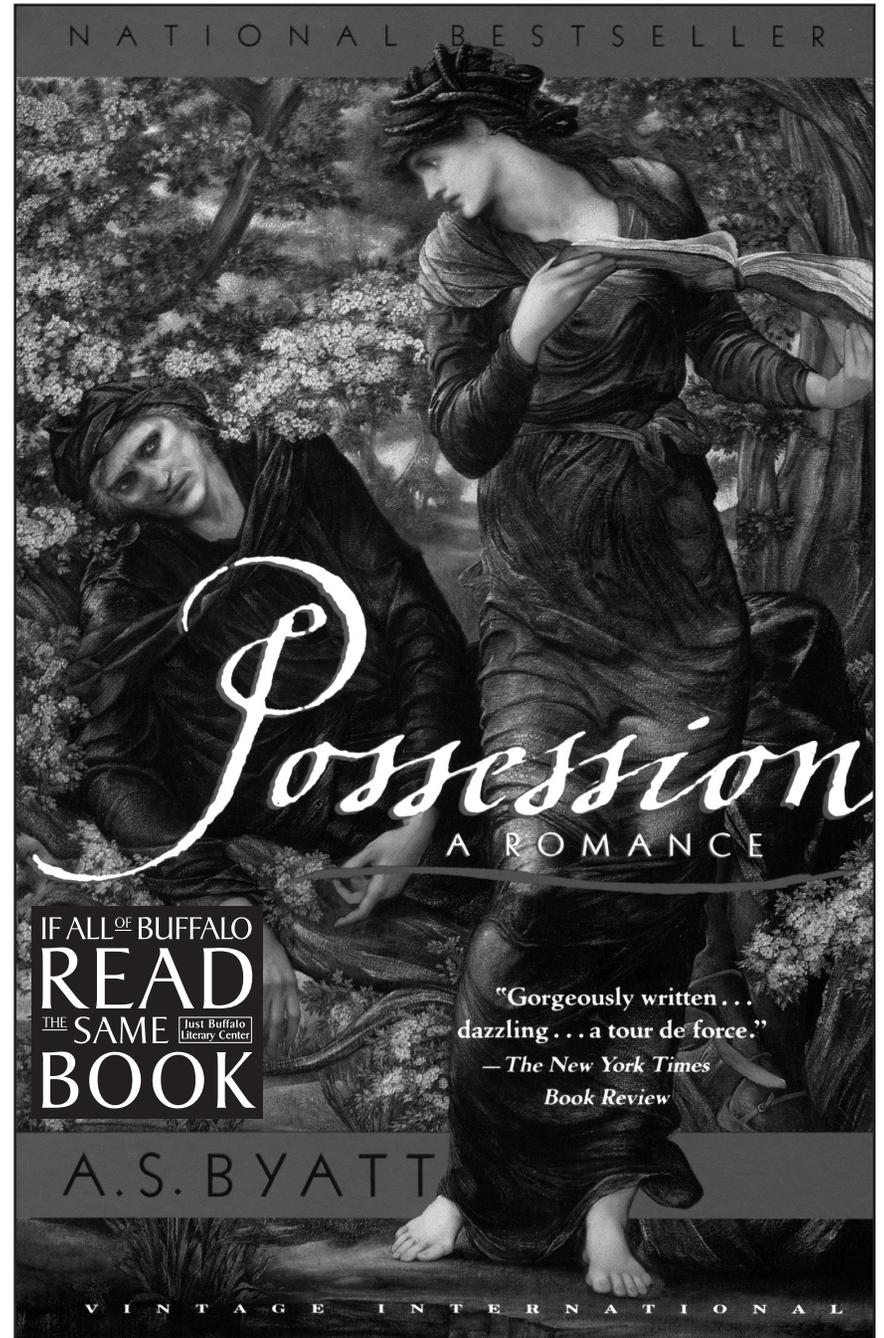


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**READER'S GUIDE**  
**POSSESSION**  
**A.S. BYATT**



# A.S. BYATT

In an essay on “The Thousand and One Nights,” A.S. Byatt notes that the stories the imprisoned queen tells – which allow her to stay alive yet another day—“are stories about storytelling without ever ceasing to be stories about love and life and death and money and food and other human necessities.”

Byatt’s novels are stories about storytellers, or readers, thinkers and artists, who are most alive when spinning tales or seeking them. Her life, too, has been propelled by writing and thinking. As a bedridden, asthmatic child in a bookish household in York, England, she was “kept alive by fictions,” she has said.

Byatt was born Antonia Susan Drabble in Sheffield in 1936. Her father was a judge who flew for the British Air Force in North Africa during World War II and was part of the British legal team at the Nuremberg trials. Her mother, a former schoolteacher and scholar, was deeply dissatisfied with a life of domesticity, but passed ambition and a respect of art and literature to her four children.

