

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

Vintage Living Texts:
A. S. Byatt

Jonathan Noakes and Margaret Reynolds

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About the Book

‘This makes me want to read my own books all over again’
Louis de Bernieres on Louis de Bernieres: the Essential Guide. In Vintage Living Texts, teachers, students and any lover of literature will find the essential guide to the major works of A. S. Byatt. Also included is an exclusive in-depth interview with A. S. Byatt relating specifically to the novels under discussion. A. S. Byatt’s themes, genre and narrative techniques are put under scrutiny and the emphasis is on providing a rich source of ideas for intelligent and inventive ways of approaching the novels. Amongst many other features you’ll find inspirational reading plans and contextual material, suggested complementary and comparative reading and an indispensable glossary. Featured texts: *Possession*, *Angels & Insects*, *A Whistling Woman*.

About the Authors

Jonathan Noakes has taught English in secondary schools in Britain and Australia for fifteen years. For six years he ran A-level English studies at Eton College where he is a house-master.

Margaret Reynolds is Reader in English at Queen Mary, University of London, and the presenter of BBC Radio 4's *Adventures in Poetry*. Her publications include *The Sappho Companion*, *The Sappho History* and (with Angela Leighton) *Victorian Women Poets*.

Gillian Alban wrote her doctoral thesis on the works of A. S. Byatt and the Melusine legend.

Also available in Vintage Living Texts

American Fiction

Martin Amis

Margaret Atwood

Louis de Bernières

Roddy Doyle

Sebastian Faulks

John Fowles

Susan Hill

Ian McEwan

Toni Morrison

Iris Murdoch

Salman Rushdie

Jeanette Winterson

‘An excellent and timely series, very useful for students,
well-produced and well-written.’

Dr Robert Eaglestone, Royal Holloway,
University of London

‘I am impressed. Students will find these texts extremely
useful, and serious general readers, too.’

Professor Chris Woodhead, former Chief Inspector of
Schools

‘Margaret Reynolds and Jonathan Noakes are at the cutting
edge of providing English teachers with the support they
need for teaching the contemporary novel.’

Dr Vivian Anthony, Training Co-ordinator, Professional
Development Services for HMC schools

‘Two highly sensitive and intelligent teachers (from school
and university) lead us into dialogue with the author, the
texts and their context and help us to question what and
how we are reading and to arrive at illuminating answers.
Such dialogue is the essence of good practice in teaching
literature.’

John Venning, Head of English,
St Paul’s School for Boys, London

‘This series is the first to teach students what they most
need to learn: how to teach themselves. It is informative,
rigorous and yet, more importantly, playful. It combines the
qualities of the best teaching.’

Anthea Church, Head of English, Kent College, Pembury

‘I didn’t realise just how good the series was until I started
working closely with it. The questions are so thoughtful and
probing, and the analysis provided allows the students to lift
their own understanding. The texts really do occupy their

own niche between guides purely for teachers and the ubiquitous student crib, and are much better than either.'

Michael Parker, Head of English, Newington College, NSW, Australia

'This is a terrific series. The text and the reader's response are at the heart of these guides; the tone is authoritative but never dogmatic, while the style is enthusiastic and approachable. The series is aptly named – not only are the subjects still alive, so too are the guides.'

Lucy Webster, *The English Magazine*

'*Vintage Living Texts* are very modern. They are certainly democratic as they give the literary text to the reader, prompting personal critical response without suggesting what those responses should be. They will be a blessing to teachers and students.'

Iain Finlayson, *The Times Play Magazine*

'These guides, designed to reflect the National Curriculum, are likely to appeal also to university students, and those who take their reading group seriously.'

Independent Magazine

'In addition to sixth formers and undergraduates, the series also works well for those taking the International Baccalaureate or on EFL courses.'

