

# A.S. Byatt

(1936—)

“I shall from time to time write a small Clue—so that you may be the more thoroughly confounded.”

—*Possession* (1990)

BY JESSICA TEISCH

## In her best-selling romance-and-literary thriller

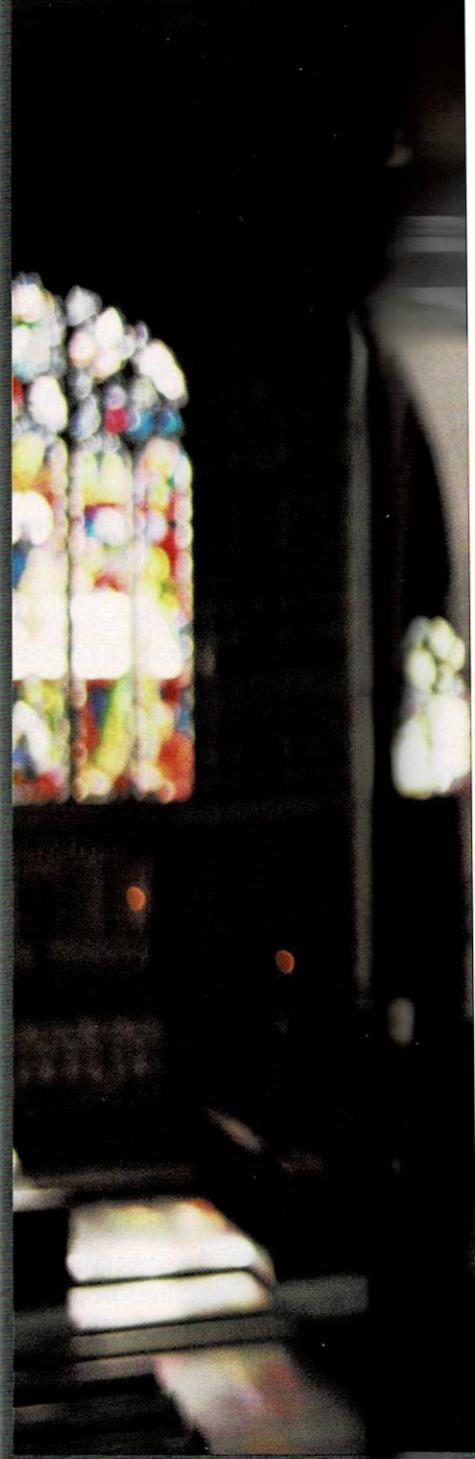
*Possession* (1990), Dame Antonia Susan Byatt—better known as A. S. Byatt—dazzled readers around the world. As two young, contemporary scholars uncover clues to a clandestine love affair between two fictitious Victorian poets, Byatt explored ideas about love, passion, progress, and the relationship between the living and dead. Pondering these concepts, 20th-century scholars Maud Bailey and Roland Mitchell become “possessed” by their Victorian subjects. “Literary critics make natural detectives,” says Maud. “You know the theory that

the classic detective story arose with the classic adultery novel—everyone wanted to know who was the Father, what was the origin, what is the secret?”

Often called the “postmodern Victorian,” Byatt is one of Britain’s greatest fiction writers alive today. Also described as a novelist of ideas, Byatt has altered our expectations of that label with her entertaining, erudite, and often experimental inquiries into life. Her interests extend from literary scholarship to painting, philosophy, education, politics, biology, history, genetics, religion, physics, law, pornography, counterculture, and the influence of art on life—not to mention Lacan’s theory of *morcellement* (the dismemberment of the imagined body). In short, entering one of Byatt’s more than two dozen books “is like going to a party of very smart people. The

## Where to Start

Few novels enchant like **POSSESSION**, in which a set of mismatched literary sleuths unearth the love affair between two Victorian poets. **ANGELS & INSECTS** continues the Victorian theme from a Darwinian perspective. For a more modern sensibility try **THE FREDERICA QUARTET** (start with **THE VIRGIN IN THE GARDEN**), which explores postwar English life. For short fiction buffs, **THE DJINN IN THE NIGHTINGALE’S EYE** is a fantastical collection.



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initial thrill of mingling with such brilliance is tempered by the nagging sense of one's relative stupidity" (Ron Charles, *Christian Science Monitor*, 1/2/2001).