Byatt has said she was unhappy as a child: “It seemed a horrible thing to have to be.” In Dickens, Scott, Stevenson and Austen she found “that one would live much more intensely in these complicated worlds of adventure and excitement and passion than one would in one’s daily life of getting up and having one’s little breakfast and being trotted off to one’s school where you were frightened of the other kids in the playground.”

Byatt, like her siblings—including the novelist Margaret Drabble – excelled as a student. Byatt was one of the first women admitted to Cambridge and later studied at Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania and at Oxford. She married in 1959 and began to juggle an academic and domestic life, with two children and teaching positions, beginning in 1962, at the University of London and the Central School of Art and Design.

Her first novel, *The Shadow of the Sun*, was published in 1964 and *The Game* appeared three years later, but Byatt was known as a literary scholar as much as a fiction writer. She published a book-length study of Iris Murdoch in 1965 and another on Wordsworth and Coleridge in 1970. By 1988, when she had published



photo: Don Usner

four novels and a collection of short stories, she told an Australian newspaper, “I get very annoyed when people refer to me as the critic A. S. Byatt. I feel by now it is quite clear that I am a writer, or a novelist, who writes criticism.”

Byatt hoped to write full-time as early as the 1970s, when she divorced and remarried and was pregnant with her third child (she later had a fourth). But in 1972 she agreed to take a lecturing post at University College London to help pay for the cost of her son’s school and, that same year, her son was killed in a car accident caused by a drunk driver. She kept the teaching job for the next 11 years, “as long as he had lived.”

Free to write full-time beginning in 1983, Byatt flourished. She embraced her 50s, noting she thought it would be “awful to be past child-bearing” but found the age “marvelous because, finally, you are allowed to be what you are, and think. Suddenly, (a), I have not much time left, and, (b), I know what I want to do with it.”

# THE NEW VICTORIAN NOVEL

She had a breakthrough in 1990 with *Possession: A Romance*. She won the Booker Prize and the Irish Times/Aer Lingus Prize and was made a Commander of the British Empire (she was later knighted and became Dame Antonia Byatt).

Other books followed every few years: *Angels and Insects*, a compilation of two novellas, “The Conjugal Angel” and “Morpho Eugenia,” in 1992; *Babel Tower* in 1996; *The Biographer’s Tale* in 2000; *A Whistling Woman* in 2002 and *The Children’s Book* in 2009.

Byatt’s novels are bookish and she prizes vast worlds of thinkers over small, single perspectives. “I like to write about people who think,” she has said, “to whom thinking is as important and exciting (and painful) as sex or eating.”

Her writing process usually begins with an inspiring idea, which she develops by reading and researching exhaustively across vastly different disciplines. John Updike wrote of Byatt in 1999 that she is “a vigorous exponent of the view that there is nothing wrong with making books out of books—with admitting that the impulse to write stems from enthusiastic reading, and that literary adventure takes place in a mental world generated from existent texts.”

Byatt has said she is able to make those books because of her faith in the act of reading, and the intimacy of a written record. Reading, she was written, “reflects, and constructs, the inner life as nothing else does. It makes us into responsible individuals, and gives us a set of concepts and a complex language for understanding what is happening to us, exactly who we are, and what we are doing.”

A.S. Byatt had an idea in the 1970s that a Victorian novel could be “a big English blockbuster” because “nobody was writing them and everybody was disparaging them, so they must be due to come back.” *Possession* is her “Victorian novel,” a book she thought about “for at least 15 years” while the broken narratives, spare prose, and moral ambiguity of much modernist fiction were taking new form in postmodernism. In contrast, Victorian novels were plot- and character-driven, full of social law and censure, hidden identities, and, sometimes, gothic scenes like *Possession’s* graveyard finale.

Victorian England was defined in name and manner by its queen, Victoria, whose nationalist enthusiasm and moral virtue were mirrored by the society she ruled. The period between 1830 and the century’s end was a time of intense change: it was the height of England’s role as a world and imperial power; it saw a rapid growth in population and industrialization as well as the rise of the middle class; and it was a vibrant time of economic prosperity and scientific, technological and artistic invention.

In the midst of this change and ingenuity, which was widely celebrated, England’s citizens also encountered a deep doubt: they were anxious about the path of change, what it meant for established moral, philosophical and religious beliefs and the foundational patterns of daily life. The publication, in 1859, of Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* – his landmark treatise on evolution – was perhaps the greatest example of science conflicting with established religious belief and the greatest catalyst for such doubt.

*Possession* is full of examples of the Victorian characters struggling with this conflict. Randolph Henry Ash’s time in Yorkshire (not coincidentally in 1859) collecting marine specimens to dissect and examine – as well as the mentions of “widespread and vehement” anti-vivisection propaganda – reflects both the period’s celebration of discovery and the anxiety of destruction, power and loss.