Liz Thomson, *Publishing News*

Vintage Living Texts: A. S. Byatt

The Essential Guide to Contemporary
Literature

Jonathan Noakes and Margaret Reynolds

Possession: A Romance
Angels & Insects
A Whistling Woman



VINTAGE LIVING TEXTS

Preface

About this series

VINTAGE LIVING TEXTS: The Essential Guide to Contemporary Literature is a new concept in reading guides. Our aim is to provide readers of all kinds with an intelligent and accessible introduction to key works of contemporary literature. Each guide suggests techniques for reading important contemporary novels, and offers a variety of back-up materials that will give you ways into the text – without ever telling you what to think.

Content

All the books reproduce an extensive interview with the author, conducted exclusively for this series. This is not to say that we believe that the author's word is law. Of course it isn't. Once his or her book has gone out into the world he or she becomes simply yet another – if singularly competent – reader. This series recognises that an author's contribution may be valuable, and intriguing, but it puts the reader in control.

Every title in the series is author-focused and covers at least three of their novels, along with relevant biographical, bibliographical, contextual and comparative material.

How to use this series

In the reading activities that make up the core of each book you will see that you are asked to do two things. One comes from the text; that is, we suggest what you should focus on, whether it's a theme, the language or the narrative method. The other concentrates on your own response. We want you to think about how you are reading and what skills you are bringing to bear in doing that reading. So this part is very much about you, the reader.

The point is that there are many ways of responding to a text. You could concentrate on the methods you might use to compare this text with others. In that case, look for the sections headed 'Compare'. Or you might want to do something more individual, and analyse how you are reacting to a text and what it means to you, in which case, pick out the approaches labelled 'Imagine' or 'Ask Yourself'.

Of course, it may well be that you are reading these texts for an examination. In that case you will have to go for the more traditional methods of literary criticism and look for the responses that tell you to 'Discuss' or 'Analyse'. Whichever level you (or your students) are at, you will find that there is something here for everyone. However, we're not suggesting that you stick solely to the approaches we offer, or that you tackle all of the exercises laid out here. Choose whatever most interests you, or whatever best suits your purposes.

Who are these books for?

Students will find that these guides are like a good teacher. They introduce the life and work of the author, set each novel in its context, explain key ideas and literary critical terms as they arise, suggest comparative exercises in a number of media, and ask focused questions to encourage a

well-informed, analytical approach to reading the novels in a way that is rigorous, but still entertaining.

Teachers will find in this series a rich source of ideas for teaching contemporary novels and their contexts, particularly at AS, A and undergraduate levels. The exercises on each text have been tailored to meet the various assessment objectives laid down in the subject criteria for GCE AS and GCE A Level and the International Baccalaureate in English Literature, and are explained in such a way that they can easily be selected and fitted into a lesson plan. Given the diversity of ways in which the awarding bodies have devised their specifications to meet these assessment objectives, a wide range of exercises is offered. We've had fun devising the plans, and we hope they'll be fun for you when you come to teach and learn with them.

And if you are neither a teacher nor a student of contemporary literature, but someone reading for your own pleasure? Well, if you've ever wanted someone to introduce you to a novelist's work in a way that will let you trust your own judgement and read more confidently, then this guide is also for you.

Whoever you are, we hope that you will enjoy using these books and that they will send you back to the novels to find new pleasures.

All page references to *Possession: A Romance*, *Angels & Insects* and *A Whistling Woman* in this text refer to the Vintage editions.

A. S. Byatt

Introduction

IN AN ESSAY entitled 'Fathers' published in *On Histories and Stories* in 2000, A. S. Byatt says: 'My own short novel, *The Biographer's Tale*, is about these riddling links between autobiography, biography, fact and fiction (and lies).'

It is an interesting remark: A. S. Byatt casts herself as a writer of fiction ('My own short novel'), who sets conundrums, sifts for treasure and puzzles us with wordplay ('riddling'); who makes connections ('links'); who exploits different forms and genres ('autobiography, biography, fact and fiction'); and who teases us with the possibility that none of this is true ('(and lies)').

