

THE PAPERCHASE by Marcel Theroux Published 2001

Marcel Theroux's second novel is an exquisitely calculated tease; sibling rivalry in high-achieving literary families has been a hot subject since long before William James described Henry as his "younger and shallower and vainer brother." Mycroft Holmes is Sherlock's older, smarter, lazier brother, a shadowy but nonetheless vivid occasional presence in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's stories. He has a nebulous but potent role as "the most indispensable man in the country," according to Sherlock. Among the only things that are certain about him, Theroux reminds us, "are that he is very fat, and a member of the Diogenes Club, where conversation is forbidden."

It is hard for the reader not to jump to a quick conclusion about the subject of the novel, given the highly public sibling rivalry exhibited by the older generation of the Theroux family. Marcel is Paul Theroux's son; a section of his father's uproariously entertaining book about V. S. Naipaul, "Sir Vidia's Shadow," elaborated with what seemed like relish on the theme that one brother is always the other's literary inferior. Many readers felt that these passages drew on feelings about Alexander Theroux, Paul's writer brother. And then there is the fact that Marcel's own brother, Louis, has achieved fame in Britain (where both of them were brought up) as a host of TV documentaries. As Sherlock Holmes might have said, these are murky waters, Watson.

Having set up expectations with its American publisher's title, "The Confessions of Mycroft Holmes" then plays with them mercilessly. In Britain, Marcel Theroux's subtle and intelligent book is titled "A Paper Chase", and while that undersells the novel's underlying seriousness and sadness, it does catch the way the reader is led on, and through, its gradually unfolding mysteries. Mycroft himself isn't even mentioned until Page 143, three-quarters of the way into the book; but by that point the reader has long since been hooked.

The narrator is Damien March, a 35-year-old BBC television journalist whose American birth and British upbringing have left him deracinated and equally not quite at home wherever he is. ("I always forget you're a Yank," one of his colleagues tells him, to which Damien replies, "Yeah, me too.") Damien works the night shift at the BBC, putting together captions and introductions to filmed pieces. He has no ambition, no girlfriend and not much impetus to do anything. "I often had the feeling, though I tried to deny it, that England was tired and second-rate, and that it was precisely its tiredness and second-rateness that fated it to be a significant part of my life." As for the BBC, "It grew to remind me of my family, in the way that it seemed to be full of bright people competing for too little love and attention."

That family background is the subject of the novel. Damien has a brother, a successful movie director, to whom he hasn't spoken for two years. His mother died when he was six. His father is a corporate lawyer, a well-meaning man but a weirdo and emotional cripple; for instance, when Damien got into trouble as a teenager, his father's solution was to start learning Latin, by way of setting a good example. But then he became obsessed with the subject, and ended up taking the same O-level examination as his son. This is typical of the novel's acuteness, its deadpan comic sadness:

"In the final exam, he called the invigilator over to complain about an apparent misprint in the unseen translation, and the papers were taken away from us, and we had to wait 45 minutes while it was established over the telephone that a misprint had indeed occurred and the erratum in question was chalked up on the blackboard.

"The thing that etched it forever on my memory as a terrible moment was the reaction of my fellow students, who treated me with a tender, kindly pity that hurt much more than any name I had been called in the preceding years.

"Dad got an A in the exam and came second overall in the entire country. The boy who beat him was a nine-year-old prodigy from Scotland. I got an E."

As the book opens, Damien's uncle Patrick -- the last person in my family that meant anything to me" -- has just died. Patrick was a reclusive writer, a resident on the (fictional) island of Ionia, near Cape Cod; he had had an early success with a novel called "Peanut Gatherers" -- the apparently innocent title is a punning allusion to a Samoan sexual custom" -- but his subsequent novels were either unreadable or unpublishable, and his career was finished off by a plagiarism scandal. Damien and his brother and father spent long summer holidays with Patrick after the boys' mother died; Damien appeared to be his uncle's favourite. This status is confirmed after Patrick's death: Damien is his heir, and the house on Ionia and all his contents have been left to him. He quits his job at the BBC and goes back to America to live on the island.