The persistence of this doubt shaped much of middle Victorian literature, as it shapes Ash’s and Christabel LaMotte’s work in *Possession*. Ash’s “Ragnarök” is called by its fictional critics “the epic of Victorian doubt and despair” while his



Dante Gabriel Rossetti -  
Proserpine (Oil on canvas, 1874)

Proserpine is “a Victorian reflection of religious doubt.” The place of religious faith in critical thought is a central concern in Ash and LaMotte’s letters, in which LaMotte confesses “Ragnarök” caused “the worst crisis in the life of my simple religious faith” in part because “you made Holy Scripture no more than another Wonder Tale.”

Victorians, including artists, were defined by their earnestness and energetic hard work, their emphasis on sobriety and practical effort, and their awareness of a moral code as well as the suffocation of the imposition of that code on society’s outliers. Many Victorian poems evoke a historical or mythical past (like LaMotte’s “Melusina” and fairy tales and Ash’s “Ragnarök”) and, of course, focus on love.

In the book, Byatt reflects on and recreates Victorian literature through these two imagined lovers and poets, Ash and LaMotte. The characters are based loosely on the work and lives of Robert Browning (1812-1889) and Christina Rossetti (1830-1894).

Browning, like Ash, was a “great ventriloquist.” Through the voices of a musician, a painter, a duke, a bishop, a monster, and other fully imagined characters, however flawed, Browning made the dramatic monologue a central poetic form. (Ash’s ventriloquism is clear in his “unwieldy range”: his ability to write “a troubadour lyric, a piece of dramatic Jacobean verse, some satirical couplets, a blank verse meditation on volcanic mud and a love-sonnet,” for example.) Browning tended, like Ash, to write about subjects and people that were seemingly removed from contemporary England, but through them, he explored the major Victorian preoccupations of faith, science and art. Rossetti, like LaMotte, chose never to marry and was a serious Anglo-Catholic, devoted to religious faith and her family. She wrote works of fantasy and poems for children. Like LaMotte’s recreations of fairy tales and mythical characters, Rossetti’s most celebrated poem, “Goblin Market,” appeared to be a children’s fable but was an exploration of temptation tempered with religious severity. A summary in the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* captures the real and imagined writers’ parallels: Rossetti “writes a poetry of deferral, of deflection, of negation, whose very denials and constraints give her a powerful way to articulate a poetic self in critical relationship to the little that the world offers.”

For all its grounding in the Victorian era, *Possession* is also tied to the moment in which it was created. Postmodernism, especially its parody and play, was central in the late 1980s to the way books were written and read. “I half-knew that the form of my novel should be a parody of every possible form, popular and ‘high culture,’” Byatt has said. The book weaves together several genres, including detective fiction—shaped by the Margery Allingham stories Byatt loved as a child—and historical romance—inspired by Hawthorne’s description of the form connecting “a bygone time with the very present that is flitting away from us.”

In *Possession*’s plot and structure, Byatt also replicates a Victorian nove—down to its faux epistolary structure—while also questioning it and criticizing it in self-aware, postmodern fashion. Byatt’s selection of Browning’s “Mr. Sludge, ‘the Medium’” as an epigraph is particularly apt for this reason: “How many lies,” the narrator asks, “did it require to make/ The portly truth you here present us with?”

# QUESTIONS

1. What are the various instances of possession that the characters enact, feel or observe in Byatt's novel? Who or what is possessed? Why? What are the consequences?
2. Christabel and Blanche, and later Roland and Maude, try to defend or create room in their lives to be independent. What are the stakes of each character's independence? What do they eventually have to give up as they keep or lose that freedom? How is it related to artistic creation or scholarship?
3. Was Christabel and Ash's relationship worth all that she had to go through to have it?
4. Near the end of the novel, Roland thinks he is "in a Romance, a vulgar and high Romance simultaneously" and, later, Euan says the unfolding mystery of LaMotte and Ash is like "the unmasking at the end of a detective novel." How are these genres (Romance and detective fiction) combined in Byatt's novel? Why do you think the characters in the novel comment on its making?
5. By the end of the novel, the reader knows more about LaMotte and Ash's relationship than any of the scholars do. Why does Byatt show the reader Ash and LaMotte first hand and not only through the written record of their lives?
6. Do the poems add to the novel? What do they tell you about the characters that "wrote" them and the academics that study them? How do they hint at the chapter that they precede?
7. Why does Beatrice Nest form such a strong alliance with Ellen Ash? How are both women, across decades, defined by proscribed roles they can't escape?
8. What are the different types of academic work, and academics, that Roland, Maud, Cropper, Blackadder, Beatrice, Leonora and Fergus embody? Do any of them escape criticism? How does Byatt (sometimes subtly, sometimes outright) mock them?
9. What metaphorical significance does the Fairy Melusina have for women artists in general and Christabel LaMotte in particular? Does Ash—the great ventriloquist—seem to reflect himself in the personas in his poems?
10. Why does the work of discovering Ash's life and work lead the men in the novel—Roland, Blackadder, Cropper—to dwell on their own identity? What do they discover about themselves?



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