Acclaim for A. S. BYATT’s
BABEL TOWER

“In this major novel Byatt establishes herself as one of the two or three most important contemporary British writers.” —Atlanta Journal-Constitution

“Byatt displays a dazzling range of narrative interests and inventiveness.” —Elle

“Byatt is in top form here…. [She] uses her skills to masterly effect, illuminating a period of our history while employing the many facets of the English language to convey the struggles, anxieties and triumphs of a memorable cast of characters.” —Denver Post

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“Babel Tower is … brilliant and rich, employing such a virtuoso range of narrative styles and character voices.” —San Jose Mercury News
“This is a book only Byatt could write: the humor mingled with a dark, suspenseful foreboding; the deconstruction of great novels intertwined with romance and jealousy. And happily, it’s long enough that even the most compulsive reader won’t finish it in a day.”

—Charlotte Observer

“[Byatt is] a riveting storyteller who grants her own wish, making her readers care about the people in her book. The many stories twine together with ingenious thoroughness.”

—Newsday

“Byatt’s writing is extravagant and sensual, and even her most outrageous characters seem entirely real. A feast of a book.”

—Town & Country

“It is all rich and often exhilarating. Byatt writes with a fierce intelligence and a sharply observant eye. Her characters are described with rare acuity and precision.”

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“Babel Tower’s ... ability to sustain narrative bite while refusing to cave in to the nastiness it probes pushes Byatt to the forefront of active English language novelists. Here is a book for those willing to be angered, jolted and, possibly, enriched.”

—St. Louis Post-Dispatch

“For intelligence and observation, Byatt has few peers.”

—Hartford Courant
A. S. BYATT
BABEL TOWER

A. S. Byatt is the author of Possession, winner of the Booker Prize and a national bestseller. Her two novels that lead up to Babel Tower, tracing the fortunes of Frederica and her family through the 1950s, are The Virgin in the Garden and Still Life, and her other fiction includes The Shadow of the Sun, The Game, Angels & Insects, and two collections of shorter works, Sugar and Other Stories and The Matisse Stories. She has also published three volumes of critical work, of which Passions of the Mind is the most recent. She has taught English and American literature at University College, London, and is a distinguished critic and reviewer. She lives in London.
Books by A. S. BYATT

FICTION

Babel Tower
The Matisse Stories
The Shadow of the Sun
The Game
The Virgin in the Garden
Still Life
Sugar and Other Stories
Possession
Angels & Insects

CRITICISM

Degrees of Freedom: The Novels of Iris Murdoch
Unruly Times: Wordsworth and Coleridge
Passions of the Mind: Selected Writings

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For David Royle
Acknowledgements
A NOTE FOR AMERICAN READERS

The Profumo scandal and the Moors Murders were important public events which helped to define the moral atmosphere of “swinging London” and the “permissive society” in England in the 1960s. Other important events were the prosecution and acquittal of the publishers of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* in 1960 and the prosecution and conviction of the publishers of *Last Exit to Brooklyn* in 1967. The *Last Exit* decision was reversed on appeal. I have taken some legal details from that trial, particularly the unusual decision by the judge to hear the defence witnesses before those for the prosecution, and also the fact that it was tape-recorded in full on behalf of the publishers, who later used their transcript to prepare the appeal.

John Profumo was Secretary of State for War in Harold Macmillan’s government. In 1963 there were rumours that he had slept with a prostitute, Christine Keeler, who had also slept with a Soviet naval attaché, Eugene Ivanov. National security was thought to be threatened by this. Profumo made a personal statement to the House of Commons in March, denying the allegations, but resigned in June, confessing that his statement had been a lie. Also in June Christine Keeler and another young woman, Marilyn (Mandy) Rice-Davis, were involved in the trial of Dr. Stephen Ward, osteopath and artist, who was convicted in August of living on their immoral earnings, but killed himself on the day of the verdict. The trial made public figures of the two composed and attractive young women, and aroused a swarm of rumours of sleaze and corruption in high places, which contributed to the fall of the Conservative government. Lord Denning, an eminent judge, wrote a report on the “Profumo Affair” dealing solemnly with, among other things, rumours that a government minister had attended sadistic orgies at Stephen Ward’s house in “a black leather mask which laces up at the back,” and that there were parties where “the man who serves dinner is nearly naked except for a small square lace apron round his waist such as a waitress might wear.”

