



On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays

A.S. Byatt

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As writers of English from Australia to India to Sri Lanka command our attention, Salman Rushdie can state confidently that English fiction was moribund until the Empire wrote back, and few, even among the British, demur. A. S. Byatt does, and her case is persuasive. In a series of essays on the complicated relations between reading, writing, and remembering, the gifted novelist and critic sorts the modish from the merely interesting and the truly good to arrive at a new view of British writing in our time.

Whether writing about the renaissance of the historical novel, discussing her own translation of historical fact into fiction, or exploring the recent European revival of interest in myth, folklore, and fairytale, Byatt's abiding concern here is with the interplay of fiction and history. Her essays amount to an eloquent and often moving meditation on the commitment to historical narrative and storytelling that she shares with many of her British and European contemporaries. With copious illustration and abundant insights into writers from Elizabeth Bowen and Henry Green to Anthony Burgess, William Golding, Muriel Spark, Penelope Fitzgerald, Julian Barnes, Martin Amis, Hilary Mantel, and Pat Barker, *On Histories and Stories* is an oblique defense of the art Byatt practices and a map of the complex affiliations of British and European narrative since 1945.

On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays Details

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Davy says

For the longest time, I couldn't remember what Byatt book I had read in my Introduction to Literary Theory course. One night, though, I'm working the register at Borders when who comes walking up to the counter but Dr. So-and-so, the professor who taught that class! I had to wrack my brain to recall his name, but when I did, we had a pleasant and lively half-hour conversation. We spoke of that class, then and now, the morning of September 11 (our class began right after the news got out), WG Sebald, and book preservation. A very enjoyable confrontation, and I owe it all to Byatt.

I. says

"I think the stories are studies of the danger of thinking with images that think with images themselves and I do think that in some curious way they find, not impose."

Someone once asked me if I've ever been in the presence of someone so intelligent that they've made me shrivel up with brain fear. (Yes - a few profs tbh) I often feel like that when reading Byatt's novels and her discussion of her stories: *The Conjugal Angel* and *Morpho Eugenia* sealed the deal.

That said, I didn't like the first three essays (possibly because I haven't read most of the books it reference). The last four were great though - particularly 'Ice, Snow, Glass'

Jerry says

I have never taught 'creative writing'. I think I see teaching good reading as the best way of encouraging, and making possible, good writing.

Byatt writes about the reading, writing, and relevance of historical novels, which, she writes, are "frowned on, and disapproved of, both by academic critics and by reviewers." They are dismissed as "escapist" or "pastoral" and not "serious depictions of contemporary life". Byatt regrets the focus that modern academics put on ensuring that all canons are focused on not just contemporary life but contemporary politics.

She finds "curiosity" "an important value", and "I write about scientists because they do not spend their time deconstructing the world, or quibbling theologically about abstract terms of value."

This is not about her own writing, however, but about the resurgence of historical novels among writers in general, such as Sybille Bedford and even Salman Rushdie.

On talking about "the greatest story ever told"—*The Thousand and One Nights*— she writes that

Narration is as much part of human nature as breath and the circulation of the blood. Modernist literature tried to do away with storytelling, which it thought was vulgar, replacing it with flashbacks, epiphanies, streams of consciousness. But storytelling is intrinsic to biological time, which we cannot escape.

All of us are under sentence of death, that is, and all of us think of our lives as having beginnings, middles, and ends.

I think the fact that we have in some sense been forbidden to think about history is one reason why so many novelists have taken to it.

Jana says

Some wonderful hours of A. S. Byatt telling me about her favourite books, her thoughts about narrative, and the representation of history, while the shelves on the walls grow and start humming.

Ginny says

For me, some bits of this book were absolutely fascinating, some bits intriguing, and quite a few almost incomprehensible. Ms. Byatt uses many, many novels to illustrate her analysis, resulting in quite a few additions to my to-read list. I am a devoted fan of Anthony Trollope, and have given some thought to his narrators. I really liked this quote, referring to the 19th century narrator:

"...--this kind of fictive narrator can creep closer to the feelings and the inner life of characters--as well as providing a Greek chorus--than any first-person mimicry."

In the chapter "Old Tales, New Forms", Byatt says:

"So I stumbled, whilst working, across the idea that stories and tales, unlike novels, were intimately to do with death. We are narrative beings because we live in biological time. Whether we like it or not, our lives have beginnings, middles and ends."

The essay (lecture) I enjoyed the most was Ch. 6, "Ice, Snow, Glass" in which Byatt explores the symbolism of Snow White and Rose Red, referring to, among others, Middlemarch, which I have read 3 times. I'm sure this helped my understanding of the argument in this section.

"Rosamond is outwardly rosy and inwardly glassy; Dorothea is outwardly pale, but inwardly 'ardent' or 'burning'."

I really must explore the use of the semicolon. Both Byatt and Trollope use it often. If I were a writer of fiction, this book would be on my shelf as a reference.

Conrad says

I find Byatt a lot more useful for her nonfiction than her fiction. I'm paraphrasing, but in this book, for example, she describes radicalism as a belief that the truth is always knowable but hidden to most. She's full of revealing aphorisms like that, but in her fiction she seems mostly to talk around them.

Amanda says

Most of this went right over my head. But the essays did reveal insights into Byatt's books. The essays *Old Tales*, *New Forms*; and *Ice, Snow, Glass* made sense in the light of the 2 novels of hers I have read. And I think it will help in further reading of her books, and probably in the reading of other similar authors.

Chris says

The essays in this book center around the writing of historical fiction as well as the use of stories. Byatt gives insightful comments abouts the popularity of the genre as well as analysis of some of the writers in the genre. She focuses on Penelope Fitzgerald, Bowen, Swift, Blixen, and Pratchett among others.

Byatt also includes remarks about her own works - *Possession*, *Angels and Insects*, and the Fredericka novels. After reading this book, I think I finally understand the ending of *Still Life*. She also discusses her methods in writing the books as well as where the ideas for the stories came from.

Byatt's prose is engaging, and you do it have to have a degree in literary theory to understand her. In fact, sometimes she seems to be writing aganist theory and for the text of books. This theme is in *Possession* and having read some far out criticism in my time, Byatt's theme is one I am in agreement with.

Ash Crowe says

The book is at its best when Byatt i discussing her own books in the context of common themes of British authors.

Tom says

I've never read B's fiction, but since I'm a fan of historical novels, this book of criticism looked quite interesting. A series of linked essays on resurgence of historical fiction, focusing mostly on Brit Lit, in latter 20th c. So far, quite enlightening. B. appears to have read everything by her peers and by previous generation of Brit novelists. She's a rigorous and percpetive commentator, capable of imparting enthusiasm for work of others. I find myself keeping a growing "to read" list of books she addresses.

Jessica says

I very much liked this book. I love Byatt's mind, and it was wonderful to see it through her nonfiction thought. Her interests in literature are wide ranging and draw from many national literatures. Her observations are keen, and - which I appreciated most of all - focused on what is really in the text, as opposed to what one might like to be there. She is a true believer in stories, and well-crafted ones at that. And for that, I am eternally grateful.
