

Notes on The Thing in the Forest by A.S. Byatt

The next book on the shelf is the last short story collection by AS Byatt, and this one is called Little Black Book of Stories. There are five stories in this collection – and the first one is called “The Thing in the Forest”. This story is creepy. I love, too, when AS Byatt writes about the WWII generation – not the adults – but the kids, the ones who were little during the war in England. What did it mean – to not be fully conscious of world events, at least not the political ins and outs – but to have your life be so impacted? And that generation stands apart, in terms of its thrift, its practicality – , etc. Byatt comes back to this time and time again. That era is closer to the Victorian era, in terms of sensibility, than anything closer to the modern era. “The Thing in the Forest” is all about that.

It’s written like a fairy tale, which adds to the creep factor – because it’s a fairy tale during the Blitz. Penny and Primrose and two little English girls who are one of a huge group of kids evacuated to the country during the war (a la Lion Witch and Wardrobe). Penny and Primrose befriend each other on the train. The kids are sent to a massive drafty country estate – and are basically set free, to do what they please all day long, before they have to go to sleep in makeshift dormitories set up throughout the estate.

And one day Penny and Primrose take a walk in the forest. And while in the forest, they see a “thing”. A terrifying huge slug-like creature – out of a nightmare – stinking of death and decay. By huge, I mean – fairy-tale huge. They hang back, and watch it slither by – destroying everything in its path. It doesn’t swerve for trees in its way – it moves right through, so the tree slices it in half – and then the slug re-attaches itself afterwards. Penny and Primrose never speak about what they saw. And they never speak to each other again.

Until Many years later – when they are both in their 40s or 50s – and they are taking a tour of that old country estate – which has now been turned into a WWII museum. And they happen to be there on the same day.

What was “the thing”? Was it real? They BOTH saw it. But there is something unspeakable about it. Do they feel marked by it? It’s like the kids in Stephen King’s It – they will be forever changed, and forever linked together, by the horror that they saw. How to live with it?

This is a dark fairy tale. Wonderful writing.

I’ll excerpt from the beginning.

Excerpt from Little Black Book of Stories– “The Thing in the Forest”

The two little girls had not met before, and made friends on the train. They shared a square of chocolate, and took alternate bites at an apple. One gave the other the inside page of her Beano. Their names were Penny and Primrose. Penny was thin and dark and taller, possibly older, than Primrose, who was plump and blonde and curly. Primrose had bitten nails, and a velvet collar to her dressy green coat. Penny had a bloodless transparent paleness, a touch of blue in her fine lips. Neither of them knew where they were going, nor how long the journey might take. They did not even know why they were going, since neither of their mothers had quite known how to explain the danger to them. How do you say to your child, I am sending you away, because enemy bombs may fall out of the sky, because the streets of the city may burn

like forest fires of brick and timber, but I myself am staying here, in what I believe may be daily danger of burning, burying alive, gas, and ultimately perhaps a grey army rolling in on tanks over the suburbs, or sailing its submarines up our river, all guns blazing? So the mothers (who did not resemble each other at all) behaved alike, and explained nothing, it was easier. Their daughters they knew were little girls, who would not be able to understand or imagine.

The girls discussed on the trip whether it was a sort of holiday or a sort of punishment, or a bit of both. Penny had read a book about Boy Scouts, but the children on the train did not appear to be Brownies or Wolf Cubs, only a mongrel battalion of the lost. Both little girls had the idea that these were all perhaps not very good children, possibly being sent away for that reason. They were pleased to be able to define each other as “nice”. They would stick together, they agreed. Try to sit together, and things.

The train crawled sluggishly further and further away from the city and their homes. It was not a clean train – the upholstery of their carriage had the dank smell of unwashed trousers, and the gusts of hot steam rolling backwards past their windows were full of specks of flimsy ash, and sharp grip, and occasional fiery sparks that pricked face and fingers like hot needles if you opened the window. It was very noisy too, whenever it picked up a little speed. The engine gave great bellowing sighs, and the invisible wheels underneath clicked rhythmically and monotonously, tap-tap-tap-CRASH, tap-tap-tap-CRASH. The window-panes were both grimy and misted up. The train stopped frequently, and when it stopped, they used their gloves to wipe rounds, through which they peered out at flooded fields, furrowed hillsides and tiny stations whose names were carefully blacked out, whose platforms were empty of life.

The children did not know that the namelessness was meant to baffle or delude an invading army. They felt – they did not think it out, but somewhere inside them the idea sprouted – that the erasure was because of them, because they were not meant to know where they were going or, like Hansel and Gretel, to find the way back. They did not speak to each other of this anxiety, but began the kind of conversation children have about things they really disliked, things that upset, or disgusted, or frightened them. Semolina pudding with its grainy texture, mushy peas, fat on roast meat. Listening to the stairs and the window-sashes creaking in the dark or the wind. Having your head held roughly back over the basin to have your hair washed, with cold water running down inside your liberty bodice. Gangs in playgrounds. They felt the pressure of all the other alien children in all the other carriages as a potential gang. They shared another square of chocolate, and licked their fingers, and looked out at a great white goose flapping its wings beside an inky pond.

The sky grew dark grey and in the end the train halted. The children got out, and lined up in a crocodile, and were led to a mud-colored bus. Penny and Primrose managed to get a seat together, although it was over the wheel, and both of them began to feel sick as the bus bumped along snaking country lanes, under whipping branches, dark leaves on dark wooden arms on a dark sky, with torn strips of thin cloud streaming across a full moon, visible occasionally between them.