The eldest of four children, Byatt was born in 1936 in Sheffield, England. As a child, she worked her way through Charles Dickens, Robert Louis Stevenson, Jane Austen, and Sir Walter Scott. "To me," she said, "it seemed self-evident and exciting that one would live much more intensely in these complicated worlds of adventure and excitement and passion than one would in one's daily life" (*Salon.com*, 6/17/96). At age 13, Byatt and her younger sister, British novelist Margaret Drabble, were sent to a Quaker school in York. Byatt then attended Newnham College at the University of Cambridge, where she graduated in 1957. She

worked toward her doctorate in 17th-century English literature before marrying British economist Ian Byatt in 1959. They had a daughter and son; sadly, he died in his youth.

Through the 1960s Byatt taught literature part-time in London and wrote. In 1964 she published her first novel, *The Shadow of the Sun*, about a young woman's struggle to define her intellectual self. She followed it with works of criticism about Iris Murdoch (one of her favorite novelists, to whom she is repeatedly compared) and Romantic poets. In 1969, after her first marriage dissolved, Byatt married Peter John Duffy, with whom she had two daughters. In 1972, she began a decade-long teaching career at University College but left in 1983 to focus on her writing.

The *Virgin in the Garden* (1978), the first volume of *The Frederica Quartet*, which traces mid-20th-century British life from the conventions of the 1950s through the revolutionary dreams of the 1960s, met with acclaim. Yet not until the publication of *Possession* in 1990 did Byatt's fame cross the Atlantic. Following its publication, Byatt was made Commander of the British Empire (CBE) and, in 1999, a dame of the British Empire. In later novels, including *Angels & Insects* (1992), Byatt continued to recreate the Victorian novel of ideas; her short fiction, including the adult fairy tales in *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* (1994), combines fantasy and realism. Considering her entire body of work, Byatt writes "like a novelist who believes that her work really can matter that deeply, and more often than not, she's right" (Laura Miller, *Salon.com*, 5/24/96).

## Debating the highbrow

On July 7, 2003, Byatt asked in a *New York Times* op-ed, "What is the secret of the explosive and worldwide success of the Harry Potter books? Why do they satisfy children and—a much harder question—why do so many adults read them?" She concluded that J. K. Rowling's series catered to adults "whose imaginative lives are confined to TV cartoons" and who lack "the skills to tell ersatz magic from the real thing." Some critics dismissed Byatt as a patronizing snob who "shoulder[s] the mantle of high culture" (Charles Taylor, *Salon.com*, 7/8/03). Others, siding with Byatt, criticized adults who "retreat from the complexities of adulthood in a dangerous world" (Caleb Carr, *New York Times*, 7/7/03). Byatt's scathing criticism touched off a minor culture war. It also begged a larger question: Is Byatt's own work too highbrow for modern readers?

The jury is still out. Many of Byatt's works, the beloved *Possession* excepted, simply lack widespread appeal. Many critics consider Byatt a welterweight whose complicated, arcane ideas and references alienate a general readership. Even *Possession* contains alienating pages of Victorian poetry and correspondence that her American editors advised her to excise (she didn't) and that Hollywood dumbed down in the movie version. When *Possession* became a best seller, however, Byatt received so many letters "from so many kinds of readers that I decided there are readers who can be interested in almost anything—including erudition—as long as you also tell a story" (*Washington Post*, 4/22/04). Byatt also admits that *Possession* is the only novel she has written "to be liked," with much of it meant to be a humorous commentary on academia. So for readers looking for "another Byatt novel like *Possession*," there is no obvious place to turn. See our "Where to Start" box for suggestions. In the end and beyond her best seller, Byatt may only offer "a winning combination of snob appeal and genuine accessibility ... highbrow postmodernist conceits and middle-brow reader-friendliness"—in other words, a healthy dose of culture for the masses (Mira Stout, *New York Times Book Review*, 5/26/91).

## MAJOR WORKS

### The Frederica Quartet

#### I. THE VIRGIN IN THE GARDEN (1978)



*The Virgin in the Garden*, the first volume of *The Frederica Quartet*, explores postwar English life. Though the novel focuses on Frederica Potter, it also features her gifted, literary older sister Stephanie and their younger brother Marcus, a withdrawn math genius. *Virgin in the Garden* reflects Byatt's concern with realism and questions about the fashionable experimental fiction of the time.

