

tience, and acute shyness the desperate need to figure out a way of communicating other than face-to-face" (133). Details are filled in elsewhere about her Mt. Holyoke College years, her husband, her children, her fondness for such works as Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own" (the poetics of the women's movement). But it is her "love of words" which determines the contours of *Accidents of Influence*—as it does of her four novels and her collection of stories, *Green*.

A.S. Byatt

*Angels and Insects*

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Reviewed by Jane Campbell

In the two novellas, "Morpho Eugenia" and "The Conjugal Angel," which comprise her latest book, A.S. Byatt extends the project of fictional recreation of nineteenth-century history which she began in her prize-winning novel *Possession*. Some admirers of the earlier book will miss the additional dimension provided by the interaction, in *Possession*, of Victorian and late twentieth-century characters, and some will regret that the compression of the form prevents the development of characters as richly many-sided as those in the earlier book. Like its predecessor, however, this volume brilliantly probes the Victorian mind, its preoccupations and terrors, and the stories it told itself in its search for comfort and coherence. Like *Possession*, too, *Angels and Insects* both metafictionally foregrounds its own fictionality and presents characters which are meant to be taken seriously. Like all Byatt's work, *Angels and Insects* is intellectually engaging, resolutely involved with human experience, satisfyingly evocative and explorative of a dazzling range of intertexts, and seriously playful with language and form.

The two stories, set a decade and a half apart (the first in the early 1860s, the second in the mid-70s), are independent yet linked by motifs (shipwrecks bring about the beginning of "Morpho Eugenia" and the ending of "The Conjugal Angel"; classification and naming are prominent in both); by one character, the sea captain Arturo Papagay; and by their subjects: religious doubt, Darwinian science, gender roles and relationships, and, joining and transcending all these, loss, love, and transformation.

In the first story a Darwinian entomologist, William Adamson, returns to England after years in the Amazon jungle. Without funds, his specimens lost in the shipwreck from which he barely escaped, he finds a temporary haven with the wealthy, leisurely Alabaster family, classifying the insect collection amassed by his host, a clergyman fascinated by natural history yet tormented by its challenges to faith. There is a beautiful unmarried daughter, Eugenia, and, in this inversion of the Ferdinand-Miranda plot, William marries her. "And so he lived happily ever after?" asks the narrator—and proceeds to tell of William's sexual joy with Eugenia, the birth of many children, his increasing awareness of Bredely as a microcosm of hierarchical, patriarchal social organization and his longing to return to the Amazon to continue his work. His troubled idyll ends abruptly when he discovers that his wife and her half-brother are incestuous lovers and that the chil-

dren are probably not Adamsons. He begins a new, more solidly based romance with Matilda Crampton, a dependent of the Alabasters who has become his collaborator on a book of natural history, and sets sail with her across the Atlantic on Papagay's ship.

"The Conjugal Angel" begins with Liliás Papagay, the captain's putative widow (he is presumed drowned on his last voyage), a professional spiritualist who, with her protégée, Sophy Sheekhy, a medium, is part of a circle which includes Tennyson's sister, Emily, who had been engaged to marry Arthur Hallam before his early death, her husband Captain Jesse and other characters whom Byatt invents; all, for their separate reasons, are hungry for communication with the dead. Despite her marriage, Emily is expected—and expects herself—to prolong her mourning for Hallam (now 42 years dead), as her brother Alfred did in *In Memoriam* (although Byatt presents Alfred as now apprehensive that his elegy has a beauty which is "something inhumane" about it). But when Sophy, after experiencing a terrifyingly physical private manifestation of the dead man, reports in a séance that Hallam's spirit has proclaimed that he and Emily are to be "one Angel" in eternity, Emily realizes and declares her preference for her living captain. The same night, as Liliás and Sophy walk home, they meet Arturo, who has survived after all. Like its companion piece, this novella ends with restoration and consolation, but both endings are also open and contingent, avoiding the banality of more simplistic romance.

As epigraph to "Precipice-Encurled," a short story about Browning, Byatt uses a passage from *The Ring and the Book* which asks "Is fiction, which makes fact alive, fact too?" As historical fiction, *Angels and Insects* addresses the same question, together with the broader one of how a postmodern writer can avoid creating what Byatt in an essay calls "people in paper houses"—openly fictive linguistic constructs, not "real peopel" who make serious claims on the reader's imagination. *Angels and Insects* succeeds in the task she sets herself. Her characters are alive in their vulnerability to fear and loss as well as in their openness to sensuous and intellectual enjoyment. Although their problems take a different form for us, their experiences—of the delights and perils of intellectual curiosity, the sometimes deceptive force of the imagination, the creative and destructive potential of love, the inevitability of loss—endure. Byatt's language continually makes the ordinary and familiar appear fresh, even miraculous, whether she is explicating a Victorian text or inventing one (*The Conjugal Angel* contains, along with much sophisticated, sympathetic comment on *In Memoriam*, a wickedly clever parody of the same poem) or imagining, through a character's eyes, the provenance of a cup of tea. She convinces us, once again, that (to quote Papagay) "everything is surprising, rightly seen."