

Daphne du Maurier's books seem strangely familiar from TV and film adaptations even if one has not actually read any of them. But that does not tell us anything about the author.

The Mischief Makers is a fictionalised account of the life of Daphne du Maurier written in the first person as though it is a personal autobiography. It covers her childhood as well as her adulthood, throughout her writing career. And throughout the book the author J M Barrie (uncle Jim) looms large.

As a young girl Daphne was often at the theatre, her father, Gerald du Maurier, was one of the outstanding theatre actors of his time. It was during a run of Barrie's *The Admirable Crichton* that her parents had met, her mother starring opposite Gerald. Daphne's grandfather was the author of *Trilby* and creator of the character Svengali, the evil mesmerist whose name lives on.

Daphne married Major Frederick (Tommy) Browning, himself an interesting man, a career soldier who set up the first British Airborne Division that was instrumental in the defeat of Germany during WWII. Knighted for his war work, Daphne became known as Lady Browning, although the strain the war put on their marriage was one they struggled to recover from. And Daphne's immersion in her work as a writer and her determination to live quietly in Cornwall cut herself off from her husband, and at times her children.

But in this book it is the stories of her cousins, the Davies boys, and their recollections of their guardian that is really interesting. Peter as an older man is constantly engrossed in letters and memorabilia, trying to make sense of his childhood, whether or not they were simply used by Barrie, and the tragic death of his brother Michael as a young man. Was Barrie somehow at fault?

Living in a beautiful house in the wilds of Cornwall, Daphne du Maurier is on the brink of a nervous breakdown. Tangled in a self-destructive love affair that threatens to unravel her marriage, she is also distracted by worry for the family friend (J. M. Barrie) whose shadow looms over her childhood.

Daphne tries to escape into writing her new book, but the line between fiction and reality blurs dangerously when her own characters start manifesting before her eyes – in particular a woman called Rebecca who looks suspiciously like her husband's alluring ex-girlfriend.

Another view:

The Mischief Makers blends known facts with imagination to create a fictionalised account of the life of Daphne du Maurier. The story begins from the perspective of a much older Daphne, haunted by dreams of a cousin who drowned years ago. From there, we zoom back to the past and allow the narrative to unfold until we come full circle back to the beginning again. It turns out that the cousin who drowned, along with his brother, was adopted by J. M. Barrie after they were orphaned. Much attention is given to this fact and to the cousins in general at the start of the story.

Ultimately the way Daphne is portrayed makes her seem very shallow and selfish, not caring at all about how she broke apart the marriage of a person who was nothing but kind to her and thinking nothing of pursuing someone else who repeatedly states they are not interested in her.