**THE STORY:** World War II has receded into the near past, and Elizabeth II has been crowned Queen of England. Frederica Potter, a bright 17-year-old from an intellectual family in Yorkshire, plays a Virgin Queen in an amateur theatrical performance about the life of the earlier Queen Elizabeth. The role, of course, mirrors Frederica's own intellectual and sexual psyche as she starts to understand the necessity of escaping from her oppressive family.

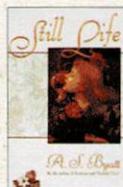
**"It is as grave, solid, ample as a Yorkshire tea, with deliberate hints of the Northern tradition of Mrs. Gaskell and Charlotte Brontë, even down to having a curate for one of its main characters. ... But the book is overdecorated with tags and references from Elizabethan literature that smell of the lecture room."** ROSEMARY DINNAGE, *NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW*, 4/1/79

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** A coming-of-age story that presages Byatt's scholarly novels to come.

**RADIO:** 2002, BBC Radio series, 30 episodes.

#### II. STILL LIFE (1985)

♦ PEN/MACMILLAN SILVER PEN AWARD



This sequel, which covers the mid-1950s, illustrates Byatt's desire to "understand the Fifties." Words and theory, of course, play a large role in her examination. By exploring Stephanie's unhappiness, Byatt also offers commentary on the period's expectations of women.

**THE STORY:** As Stephanie tries to adjust to the tedium of marriage, children, and domestic life while remaining intellectually independent, Marcus recovers from a breakdown in Yorkshire and Frederica flits along as a free spirit at Cambridge University. As always, Frederica struggles to reconcile her emotions with her academic passions as life's choices loom ahead: a future in academia or the "real" world and a life of lust or love—the "hypothetical future Fredericas" that "were really indissolubly one."

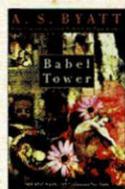
**"Despite these occasional lapses into narrative self-consciousness, this is a nearly perfect novel. ... Generation, regeneration and the progress of life toward death all become real on the page."** BRETT SINGER, *LOS ANGELES TIMES*, 11/28/85

"[A]mong the best new novels I've ever read. ... Byatt, at last, shows that a novel can think about itself without resorting to nervous Borgesian paper-puzzles, tricks, tics." ROGER LEWIS, NEW STATESMAN, 6/28/85

"The most effective and memorable parts of *Still Life* are her meditations on pregnancy and giving birth, on how an infant begins to see. ... It is a pleasure to watch Miss Byatt attending to things that less scrupulous novelists skimp in a standard phrase. What happens is less important." PAUL WEST, NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW, 11/24/85

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** An exploration of life that pits emotion against intellect, domesticity against ambition.

### III. BABEL TOWER (1996)



The third in the quartet extends Frederica's story through the mid-1960s. More experimental than *Virgin in the Garden* in its use of words, concepts, and images, the novel explores literature and art against a dramatic cultural revolution and asks whether literature and

pornography can coexist. Despite its heavy themes, Byatt admits that, "I was baffled by [the '60s] really. It was very exciting and very pointless" (*Salon.com*, 6/17/96)

**THE STORY:** Frederica, who married a schoolboy for sex at the end of *Still Life*, is now unhappily married to a rich squire and living on a Herefordshire estate with a small son. Yearning for freedom, she escapes to Bloomsbury, becomes a literary freelancer, and meets novelist Jude Mason, whose Utopian novel *Babeltower* (heavily excerpted in the novel) becomes famous—and famously obscene. Then, like Frederica's messy divorce, Mason's novel heads to the courts.

"It is a measure of Byatt's narrative skills that one wants the 'wrong' outcomes—Frederica to lose custody of Leo, and Jude's book to be banned. Unquestionably, many who bought Byatt's Booker-winning *Possession* ... will be perplexed by this novel, but it is the better book." DJ TAYLOR, MAIL & GUARDIAN, 6/16/97

"If Byatt never successfully captures the fizzy, fragmented sensibility of the pop-maddened '60s, she does something more rare: frame the usually simplified 'social issues' of the era with the agonized moral complexity of her Victorian forebearers." LAURA MILLER, SALON, 5/24/96

"To read this novel is to be immersed in an overwhelmingly literary experience, an experience about literature at its most self-conscious. ... *Babel Tower*, in other words, offers strenuous intellectual fare: To clamber onto its pages is to mount a fictionist's Stairmaster for the mind." SHASHI THAROOR, WASHINGTON POST, 5/12/96

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** More sprawling than its predecessors, but a thoughtful portrait of the 1960s and considered the strongest volume in the quartet.