Ian Brady was found guilty in 1966 of the murders of Edward Evans, Lesley Ann Downey, and John Kilbride. Myra Hindley was found guilty of murdering Evans and Downey, not guilty of murdering Kilbride, but guilty of abetting Brady in that murder. The murders were particularly horrific because they seemed to have been committed for the pleasure of murdering. Brady did have the works of de Sade, amongst others, in his library. The victims were buried on the Moors, and Hindley later confessed that further victims were still hidden there. Both Brady and Hindley are still in prison.
*Her Telepathic-Station transmits thought-waves
the second-rate, the bored, the disappointed,
and any of us when tired or uneasy
are tuned to receive.*

*So, though unlisted in atlas or phone-book,
Her Garden is easy to find. In no time
one reaches the gate over which is written
large: MAKE LOVE NOT WAR

...*

*She does not brutalise Her victims (beasts could
bite or bolt), She simplifies them to flowers,
 sessile fatalists who don’t mind and only
can talk to themselves.*

*All but a privileged Few, the elite She
guides to Her secret citadel, the Tower
where a laugh is forbidden and DO HARM AS
THOU WILT is the Law.*

*Dear little not-so-innocents, beware of
Old Grandmother Spider; rump Her endearments.
She’s not quite as nice as She looks, nor you quite
as tough as you think.*

  W. H. Auden, “Circe”

*La Nature n’a qu’une voix, dites-vous, qui parle à tous les hommes.
Pourquoi donc que ces hommes pensent différemment? Tout, d’après cela, devait être
unanime et d’accord, et cet accord ne sera jamais pour l’anthropophagie.*

  Mme. de Sade, Letter to her husband

*I fear we are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar.*

  Nietzsche
It might begin:

The thrush has his anvil or altar on one fallen stone in a heap, gold and grey, roughly squared and shaped, hot in the sun and mossy in the shade. The massive rubble is in a clearing on a high hill. Below is the canopy of the forest. There is a spring, of course, and a little river flowing from it.

The thrush appears to be listening to the earth. In fact he is looking, with his sideways stare, for his secret prey in the grass, in the fallen leaves. He stabs, he pierces, he carries the shell with its soft centre to his stone. He lifts the shell, he cracks it down. He repeats. He extracts the bruised flesh, he sips, he juggles, he swallows. His throat ripples. He sings. His song is liquid syllables, short cries, serial trills. His feathers gleam, creamy and brown-spotted. He repeats. He repeats.

Characters are carved on the stones. Maybe runes, maybe cuneiform, maybe ideograms of a bird’s eye or a creature walking, or pricking spears and hatchets. Here are broken alphabets, α and ∞, C and T, A and G. Round the stones are the broken shells, helical whorls like empty ears in which no hammer beats on no anvil. They nestle. Their sound is brittle. Their lips are pure white (Helix hortensis) and shining black (Helix nemoralis). They are striped and coiled, gold, rose, chalk, umber; they rattle together as the quick bird steps among them. In the stones are the coiled remains of their congener, millions of years old.

The thrush sings his limited lovely notes. He stands on the stone, which we call his anvil or altar, and repeats his song. Why does his song give us such pleasure?
Or it might begin with Hugh Pink, walking in Laidley Woods in Herefordshire in the autumn of 1964. The woods are mostly virgin woodland, crowded between mountainsides, but Hugh Pink is walking along an avenue of ancient yews, stretched darkly over hills and across valleys.

