A.S. Byatt Interviewed by [Sam Leith](https://www.theguardian.com/profile/sam-leith) for *The Guardian* (UK newspaper)

Writing in terms of pleasure



AS Byatt at home in west London. Photograph: Eamonn McCabe

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'Do you know what her children call her?" a mutual friend asked me when I said I was going to see [AS Byatt](https://www.theguardian.com/books/asbyatt). "You'll never guess. Not in a million years."

"Antonia? Mum?"

"No," he said, laughing. "They call her 'AS Byatt'."

Why is this funny? I think it's because it seems to play to a public idea of Byatt's austerity. It's a version of the joke that's told about the Cambridge poet Jeremy Prynne. Prynne is asked: "What's your wife's name." He replies: "Mrs Prynne." It identifies an anxiety by teasing it. In England, we're in awe of intellectuals, and scared of them, and Byatt - as novelist, critic, anthologist, essayist - is an unapologetic four-star intellectual.

In person, she's both formidable and friendly; her voice has a very slight quaver or tremor to it. Everyone does seem to call her something different. "Antonia", "Dame Antonia", "ASB", "AS", or just - with lugubrious reverence - "The Dame". Born Antonia Susan Drabble, she writes under Byatt (the name of her first husband) and signs her emails "ASD" (her second husband is Peter Duffy). Her email address presents her as "Arachne". And her grandchildren, running into the room waving plastic toys, do, as promised, call her "AS".

George Haight's biography of George Eliot describes a Mrs Shaw noticing the young Mary Anne Evans sitting to one side by herself at a children's party.

"My dear, you do not seem happy," she said. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

"No, I am not," said Mary Anne. "I don't like to play with children. I like to talk to grown-up people." George Eliot - along with Robert Browning - is one of the fixed stars by which Byatt navigates, and the story told of Eliot could as easily have been told of her disciple.

"I was a deeply unhappy child," she says. "I didn't like being one. It seemed a horrible thing to have to be."

Byatt grew up in York, the oldest of four children in a clever, competitive household (her sister is Margaret Drabble; they don't get on, and she's fed up of being asked about it - as I was twice warned before going to see her). Her father, John Drabble, was a county court judge and her mother was a scholar of Browning who felt trapped as a housewife. "My poor little mother," says Byatt, almost to herself. "She shouted and shouted and shouted." Antonia's adolescence coincided with her mother's most acute dissatisfaction, and she found her own escape in literature and, at Cambridge, in academic work.

**One of the characters in her new novel,** [**The Children's Book**](https://www.theguardian.com/books/the-childrens-book)**, she says, "represents my greatest terror which is simple domesticity." Greatest terror? She says, decisively: "Yes. I had this image of coming out from under and seeing the light for a bit and then being shut in a kitchen, which I think happened to women of my generation."**

**Though she has had four children, domesticity never swallowed her. She spent a little over a decade as an academic at University College London before giving it up to write full time.** Her fiction, though admired, remained a specialist taste until she won the Booker prize in 1990 for Possession - a novel that transformed her reputation, brought her work to a mass audience (it went on to become a successful Hollywood film) and paid for the swimming pool at her house in France. Subtitled "A Romance", its parodies of Victorian verse are blended into a virtuosic exercise in genre writing. It also - like few books before or since - evoked what could be pleasurable and exciting about academic work.

"She's very unusual for an English person," her friend Philip Hensher says of her, "in that she's quite suspicious of comedy. With most people, sooner or later, every intellectual position comes down to a joke - it never does with her. This is where I think she fights with Kingsley Amis."

I read Possession years ago, I tell her, but a passage has stuck in my mind. One character makes a sneering remark about another "taking himself rather seriously". Their interlocutor replies briskly: "There are worse things human beings can do than take themselves seriously."

"Yes," she says. "I've been saying that all my life."

Byatt was educated at a Quaker school, and it has stayed with her: "I am not a Quaker, of course, because I'm anti-Christian and the Quakers are a form of Christianity but their religion is wonderful - you simply sat in silence and listened to the nature of things."

