

*Little Black Book of Stories* by A.S.Byatt (Chatto and Windus, R170)

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A.S.Byatt can be a somewhat austere writer. Even in her most reader-friendly novel, *Possession*, the reader has to negotiate – or, more often, skip – large tracts of pseudo-Browning Victorian verse; and *The Biographer's Tale* is, amongst other things, a tissue of abstruse scholarship encompassing figures like Francis Galton, Linnaeus, and Henrik Ibsen.

This little book thus comes as something of a relief, in containing the essence of Byatt without the hard work. It's not exactly light reading, but it comes at you in manageable chunks. Of course, the chunks are very highly polished indeed, wherein lies the pleasure of reading Byatt.

The *Little Black Book* contains five long short stories, united mainly by – well, a certain blackness. In the most haunting of the stories, "The Thing in the Forest", two little girls, evacuees from wartime London, on their first day in the country come across a creature of surpassing hideousness, which changes their lives forever. In "A Stone Woman" a woman – well, turns to stone, slowly but inexorably. In "The Pink Ribbon" a husband contemplates the decline into Alzheimer's of his once beautiful wife. In "Raw Material" two genteel spinsters apparently torture each other with cigarette ends.

What saves these stories from unrelieved gloom is the quality of Byatt's imagination and the sheer technical skill with which she deploys it. The approach of the Thing, for instance, unleashes a virtuoso cadenza of sound and smell: "A crunching, a crackling, a crushing, a heavy thumping, combined with threshing and thrashing, and added to that a gulping, heaving, boiling, bursting steaming sound, full of bubbles and puffs, piffs and explosions, swallowings and wallowings. The smell was worse, and more aggressive, than the sound. It was a liquid smell of putrefaction, the smell of maggoty things at the bottom of untended dustbins, the smell of blocked drains, and unwashed trousers, mixed with the smell of bad eggs, and of rotten carpets and ancient polluted bedding."

Byatt is clearly having fun here, and the reader has no choice but to join in: if Byatt is a bit of a sadist, she knows how to bring out the masochist in the reader. She prepares her macabre dishes with the loving care and skill of a master chef.

By the same token, the Stone Woman doesn't just turn into a lump of Table Mountain sandstone: she metamorphoses into a lapidarian extravaganza of textures and colours: "The two she loved most were labradorite and fantomquartz. Labradorite is dark blue, soft black, full of gleaming lights, peacock and gold and silver, like the aurora borealis embedded in hardness. In fantomquartz, a shadowy crystal contains other shadowy crystals growing at angles in its transparent depths."

Paradoxically, in this apparently black-dominated book, colour is the strongest unifying element. In "Body Art" a young art student decorates a rather grim gynaecological ward for Christmas, and Byatt uses the conjunction of art with bodies to explore a vast range of colours, from the rainbow colours of the decorations to the orange and green of the pasta a doctor feeds the student after she faints: "He remarked that they were nasty colours, unappetising really, fleshy and mouldy. ... You're right, she told him, it's meant to look appetising, tomato juice, spinach. It looks a bit disgusting. Dead maybe. Lots of colours are sort of deathly. You have to be careful."

That sums up this collection's strange attentiveness to the surface of things: it's a surface that conceals depths, often "sort of deathly". For if on one level Byatt is a superb realist, charting and tracing meticulously and precisely what one of her characters calls "things in their contingent quiddity", she is on another level a practitioner of the dark art of the folk tale and the fairy story. Beneath the glitter and beauty lurks the blackness. As one of the little girls in the forest, now grown up, realises: "glamour and the thing they had seen came from the same place, ... brilliance and the ashen stink had the same source." Nowhere do brilliance and ashen stink come together more spectacularly than in "Raw Material", a story about a teacher of creative writing, himself a novelist who has seen better days. One of his students, an eighty-two year old spinster named Cecily Fox, writes, as her contribution, an essay on "How We Used to Black-lead Stoves." The essay is in fact a virtuoso, near-parodic, piece of realist observation and representation, describing the workings of a coal stove as if it were a vision of Paradise or Armageddon: "If you opened the door, when it was fully burning, you could hear and see it – a flickering transparent sheet of scarlet and yellow, shot with blue, shot with white, flashing purple, roaring and burping and piffing. You could immediately see it dying in the rusty edges of the ember."

The other students, intent on their own descriptions of lurid torturings and pillagings, scoff at this with "merciless adjectives ... 'Show-off.' 'Over-ornate.' 'Nostalgic'". They forgive Cecily Fox only when she becomes the victim of a gruesome murder: "They were vindicated. Miss Fox belonged after all in the normal world of their writings, the world of domestic violence, torture and shock-horror."

Byatt would seem to be mocking both her own inclination to "show-off", and those of her readers wanting more lurid stuff. The point is, of course, that Byatt can do both the black-leading and the lurid stuff: she is a writer at the height of her powers. .

The little girls in the forest feel "as though ... they had got to some original place, from which they, or those before them, had come, and which they therefore recognised." It is that "original place" to which Byatt reintroduces her reader again and again, for us to recognise and be terrified by, to be horrified by and delighted at.