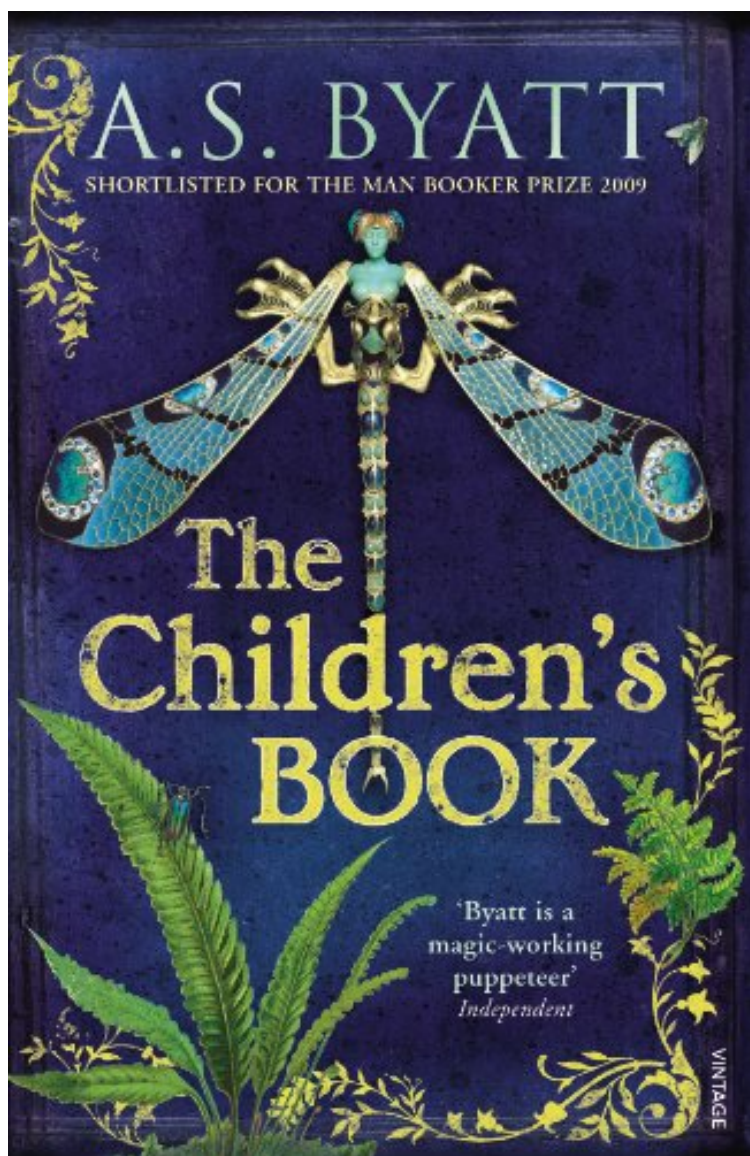


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The Children's Book



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurFamous author Olive Wellwood writes a special private book, bound in different colours, for each of her children. In their rambling house near Romney Marsh they play in a story-book world - but their lives, and those of their rich cousins and their friends, the son and daughter of a curator at the new Victoria and Albert Museum, are already inscribed with mystery. Each family carries its own secrets. They grow up in the golden summers of Edwardian times, but as the sons rebel against their parents and the girls dream of independent futures, they are unaware that in the darkness ahead they will be betrayed unintentionally by the adults who love them. This is the children's book.ExtraitTwo boys stood in the Prince Consort Gallery, and looked down on a third. It was June 19th, 1895. The Prince had died in 1861, and had