At the beginning of the interview included in this book, Byatt starts on an explanation about her ideas of 'romance' by saying 'My mind is naturally inclusive'. As a voracious reader, an eminent academic, and a philosopher and critic, Byatt's work gives us access to an astonishing breadth of reference and systems of thought. Nothing is too large for her, and nothing too small. But everything is connected and inclusive. One idea will always lead on to another as nothing comes to her singly. Which is probably why she has always been compelled to write fiction.

Byatt has experimented with other forms of discussion within her fiction. In *A Whistling Woman* Frederica Potter becomes the host on a new and inventive television show called *Through the Looking Glass*. This is an arts discussion programme like no other. A theme is chosen, eminent cultural critics are invited, art objects are portrayed or books

discussed, images flicker across the screen to suggest, to hint, or provoke ideas beyond the actual topics under discussion. It is a brilliant notion. Yet it is a notion that can only work in fiction, and in Byatt's fiction in particular.

It works for two reasons. One concerns Byatt as a writer and the other refers to Byatt as a reader. As Byatt has a huge range of reference at her command, she is always willing to let one reference slide into another, and she is capable of describing the 'inclusiveness' of her imagined television series. On the other hand, Byatt herself is a reader and knows the pleasure of reading works in a doubled fashion. Byatt – or you, the reader – reads the text (in this case both the text of *A Whistling Woman*, and the included narrative of the fictional television programme) and continues to make yet more connections. We might wish that *Through the Looking Glass* really was available on our screens, but the truth is that the programme can only be so 'inclusive' and impressive because it is fictional.

Byatt has spent some of her working life as an academic teaching English literature at a university. In 1983 she became a full-time writer and she says, in a personal statement offered on her official website, that 'I held a full-time university teaching post for eleven years and now feel entirely happy, for the first time in my life, at the prospect of writing full time, thinking things out from beginning to end, and reading for my own purposes'. As an academic, Byatt's many professional skills included ordering, seeking, shaping, collecting, analysing, cataloguing, listing, sorting and filing. You can see that these processes still intrigue her and she uses them imaginatively and often in her fiction: for example, in the cataloguing and sorting undertaken by William and Matty in her novella 'Morpho Eugenia', or in the research quest through libraries and collections undertaken by Maud and Roland in her novel *Possession*. But, for Byatt, that sorting is not an end in itself; it's the linking that she focuses on. This playful linking, a 'riddling linking' may, in

fact, be precisely the opposite of the neat academic ordering which she describes so well.

Byatt has often said that scholarship and formal paths of knowledge – fact – can only take us so far. There will always be things that are unknown, things that are hidden and which can only ever be imagined. This is why she added the ‘Postscript’ to *Possession* as she says in the interview:

The narrator tells the reader what happened in the Postscript. Nobody in the modern time knows that. And I think this is partly me saying ‘Look . . . with scholarship, you think you will get to the end of the quest and find out what this person was really like, and what they really felt, and actually the chances are that the most important moment of their life, or most important moments, are forever hidden’. So it was partly a theoretical matter of principle to tell people things that couldn’t be found out by scholars. In that sense I was also saying a novel is better than a biography, or that a novel does things a biography can’t do.

If imaginative connections and inventive links are part of Byatt’s key qualities as a novelist, another is her love of language. The ‘riddling’ pun in the quotation from her essay on ‘Fathers’ has been pointed out, but glance at virtually any page of Byatt’s work and you will see how she exploits the possibilities of wordplay with a verve and an abandon that is distinctive. It’s in the very title of *Angels & Insects*, where one story turns on the near-anagram of insects/incest. It’s in *A Whistling Woman* where Frederica, pregnant, is ‘full of life’. Above all, it’s in *Possession* where wordplay on the word ‘Ash’ is exactly one of the open, known things that help Roland and Maud to learn the punning clues to the unknown, hidden story of Christabel LaMotte and Randolph Henry Ash.

It’s not just a pleasurable game. A careful analysis of why puns and wordplay work shows how this is actually connected to the pleasures of reading and understanding. In the interview included in this guide Byatt says:

That’s what I so love about metaphor. I’ve got a theory about metaphor now. That we take such pleasure in it because it’s where the synapses

cross and two sets of association become, briefly, the same, and for some reason this excites us immensely. Like we're excited by visual images where we can't work out whether it's an old woman or a young woman. All the ones that Wittgenstein got excited about. Is it a vase or is it two faces? We like anything that's on that kind of ambiguous edge.