Her nature is not to mock or sneer. She might not think something is much good - but she'll think about it patiently, assess it fairly, and then judge it with a presbyterian directness. There was a great hoo-hah when she wrote a negative review of Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix for the New York Times. It was claimed that she was "just jealous". But she simply described, conscientiously if a little irritably, what she saw: "a secondary secondary world, made up of intelligently patchworked derivative motifs from all sorts of children's literature". It was "infantile" - a word not meant as a sneer, but as a straightforward diagnosis.

Her new novel takes place at another time - the turn of the 20th century - when "it was seriously suggested that the great writing of the time was writing for children, which was also read by grown-ups". The Children's Book tells the story of two generations of a group of families living near each other in the country, the closest thing they have to a matriarch being Olive Wellwood, a successful published writer of children's stories.

"A book starts when two things you thought were different come together," she says. "I started with the idea that writing children's books isn't good for the writers' own children. There are some dreadful stories. Christopher Robin at least lived. Kenneth Grahame's son put himself across a railway line and waited for the train. Then there's JM Barrie. One of the boys that Barrie adopted almost certainly drowned himself. This struck me as something that needed investigating. And the second thing was, I was interested in the structure of E Nesbit's family - how they all seemed to be Fabians and fairy-story writers."

The Children's Book is on one level a work of careful social and psychological realism: dense with information, following with reportorial exactness the lives of interlinked households over decades. Byatt plots out her timelines on Excel spreadsheets so she can make sure her characters are the right age at any given time. You can learn a lot from it about the chemistry and history of pottery, about the politics and literature of the Fabian and suffragist movements, about the run-up to the first world war.

**On another level, it is stuffed with the motifs of fairy stories: doubles, changelings, locked rooms, underground journeys, boys who refuse to grow up. Like Possession, it nests a story within a story. It plays deliberately with mythic motifs such as silver and gold, or the spinning of webs. "I can't say how important it was to me when Angela Carter said 'I grew up on fairy stories - they're much more important to me than realist narratives'. I hadn't had the nerve to think that until she said it, and I owe her a great deal."**

It is also a disconcertingly centreless book. When at one point Byatt describes Olive as its heroine she corrects herself: "I heard myself say that word. But I think there isn't a main character ... Iris Murdoch once said the world has enormously more people in it than you can ever imagine. She said whenever she finished a novel she wanted to start again and write it from the point of view of all the minor characters. In a sense I felt I was able to do that, because the minor characters became major characters when the book turned its gaze on them."

If Possession is Byatt's Mill on the Floss, then this is her Middlemarch: the life not of a couple but of a community. It is an anxious, rather than a romantic book - it abounds with confusion, compromise, family dysfunction, thwarted love. Sex is pervasive, and threatening. The connection is there between childishness and child abuse (the manic-depressive master potter, Fludd, in certain aspects resembles Eric Gill).

The book touches, too, on what Byatt calls "one of the steady themes of my writing that I don't understand - as opposed to several that I do. I don't understand why, in my work, writing is always so dangerous. It's very destructive. People who write books are destroyers."

You might be tempted to assume that Olive, as the writer in the book, is a proxy for Byatt. If so, the relationship is intriguing. One of her friends "thinks I haven't written another character that I don't like, and he's extremely shrewd".

The first world war comes down on the end of The Children's Book like a guillotine. Unexpected in history, it was also unexpected by the author - "I started working on the 1890s without thinking it through that all these children would die in the war ... I keep trying to get people to take the word 'looming' out of the publicity material." Researching the novel, she made a discovery that seemed too good - or bad - to be true: soldiers named trenches and redoubts after children's books: "Peter Pan Trench", "Hook Copse", "Wendy Cottage" ...

**Fairystories and utopian politics are entwined in the book. "I'm a naturally pessimistic animal and there's a sort of innocence in these people. They came after the high Victorians, whom I love in a way I don't love these people. I love Browning in a way I love nobody in the period this novel is set in, except perhaps Rodin. I love Tennyson too. I feel they understood that the world might be tragic whereas the Shaw, and even the Woolf generation ... "**

**She identifies the same soppy spirit in the second half of the century: "I don't like the 1960s either. The last big novel I wrote was called A Whistling Woman and it was about utopianism on the one hand and a dangerous sort of mystical romanticism on the other. I don't believe that human beings are basically good, so I think all utopian movements are doomed to fail, but I am interested in them."**

Byatt may be serious, but I think it's a mistake to see her as humourless or intellectually snobbish. After our interview, she and her husband laugh about the wit of a football crowd - England fans chanting to the Belgian team: "You're French, and you know you are."