The uncle's bequest has a condition, however: Damien must leave the house and its half-astonishing, half-nightmarish collection of junk and bric-a-brac untouched. Damien's circumstances on Ionia soon become as static and confining as his life in London had been, and this is a point at which the momentum of the novel risks sagging. But a burglary and a mystery restart the paper chase of the subtitle, and it becomes clear, after the discovery of a manuscript entitled "The Confessions of Mycroft Holmes," that Patrick was a man tormented by a violent sense of guilt. A sequence of Ionian clues needs to be tracked down and deciphered before the source of that anguish can be revealed. It would give too much away to be more explicit about the mystery inside the last of the book's Russian dolls, but the events of the novel do leave Damien with a plan of action: "In my life, I have been trying to commemorate Patrick by becoming more unlike him. It's an ongoing and never wholly successful undertaking, but a key part of it is the effort to renounce damaging certainties, to try and know a little less every day."

There is a point in the book, not long after the discovery of "The Confessions of Mycroft Holmes," when it seems that Theroux is going to be too efficient about setting up his puzzles and then resolving them by sweeping up too briskly after himself. But the mystery at the heart of the book isn't like that, and there is in the end something very satisfying about the momentum of the novel. The story moves forward with a pleasant, un-thrillerish pressure. The novel's other great delight is Damien's narration; Theroux extracts full value from his rootless, sceptical, sharp-eyed perspective. Of his downstairs neighbour in London, Damien observes, "I had avoided getting to know her on the very English principle that it's better to have cool but cordial relations with your neighbours than try to make friends and discover you actually hate each other." That is deeply accurate, and it is matched by observations from the other side of the Atlantic. Patrick's lawyer on Ionia had "that odd American gift - - or is it a kind of insensitivity? -- of talking all the time and still seeming able to form a distinct and favourable impression of your personality." The jokes are good, not least in their timing. Patrick's education had left him with "a range of almost wholly useless abilities -- basic conversational Latin from the seminary, good Samoan, a degree in English literature." The title tease turns out to be the best joke of all, since the book does eventually wind up being about brothers, and also about the ways in which "the imagination roams widely over the world until it finds a predicament that reflects its own secret agonies."

THE TAP DANCER by Andrew Barrow

In the library of the Reform Club, 'a lot of old men lay snoring. Some looked very old indeed, on the point of death. 'Of course the club is at its busiest now,' said my father.' William, the narrator of Andrew Barrow's first novel, is the son of a man who could rank alongside Mr Pooter and Nancy Mitford's Uncle Matthew for fascinating awfulness, rooted in the unyielding, heavy clay of the English social system. Poised uncomfortably between the middle and upper classes, he is at this point briskly instructing his son in the arcane rules by which their precarious position can be maintained. The club, he has decided, is a criterion against which potential bounders should be assessed. 'He'd never get into the Reform' is akin to ultimate damnation.

The novel begins when William, the fourth of five sons, is 20. An engaging hilarity lurks just below the deadpan level of his narration. Sometimes it surfaces as bathos ('the big event of the week was the arrival of the dog's meat'), sometimes as a kind of cold comfort pathos: 'In February the odd battered primrose appeared in the garden'. But it blossoms most in the bizarre but alarmingly recognisable characters who do their best to shape poor William's life.

There is Great Aunt Amy, 'a comfortable spinster figure high up in the Girl Guide movement', whose inexplicably unfair will unsettles everyone; Aunt Peg, who grandly chairs committees but lives in unfathomable squalor in Cumberland; and Mother, who roundly curses vegetables slow to boil, but speaks fondly to a plant as she re-pots it: 'How pleased you must be to get into that.' Her great relaxation is to tinker with her fishing tackle and get away from her husband.

This unnamed monster is a magnificent creation. Retired from the Prosecutions Department of the Board of Trade, he exerts a mesmeric power over fictional sons and real reader alike. His pleasures include a meticulous planning of journeys - 'I shall be passing water around the Bishop's Palace' - and the construction of elaborate files on everyone he knows. He revels in local gossip, particularly when disgustingly medical: 'Colonel Cocky's war-wound has started discharging again.' Like Mr Pooter and the paint, he gets carried away by innovations, such as putting castors on everything, so that 'beds now leapt from the walls as you climbed into them'.

