

"Black Enamel," Tony's narrative, comes first, followed by "Weasel Nights," the story of Charis, and "The Robber Bride," the life story of Roz, perhaps the most entertaining of all, comes last. *The Robber Bride* opens in 1990, as Atwood reconstructs the context and sets the scene: "An arbitrary choice then, a definitive moment: October 23, 1990. It's a bright clear day, unseasonably warm. It's a Tuesday. The Soviet bloc is crumbling, the old maps are dissolving, the Eastern tribes are on the move again across the shifting borders. There's trouble in the Gulf, the real estate market is crashing, and a large hole has developed in the ozone layer. The sun moves into Scorpio, Tony has lunch at the Toxique with her two friends Roz and Charis, a slight breeze blows in over Lake Ontario, and Zenia returns from the dead" (4).

The novel that ensues makes entertaining reading of the first order, with the narratives of the three women friends complementing each other. The conclusion, however, is a little disappointing, for the ending, like the beginning, is arbitrary: "Every ending is arbitrary" (540), Atwood rationalizes: "An ending, then. November 11, 1991, at eleven o'clock in the morning, the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month. It's a Monday. The Recession is thickening, there are rumours of big-company bankruptcies, famine is rolling over Africa; in what was once Yugoslavia there is ethnic feuding. Atrocities multiply, leaderships teeter, car factories grind to a halt. The war in the Gulf is over and the desert sands are spackled with bombs; the oil fields still burn, clouds of black smoke roiling out over the greasy sea. Both sides claim to have won, both sides have lost. It's a dim day, wreathed in mist" (540).

So *The Robber Bride* dramatizes the sex war: "The personal is not political, thinks Tony: the personal is military. War is what happens when language fails" (45), as public parallels private. But Atwood's novel leaves the reader wondering whether Zenia is primarily warrior or victim. If *The Robber Bride* does not leave the reader with something as lasting as *Cat's Eye* did, it certainly is an enjoyable read while it lasts. And it lasts for 546 pages. After all, as the quotation from Oscar Wilde, which forms the final of Atwood's three epigraphs to the novel, states, "Illusion is the first of all pleasures." And Atwood remains a mistress of that particular brand of pleasure.

A.S. Byatt

The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye

London: Chatto and Windus, 1994. Pp. 280

Reviewed by Jane Campbell

Through the voice of the narrator of "The Threshold," one of the stories written by her Victorian character Christabel in *Possession* (1990), Byatt points to "the power of necessity in tales" and the predetermined endings established by traditional "wisdom" (155). However, she adds, "one day we will write it otherwise" (155). In the five stories in her latest collection Byatt uses that most fixed of forms, the fairy tale, to "write it otherwise"—and especially to subvert narrative necessity by inserting freedom into plots about women. Two of these adult fairy stories

originally appeared in *Possession*; two were commissioned for other occasions; the much longer title story taps (both by its main setting, contemporary Turkey, and its content) that great source of tales, *The Arabian Nights*.

The opening story, "The Glass Coffin," is a recasting of the plot of male quester and imprisoned princess. The hero, a little tailor, is sent to liberate the princess from her sleep under glass, but a parodic element enters the familiar plot when the tailor disclaims the princess's identification, "You must be the Prince" (15), and offers, as well, to forego the reward of marriage so that she can, if she chooses, remain free.

The second, "Gode's Story," appears to counter its predecessor by representing women's imprisonment. However, the plot, of a girl's love for a sailor, her giving birth in his absence, the death (infanticide?) of the child and the persistence of its dancing ghost, which claims the lives of both parents, is so delicately outlined that the emphasis falls on the boundary-crossing power of the imagination rather than on the tragedy of love.

In the third story, "The Eldest Princess," Byatt writes otherwise both the male-centered quest and the requirement that the third of three alternatives be the appropriate one. Sent to find a silver bird and thus (in the crazy logic of the archetypal tales) to restore the blue sky to her father's kingdom, the eldest princess realizes that the predetermined plot dooms her to failure, imprisonment, and rescue by the third and youngest princess. Rebelliously, she breaks the plot by leaving the prescribed path to help injured creatures who need to reach the wise old woman in the forest. The old woman uses the creatures' own stories to heal them, and their rescuer, who has always been "a reading, not a travelling Princess" (41) becomes a storyteller herself, and, as a result, free. The old woman completes the new narrative by telling about the second princess, who asserts her freedom by completing the quest, and the third, who, realizing that she now has no story, refuses both the love plot and the plot of women's work (she is offered a magic loom) to follow a glittering thread into the forest of her own free life.