When Byatt says 'we' here, that is exactly what she means. As a dedicated reader herself, Byatt writes movingly about the excitements of reading – especially in *Possession*. But she is conscious also that she can communicate the same pleasure to her own readers.

It felt as though I was trying to hold everything together, and the other was always shimmering underneath. And I wrote all the poems thinking, none of these poems should exist without having a clue towards the modern story, as well as existing in the past as part of the story. So there is a lot of this kind of verbal flickering, which is, of course, at its very root – it's the nature of reading. That's why we read in a scholarly way, that's why we read critically, in order to hear the flickering of the words, both then, and now.

'Then and now' always count for Byatt. In *Possession*, the 'then' of the Victorian story is carefully set against the 'now' of the present story. In the quartet of novels which includes *The Virgin in the Garden*, *Babel Tower*, *Still Life* and *A Whistling Woman*, Byatt does something even more curiously complicated with 'then and now'. The stories in each have a chronological line spanning from 1953 to 1980. But you have to work hard to realise that they end as late as 1980, because the final novel, *A Whistling Woman*, ends in 1968, and it's only in the second novel, *Still Life*, that you find that the Prologue goes beyond the ending of the fourth and last novel because it is set in 1980. If that sounds complicated, then it is, but it does have a purpose.

In another essay, 'Old Tales, New Forms' in *On Histories and Stories*, Byatt says, 'I stumbled, whilst working, across the idea that stories and tales, unlike novels, were intimately to do with death.' Byatt goes on – in her 'inclusive' way – to refer to Scheherazade, to the drowning man who sees his life pass before his eyes, to Boccaccio's

Decameron, and Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*. One of her arguments is that children love stories because they see themselves existing in an 'infinite' time where there is no death. Older people love stories because they know that they exist in a 'finite' time and that will come to an end with their own death. In between are the worries about 'motives and responsibilities' that take up the urgencies of middle age.

It's a persuasive argument. It makes us realise that all of Byatt's fiction – stories and novels – are about death, and a defence against death. Time – as in her quartet of novels or even in *Possession* – has no relevance, because it weaves in and out and around, and resists shaping, sorting, ordering, cataloguing, listing. Byatt's imagination 'includes' everything and isn't limited by finite boundaries.

It is this same principle that is at work in the allusive, referential style that is Byatt's distinctive trademark. With her use of form (or antithesis of form) one idea will always lead on to another, one word will always translate into another, and no story will ever come to an end.

Interview with A. S. Byatt

London: 2 April 2003

JN: *Possession* has the subtitle, 'A Romance'. What versions of romance you are playing with in the novel?

ASB: My mind is naturally inclusive and once I'd had the idea, I decided to include every conceivable version of romance. But it did start with Nathaniel Hawthorne who defined a romance as 'a novel that didn't have to keep strictly to the truth and could include elements of fantasy', and I also think Hawthorne was talking about the historical novel as being a kind of imaginative structure as opposed to the realistic account. So I started with him, and then I thought, what other meanings are there: and I thought of medieval courtly love, and I thought it's a love story both in the past and in the present, and then I thought about Tennyson reworking the Arthurian legends.

And then, I think quite late on in the planning of *Possession*, I got it into my head that I should also be parodying modern romantic literature in some sense; it should be, as it were, a modern love story. So I was writing a parody of Georgette Heyer. There are one or two scenes in it that are pure – in my mind – scenes out of Heyer that I read and read when I was little. So it's all those things, working together.

JN: Is there also the romance of the archive and of a kind of romantic quest of scholarly endeavour?

ASB: Yes. The moment I saw that there were going to be two scholars was the moment I realised that there could be two romances, a modern one and an old one. Of course, any kind of archival work is a kind of detective story, so I wound a Margery Allingham quest into it. But there is also the sense of the Holy Grail, the knights riding out into the forest to find the hidden object. So it was very much about all these things.