seen only the beginnings of his ambitious project for a gathering of museums in which the British craftsmen could study the best examples of design. His portrait, modest and medalled, was done in mosaic in the tympanum of a decorative arch at one end of the narrow gallery which ran above the space of the South Court. The South Court was decorated with further mosaics, portraits of painters, sculptors, potters, the "Kensington Valhalla." The third boy was squatting beside one of a series of imposing glass cases displaying gold and silver treasures. Tom, the younger of the two looking down, thought of Snow White in her glass coffin. He thought also, looking up at Albert, that the vessels and spoons and caskets, gleaming in the liquid light under the glass, were like a resurrected kingly burial hoard. (Which, indeed, some of them were.) They could not see the other boy clearly, because he was on the far side of a case. He appeared to be sketching its contents. Julian Cain was at home in the South Kensington Museum. His father, Major Prosper Cain, was Special Keeper of Precious Metals. Julian was just fifteen, and a boarder at Marlowe School, but was home recovering from a nasty bout of jaundice. He was neither tall nor short, slightly built, with a sharp face and a sallow complexion, even without the jaundice. He wore his straight black hair parted in the centre, and was dressed in a school suit. Tom Wellwood, boyish in Norfolk jacket and breeches, was about two years younger, and looked younger than he was, with large dark eyes, a soft mouth and a smooth head of dark gold hair. The two had not met before. Tom's mother was visiting Julian's father, to ask for help with her research. She was a successful authoress of magical tales. Julian had been deputed to show Tom the treasures. He appeared to be more interested in showing him the squatting boy. "I said I'd show you a mystery." "I thought you meant one of the treasures." "No, I meant him. There's something shifty about him. I've been keeping an eye on him. He's up to something." Tom was not sure whether this was the sort of make-believe his own family practised, tracking complete strangers and inventing stories about them. He wasn't sure if Julian was, so to speak, playing at being responsible. "What does he do?" "He does the Indian rope trick. He disappears. Now you see him, now you don't. He's here every day. All by himself. But you can't see where or when he goes." They sidled along the wrought-iron gallery, which was hung with thick red velvet curtains. The third boy stayed where he was, drawing intently. Then he moved his position, to see from another angle. He was hay-haired, shaggy and filthy. He had cut-down workmen's trousers, with braces, over a flannel shirt the colour of smoke, stained with soot. Julian said "We could go down and stalk him. There are all sorts of odd things about him. He looks very rough. He never seems to go anywhere but here. I've waited at the exit to see him leave, and follow him, and he doesn't seem to leave. He seems to be a permanent fixture." The boy looked up, briefly, his grimy face creased in a frown. Tom said "He concentrates." "He never talks to anyone that I can see. Now and then the art students look at his drawings. But he doesn't chat to them. He just creeps about the place. It's sinister." "Do you get many robberies?" "My father always says the keepers are criminally casual with the keys to the cases. And there are heaps and heaps of stuff lying around waiting to be catalogued, or sent to Bethnal Green. It would be terribly easy to sneak off with things. I don't even know if anyone would notice if you did, not with some of the things, though they'd notice quickly enough if anyone made an attempt on the Candlestick." "Candlestick?" "The Gloucester Candlestick. What he seems to be drawing, a lot of the time. The lump of gold, in the centre of that case. It's ancient and unique. I'll show it to you. We could go down, and go up to it, and disturb him." Tom was dubious about this. There was something tense about the third boy, a tough prepared energy he didn't even realise he'd noticed. However, he agreed. He usually agreed to things. They moved, sleuthlike, from ambush to ambush behind the swags of velvet. They went under Prince Albert, out onto the turning stone stairs, down to the South Court. When they reached the Candlestick, the dirty boy was not there. "He wasn't on the stairs," said Julian, obsessed. Tom stopped to stare at the Candlestick. It was dully gold. It seemed heavy. It stood on three feet, each of which was a long-eared dragon, grasping a bone with grim claws, gnawing with sharp teeth. The rim of the spiked cup that held the candle was also supported by open-jawed dragons with wings and snaking tails. The whole of its thick stem was wrought of fantastic foliage, amongst which men and monsters, centaurs and monkeys, writhed, grinned, grimaced, grasped and stabbed at each other. A helmeted, gnomelike being, with huge eyes, grappled the sinuous tail of a reptile. There were other human or kobold figures, one in particular with long draggling hair and a mournful gaze. Tom thought immediately that his mother would need to see it. He tried, and failed, to memorise the shapes. Julian explained. It had an interesting history, he said. No one knew exactly what it was made of. It was some kind of gilt alloy. It was probable that it had been made in Canterbury modelled in wax and cast but apart from the symbols of the evangelists on the knop, it appeared not to be made for a religious use. It had turned up in the cathedral in Le Mans, from where it had disappeared during the French Revolution. A French antiquary had sold it to the Russian Prince Soltikoff.

