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A 'child of this century': short stories by women writers

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A 'child of this century': Short Stories by Women Writers. Joan Fitzpatrick

If we think of literature in terms of food then a good short story is a light yet substantial indulgence; it is too delicate for the vulgar label 'snack'. Its flavours should be intense and satisfy without leaving the reader feeling replete. At times it may function like an appetizer, say asparagus or moules marinere, preparing the literary taste-buds for a main-course, a novel perhaps, by the same writer but often it satisfies all on its own.

Our consumption of literature is probably not so very different from our eating habits. Bookshops are much like restaurants: most of us have been in a restaurant and ordered a main course (bought a novel) which sounded appealing (the menu being the gastronomic equivalent of the publisher's blurb) only to realize--two mouthfuls (or chapters) in--that it doesn't offer quite what we expected. Perhaps the best alternative to risking disappointment is to plump for a variety of satisfying options. A short-story anthology featuring various authors is the literary version of the tapas, and is probably the safest bet.

Such an anthology is The Oxford Book of Modern Women's Stories edited by Patricia Craig which I recently selected as a set text for a course I was teaching on twentieth-century women's literature. In the introduction to her anthology Craig quotes Elizabeth Bowen's comment on the modernity of the short story which she calls 'A child of this century'. Bowen was a novelist and short story writer and her story "Look at all those Roses", a wonderfully creepy and atmospheric tale, is featured in the Oxford anthology. Bowen is probably best known for her short stories but what struck me as particularly fascinating were those stories penned by writers who are primarily famous for their work in a different genre, usually either the novel or poetry.

Whilst I would not argue for a discernably female language or structure in short stories that are written by women it is true that many of the stories in this anthology give voice to the exclusively female experiences of being a wife, mother, or daughter. Many of the stories explore notions of passivity, imposed confinement, alienation from society and the short-comings of tradition, and while these are not restricted to writings by women, they are perhaps thrown into relief by the obvious inequality that continues to exist between men and women.

Sylvia Plath's "The Day Mr Prescott Died" presents the reader with a difficult relationship between a mother and daughter. The daughter, our narrator, is brutally frank, shockingly unsentimental, but also callous in her resistance to the traditional duties which her mother deems proper in the aftermath of the death of a family friend. The defiance of youth, kicking against tradition and what is naively perceived as hypocrisy, is contrasted with the mother's acceptance of her supportive role. What comes through clearly is that the cliches people use to cope with death, whether they are consoling or being consoled, may be the best we have. What else can we say about something that is difficult to make sense of? The gathering in Mrs Prescott's living-room (an ironically named place to pay respects to the dead) catches well the awkwardness of the occasion but also the ordinariness of death when, although the situation seems to call for a magnificent gesture or an original pronouncement, we are reduced, like generations before and probably after us, to silence or mundane

utterances. Mrs Prescott's reaction to her husband's death, and thus her feelings about him, are perceived through the eyes of our unreliable narrator so we are not quite sure what to make of their relationship. Perhaps the point is that we cannot fully understand any marriage with only a biased third party as our guide, which is a sobering thought when we consider the various theories put forward about Plath's own marriage with Ted Hughes. Plath's private life is never very far from her creative writings and in this story we see examples of her tendency in her diaries to present acerbic miniature portraits of those closest to her. The descriptions of Mr Prescott--a grumpy old man with a nasty skin disease on his hands--and his sister--an overweight, over-eater--are nasty but strikingly honest and darkly humorous. Finally, the daughter experiences a kind of epiphany when she realises not only how much her mother means to her but how like her mother she really is. The conclusion that children can never fully escape their parents because their parents are part of them is a positive, even a comforting, one.