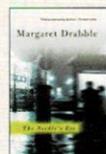
## Margaret Drabble (1939-)

A notorious sibling rivalry exists between A. S. Byatt and her younger sister, Margaret Drabble—a result, perhaps, of academic or familial competition. Drabble's 1996 novel, *The Witch of Exmoor*, explores such rivalry, along with themes of political idealism. While critics have speculated wildly on the source of such rivalry, both Drabble and Byatt have largely remained mum. Best known for her coming-of-age novels about love, marriage, and motherhood, Drabble has also written screenplays, short stories, and biographies—and, early in her career, joined the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford-upon-Avon. She is often considered the quintessential English novelist who, by relating contemporary English society to its middle- and upper-class citizens, particularly women, offers scathing commentary on society. "Family life itself, that safest, most traditional, most approved of female choices," she writes, "is not a sanctuary: It is, perpetually, a dangerous place."

A sampling of Drabble's work:



**THE MILLSTONE (1966):** ♦ JOHN LLEWELYN RHYS PRIZE. In the 1960s, an intelligent but naïve young woman accidentally becomes pregnant, and she decides to have the baby.

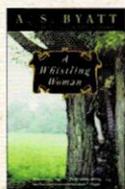


**THE NEEDLE'S EYE (1972):** ♦ YORKSHIRE POST BOOK AWARD. When a married barrister meets a divorced woman, he eventually realizes that she is inextricably tied to her children and former husband.



**THE PEPPERED MOTH (2001):** A semibiographical account of Drabble's mother's life and a study of heredity, this novel features three generations of women—from the talented but dissatisfied Bessie Bawtry (Drabble's mother) to her journalist granddaughter.

### IV. A WHISTLING WOMAN (2002)



This concluding volume takes place between 1968 and 1970. Sometimes slow going, it introduces ideas about feminism, mass culture, religion, love, myth, science, and the limits of liberalism, with the study of snails thrown in. Critics commented on Byatt's '60s-era clichés and Frederica's odd, rather unlikable, character.

**THE STORY:** Frederica gives up her teaching position and starts to work in London as a BBC talk-show host on a fashionable program about television. Nearby, an "anti-university" forms near an existing one. At the same time, her family feels the effects as a cultish leader takes over a therapeutic community near its home in Yorkshire. As all those around her struggle to discover their true sexual and intellectual identities, Frederica finds belated love.

"This novel can be read as a sustained attack on the woolly liberalism, New Age spiritualism, and anti-intellectualism of both the Sixties and the present day. ... To portray *The Whistling Woman* as a baffling cerebral exercise would be to ignore the characteristic wisdom, humanity, and humour that gives it life." LISA ALLARDICE, DAILY TELEGRAPH, 8/31/02

"What is aggravating is that the natural audience for Byatt's works are precisely those who will already be familiar with the works of Stephen Pinker, E. O. Wilson and Richard Dawkins. Seeing their ideas voiced through absurdly named characters such as Luk Lysgaard-Peacock becomes mildly insulting."

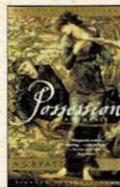
AMANDA CRAIG, TIMES (LONDON), 8/02

"Byatt writes with unbridled animosity towards ['60s students], yet scarcely criticises the anachronistic, conservative institutions that housed the revolt. ... The problem is that her subject matter and her 'cleverness' are not always integrated into the narrative." DAVID ARCHIBALD, SCOTLAND ON SUNDAY (UK), 9/22/02

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** An impressive, but not the most cohesive, novel to close the Frederica Quartet.

## Possession: A Romance (1990)

- ◆ BOOKER PRIZE
- ◆ IRISH TIMES/AER LINGUS INTERNATIONAL FICTION PRIZE
- ◆ COMMONWEALTH WRITERS PRIZE (EURASIA REGION, BEST BOOK)
- ◆ NAMED A *NEW YORK TIMES* BEST BOOK OF 1990



*Possession* catapulted Byatt to the international stage. With pages of original lyric poetry, fairy tales, and secret letters written by two prominent Victorians (based on Robert Browning and an amalgamation of Christina Rossetti, Emily Dickinson, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning), the novel is many genres at once: a compelling detective saga, a romance novel, and a post-Freudian biography. Byatt cites as her inspiration watching a Coleridge scholar at work in the British Museum Library. "It started with the idea of possession," she said. "Does the scholar possess the poet or does the poet possess the scholar?" (*New York Times*, 3/31/91). *Possession* explores that very dialectic.