What distinguishes her is a sort of grounded curiosity. She has been a visible admirer and encourager of younger writers including Hensher, Lawrence Norfolk, David Mitchell, Adam Thirlwell and Ali Smith. Her advocacy is "not entirely disinterested, because I wish there to be a literary world in which people are not writing books only about people's feelings. If you notice, all the ones I like write also about ideas. You know, there's been that sort of clonking account of what was good about British writing which was McEwan, Amis, Graham Swift and Julian Barnes - but there's all sorts of other things going on. In fact I admire all four of those writers . . . and they don't only do people's feelings but nevertheless it's become ossified."

As a young writer herself, Byatt befriended Iris Murdoch, though "because I actually didn't want a mentor I found the friendship very difficult to handle ... she simply used you as material. She loved you very much but she would take you out to lunch and just fire questions at you like a clay pigeon shoot."

Was she taken aback by the memoir written by Murdoch's husband, John Bayley? "I think what he did was wicked and I don't mind you writing that. I knew her enough to know that she would have hated it ... it's had a horrible effect on how people feel about her and see her and think about her. She was a wonderful novelist and she was a novelist who didn't write about herself. Feelings were in her work but it wasn't restricted to feelings. There was thought in it. There was structure in it. An intelligent, complicated world ... I think what John did was unforgivable."

Byatt's hostility to the cult of "feelings" can, though, be easily misunderstood. The Children's Book is filled with emotion - and into it is woven, discreetly and obliquely, one of the central emotional facts of Byatt's own life, the loss of her son in a car accident when he was 11.

It's something she brings up, unexpectedly, when we're talking about her time as an academic. "This is two sentences, and that's the end of the story." She had wanted to write full-time, but "if I had a job we could send my son to a fee-paying school. My son got killed on Frank Kermode's doorstep, the day I accepted the job more or less - so there was no point in having the job except what else was I going to do." She did the job for "as long as he had lived, which was 11 years", at the end of which "it was like being released from a spell". A poem she wrote, "Dead Boys", described how after his death a child is perpetually present, at every age, to his mother. The same image appears in The Children's Book.

"I was watching David Cameron saying that people have been writing to him and saying that, after a time, you get to want to celebrate somebody's life. All I can say is no, you don't. It's just terrible. It stays like that."

**She's dismissive, though, of the idea of writing as therapy or emotional exorcism. "I think of writing simply in terms of pleasure. It's the most important thing in my life, making things. Much as I love my husband and my children, I love them only because I am the person who makes these things."**

**I ask her to elaborate: "I," she says, "who I am, is the person that has the project of making a thing. Well, that's putting it pompously - but constructing. I do see it in sort of three-dimensional structures. And because that person does that all the time, that person is able to love all these people."**

**Byatt on Byatt**

"The minds of stone lovers had colonised stones as lichens cling to them with golden or grey-green florid stains. The human world of stones is caught in organic metaphors like flies in amber. Words came from flesh and hair and plants. Reniform, mammilated, botryoidal, dendrite, haematite. Carnelian is from carnal, from flesh. Serpentine and lizardite are stone reptiles; phyllite is leafy-green. The earth itself is made in part of bones, shells and diatoms. Ines was returning to it in a form quite different from her mother's fiery ash and bonemeal. She preferred the parts of her body that were now volcanic glasses, not bony chalk. Chabazite, from the Greek for hailstones, obsidian, which, like analcime and garnet, has the perfect icositetrahedral shape."

**This is from my story "A Stone Woman", a fairy tale about a woman who is turned into stone - or into many kinds of stone. The stone is a metaphor for grief and for ageing and stiffening. We are always being told language is inadequate to describe things. I think it is endlessly inventive if we pay it attention. I love all the buried metaphors in the stone-names. Thinking and writing are making connections. I once gave a reading in a university where a student said self-righteously "You used a word I didn't know in that reading. Don't you think that was elitist of you?" I replied that if I were her I should have rushed to the dictionary in glee and delight.**

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/apr/25/as-byatt-interview>