The fourth tale, "Dragon's Breath," celebrates the power of creativity in a more explicit way. It presents a village of peasants who are bored by the monotony of their lives, and dragons who drive the people out, wreaking devastation on all but one of their houses. When the villagers return, their wonder at the miracle of survival transforms them into tellers of tales which endure as "charms against boredom" (92). Before the dragons, Eva, a weaver, had been frustrated by the limited range of dyes available to her, and had dreamed of strange unknown colors; now she finds an artist's delighted amazement in the familiar materials. The occasion of this story, commissioned to be read at a project in aid of Sarajevo, gives its "hints of the true relations between peace and beauty and terror" (92) allegorical resonance.

The book's most extended experiment with self-reflexive narration continues Byatt's lifelong preoccupation with the way imagination, relating freedom and necessity, explores what its title character calls "forever possibilities. And impossibilities" (272). The Djinn in question is released from his centuries-long incarceration, in a jar made of an ancient Turkish glass called nightingale's eye, by a middle-

aged narrator, Gillian Perholt. With this act his rescuer crosses the boundary between being an expert *on* stories (as her name's proximity to that of Perrault, compiler of fairy tales, suggests) to being a character *in* a tale (the Djinn's version of her name transforms her into a *peri*, a Persian elf). At the same time, Byatt's language slips, apparently effortlessly, over the boundary between reality and fantasy, as the Djinn and Gillian confide in each other, share stories, and become lovers. Gillian, now inhabiting both worlds, uses her predetermined reward of three wishes to subvert the destructive consequences which those wishes usually bear with them. By wise and imaginative wishing, she secures, for herself and her new friend, the greatest degree of freedom which, in their differently constructed worlds, is possible for each of them. Her acceptance of her fate as an aging human, and her recovery, at the same time, of a sense of wonder, are imaged in the two glass paperweights which the Djinn, in one of his human disguises, buys for her as a farewell gift. Referring to the story of Gilgamesh, they enclose, respectively, the flower of immortality and the snake which steals it. The glass itself is a metaphor (as it is elsewhere in Byatt's work) for "what art is," "a medium for seeing and a thing seen at once" (274-75).

This volume, once again, displays Byatt's intelligence, learning, and playful dexterity; it also shows, as her more recent work has increasingly done, her mature gifts of compassion and wisdom.

Carmen Benito-Vessels and Michael Zappala, eds.
The Picaresque. A Symposium on the Rogue's Tale
 Newark: University of Delaware Press. 1994. Pp. 191. \$35
 Reviewed by Roger Gerald Moore

The Picaresque is a collection of papers read in April 1989 at the University of Maryland at College Park Symposium on Picaresque Discourse. The following essays are published: a Preface by Carmen Benito-Vessels and Michael Zappala (11-22); "Discursive Parameters of the Picaresque," by Marina S. Brownlee (25-35); "Classicality in the Spanish Golden Age: Gonzalo Pérez's Translation of *La Ulyxea* and the Origin of the Picaresque Novel," by Joseph V. Ricapito (36-56); "*La Lozana andaluza* as Precursor to the Spanish Picaresque," by Bruno M. Damiani (57-68); "The Picaresque and Autobiography," by Randolph D. Pope (69-78); "Richard Head and Origins of the Picaresque in England," by Calhoun Winton (79-93); "Translation and Cultural *Translatio*," by Jerry C. Beasley (94-106); "From Duplicious Delinquent to Superlative Simpleton: Simplicissimus and the German Baroque," by Gerald Gillespie (107-22); "A Latin American Enlightenment Version of the Picaresque: Lizardi's *Don Catrín de la Fachenda*," by Nancy Vogeley (123-46); "Don Picaro: Lord Byron and the Reclassification of the Picaresque," by Jerome Christensen (147-62); and finally "The Brazilian Picaresque," by Mário M. González (163-75).

These are excellent essays. Marina S. Brownlee, for example, questions the whole notion of genre as prescriptive: "Genre is not conceived as ahistorical, ty-