**THE STORY:** British academic Roland Mitchell, a young 1970s scholar of (fictitious) 19th-century British poet Randolph Henry Ash, works at the "Ash Factory" in the British Museum. One day he uncovers two shockingly passionate letters addressed to a female poet, steals them, and traces their intended destination to feminist poet Christabel LaMotte. When Roland meets Maud Bailey, a haughty

## Selected Other Works

\* Discussed in Major Works

### THE SHADOW OF THE SUN (1964)

Byatt's debut novel introduces a teenage girl who lives under the shadow of her father, a famous English novelist.

### DEGREES OF FREEDOM: THE EARLY NOVELS OF IRIS MURDOCH (1965)

This book of criticism explores Murdoch's philosophical ideas and early fiction.

### THE GAME (1967)

Their father's death reconnects two estranged sisters with their Brontësque fantasy world in childhood—and reignites their rivalries.

### WORDSWORTH AND COLERIDGE IN THEIR TIME (1970)

Byatt examines the relationship between Wordsworth and Coleridge and their role in society, politics, and literature.

### \* THE VIRGIN IN THE GARDEN (1978)

### \* STILL LIFE (1985)

### SUGAR AND OTHER STORIES (1987)

These 11 tales—about mortality, magic, life, art, and memory—introduce characters that include a self-doubting Robert Browning.

### \* POSSESSION: A ROMANCE (1990)

### PASSIONS OF THE MIND (1991)

This collection of criticism contains essays on Byatt's favorite Victorians and reflections on her own work.

### \* ANGELS & INSECTS (1992)

### THE MATISSE STORIES (1993)

These three stories—"Medusa's Ankles," "Art Work," and "The Chinese Lobster"—explore how Henri Matisse's paintings affect different women.

### THE DJINN IN THE NIGHTINGALE'S EYE (1994)

These five fairy tales (two previously told in *Possession*, and one a novella) lay to rest traditional storytelling themes, characters, and techniques.

### \* BABEL TOWER (1996)

### ELEMENTALS: STORIES OF FIRE AND ICE (1998)

This shimmering collection of fairy

tales and folktales explores love, tragedy, exile, myth, and, as the subtitle title implies, opposites.

### ON HISTORIES AND STORIES: SELECTED ESSAYS (2000)

In seven essays, Byatt explores the historical novel and the modern European novel and the relationship between the study of natural sciences.

### \* THE BIOGRAPHER'S TALE (2000)

### PORTRAITS IN FICTION (2001)

Byatt surveys the interplay between portraits and literature, from Holbein and Botticelli to Woolf and Rushdie.

### THE BIRD HAND BOOK (WITH PHOTOGRAPHS BY VICTOR SCHRAGER) (2001)

Byatt's rumination on 5,000 years of bird writing, from Chaucer to Audubon.

### \* A WHISTLING WOMAN (2002)

### THE LITTLE BLACK BOOK OF STORIES (2003)

In these dark stories that mesh fantasy and realism, a monster haunts two girls; a woman turns to stone; and an elderly art student meets a grisly end. (★★★★ Sept/Oct 2004) ■

LaMotte scholar, the two scholars urgently start to unearth Ash's and LaMotte's extramarital love affair and try to understand passion—both past and present.

**"Possession is most of all about speech, language, the pleasure of reading, the singularity of reading. ... [But] one bristles at the liberty she takes in describing at first hand certain scenes involving Ash and LaMotte that no one could plausibly have witnessed."** CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT, NEW YORK TIMES, 10/25/90

**"Although the love lives of 19th-century poets and 20th-century academics may seem as distant and uninviting to you as the prospect of reading Byatt's poetic imitations of Ash and LaMotte ... I found myself utterly involved in the mystery."**

ROBERT WILSON, USA TODAY, 11/2/90

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** Byatt's best-selling classic about the relationship of literary biography to truth and life.