The South Kensington Museum had acquired it from his collection in 1861. There was nothing, anywhere, like it. Tom did not know what a knop was, and did not know what the symbols of the evangelists were. But he saw that the thing was a whole world of secret stories. He said his mother would like to see it. It might be just what she was looking for. He would have liked to touch the heads of the dragons. Julian was looking restlessly around him. There was a concealed door, behind a plaster cast of a guarding knight, on a marble plinth. It was slightly ajar, which he had never seen before. He had tried its handle, and it was always, as it should be, since it led down to the basement storerooms and workrooms, locked. "I bet he went down there." "What's down there?" "Miles and miles of passages and cupboards and cellars, and things being moulded, or cleaned, or just kept. Let's stalk him." There was no light, beyond what was cast on the upper steps from the door they had opened. Tom did not like the dark. He did not like transgression. He said "We can't see where we're going." "We'll leave the door open a crack." "Someone may come and lock it. We may get into trouble." "We won't. I live here." They crept down the uneven stone steps, holding a thin iron rail. At the foot of the staircase they found themselves cut off by a metal grille, beyond which stretched a long corridor, now vaguely visible as though there was a light-source at the other end. The passage was roofed with Gothic vaulting, like a church crypt, but finished in white glazed industrial bricks. Julian gave the grille an irritated shake and it swung open. He observed that this, too, should have been locked. Someone was in for trouble. The passage opened into a dusty vault, crammed with a crowd of white effigies, men, women and children, staring out with sightless eyes. Tom thought they might be prisoners in the underworld, or even the damned. They were closely packed; the boys had to worm their way between them. Beyond this funereal chamber, two corridors branched. There was more light to the left, so they went that way, negotiated another unlocked grille, and found themselves in a treasure-house of vast gold and silver vessels, croziers, eagle-winged lecterns, fountains, soaring angels and grinning cherubs. "Electrotypes," whispered the knowledgeable Julian. A faint but steady light rippled over the metal, through little glass roundels let into the brickwork. Julian put his finger to his lips and hissed to Tom to keep still. Tom steadied himself against a silver galleon, which clanged. He sneezed. "Don't do that." "I can't help it. It's the dust." They crept on, took a left, took a right, had to force their way between thickets of what Tom thought were tomb railings, surmounted by jaunty female angel-busts, with wings and pointed breasts. Julian said they were cast-iron radiator covers, commissioned from an ironmaster in Sheffield. "Cost a packet, down here because someone thought they were obtrusive," he whispered. "Which way now?" Tom said he had no idea. Julian said they were lost, no one would find them, rats would pick their bones. Someone sneezed. Julian said "I told you, don't do that." "I didn't. It must have been him." Tom was worried about hunting down a probably harmless and innocent boy. He was also worried about encountering a savage and dangerous boy. Julian cried "We know you're there. Come out and give yourself up!" He was alert and smiling, Tom saw, the successful seeker or catcher in games of pursuit. There was a silence. Another sneeze. A slight scuffling. Julian and Tom turned to look down the other fork of the corridor, which was obstructed by a forest of imitation marble pillars, made to support busts or vases. A wild face, under a mat of hair, appeared at knee height, framed between fake basalt and fake obsidian. "You'd better come out and explain yourself," said Julian, with complete certainty. "You're trespassing. I should get t... Revue de presse Sweeping . . . At the center of this epic are the Wellwoods and their many offspring. Olive, the matriarch, is the author of childrens books, vivid tales of fairies and demons, little people and spirits. . . . Along with other families, they weave in and out of one another's lives, building an edifice of domestic tranquility that increasingly becomes a house of cards. . . .