His thoughts buzz round him like a cloud of insects, of varying colours, sizes and liveliness. He thinks about the poem he is writing, a rich red honeycomb of a poem about a pomegranate, and he thinks about how to make a living. He does not like teaching in schools, but that is how he has recently made some sort of living, and he reconstructs the smells of chalk and ink and boys, the noise of corridors and tumult, amongst the dark trees. The wood floor smells pungent and rotting. He thinks of Rupert Parrott, the publisher, who might pay him to read manuscripts. He does not think he will pay much, but it might be enough. He thinks of the blooded pink jelly of pomegranates, of the word “pomegranate,” round and spicy. He thinks of Persephone and is moved by the automatic power of the myth and then repelled by caution. The myth is too big, too easy, too much for his pomegranate. He must be oblique. Why is there this necessity, now, to be oblique? He thinks of Persephone as he used to imagine her when he was a boy, a young white girl in a dark cavern, before a black table, with a gold plate containing a heap of seeds. He had supposed the six seeds she ate were dry seeds, when he was a boy and had never seen a pomegranate. Her head is bowed, her hair is pale gold. She knows she should not eat, and eats. Why? It is not a question you can ask. The story compels her to eat. As he thinks, his eyes take in the woods, brambles and saplings, flaming spindle-berries and gleaming holly leaves. He thinks that he will remember Persephone and holly, and suddenly sees that the soft quadruple rosy seed of the spindle is not unlike the packed seeds of the pomegranate. He thinks about spindles, touches on Sleeping Beauty and her pricked finger, goes back to Persephone, dreaming girls who have eaten forbidden bloody seeds. Not the poem he is writing. His poem is about fruit flesh. His feet make a regular rhythm on fallen needles and the blanket of soft decay. He will remember the trees for the images in his mind’s eye, and the images for the trees. The brain does all sorts of work, Hugh Pink thinks. Why does it do this sort so well, so luxuriously?

At the end of the ride, when he comes to it, is a stile. Beyond the stile are rough fields and hedges. On the other side of the stile are a woman and a child, standing quietly. The woman is wearing country clothes, jodhpurs, boots, a hacking jacket. She has a green headsquare knotted under her chin, in the style of the Queen and her royal sister. She leans on the fence, without
putting her weight on it, looking into the wood. The child, partly obscured by the steps of the stile, appears to be clinging to the leg of the woman, both of whose arms are on the top bar of the fence.

They do not move as Hugh Pink approaches. He decides to strike off himself, into a shady path on his left. Then she calls his name.

“Hugh Pink? Hugh Pink. Hugh—”

He does not recognise her. She is in the wrong clothes, in the wrong place, at the wrong time. She is helping the child on to the stile. Her movements are brisk and awkward, and this reminds him. The child stands on the top step, balancing with one hand on her shoulder.

“Frederica—” says Hugh Pink.

He is about to add her old surname, and stops. He knows she is married. He remembers the buzz of furious gossip and chatter at the time of this marriage. Someone nobody knew, they had said, they had complained, none of her old friends, a stranger, a dark horse. No one was invited to the wedding, none of her university lovers or gossips, they had found out purely by chance, she had suddenly vanished, or so they told each other, with variants, with embellishments. It was put about that this man kept her more or less locked up, more or less incommunicado, in a moated grange, would you believe, in the country, in outer darkness. There had been something else, some disaster, a death, a death in the family, more or less at the same time, which was said to have changed Frederica, utterly changed her, they said. She is very changed, everyone was saying, you would hardly know her. Hugh was on his way to Madrid at this time, trying to see if poetry and making a living could be done in that city. He had once been in love with Frederica, and in Madrid had fallen in love with a silent Swedish girl. Also he had liked Frederica, but had lost her, had lost touch, because love always came before and confounded liking, which is regrettable. His memories of Frederica are confused by memories of his own embarrassment and memories of Sigrid, and of that embarrassment.

It is true that she is changed. She is dressed for hunting. But she no longer looks like a huntress.