**MOVIE:** 2002, starring Gwyneth Paltrow and Aaron Eckhart, and directed by Neil LaBute.

## Angels & Insects: Two Novellas (1992)



These two novellas gave Byatt the moniker "Victorianist Iris Murdoch." Observing Victorian society through a Darwinian lens, Byatt takes a bleak view of it. In the gothic *Morpho Eugenia*, the metaphorical play between an incestuous, rigid Victorian household and an anthill makes contrasts among nature, religion, sexuality, and genetic determinism. *The Conjugal Angel* is more of a ghost story.

**THE STORY:** In *Morpho Eugenia*, entomologist William Adamson returns from the Amazon and falls in love with the wealthy Eugenia Alabaster (the queen ant). Despite warnings, they wed. As Eugenia bears children, Adamson admits, "It is though environment were everything and inheritance nothing. ... I only very rarely catch glimpses of myself in their expression." Then he uncovers Eugenia's nasty secret. *The Conjugal Angel*, also set in mid-century Victorian England, concerns more spiritual matters. Mrs. Jesse, Alfred Lord Tennyson's sister, explores her past engagement to her brother's closest friend, Arthur Hallam, and the creation of Tennyson's "In Memoriam."

**"Morpho Eugenia uses its Tennysonian blend of sensuousness and science to embellish a story rippling with narrative appeal. Suffused with other themes of [Tennyson's] grief, connubial warmth, melancholy wonderings about the afterlife, *The Conjugal Angel* is, in contrast, sluggish, virtually eventless and pitched in a tone of rather hectic didacticism."**

PETER KEMP, TIMES [LONDON], 10/18/92

**"[*The Conjugal Angel*] is equally ambitious but considerably more successful. ... There's a strange hermetic feel to [Byatt's] world, as if nothing existed outside the text—and the boudoir."** ANN DIAMOND, GAZETTE [MONTREAL], 1/23/93

**"In each novella, there is a play of ideas current at the time on the circumstances of the individual loves and losses: in *Morpho Eugenia*, the texts were Darwin's *The Origin of Species* and 'In Memoriam.' ... The two novellas are neatly contrasting and vividly effective stories of people grappling with the ineradicable loss of love."** JOSEPH COATES, CHICAGO TRIBUNE, 6/13/93

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** A charming, erudite mix of Darwinism and spiritualism—and the incongruity of such ideas.

**MOVIE:** *Angels & Insects*, 1995, starring Mark Rylance, Kristin Scott Thomas, and Patsy Kensit, and directed by Philip Haas.

## The Biographer's Tale (2000)



Byatt called this novel a "patchwork, echoing book," and, though the academic setting recalls that of *Possession*, *The Biographer's Tale* veers into messier intellectual territory. Byatt raises difficult questions about biographical accuracy, poststructural literary criticism, and psychoanalytic biography. Many critics thought the subject matter too esoteric.

**THE STORY:** Young scholar Phineas G. Nanson abandons his training as a poststructuralist literary theorist to become a biographer of (fictitious) Scholes Destry-Scholes, himself a biographer of Victorian politician, explorer, scientist, and novelist Sir Elmer Bole. Though few clues exist about Destry-Scholes's life, Nanson discovers partial manuscripts about three men whose lives Destry-Scholes intended to fictionalize: naturalist Carl Linnaeus, eugenicist Francis Galton, and playwright Henrik Ibsen.

**"There are preposterous set-pieces and clever-clever names, never as successful as in late Iris Murdoch, but fun for robust readers. And yet, she has produced a book that may not—just now—be her most popular, but is certainly her best."** CANDIDA

MCWILLIAM, FINANCIAL TIMES [UK], 6/24/00

**"Readers of Byatt ... will find some familiar things here—literary ventriloquism, scholars in turmoil, lapidary descriptions of both the organic and the inanimate world—but may be surprised by the book's experimental heart, by its odd weightlessness. ... It reads like a very complicated prank."**

THE PHOENIX, 6/20/06

**"Because Byatt writes so brilliantly when she allows her own voice to be heard, it's disappointing to find so many pages that parody scholarly writing of the most cautious, over-footnoted kind. ... Because Phineas's biographical project is simply daft, much of the satirical attack misses its mark."**

BRENDA NIAL, THE AGE, 7/31/00

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** Not as tidy or as satisfying as *Possession*, despite its similar themes. ■