Restless and vindictive, he is forever adding to the list of people he hates, including Cockneys, 'homosexualists' and Roman Catholics, who cause him to emit a low growling noise. He is mean, snobbish, selfish and pessimistic, and heaven knows why you grow fond of him. He is a wonderful creation, superbly realised and, we can only hope, based on no real individual but born of Andrew Barrow's fecund imagination. 'Have you ever thought of undertaking as a career?' he asks the demoralised William towards the end, rapidly following up this question with a more solicitous one: 'Would you like me to give you a salt-and-water enema?'

THE WATERMARK by Sam Mills

Sam Mills's virtuosic novel is – when defined in the strictest terms – a romp. By that I mean it's an adventure story that doesn't ask you to take it all that seriously. The Count of Monte Cristo is the definitive romp: a tale of repeated imprisonment and escape, of thwarted romance, of daring disguises and, in the end, of triumphant human grit and ingenuity. The Watermark has all that, but with added metatextuality and time travel. If you love Doctor Who, you will love this book. It whirls you off on a similarly breathless Technicolor tumble through different eras and genres. But where the Doctor has the Tardis, the two main characters of The Watermark – journalist Jaime and painter Rachel – have cups of magical tea.

The tea is administered to them by an obviously rompish baddie, Augustus Fate. Fate is a bestselling but extremely bitter author, living in rural Wales, who has realised after seven Booker prize

shortlistings that his novels lack convincing characterisation and genuine emotion. His solution is to lure two real people to his remote house, and then, by means of the magical tea, to sedate, brainwash and insert them into his stalled work in progress, Thomas Turrige. This is a poor Victorian pastiche set in 1860s Oxford. Jaime will become the titular Thomas; Rachel will keep her real name. Neither of them will remember anything of who they are or what's happened to them before. Instead, Fate can put them through terrible trials, and note down what they say and do as they react. A prize-winning literary masterpiece is almost bound to ensue, if he can only keep the police at bay and his two bedbound prisoners unconscious.

However, because this is a romp, Jaime and Rachel are gradually able to wake up within Fate's world. They begin to hear the narrator saying things like, "And so Thomas kissed Rachel and they burnt with a fiery, illicit passion." Here is where the novel is really clever – because it forces us to read extremely attentively. Each anachronism, everything that fits our world but not Victorian times, is a sign of Jaime's genuine self struggling to break through. Eventually, with the crashing arrival of a helicopter in the middle of a church service, we get the full world-splitting effect. Fate is thwarted, temporarily at least, and Jaime and Rachel are able to flee into another book – this time set in a poorly imagined 2010s Manchester. Poorly imagined, because its author is their friend and adviser from within the first story, Mr James Gwent, apparently a man of the 1860s but actually an earlier abductee of Fate's. Metafiction is often seen as a heartless literary game, but there's nothing cold about Mills's writing

This section is one of the novel's many highlights. Mills has a great deal of fun with the limitations of Gwent's imagination. When Jaime and Rachel try an excursion to St Petersburg, their flight becomes increasingly sketchy. "I point at the window. The scenery outside has been leached of colour. Our seats are no more than pencil strokes; the view from the window is reduced to a draft." Three further jumps occur, with the lovers book-surfing to Soviet Carpathia in 1928, to a robot-dominated London of 2047, and one more destination.

Throughout, Mills brings to bear the skills learned in crafting her earlier genre-hopping and head-spinning novels, particularly *The Quiddity of Will Self*, and her more recent memoir about caring for a parent with schizophrenia, *The Fragments of My Father*. Metafiction, under which category *The Watermark* certainly falls, is often seen as a heartless literary game. But there's nothing cold about Mills's writing. Exactly what August Fate lacks, and needs to steal from others, she gives away with great generosity. The watermark that runs through the whole novel is the troubled love between Jaime and Rachel. Whatever reality they inhabit, he will always appear carrying a bird and she will always reluctantly but passionately fall for his foolishness. They will bicker. They will split up. They will disagree about the fundamentals of life: Jaime will be optimistic and rational; Rachel will be near-suicidal and yet believe in higher forces. But they will always stumble back together. They fight their way out of each new prison of clunky worldbuilding, and re-establish their true, flawed relationship.

Various phrases echo through their story, reminding the lovers of the reality they started from. The one that recurs most piercingly, rather like Alice in Wonderland's "You're nothing but a pack of cards!", is the call to disillusion, the call to life. "*This is not real. This is a backstory being wrapped around my soul. You're in a book, you're in a book.*" But what a book to be in.