“Frederica,” says Hugh Pink.

“This is Leo,” says Frederica. “My son.”

The boy’s look, inside his blue hood, is unsmiling. He has Frederica’s red hair, two or three shades darker. He has large dark brown eyes, under heavy dark brows.

“This is Hugh Pink. One of my old friends.”

Leo continues to stare at Hugh, at the wood. He does not speak.

Or it might begin in the crypt of St. Simeon’s Church, not far from King’s Cross, at the same time on the same day.

Daniel Orton sits on a slowly rotating black chair, constrained by a twisted telephone wire. Round and back. His ear is hot with electric words that filter through the black shell he holds to his head. He listens, frowning.
“I say I’m completely shut in you know I say I say I say I don’t get up off my butt and go out of this room any more I can’t seem to get up the force I ought to try it’s silly really but what’s the point I say I say I say I say if I did get out there they’d all stomp on me I’d be underfoot in no time it isn’t safe I say I say I say are you there are you listening do you give a damn is there anyone at all on the end of this line I say I say.”

“Yes, there’s someone. Tell me where you want to go. Tell me why you’re afraid to go out.”

“I don’t need to go nowhere no one needs me there’s no need that’s why oh what’s the point? Are you still there?”

“I’m here.”

The crypt is dark and solid. There are three telephones, set round the base of a pillar, in plywood cubicles soundproofed with a honeycomb of egg-boxes. The other two telephones are unmanned. There is a small blue-and-white jug of anemones in Daniel’s cubicle. Two are open, a white and a dark crimson with a centre full of soft black spikes and black powder. There are unopened blue and red ones, bright inside colours hidden under fur, steel-blue and soft pink-grey, above the ruffs of leaves. Over each telephone is a text, done in good amateur calligraphy. Daniel’s says:

So likewise ye, except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? For ye shall speak into the air.

There are, it may be, so many kinds of voices in the world, and none of them is without signification.

Therefore if I know not the meaning of the voice, I shall be unto him that speaketh a barbarian, and he that speaketh shall be a barbarian unto me. I Corinthians 14:9–11.

The second phone rings. Daniel has to decide to disengage from the first caller. Someone else should be there, but even saints can be tardy.

“Help me.”

“If I can.”

“Help me.”

“I hope I can.”

“I’ve done wrong.”

“Tell me, I’ll listen.”

Silence.

“I’m here simply to listen. You can tell me anything. That’s what I’m for.”

“I can’t. I don’t think I can. I made a mistake, I’m sorry, I’ll go.”

“Don’t go. It might help you to tell me.”

He is a man playing a hooked creature in the dark depths on a long dark line. It gasps and twists.

“I had to get out, you see. I had to get out. I thought I had to get out. Every day that was what I thought.”
“Many of us do.”
“But we don’t—but we don’t—do what I did.”
“Tell me. I’ll simply listen.”
“I’ve not told anybody. Not for a whole year, a whole year is probably what it is, I’ve lost count. It might kill me to tell anyone, I might just be—nothing, I am nothing.”
“No. You are not nothing. Tell me how you got out.”
“I was making the kiddies’ tea. They were lovely kids, they were—”
Tears, hectic gulps.
“Your own kids?”
“Yes.” In a whisper. “I was just making bread and butter. I had this big knife. This sharp big knife.”
Daniel’s spine stiffens. He has taught himself not to make imaginary faces or places for the voices; that has led to errors; he unmakes a cramped kitchen, a tight-lipped face.
“And?” he says.
“I don’t know what come over me. I stood and just looked at everything, the bread, and the butter, and the cooker, and the dirty dishes, and that knife, and I just became someone else.”
“And?”
“And I put down the knife, and I didn’t say anything, I just went and got my coat and my handbag, I didn’t even say, ‘I’m just going out for a minute or two,’ I just went out of the front door quietly and shut it behind me. And I went on walking a long time. And. And I never went back. The little one was in his high-chair. He might have fallen over or anything might have happened. I just never went back.”
“Did you get in touch after? With your husband? Do you have a husband?”
“I did, yes. I do have a husband, I suppose. I didn’t get in touch. No. I couldn’t. You see I couldn’t.”
“Do you want me to help you to get in touch?”
“Yes,” says Daniel. “But I wouldn’t say it couldn’t be helped.”
“I’ve said it now. Thank you. I think I’ll go now.”
“I think I can help, I think you need help—”
“I don’t know. I’ve done wrong. I’ll go.”

