

## **Kept by D.J. Taylor**

What, you may ask yourself Dear Reader, would possess a young man of a mere forty six years of age, a husband and a father, indeed a Citizen of Norwich, an intellectual and a biographer of some acclaim, to write an historical novel in the manner of his own Great-Grandpapa? - assuming, that is, that his own Great Grandpapa was a wordy old fraud with the manner of the late Mr Dickens. Well enough, that the novel itself is an engaging, not to say fascinating experience for the reader! But why should it be expressed in sentences so tortuous, so verbose, so richly endowed with clauses and subclauses, that the reader is led, as it were, into frantically irritating byways of Victorian versimilitude, until he cries out – just as you, no doubt, are crying now – “oh for God’s sake stop it!”

D.J. Taylor’s Kept, is, despite this, a genuinely fascinating reading experience. His grasp and description of mid (19<sup>th</sup> London, the English countryside, and even Canada is powerfully evocative. He tells his interweaving story from the points of view of characters who are mysteriously connected, and part of the fascination of the story is to discover how the maid, the grocer, Mr Chubb the locksmith, and the egg collector all fit together. This makes the book a page-turner of the highest order, it is a genuine mystery - not a simple whodunnit - but a constant revelation of the complex and tightly knitted plot.

Throughout, run disturbing themes. The notion of imprisonment is a powerful one: we see a chained blackbird, an imprisoned woman, and a captive wolf. The metaphor of consumption, the fear of being eaten alive, is a persistent (sometimes overdone) image. It is a gothic novel, with a madwoman in the attic and a hidden villain whose traps are slowly sprung in a dark city where the dancing nobility at their balls know nothing of the starvation and misery of the slums.

This is not historical fiction as authentic history. The past evoked in this novel is the scenery of other fictions, not the reality. This is not the world we have lost, it is the world we have imagined. It is as if the novel is based not on detailed reading in the history section of the library, but written from a desk placed firmly among the fiction. It is not the London of John Fielding JP, but of his brother. More than anything else: it is the London of Charles Dickens, especially when we float towards the dark mystery of the river.

‘Very sluggish around Temple Pier, somnolent at Blackfriars, and at London Bridge positively sedate, so that an intrepid boatman paddling east in the shadow of the Tower might think that he had strayed by accident into a lagoon, a kind of Sargasso Sea of murky water, cast-off rubbish bobbing on the swell from the lighters and the cargo boats in midstream, old hawsers washed up on the Middlesex shore, gulls swinging south towards the factory chimneys of Bermondsey and Deptford.’

Since it is a novel this is a tremendous strength. The work draws on the images of the past; and indeed the imaginary language of the past. The only complaint the reader could make about this engrossing experience is the author’s decision to write the novel in the dialect of Past-Shire. I have to say, he does it wonderfully well. There may be the occasional anachronism but I assure you, Sir, I could not detect one. It is a Victorian novel as written in the high language and style of a Victorian novelist; which rather begs the question firstly: why a modern author would write like this, and secondly, if a reader wants to read a mid (19<sup>th</sup>) novel, why he or she does not simply do so, since heaven knows there are enough to choose from? It also is slightly troubling to think that a modern writer is so disenchanted with modern consciousness that he really thinks that it

has nothing to contribute to his analysis or narrative, or even that it can be eliminated from his writing. Surely the nuclear bomb is in his consciousness as Strontium 90 is in his bones, and cannot be denied? Can it be possible to write a serious novel which celebrates the past, but denies the equally valid time which extends from the end of the novel until now? Can anyone put aside the prejudices of their own time, the knowledge of their own time, and write as if their own time had not yet happened? I think not, and I believe there is a thin line between homage and pastiche.

Historical fiction has been a disreputable genre since the great exponents from Walter Scott to Georgette Heyer preferred romancing the facts to historical accuracy. Condemned by critics, but adored by addicted readers, it has enjoyed a renaissance in recent years. The emergence of radical, working class and women's history gave a new relevancy to the research, the return of narrative history, as told by historians like Alison Weir, David Starkey and Simon Schama, has encouraged a readership that demands an authentic historical background to a persuasive novel. As A.S. Byatt's *Posession* showed: a traditional novel set in the past can be as profound and challenging as any contemporary experiment, it does not have to be a love story about half-wit girls in big frocks. Rose Tremain, Tracey Chevalier, and the new writers of historical fiction have developed the historical novel beyond its conventional boundaries with experiments in material, style, and psychological immediacy. Julian Barnes in Arthur and George developed a documentary approach which produced something that was more history than fiction and will prove to be a fertile innovation. D.J. Taylor, in this novel with footnotes, extracts, and appendices, is blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction yet further. It is a powerful contribution to the changing practice of historical

fiction, and it succeeds as a novel in its own right. 'Pon my word it does!

Philippa Gregory's *The Constant Princess* is published by Harper Collins.