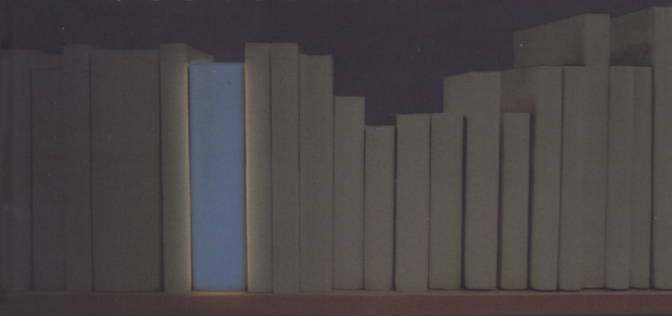


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# *Possession*



BY CATHERINE BURGASS

A READER'S GUIDE

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# *Possession*

A READER'S GUIDE

**CATHERINE BURGASS**

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## The Novelist

**A. S.** Byatt rejects the academic tendency to reduce literary works to a convenient label. In both her personal and professional life, she has worked assiduously towards encompassing what are frequently regarded as mutually exclusive states: a successful career and family life; criticism and creative writing; a fiction both intellectual and sensual, realist and romantic. *Possession* represents the realisation of this ambition, since it managed to please nearly everybody—academics, critics, and ordinary readers—by means of its diversity and won its author a significant degree of fame and fortune. It is a novel which, in common with many successful postmodern fictions, is complex enough to lend itself to sophisticated critical analysis, yet manages to cater to the recreational reader. It includes, in its 550-odd pages, an astonishing variety of literary forms woven into an intricately constructed plot, and addresses esoteric intellectual questions while retaining traditional elements of story, well-realized scenes and well-rounded characters. Byatt's fiction has, from the first, been preoccupied with the tensions between different ways of writing and living; this section will focus on the evolution of these thematic and formal issues—from

unresolved conflict in her first novel towards reconciliation in *Possession*.

### THE LIFE AND THE WORK

A. S. Byatt was born Antonia Susan Drabble on 24 August 1936, in Sheffield, to John Drabble and Kathleen (Marie) Drabble, *née* Bloor. Both her parents had “bettered themselves” through education, and had graduated from Cambridge University. But for Byatt’s mother this education had resulted in frustrated ambition when marriage and children precluded any kind of career. Byatt has described the atmosphere at home as unhappy; her mother was unable to control her bitterness, and conveyed to her children not only her own dissatisfaction, but her high expectations. Byatt grew up in this fraught domestic atmosphere an introverted and asthmatic child and a bookish high-achiever. Just as Roland experiences a disconcerting sense of his actions being determined by a romance plot in *Possession*, Byatt conceives of her life in terms of literary narrative. As a child, she identified with characters in fairy tales and myths of a literate household. This identification may not be unusual, but Byatt placed herself in the imaginative world of stories more firmly than many. Her mother’s vicarious ambition was fulfilled; both Byatt and her sister, the novelist Margaret Drabble, have highly successful literary careers, though the press reports a kind of literary sibling rivalry, to Byatt’s irritation.

While biographical readings of literary texts are regarded as slightly suspect in the academy, in Byatt’s case a special plea can be made. Byatt herself believes that it is easier to penetrate the mind of a writer through his or her work than through superficial conversation. She has said of Iris Murdoch, with whom she was accus-

tomed to lunch: "She knew I knew her secret self, which she had made public in her novels. And I knew I knew it, but the conversations remained the polite conversations of two women who liked each other but were not that intimate." In *Possession*, the two literary sleuths express a certain high-minded distaste for prying into the private lives of their subjects, which is born of a sense of decorum and their critical detachment. But in Byatt's fiction perennial thematic concerns clearly reflect her particular socio-historical location, and there is a significant part of the work which is semi autobiographical.

#### CREATIVITY/DOMESTICITY

As an educated middle-class woman coming of age in the post-war period Byatt faced certain conflicts in her own life which she repeatedly addresses in the novels. Byatt was subject to her mother's high expectations and was told at the age of five that she *would* go to Cambridge University, but further education was raising the expectations of a growing number of women. The expectations of society, however, were still such that these women were likely to marry young and follow the domestic pattern of their mothers' generation—a particularly unfortunate model for Byatt. She says in her preface to *The Shadow of the Sun* that all her novels "think about the problem of female vision, female art and thought," but this female vision is often occluded by domesticity, specifically the demands of dependent beings.

Byatt was apparently aware early of the inevitable loss of autonomy and the life of the mind occasioned by marriage. In her collection of essays *On Histories and Stories*, she describes the way that this loss is allegorized in fairy tales, where the princess is always