

A.S. Byatt

*The Matisse Stories*

London: Chatto and Windus, 1993. Pp. 135. \$20.00

Reviewed by Jane Campbell

This trio of stories, like the earlier collection, *Sugar* (1987), demonstrates that A.S. Byatt can work as impressively within the restrictions of the short story as in the more expansive forms for which she is better known. Her passionate concern with the work of the imagination and her particular preoccupation with painting (shown especially in *Still Life* [1985] and her critical work on Van Gogh) shape each of the *Matisse Stories* in different ways. In contrast to the exploration of Victorian life and thought which was the focus of *Possession* (1990) and *Angels and Insects* (1992), these pieces encapsulate moments of contemporary reality. Each story is presented through a woman's consciousness, and each has to do with women's relationship to their bodies. More broadly, they are also connected by the idea of creative energy, sometimes exuberant, sometimes enraged. In each, paintings and drawings by Matisse (reproduced on the dust jacket and as frontispieces to the individual stories) act, often ironically, as commentaries on the action and as icons of achieved calm, joy, and power.

In the first, briefest story, "Medusa's Ankles," a reproduction of a Matisse nude hanging in a hairdressing salon entices a middle-aged woman, Susannah, to entrust her hair to its owner, Lucian. One day, her recognition of a new, snakily curly hair style as a grotesque attempt to disguise her inevitable aging coincides with a pang of fellow feeling for Lucian's wife, in the process of being abandoned because of her swollen ankles. The story ends with Susannah's furious, frenzied assault on the shop and its contents, but the brief satisfaction produced by this outburst is punctured by two male responses.

In the longer centerpiece, "Art Work," Byatt presents a married couple, both disappointed artists. The husband, devoting himself to his ideal (inspired by Matisse) of the possibilities of painting, labors at painstaking, minimally successful experiments with color, while his wife, design editor for a women's magazine, harbors unspoken resentment over the loss of her first love, wood engraving, put aside so that she can be the family's breadwinner. The "inhabited silence" of their household (represented by another Matisse painting) is disrupted when their cleaning woman, Mrs. Brown, turns out to be a secret textile artist who uses found objects to construct a bizarre, brilliantly colorful fantasy world which features (without, she insists, any agenda of feminist anger) a woman enchained by a load of washing and guarded by a vacuum cleaner-like dragon. Mrs. Brown's revelation of her treasure trove (and of her first name, Sheba) releases new creativity in both her employers. The husband paints the now-famous Sheba as Kali the Destroyer; the wife embarks on a series of wood engravings for a children's book, using Sheba and her replacement as models for the Bad and Good Fairies. But neither, it is clear, is likely to match Sheba's spontaneous joy.

The final story, "The Chinese Lobster," focuses more directly and more disturbingly on female entrapment. The primary trapped figure, a young art student named Peggi Nollett, is present only through her letters to her Dean of Women Students, Gerda Himmelblau—incoherent, desperate letters which accuse her male

advisor of sexual harassment and, more important, of failure to understand that her feminist project, "The Female Body and Matisse," necessitates that she violently deface posters of Matisse's work. The Dean, who knows of Peggi's history of depression, anorexia, and attempts at suicide, reads the letters as tormented cries for help. Devoted to truthfulness and accuracy, she knows intuitively that there was no attempt at sexual assault. At the same time, she understands, although she does not share, Peggi's objection to Matisse's constructions of the female body. The advisor, an elderly, distinguished art historian for whom Matisse's work is "*the thing itself*" (124), can only respond angrily to what he views as the student's failure of imagination. The two discuss the issue in a Chinese restaurant, where a display case containing a dying lobster provides an image both for Peggi's room of anguished isolation and for the white space which, the two scholars discover, is for each of them an emblem of the possibility of suicide, which has attracted them also. On the other hand, there are the Matisse canvasses, which they both see as permanent affirmations of life and joy. In all three stories, these paintings are "bright forms" which "go on shining in the dark" (133).

In these stories Byatt again displays the range of effects and the sureness of touch of the mature artist. Her prose is witty, nuanced, and richly sensuous; it catches the confusions and tensions, the anguish and the comedy of everyday life, while offering its readers a cornucopia of colors, textures, sounds, smells, and tastes. *The Matisse Stories* will win Byatt new readers and continue to engage old ones.

Angelo Caranfa

*Proust: The Creative Silence*

Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1990. Pp. 202

Reviewed by Anthony R. Pugh

This is an ambitious book, setting Proust in the context of the long Platonic philosophical tradition of reflection on the world of pure forms. A paragraph on the dust jacket gives the essence of Caranfa's argument: "Faced with the corruptibility of things, Proust flees into the world of art, where he finds momentary joy. At the same time, art reduces him to tears, even despair, since he sees himself as a mere nothing in the landscape of human existence. Yet in art Proust overcomes corruptibility; and *A la recherche du temps perdu* expresses existence by transforming it into a language of creative silence, thus conferring upon it a spiritual significance, a privileged moment."

Caranfa claims Proust as a phenomenalist. The self is subjective in nature, but feels the need to discover an objective form for itself. Caranfa's argument is that whereas the Platonic-Christian tradition considers the world of phenomena as a sign of a spiritual world, to which we are called, Proust cannot go further along that road than the experience of longing. The "form or image that exists in things . . . is forever beyond his grasp" (54). We do surpass the world of appearances, through dreams and memory, and these "privileged moments" are recomposed by the artist, whose world is entirely subjective, and the artist's work leaves wide open the question of the objective "sense" of the world behind phenomena. The word "si-