JN: You say that your mind is inclusive, and I can see the way in which your title, *Possession*, is used in a very inclusive way as well. Could you explain about the kinds of possession that you were tackling in the novel?

ASB: I think this is the only novel I've written in which the title word is the first thing I've thought of. The story I like to tell – which is a true story – is how I used to watch Kathleen Coburn, the great Coleridge editor, walking round and round the circular catalogue in the British Museum library and I thought, 'Here is a woman who, as far as I can see, spends every waking moment, and a lot of the sleeping moments, of every day, thinking about Coleridge.' And then the word came into my mind, with the immediate sense of demonic possession. I thought, 'Does he possess her? Has this dead man taken over this living woman?, or has she taken possession of him, because we read his thoughts as mediated by her?' In some ways, the manner in which she has arranged his thoughts in the Notebooks, according to a system entirely of her own, is faintly irritating, because you have to read his thoughts in the order in which she has put them, rather than reading Notebook by Notebook. Then I discovered, from talking to Coleridge scholars, that she had actually, rather secretly, carried away a lot of his Notebooks to Canada, and had only – from the mid-Atlantic – telegraphed the Coleridge scholars in England

saying, 'Notebooks on their way to Toronto, perfectly safe, will be well looked after.'

That gave the idea of economic and financial possession. Of course, Henry James plays with the word 'possession' - 'great possessions in great houses' - owning *things*, and I realised that actual manuscripts are things which people fight for the possession of. I wrote in a newspaper in 1970: 'I think of writing a novel called "Possession",' and I didn't publish it till 1990, so there was a long gestation. About five years after I'd thought of the title, I thought of the sexual meaning of the word 'possession', and I thought if it was looking for something, something like the Browning love letters, then you could have modern lovers looking for ancient lovers, and you would have a sort of plot that would almost make itself - which it did.

JN: And which of the two plots - the nineteenth-century plot, or the twentieth-century plot - came to you first?

ASB: It came as it is - very much in the order it is in the book. It's a quest, and I went on the quest, and I found the objects. One of the most difficult things was, in fact, to delay the discovery of bits of the nineteenth-century plot, unnaturally, really - because once you have found all the correspondence, what is there left to find? So I had to invent all the bit about Christabel having gone to Brittany, in order for there to be more plot. So then I thought, well, why would she have gone to Brittany? And then I thought up the baby, and then I saw that this was a romance of a quite beautiful kind. But an enormous amount of the plot was invented in order to keep the process of discovery going. I was never, to be truthful, as interested in the modern plot, except as a detective story. Or in the modern people's emotions. When they made the film, I think they assumed - because they were Hollywood Americans - that

the story is a story about the young modern lovers, whereas actually, almost all *readers* know that the story is an occluded story about the Victorian lovers, and the other two are there for finding it out.

JN: The reader is also turned into a detective. You say that you delay the revelations, so the reader is left to pick up clues. Am I right in thinking that sometimes the correspondences are really quite minor? There is a moment in which Roland says to Maud that she has 'inherited Christabel's books' and I misread it as that she had inherited her 'looks'. I wondered if that kind of connection – a sort of verbal echo – is also woven in consciously?

ASB: It probably was. It felt as though I was trying to hold everything together, and the other was always shimmering underneath. And I wrote all the poems thinking, none of these poems should exist without having a clue towards the modern story, as well as existing in the past as part of the story. So there is a lot of this kind of verbal flickering, which is, of course, at its very root – it's the nature of reading. That's why we read in a scholarly way, that's why we read critically, in order to hear the flickering of the words, both then, and now. That's what we do it for. That's why we bother to read with care, rather than doing what the French call simply 'consuming'.

JN: There are also clues which are more obvious, such as the colour-coding.

ASB: Ah yes. I always colour-code my novels, it's not peculiar to this one. Christabel goes with green because of the green of the serpent woman and the Lamia and the Ondine and the water. And people get quite annoyed by it and keep writing to me, saying, 'Why is she green?', and I