

## Who Is the Inheritor of A. S. Byatt's "Big Historical Book" Legacy?

“ The novel *The Children's Book*, by British author A. S. Byatt, has as its title a misnomer—it is emphatically not a novel for children. As with many of her books, it is voluminous and compendious at the same time, both long—the American hardback edition runs to 675 pages—and concise in terms of all it expresses and seeks to portray. The book is not one for the faint-of-heart, either, when it comes to the matters it discusses. Like Dickens in maintaining at length a fictional world which enchants, instructs, and sometimes terrifies, Byatt yet cannot be charged, as Dickens often has been—with a certain amount of justice—with being sentimental. It is not an easy read, but it is a wondrous and compelling one.

The book is ‘about’ the Wellwood family and their host of friends and acquaintances during the historical periods ranging from the late Victorian through Edwardian to Georgian (of George V). It examines the social optimism of the last of the Victorians to the great despair and anguish wrought across England and the Continent by the pain and struggle of the First World War, and the stirrings of fascism in the 1920's. The many Wellwood children and the other children as well whose lives are pictured in the vignettes of the progressive chapters are both the celebrities and the victims of well-intentioned parents such as Olive Wellwood, the main mother-figure, who is also a famous writer of fairy tales, a form very popular with children and adults alike during this time period. But, as Olive, her husband Humphrey, and the other *adult* artistic, political, and social celebrities know perhaps subconsciously, and find for a fact in retrospect, children are not merely subjects for societal and artistic experiments, but growing people in their own right.

*The Children's Book* is wonderfully personal and suspenseful in its appeal to the reader's emotions, playing on both one's hopes and fears for the characters with true mastery, and

rewarding close attention to ‘the facts of the case’ with a better understanding of how people work *en masse* as well as singly. The reader threads his or her way through secondary subjects from bimetallism to socialism to women's suffrage to *Peter Pan* to Victorian sexual habits to puppeteers. Old secrets become new revelations and vice versa. Sketches of real historical figures mingle with those of the fictional characters to add a strong dimension of verisimilitude, which in turn makes possible for the reader a ‘willing suspension of disbelief.’ As well, this tactic provides a well-based notion of the sexual lives, loves, and mores of various types of historical characters, and replaces our all-too-frequent notion of the people of that era as only restrained and repressed, with a good idea of what lay under the repressions and restrictions of the time. In short, the novel is a world to live in, and its close leaves one both sad and anxious for the characters, who do not yet anticipate the advent of World War II. Yet it remains a prize fiction as well, a moving kaleidoscope of images of beauty and terror.

To those faithful readers of Byatt who are familiar with her quartet of novels about a fictional 20<sup>th</sup>-century woman, Frederica Potter (*The Virgin in the Garden*, *Still Life*, *Babel Tower*, and *A Whistling Woman*), this novel will appeal for its complexity of psychological insight into what helps build a person's character. To those who prefer Byatt at her mythical, magical best from such volumes of fairy tales as *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* and the fanciful stories from *Elementals*, the intermixture of fairy tale motifs with the modern twists and turns of the frame story in *The Children's Book* will produce the same overall feeling of basic truth to psychic, yet storybook reality as her more thaumaturgically based novels do. Alternately, it will suit those who prefer the Booker Prize-winning Byatt of the novel *Possession* (which combines fantastic features with fictional and period history and a generous dollop of academic satire), and the playful Byatt of the tale ‘*The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye*’ (a deliciously wayward

combination of fantasy and academic satire from the book of the same title). These readers will find themselves at home here with her wit and sagacity. Finally, to those to whom Byatt is a new experience, this book should have the ability to fix itself in memory as a genuine picture of the combined moral earnestness and passion of the late Victorians, and of the emotional distance with which their immediate descendants found it often necessary to greet their pet projects while engaging in pursuits and enthusiasms of their own. This novel is developed and handled with a precision and lightness of touch that belie the intricacy and excellence of the picture presented, and should be a welcome addition to the library of anyone who likes to read and re-read a complex book.”

At the time when I first sketched out this short review essay, in the tweens of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I was a fairly genuine expert on A. S. Byatt. I had read most of what she had produced, and could comment on it more or less knowledgeably. Even at the time, though, it was true that reading and re-reading a Byatt book seemed never to disclose all that was there, not even in the whimsical books of short stories with forests and mermaids and a djinn and other magical creatures in them. Byatt was just too complex, too knowledgeable about too many things for one to keep track of easily. But in the time since, I have had other things to preoccupy me, and I thought sadly of all the Byatt books I must be missing.

It’s not true, however, for in 2011, Byatt—or Dame Antonia Susan Byatt, sister of Margaret Drabble, as she is better known to the British public—wrote what seems to have been her latest fiction venture, barring something else to come along. It’s entitled *Ragnarok: The End of the Gods*, and is a retelling of the Norse myth set in the modern countryside evacuation procedures of WW II. I have not read that, to review it, nor have I read what is her only other book since

then as far as the Google records show: *Peacock and Vine*, a non-fiction work of 2016 about William Morris and Mariano Fortuny.

Dame A. S. Byatt is eighty-five this year, however, so perhaps she has done her shot, or perhaps she may still surprise us. In the meantime, I am proposing that we name her successor as Prof. Honorée Fanonne Jeffers, another mighty historical lady with a voluminous book, the already famous *The Love Songs of W. E. B. Du Bois* (and deservedly so, I think, who am still devouring the text myself). I've reached page 93 of a nearly 800-page read, and yet already, the resemblances to Byatt are becoming clear, though so are some of the differences.

For one, the main character in Jeffers's book, Ailey Pearl Garfield, is a child when the book begins, and has a secret demon as many of the children of Byatt do: she wets the bed at the "dream vision" instigation of a tall lady with long hair, until finally her sister Lydia helps break her of the problem. And the mythology of the ancestors' parts of the book are as full of history and the influence of some supernatural beings as Byatt at her best, though Jeffers handles it in a different way, not so much invoking actual genii as proposing a magical ancestor coming forth to parts of the family in the dawn of the family history. Also, finally, not only is the picture that of the societal mythologies which blacks, whites and indigenous peoples all have concerning each other, some of which may be truer, some of which may be not so true, but the history invoked as the background for the book is the history of Africa and America this time, not of Britain.

Still, the book is beckoning me on with its huge march of events across its own special stage, and as I read some every night, I feel my own place in things the greater, not as a white woman who doesn't belong reading a black woman's writing, not as a white woman who doesn't feel or understand the characters and issues involved, but as an eager audience member who is included just as much as if I had been black, because it is about me, too, about what I should already have

learned about another people in my country whom I'm previously felt I knew pretty well from the few black friends I've had, about the bigger picture familiar to them which cannot of necessity be equally familiar to me with my experience. And there is the key to the whole situation: we owe each other this dialogue, this exchange, and Prof. Honorée Fanonne Jeffers has more than done her part to present the portion of black history that is special and important to her, sharing it with anyone who wants to take the time to read and live into the characters and their dilemmas and victories. Maybe, just maybe, the honors should go this time to this side of the Atlantic, as we watch another great lady retell another people's interiority and history.