Byatt rewards [the reader] by serving a literary feast, telling the story not only of these characters but of their world. She sprinkles in cameos by major figures of this era [and] sets elaborate stages for her characters in historical events . . . And she creates an alternate universe, the frightening fantasy world from which Olive draws as she writes of children who are lured away from their parents to live with magical beings, or who must descend into the depths of hidden worlds to save themselves. In the fictional world of these stories and the real world of the Wellwoods, deceptions shape young lives that grow to adulthood in a world on fire. Byatt fills a huge canvas with the political and social changes that swept the world in those years, and the devastation of war that swept its families. She elicits great compassion for the individual beings caught in that tableau. Its not a tale you'll soon forget. Susan Kelly, USA Today Engaging and rewarding . . . Spanning the two and a half decades before the First World War, [The Childrens Book] centers on the Wellwood family, led by a banker with radical inclinations and his wife, the author of best-selling fairy tales. At their country estate, they preside over a motley brood of children and host midsummer parties for fellow-Fabians, exiled Russian anarchists, and German puppeteers. But the idyll contains dark secrets, as a potter whom the

family takes in for a time discovers. Byatt is concerned with the complex, often sinister relationship between parent and child, which she explores through various works of art, using them to refract and illuminate the larger narrative. The New Yorker Rich, expansive . . . a portrait of a time of imminent change the years [in England] when the Victorian golden age depreciated into Edwardian silver and then, with World War I, into an age of lead. The novels early sections take us to the country home of the Wellwoods, who welcome a lost youth into their midst. . . . These scenes contain everything any reader could ever dream of: a romantic country house; neighboring woods containing treehouses and other surprises; garden parties; puppet shows; leisurely intellectual discussions all meticulously imagined by one of our very best contemporary writers. . . .

Byatt captures the modern worlds uneasy crawl from its cocoon with a commanding section on the Paris Expo of 1900 . . . [Byatts] observation of the minutiae of moments in her characters lives is intense. . . . If she hadnt been a writer, Byatt should have been a naturalist or a painter. At times she captures the natural world with the precision and neutrality of Constable . . . at others, you get the feeling details have been assembled with the cunning of Poussin. . . . Cunning also applies to the novels stories within stories. . . . Byatt is a spinner of multiple tales, adding gorgeous layers and dimensions to this fictional world. Splendid in themselves, these stories comment on the novel at large. [One of these stories] says the most, I think, about what Byatt achieves in *The Childrens Book*. Whom does this title refer to? Olives story *The People in the House in the House* is a sly, irony-steeped tale of a little girl who captures fairies and imprisons them in her dollhouse, only to be captured herself and imprisoned by a giant child. In watching Byatts characters, especially parents who insist on clear paths for their young though their own lives are anything but clear, the simple message of that story that no one is ever in total control shows *The Childrens Book* is a title that applies to everyone. Nick Owchar, Los Angeles Times Book Majestic . . . Dazzling . . . Wonderful . . . A fascinating tour dhorizon of a society in flux . . . It has become commonplace when praising a writers craft to pose the question: How many other writers could do what he or she has done? But in the case of A. S. Byatt, she is so amazingly talented and so prodigiously and fearlessly imaginative, that the question really becomes more: Is there any other writer today who can pull off the kind of artistic feat that she can? . . . By [The Childrens Books] conclusion, the characters and the enthralled readers have hurtled through the new centurys tumultuous first two decades, including the devastation and carnage of World War I. And here at the novels end is where Byatt again demonstrates her audacity and the artistry to match by actually writing poems in the voice of one of the characters she has created, authentic poetry of the prewar years giving way to coruscating verse typical of the great war poets . . . What you see here, as you do throughout the novel, is the strength and fire of Byatts imagination. Whether she is summoning up the mud and blood of Flanders fields, the dissecting room at a fledgling medical school for women, the brutality of life at a school for privileged young boys and countless other places, such are the protean splendors of this novel her touch is sure.

