



A Time Like No Other

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Peter Hollindale discusses A S Byatt's **The Children's Book**

A S Byatt's **The Children's Book**, her first major work since **Possession**, is a novel for adult readers but its themes – the process of writing for children, the impact of artistic production on the artist's own children, the nature of childhood in the years when works by Kenneth Grahame, E Nesbit and J M Barrie were published – are centrally important to all of us interested in children's literature and its creation. **Peter Hollindale** explores an imaginative and panoramic novel.

Set between the last years of Victoria and 1919, A S Byatt's **The Children's Book** is the story of four families, and two teenage siblings from a fifth. These are momentous times, embracing the Edwardian decade which is often considered a Golden Age of children's literature. At least for the children of intellectual and prosperous middle class families, it was also a unique period. The children of late Victorian England, Byatt argues, were – different from children before and after –, admitted to the family circles as full members, their characters and plans respected and discussed, but also allowed exceptional independence, able to roam wild and free.

Some readers may be tempted to see parallels with our own times, when children's books again enjoy high status and are widely read by adults, and when children themselves are the object of ceaseless and often confused attention and concern. Byatt gives such inviting equations no encouragement at all. This is a work of historical imagination, and sometimes of explicit well-researched history. Moreover, Byatt is by temperament and inclination in part a natural scientist. She views humankind (correctly in my view) as a flawed animal species. This gives her writing distance and perspective. She centres her wonderful cast of children and families in ever-widening concentric circles of political and cultural behaviour, as the Edwardian decade (for her a –Silver Age?) moves inexorably, almost by a biological imperative, towards war. No readers interested in the years which produced **Peter Pan**, **The Wind in the Willows**, **The Railway Children** and so many other classics could fail to emerge from **The Children's Book** without their understanding of childhood's place in the time's complexity deepened and enriched.

The children's writer and her chosen child

There are several reasons why **The Children's Book** is an appropriate title. Its pivotal character, Olive Wellwood, is a children's writer, based on Edith Nesbit. The mother of a large family, she writes a private individual story for each of her children, the most complex of which is for her eldest and favourite son, Tom. Like Kipling's **Just-So Stories**, Barrie's **Peter Pan**, Grahame's **The Wind in the Willows**, and later the work of A A Milne, a private story eventually evolves into a public work, a theatrical counterpart of **Peter Pan**. The consequences are no less disastrous than in several of these other cases. For Tom is a real-life Peter Pan, incapable of growing up – an attractive child who becomes a solitary feral youth and man with almost no relationships outside his family. Coming soon after the destruction of the Tree House, a family den left over from childhood which he has made his adult lair and refuge, the public success of his own private story –Tom Underground? is felt as a betrayal. The double loss deprives him not just of what he has, but what he *is*, and is past bearing. Tom's story is not only the tragedy of –boy eternal?, but a profound enquiry into the psychology of the children's writer and her chosen child.

The 'children's book' is first the private book that Tom, like his siblings, owns. Next it is the book, and kind of book, that Olive writes, in a time of its ascendancy. But it is also the book we are reading, the story of a society whose privileged members, subsidised by a labouring and impoverished underclass, are able to behave like children even as adults, treating politics and life itself as an ideological game. Byatt's historical interventions quicken later in the novel, as the approach of 1914 brings the period's grown-up childhood to its dreadful end.

By convention children's books have happy endings. With chastening irony, after all the carnage, loss and horror of the War, this most adult of 'children's books' does indeed end happily. From the original large cast of children and adolescents, three men and three women who have survived the war come together in three unions. With careful artistic symmetry, between them they draw together the novel's themes and values. There are Charles/Karl and Elsie, opposites in social origin, whose shared qualities of thoughtful and determined independence overcome the obstacles of class division. There are Grizelda and Wolfgang, she English but half-German, he German but Jewish, who defy the years of Anglo-German hatred with their love. Above all there are Philip Warren the potter and Dorothy Wellwood the doctor, both of whom have in the past abandoned their mothers and fought against all odds to follow through a single-minded vocational commitment, but who compromise at last with the imperative of mutual need. Three love stories, this last especially unfolded by Byatt with fitting reticence, are all traceable to earlier scenes set in the fragile Silver Age when they were young. So this splendid novel, which has shown in families and politics some very childish adults and some very grown-up children, ends with an appropriate reward for the adult and the child in all of us.

The Children's Book (978 0 7011 8389 9) is published by Chatto & Windus at £18.99 or in Vintage paperback (978 0 09 953545 4) at £7.99.

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