St. Simeon’s is not in use as a parish church. It stands in a grimy courtyard, and has a heavy, square mediaeval tower, now surrounded by a bristling cage of scaffolding. The old church was enlarged in the eighteenth century and again in the nineteenth century, and was partly demolished by bombing in the Second World War. The Victorian nave was always too high and gaunt for its width, and this effect is emphasised by the fact that it has been only partly rebuilt, inside its old shell. It once had gaudy nineteenth-century stained glass, of no particular merit, depicting Noah’s Ark and the story of the Flood
on one side, and the stories of the raising of Lazarus, the appearance of the risen Christ at Emmaus and the tongues of fire descending at Whitsuntide, on the other. All these windows were sucked in by bomb blasts, leaving heaps of brilliant blackened fragments strewn in the aisles. A devout glazier in the congregation undertook to rebuild the windows, after the war, using the broken lights, but he was not able, or even willing, to reconstitute the narratives as they had been. What he made was a coloured mosaic of purple and gold constellations, of rivers of grass green and blood red, of hummocks of burned amber and clouded, smoke-stained, once-clear glass. It was too sad, he told the Vicar, to put the pictures together all smashed, with gaping holes. He thought it should all be bright and cheerful, and added modern glass here and there, making something abstract yet suggestive, with faces of giraffes and peacocks and leopards staring at odd angles out of red drapery, with white wings divided by sea blue and sky blue, angels and antediluvian storks and doves mingling with pentecostal flames. The peaks of Mount Ararat balance on a heap of smoky rubble, amongst which are planks of the Ark at all angles. Dead Lazarus's bound jaw has survived and one of his stiff white hands; both make a kind of wheel with the hand breaking bread at Emmaus and a hammering Ark-builder's hand. Parts of the primal rainbow flash amongst blue-and-white wave-crests.

Virginia (Ginnie) Greenhill clatters down on high heels. She explains about late buses and bad-tempered queues. No problem, says Daniel. She offers him tea, shortbread, comfort. She has a sweet face, round, with round glasses resting on round pink cheeks and a mouth arched upwards. She settles in her own armchair—hers does not spin—and spreads out an expanse of complicated Fair Isle, oatmeal and emerald. Her needles click. Daniel is drowsy. His telephone rings.

"Remember there is no God."
"So you have said before."
"And because there is no God, do as thou wilt shall be the whole of the law."
"So you have also said before."
"If you knew what that meant. If you really knew. You would not sound so complacent."
"I hope that is not how I sound."
"You sound stolid, you sound blinkered, you sound one-dimensional."
"You never let me say much, to sound anything."
"You are not supposed to mind that. You are supposed to listen to what I have to say to you."
"I do listen."
"I abuse you. You don't respond. I can hear you turning your other cheek. You are a Christian parson or person. I waste your time. You waste your own time, since there is no God. Homo homini deus est, homo homini lupus est and you are the dog in the fable with his neck worn bare by the dog-collar,
wouldn’t you agree?”

“You want me to dislike you,” says Daniel, carefully.

“You do dislike me. I can hear it in your voice. I have heard it before. I tell you that God is dead, and you dislike me.”

“I listen to you, God or no God.”

“And you haven’t once told me I must be very unhappy, which is very clever of you, since I am not.”

“I am reserving judgement,” says Daniel grimly.

“So just, so restrained, not a fool.”

“The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God.”

“So I am a fool?”