Childrens literature in that poem and the books very title stem from the protagonist Olive Wellwood, a celebrated author of fairy tales and such books for young people. And of course Byatt being Byatt, she treats us to some marvelous tales from Olives (and of course her own) pen. . . . Olive is a marvelously original creation, full-blooded and magnificently realized in these pages, no pale imitation of anyone else. . . . In its enormous range and depth, [The Childrens Book] resembles those great Victorian novels in which the author is clearly steeped. Her learning is matched by an imaginative capacity to transmogrify what she has studied into something truly felt. There is a great deal in this novel about enthusiasm and disillusion and about gusto for life tempered by loss. Readers will learn a lot from *The Childrens Book*, but despite its being the product of all that learning, it is never didactic. Such is the power of the book that they will feel all that is packed into it, because Byatt has succeeded in her own literary quest to go back to, to retrieve, and to reinhabit an important part of our past. Martin Rubin, San Francisco Chronicle Fascinating . . . An exhilarating panorama . . . Passionate, intelligent . . . *The Childrens Book* will undoubtedly be compared most often with *Possession* because of the scale of the enterprise, the historical setting, and the deft intertwining of fabricated texts. . . .

One of the significant pleasures of *The Childrens Book* is also what makes it hardest to summarize: The novel has no main character, no hero or heroine. Instead, Byatt follows four families and numerous minor characters from the summer of 1895 to the summer of 1919. . . . The result is a richly peopled narrative that encompasses an unusual breadth of artistic, intellectual, social, and political concerns . . . Byatt manages her large cast and many plots by using a magisterially omniscient point of view capable of giving us the broad facts of history and geography and also of creating considerable intimacy. [She is] a master builder, laying each brick of her tower with consummate skill. Here is a novel in which everything matters. Margot Livesey, Boston Sunday Globe "If you buried *The Childrens Book* under a few inches of leafy much, it might begin

to sprout that's how alive it is, how potent. David Copperfield, Prospero, Jane Eyre, and others haunt this novel, poised on the cusp of the 20th century, in which a raggedy kiln worker's son crosses class boundaries to practice pottery; a lovely matriarch writes dark fairy tales; children waste away from toxic family secrets; and ambitious women strain against tradition. Byatt is a master storyteller, but even more spellbinding than this novel's descriptions of nature and the supernatural is its intensely personal narrative of the Great War, where dreams of justice and mercy die hard."Cathleen Medwick, O, The Oprah Magazine" A complete and complex world, a gorgeous bolt of fiction . . . The central character, a writer of children's books, lives with her prodigious family on a romantically meadowed and wooded piece of Kentish property. Of course, real life is more complicated and less child-friendly than the fairy tale she struggles to maintain, and, as in a fairy tale, the characters' true identities can be a surprise. A tangle of secondary families ranging over rich historical territory provides plenty of meaty story. But the magic is in the way Byatt suffuses her novel with details, from the shimmery sets of a marionette show to clay mixtures and pottery glazes."The Atlantic Monthly Magnificent . . . Inspired . . . Starts as an idyll and ends in hell. It is like one of those vast canvases by Fragonard depicting figures in silk and lace playing lawn games, oblivious to the huge, menacing clouds looming behind them. [The Childrens Book] is an ensemble piece. Each character has a story, and while those stories may intersect from time to time, as characters stories must, each remains separate and distinct. To accommodate them, the novel takes on the quality of a mansion with many rooms and passageways...