

The Afterlife

Essays and Criticism

PENELOPE FITZGERALD

Edited by TERENCE DOOLEY

With MANDY KIRKBY & CHRISTOPHER CARDUFF

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Penelope Fitzgerald's life spanned the last four-fifths of the 20th century, and, in that way peculiar to the insular, familial world of English letters, that period of her life enabled her to know, if not personally, then at least at second hand, authors and artists ranging from the late Victorians through the present. Her father, E.V. Knox, was editor of *Punch* in the 1930s and 1940s; her uncle, E.H. Shepard, was illustrator of A.A. Milne's Winnie-the-Pooh books. She grew up in Hampstead when sheep still grazed Hampstead Heath, knife grinders and muffin men worked the streets, and Keats' ghost haunted one of his former residences down the lane. Her life was spent in a world of letters, and *The Afterlife*, a posthumous collection of essays and criticism, leaves one with a clear impression of that world and its interconnecting figures and influences.

Fitzgerald didn't publish novels until she was in her 60s, and though she wrote reviews and essays throughout her life (including, according to the editors' note, reviews of horse shows), this collection draws from the last decades of her life, the years of her renown as a novelist. Pieces range from newspaper and magazine reviews—mostly of biographies—to forewords for reprinted novels, to essays on her childhood and her techniques of writing. Fitzgerald considers nearly 50 authors, including Jane Austen, William Blake, William Butler Yeats, Olive Schreiner, Thomas Hardy, Ford Madox Ford, Radclyffe Hall, Dorothy L. Sayers, Jean Rhys, and Stevie Smith. She also relates the histories of *Punch* and Harold Monro's Poetry Bookshop—which in Fitzgerald's description seems a wonderful place for browsing, but probably an endlessly frustrating place for, say, special orders (though problems in that area would have been wholly made up for by the illustrated rhyme sheets, in the spirit of William Blake, available at the shop for mere pence). William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement are treated in detail through reviews of biographies of several of the principal figures of the movement. And though only a small number of the reviews are of contemporary works, Fitzgerald does cover books by Roddy Doyle, Carol Shields, Muriel Spark, William Trevor, and Amy Tan. Biography, however, seems to interest Fitzgerald (a biographer herself) more than fiction or poetry, in large part because biography allows her a chance to review and reconsider entire periods and their prominent figures through the discussion of the life and work of one artist.

Much of the fun of a collection such as this—especially in the case of a writer as reticent and circumspect in her fiction as Fitzgerald—is gleaning from the selections and opinions a sense of the tastes of the writer herself. *The Afterlife* is no disappointment in that regard, providing ample evidence of

what Penelope Fitzgerald likes in art, if for the most part avoiding what she dislikes. What comes across most strongly is her appreciation of hard work, craft, and dedication—as her novels, in which work and workplaces feature prominently, would suggest. And her writings about the Arts and Crafts movement reflect that appreciation. The enacted idealism of that movement is important to her, too, as in her description of designer C.R. Ashbee as “a dreamer who, by founding the Guild of Handicrafts, put his ideals into practice and then kept them going for twenty years. He has not many competitors there.”

She appreciates the difficulties of artistic work; in fact, from descriptions of early memories of her father's work as a humor columnist for *Punch*, one gets the sense that knowledge of such difficulties was a foundational element of her childhood.

A messenger boy cycled up from the printers in Mount Pleasant to collect the copy. Being funny is a very hard way to earn a living, and as my brother and I listened to my father pacing to and fro in the study overhead, our hearts ached for him. Usually, the boy sat whistling cheerfully in the hall until past the last possible moment.

Fitzgerald also cares for the fruits of close attention, ranging from that given to isolated communities by Sarah Orne Jewett or J.L. Carr to Virginia Woolf's particulars of emotion and thought, exemplified by a quote from Woolf about needing to “get down into the depths, and make the shapes square up.”

These are not the sort of reviews that warm the hearts of publishers—not because of their criticisms, which tend to be limited, judicious, even too kindly—but because they would not be easy to snip apart and use in publicity. And at the same time, they are thorough and interesting enough to render reading the books themselves, if not unnecessary, then at least postponable. It is much like having a good friend read and summarize a great many biographies—picking out the most interesting and illuminating parts, and frequently adding personal recollections of the subjects. She recalls, for example, C.S. Lewis' Oxford lectures on Spenser:

The place was always crowded, often with a row of nuns at the back. His eye was on all of us: “I shall adapt myself to the slowest note-taker among you.”

As her choice of words from C.S. Lewis demonstrates, Fitzgerald also has an eye for amusing or telling quotations. From a volume of correspondence between Ballet Russe dancer Lydia Lopokova and her lover John Maynard Keynes, Fitzgerald plucks some odd endearments Lopokova addressed to him:

“I have no chemise. I touch your bosom without a shirt,” “Your pale chaffinch,” “If it is cold where you are, as it is here, I warm you with my foxy licks,” “Recurrent dimals of sympathy,” “The jolts from my heart for you.”

Edward Burne-Jones describes his friend William de Morgan's wife as “a plain lady, whom I never look at when I talk to her.” Alida Klementaski, Harold Monro's partner in

the Poetry Bookshop, makes clear her hatred of Robert Frost: "I could have pulled that Frost man down the stairs by his coat when he said he was going up to see you."

Just as entertaining are her frequent sharp, succinct summations and observations. She opens a review of a biography of Roald Dahl with: "Truth is more important than modesty, Roald Dahl said, but glorious exaggeration seemed to suit him better than either." She describes the imposing impression Evelyn Waugh attempted to force on visitors in his later years as "I am bored, you are frightened." A biography of antiquarian ghost-story writer M.R. James is introduced with the statement "There is something dismaying in a life with nothing to regret and nothing to hide." And E.H. Shepard's lasting achievement, the visual realization of the gentle, silly bear of A.A. Milne's words, is explained perfectly:

He drew Winnie-the-Pooh ... from his son Graham's Growler, but the great improvement was in the placing of the eye, much lower down and further back than in any teddy bear before him, and certainly much lower than Growler's. The new position suggests little intelligence, but boundless loyalty and sweet temper. In this way the hard-working draftsman becomes a myth-maker.

No better description of Shepard's Pooh has been written.

Without her novels, Penelope Fitzgerald's essays and criticism would never have been reprinted. Yet they stand well on their own, leaving the reader with a coherent picture of a particular sensibility making its way through a lifetime of books and art, and justifying the book's epigraph, from Milton's *Areopagitica*: "A good book is the precious life-blood of a master-spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life." ■

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