quartet*, the authors trace the transition from the "rather earnest realism" of the first two novels, to the "bold formal experiments and seemingly chaotic proliferations of story-lines" and the 1960s concern with the breakdown and fragmentation of language of the third, *Babel Tower*, then the "fictional ponderings of the narratives of science" (6) in the fourth, *A Whistling Woman*. Gillian Beer (2000) has shown how Darwin had recourse to metaphors and stories to explain abstract scientific concepts such as heredity, proliferation or survival. Byatt uses metaphors not only to enrich her stories, but to give them structure, as Wallhead (1999) has shown. In *Possession*, the different story-lines are held together by over-arching metaphors (as defined by Lakoff and Johnson 1980) like LOVE IS AN ENTITY (Wallhead 1999: 178). Furthermore, they work through ramifications of smaller-scaled metaphors in the line of Darwin's usage, such as LOVE IS AN ELECTRO-MAGNETIC FORCE (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 49, cited in Wallhead 1999: 179) or metaphors that unite content and form, the topic with which the authors are concerned, such as MORE OF FORM IS MORE OF CONTENT (Wallhead 1999: 184). Byatt's research into nineteenth-century literature and its general political, social and scientific background prepared her for scientific discussion not only in her nineteenth-century neo-Victorian novels and stories but also in her contemporary ones of England in the 1960s and 1970s. The authors show how she brings all the strands of story-telling and science together in her latest novel, *The Children's Book*, which is at once neo-Victorian, neo-Edwardian and neo-Georgian, in that it extends as far as the First World War and its aftermath. They do exaggerate, however, in their argument about Darwinian proliferation as a necessary background to selection, and the potentially destructive power of story-telling when they claim that the fictions of the protagonist, Olive Wellwood (based on E. Nesbit), "over the course of the novel's sprawling narrative, gradually prove an even more destructive force than the First World War itself" (8).

However, they are quite right in seeing in her later fiction, particularly *The Biographer's Tale* and 'Morpho Eugenia', "glimpses of a curiously un-novelistic and anti-individualistic

ethos ... powerful images of humans as types, composites or mere representations of a species" (81; see Wallhead 2003). This is part of Byatt's concern over notions of human identity in an increasingly globalised world and in a universe explained more by scientists than humanists or the religious. The authors devote their last chapter to Byatt as "public intellectual" and champion of new writing, as "an active player in the wider cultural field she inhabits and has also undoubtedly helped to shape" (9). Indeed, Byatt graciously accepted the invitation to be guest of honour at the launch of this book at the University of Westminster on the auspicious date of 20/1/2011.

The authors show how Byatt invites her readers to participate in an interactive process: "...Byatt's commitment to the paradigm of dialogical criticism, or criticism as conversation, which not only encompasses the relationship between readers, be they lay or professional, of the same text, but also that of reader to text" (9). It seems that they have sympathised with this approach so much that they use it themselves on occasion. They create a dialogue within their text between their arguments and the quotations from Byatt that they select for illustration. Two or three examples should suffice to map this re-enactment. In the first chapter, in discussing *The Shadow of the Sun*, there is a quotation about the protagonist, Henry Severell, ending "I find this real and urgent enough'. Henry muttered into his beard. (SS: 31-2)" and their text takes up his comment: "And indeed he does" (16). In discussing *The Game*, the quotation ends: "'Why not?' said Percy. (G: 195-6)" and the text echoes the question, but as a statement: "Why not indeed" (30). Also on *The Game*: "Who had stolen whose action? (G: 252)", answered by "Nobody, as it turns out" (32). This dialogic approach is very reader-friendly as it asks readers to think about the ideas prompted by the quotation, though it guides their reading rather than challenges it. So perhaps the authors should have distanced themselves a little more.

They have uncovered a "curious fact" (9) concerning periodicity: "By the turn of the millennium, Byatt seemed to fit much more comfortably on the map of contemporary British writing than she had done as a young novelist in the 1960s and 1970s" (9). They assert that she wrote neither "gritty social realism" nor "anglicised reworkings of the *nouveau roman*" (9). The authors agree with Kathleen Coyne Kelly (1996) that Byatt has not changed in her interests and aims in writing. Her later works are not best-sellers like *Possession*; nevertheless, they are great, mature works, and Byatt prefers to pursue her constant interests and aims rather than follow a formula that might bring economic benefit. So, as Alfer and Edwards de Campos explain, it is more a case of "today's literary climate" adjusting itself to her and thus vindicating her dedication to narrative that might "grapple with important questions of our time" (9-10). The authors define her particular brand of realism, which makes her readers meditate a discursive system of representation rather than simply accept it at face value as a realism that:

far from being epistemologically naive, can indeed be a profoundly self-conscious mode of storytelling, productively worried about its own premises, and centrally concerned not so much, nor so simply, with the faithful representation of reality as with the problems and pitfalls of our desire for such representations, and the always essentially textual strategies we employ in pursuit of them (52).

In the course of their book, they chart the different influences that have been brought to bear on Byatt's thinking and with which she has grappled, a breeding-ground from which this type of realism sprang up and was tended over the decades. The critical legacy Byatt inherited encompasses the dogmatic dictates of her teacher at Cambridge, F. R. Leavis; T. S. Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1975 [1919]); and the

works of the two women writers to whom Byatt dedicated monographs: Iris Murdoch and George Eliot (see Wallhead 1999: 43-62). George Eliot wrote: "Form, as an element of human experience, must begin with the perception of difference" (1990: 232), a starting-point to which the authors attribute great importance (55). Another referent is *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (1967) by her colleague at University College London, Frank Kermode, which informs, the authors feel, formal aspects of *A Whistling Woman* (79) and, one might add, *The Biographer's Tale* and *The Children's Book*. The pervasive aspects in these are, as the authors show, "our sense of ourselves as stories with beginnings, conflicts and resolutions, and ends" (79) and "the slippery nature of human identity" (130).

By choosing to focus their study of Byatt on her "critical storytelling", the authors evade the pitfall of formulating a partisan approach, of which Byatt, that "non-belonger to schools of thought" (Byatt 1991: 2) has often made a disavowal: "she objects to the indiscriminate application, so common in contemporary academia, of critical metanarratives to a work of fiction, be they post-structuralist, postmodernist or Leavisite. To Byatt, the best methodology is to have no fixed methodology: ..." (144). Dame Antonia can have no objection to this book, quite the reverse.

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