In Virginia Woolf's "The Legacy" the motif of death recurs but here, as with other stories gathered in this anthology, the main concern is female unhappiness within marriage. Gilbert Clandon has inherited the diary that belonged to his dead wife, Angela. At first Gilbert is interested in reading it because she would not let him see it when she was alive and, besides, it is filled with detail about him. Angela's only function was to be his support system; her hopes and dreams were experienced through her talented husband. As Gilbert flicks through the volumes and the years roll by what becomes apparent to the reader, but not to Gilbert, is Angela's growing sense of isolation and dissatisfaction with her life. As far as Gilbert is concerned her writing--full of painful truths such as her regret at not having children--is a collection of "little trifles". When Gilbert recalls his wife her prettiness and her child-like ignorance are uppermost. He trivialized her work amongst the poor in the East End of London, allowing her to undertake it only if she promised not to make herself ill--the notion being that women are too delicate to work--and he remembers that he hated her work-clothes. When his own name occurs less frequently in the diaries Gilbert's interest slackens only to be revived by the appearance of a man denoted by the initials B. M. Gilbert's vanity and self-obsession are so overwhelming that, even when trying to reconstruct where he was during an evening when B. M. and his wife were alone together he can remember only the speech he made at an important dinner. Just as Woolf plays with the literary convention of using initials so she highlights the significance of the diary as a female genre. Traditionally women used diaries as literary confidants wherein they could express themselves without fear of ridicule or censure. Gilbert thinks he knows his wife until he reads her diary. We are left with the feeling that 'the legacy' is not only the diary itself but the truth it contains. That Gilbert does not learn the truth until Angela is dead is his tragedy and a deserved one.

Continuing the preoccupation with problematic relationships between men and women is Fay Weldon's "In the Great War" which is a deliciously wry look at competition between women for the attention of undeserving, ineffectual men. Relationships within and across the sexes are described in terms usually reserved for the hostilities between the post-war superpowers. This unashamedly essentialist and fanciful narrative looks back from our present state of Cold War feminism, when women are apparently allies and united against men, to the 1950s when women were at war with each other. During the Great War women prepared for battle by

paying a great deal of attention to their physical appearance and generally pleasing men. The story begins by recalling how one woman, Patty, being "badly equipped for battle" lost her husband, Arthur, to the generously equipped Helene. Watching this happen is Patty's daughter Enid who learns that women must behave mercilessly toward each other if they are to succeed. Eager not to be abandoned like her mother, Enid sets her sights on landing her married university professor, Walter Walther, who calls to mind Nabakov's Humbert Humbert. Weldon lampoons the men in the story to great effect: Enid's father and her lover are inadequate dullards and why women should compete for them is a mystery. These men want sexually passive young women to compensate for their own shortcomings. But the story is not straightforwardly feminist as the narratorial voice suggests that Patty is also to blame for her lack of effort. Enid's less attractive friend, Margot, has a loving and mutual marriage which highlights the inadequacies of Enid's relationship with Walter. Significantly, and with a little help from Hormone Replacement Therapy, Patty flourishes in Arthur's absence and is denounced (what delicious irony!) by Enid for taking a lover younger than herself. Men come off rather badly in this story but so do women who take advantage of other women. Helene, who has grown older, is on her guard against a younger version of herself surfacing and Enid has been abandoned by her inadequate husband. As if to answer the question posed in Chaucer's Wife of Bath's Tale, 'What do women want?', Enid suddenly realises, 'we want everything' and promptly becomes a feminist. This story is a good indication of the feminist sensibilities evident in Weldon's other work such as her novels The Life and Loves of a She Devil and The Cloning of Joanna May.

In Woolf's story Gilbert's wife Angela copes with her isolation within a marriage that lacks dignity and mutuality by venturing outside it, a situation familiar to many women. However other stories in this anthology focus not on experiences that are exclusively female but rather on those available to all. In Willa Cather's story "Paul's Case" Paul is isolated because of his social pretensions; the contradiction between his working-class background and his aspirations eventually destroying him. In Edna O'Brien's "Irish Revel" Mary suffers the indignity of being given work to do at a party where she thought she was a special guest. She feels the pain of backbiting from Doris and Eithne and the disappointment of unrequited love.

I could enthuse at great length about other stories contained in the Oxford anthology but I ought not to spoil all the surprises. Fay Weldon, Virginia Woolf, Willa Cather and Edna O'Brien, all renowned novelists, and Sylvia Plath, an infamous poet, had other strings to their bows. These writers, amongst others contained in this anthology, wrote vibrant short stories that usually receive little attention. Reading a short story by a writer normally celebrated for another genre can provide a good introduction to their more famous work or simply remind a reader that there are other avenues in their oeuvre worth exploring.

(The Oxford Book of Modern Women's Stories edited by Patricia Craig (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995).