

The Miniaturist (Jessie Burton)

Well, what was *that* all about? It started well enough but I rather thought it became increasingly unfocused. In its early stages it owed something to Daphne du Maurier (Marin as Mrs Danvers?). However the plot was ultimately far less satisfying than a du Maurier. One was naturally intrigued by the two central mysteries: the remoteness of the husband, Johannes, and, obviously, the Miniaturist.

I think the most unsatisfactory aspect of the story was that the cabinet of miniatures failed to mesh with the rest of the plot. In what way did the Miniaturist illuminate anything? What was the purpose of the rather self-consciously portentous messages she gave to Nella? Those feminist exhortations like, "*every woman is the architect of her own fortune*" and "*I fight to emerge*".

There were also overt feminist messages which read like Gender Studies 101, for example: "*Some of us can work*", Marin cries, "*back-breaking work, for which they won't even pay us half of what a man could earn. But we can't own property, we can't take a case to court. The only thing they think we can do is produce children who then become the property of our husbands*".

So I was primed for a plot of patriarchal oppression, which would at least have given coherency to the story. But it seemed not to emerge. For one thing, Johannes, for all his distance, was no oppressive patriarch. In fact he was rather nice. If Nella had any oppressor, it was Marin - or perhaps Agnes? And the domestic power-play between Marin and Johannes was far too realistic to conform to patriarchal control theory. It was Marin, surely, who exercised coercive control. So what exactly *was* the message? Beats me.

Marin was the most interesting, if unappealing, character. Her hypocrisy was nicely portrayed. But what was Marin's secret collection of necromantic *objet d'arts* supposed to convey? Her pregnancy by Otto - which I never saw coming, honest Injun - permitted the author to get the full suite of gender, sexuality and race into the plot. Ever so right-on. What no trans people? Shocking.

Characters gain interest through their flaws, so Nella herself was rather bland.

The whole sugar thing I found unconvincing. Johannes' wealth was real, and so, therefore, must his competence as a trader be also. So how come he failed to sell that damned sugar after months of effort, but Nella managed to start shifting the stuff the day after she made the first attempt? I suppose this was Nella being the *architect of her own fortune* and her *fighting to emerge*. But it was too obviously contrived and conveyed no real sense of achievement, being all together too easy.

And what are we to make of Johannes? Bit of a twit, wasn't he, indulging his proclivities up against a wall in full public view in a society which rewarded such behaviour by a swim in the docks with a millstone necklace. Improbable idiocy aside, Johannes was rather heroic, was he not? Expecting no mercy whatsoever at his show trial, he took the opportunity to expose the hypocrisy of Amsterdam society. Was Johannes, in fact, the only likeable person in the book? A bit of a feminist fail, that.

Perhaps the doll's house was intended to be a metaphor for Nella's power being restricted to the inconsequential? Maybe, but, in truth, wealthy Amsterdam ladies of the period really did keep such doll's houses, as status symbols. In fact, the rich gentlemen too had their "cabinets of curiosities". And Petronella Oortman really did marry wealthy merchant Johannes Brandt, though she was herself a wealthy widow at the time, so hardly conforms to the book's plot in any way. It seems wrong to have used the names of these real people to tell an entirely fictional story.

And, lastly, what about the Miniaturist? She was finally presented to us, indirectly, as a real flesh-and-blood person. Yet at the same time she was clearly an impossible omnipresent, all-knowing ghost. What's this? I thought committing magic realism was literary suicide these days?

Verdict: 5oo10