

Agnes Grey (Anne Bronte)

This is a flimsy affair, more novella than novel. It is by way of being a thin gruel rather than a hearty potage. One hopes that it is upon more than this that her reputation rests.

Still, I always enjoy the language.

In the opening scene, our heroine is living with her mother and clergyman father and her elder sister. Autobiographical, at all? The mother has married beneath her. The father is an amiable man, but dim enough to get taken in by a bad investment, losing what little money he had. The whole family therefore has to rally round to make up the loss, thus providing an opportunity for the womenfolk to show what staunch chaperones they are.

Less than thoroughly admirable the father may be, but he is the last decent man you will meet in this novel until Agnes's white knight appears much later. Until then all the male characters are unremittingly nasty, regardless of age. One wonders where Anne Bronte got her dim view of men. From being a governess herself, one supposes.

So, Agnes goes to be a governess, just as did Anne, and for the same reason, their clergymen fathers being insufficiently wealthy to permit them the luxury of not working. So, art in imitation of life - and far too closely for this to be regarded entirely as fiction.

In her first appointment Agnes has charge of three children: one boy, aged 7, and two younger girls. The son, we are told by his mother, is a paragon. It is mere seconds before we discover this to be the opposite of the truth. It is only minutes before we realise the lad is an outright psychopath, and his father and uncle no better. Pulling the legs off live birds is one of his chief pleasures. His sisters are a matching set. All three delight in the most terrible acts, not merely of defiance but of assault and destruction, such as throwing Agnes's writing cabinet out of the window. Moreover, the parents of these monstrous children blame the governess for failing to curb their offsprings' appalling behaviour.

This, I believe, is a reasonably faithful depiction of Anne's experience at Blake Hall near Huddersfield. Agnes's trauma was simply an account of Anne's own it appears.

Though Anne herself chose not to repeat the experience of being a governess after that one unfortunate episode, her heroine she made of sterner stuff. So we find Agnes this time in charge of older children, for whom the task of learning is that much more problematic. They are scarcely better than the first batch. Soon Agnes is relieved of the two boys, who are packed off to boarding school, leaving her with two girls - or, rather, young ladies. One is about as ladylike as a cart horse whilst the other is a flirt of such accomplishment as to warrant putting out a general warning to all males to keep their distance. Both are snobs even by the standards of the day, treating those beneath them socially with open disdain.

We have the satisfaction (if *schadenfreude* can be admitted) of seeing Rosalie (the flirt) becoming a Lady by marriage but finding her triumph becomes dross upon its possession. True to Bronte's dim view of men, Rosalie's Lordship husband is even more monstrous than she.

Here, though, Agnes comes across her white knight in the shape of Mr Weston, the curate. Anne Bronte seems to have had limited imagination as regards suitable

occupations for an eligible man. One notes that Bronte's own alleged paramour, William Wightman, was also a curate. For much of the novel, Mr Weston seemed as uninterested in Agnes as William Wightman was, in real life, uninterested in Anne Bronte. The author, however, has the power of wish fulfilment on behalf of her creations. So it is that, after many wrong turns, Mr. Weston suddenly turns up again - and they live happily ever after. Job done.

I can't help wondering what it would be like for a man of today to meet Anne Bronte (and we can dispense here with any distinction between Anne and Agnes). One would be met with an impenetrable brick wall of rectitude. Plain speaking of the type we are used to today would be quite impossible. Even the most benign utterance would be interpreted as vulgar at least, and perhaps entirely beyond the pale. It would become necessary to adopt the mores of the time, any departure from the accepted forms being punished by obvious shock, outrage and frank condemnation. Unless the forms of political correctness prevailing at the time were adopted, no communication at all would be tolerated. It would take months of dedicated effort, and extreme care, to break down even a small proportion of such reserve. I can hardly think it would be worthwhile, for what would be discovered to lie behind the reserve? What gems? What reward for the effort expended? The novel reveals nothing.

Score: 50010