“No. I just said that, because it seemed to fit. I couldn’t resist it. Count it unsaid, if you like.”

“Do you wear a dog-collar?”

“Under a thick jumper. Like many these days.”

“Bonhomie. Anomie. I waste your time. I am a waste of time. I occupy your line with God when other fools stuffed with Seconal or dripping gore may be trying to get through.”

“Just so.”

“They are nothing, if there is no God.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

“It is my calling to call you and tell you there is no God. One day you will hear me, and understand what I say.”

“You don’t know what I understand. You are making me up.”

“I’ve riled you. You will learn—slowly, because you aren’t very bright—I go on until I have riled you, because it is your job, your calling, not to be riled, but in the end I can rile you. Aren’t you going to ask me why I need to rile you?”

“No. I can ask myself. And I’m too riled. Satisfied?”

“You think I am childish. I am not.”

“I’m no expert in childishness.”

“Ah, you are riled. I’ll go. Until next time.”

“As you will,” says Daniel, who is indeed riled. “Steelwire,” says Ginny Greenhill. She has given this name to the death-of-god-monger, because of his voice, a clear BBC twang, a produced voice, plangent and metallic.

“Steelwire,” says Daniel. “He says he wants to rile me and he does. I can’t work out why he goes on calling.”

“He won’t usually talk to me. It’s you he likes. He just tells me there is no God and rings off. I say, yes dear, or something inane, and he rings off. I’ve no idea if he’s upset, or malicious, or what. Down here, I suppose, we are likely to over-react, to suspect someone who merely wants to rile you, of being desperate, even if he isn’t. We see the underside of the world, I suppose.”

Her needles tap. Her voice is comfortable, like honey and toast. She is in her fifties, and unmarried. She does not invite questions about her private life. She once managed a corset shop, Daniel knows, and now lives perhaps off a
small private income and a pension. She is a devout Christian and finds Steelwire harder to take than masturbators in phone-booths.

Canon Holly comes down the stairs as Ginnie Greenhill answers another call.

“No, we’re here to help, whatever the problem, you might shock me of course, but I do doubt it—”

Canon Holly takes the third chair and watches Daniel write in the log.

4.15–4.45. Steelwire. There is no God, as usual. Daniel.

“Any idea what he’s up to?” The Canon inserts a cigarette into a cracked amber holder and puffs smoke towards Daniel. He moves around in a cloud of smoke-scent, like a bloater.

“No,” says Daniel. “Same message, same style. He set out to irritate, and did. It’s possible he’s really upset because there’s no God, or God is dead.”

“Theological despair as a motive for suicide.”

“It’s been known.”

“Indeed.”

“But I think he’s too gabby to be suicidal. I wonder what he does all day and night. He rings at all times.”

“Time will reveal,” says the Canon.

“It doesn’t always,” says Daniel, who has had one or two nasty experiences, hearing desperate voices subside into meaningless babble and the burring of an empty telephone, or rise more and more shrilly before the sudden severing of the link across the air.

Or it might begin with the beginning of the book that was to cause so much trouble, but was then only scribbled heaps of notes, and a swarm of scenes, imagined and re-imagined.

Chapter I  Of the Foundation of Babbletower

When the blissful dawn of the Revolution had darkened to the red light of Terror, when the paving-stones of the city shifted on flesh and oozed blood in their interstices, when the streaming blade rose and fell busily all day and the thick sweet smell of butchery flared in all men’s nostrils, a small band of free spirits left the City separately, at night, in haste and secrecy. They wore various well-studied disguises, and had made their preparations well in advance, sending supplies secretly and ordering horses and carriages to be made ready at lonely farms, by those they could trust—for there was trust in some, even in those dark days. When they were gathered in the farmyard they seemed a ramshackle crew of rusty surgeons and filthy beggars, stolid peasants and milkmaids. In the farmyard those who seemed to be the leaders, or at least in charge of the plan of action, described the coming journey, across plains and through forests, always skirting large towns