

Graham Swift Keeps Watch

Graham Swift, *Tomorrow*, Picador, 2007. 248 pages. ISBN: 9780330450188

Grim, ghoulish things happen in Graham Swift's novels. Shrieks ring out across the Cambridgeshire fens of *Waterland*; a knife chopping parsley in a Chislehurst kitchen (in the glittering, frenetic 2003 novel *The Light of Day*) is buried, a moment later, in the flesh of an unfaithful husband. Swift's baroque imagination discovers the freakish, outlandish going-ons of suburbia. It also conjures drama from the quiet moments in between, so that a father and daughter tucking into their tikka masala might catch sight of their reflected image – two figures in a pool of light – and think of Caravaggio.

Swift's latest novel, *Tomorrow*, is not like this at all. The narrator, Paula Hook, is an art dealer with a taste for Italian renaissance painting, but you wouldn't guess it if she didn't say so. Her language is never voluptuous; her thoughts do not veer to the extreme. She delivers a nocturnal monologue, but it is not at all inflected by the madresses and distortions that tend to haunt us in the dark. *Tomorrow* is the record of an all-night vigil, but it is decidedly a daytime novel: honest, attentive, and relentlessly sane.

The scenario is a compelling one. We enter promisingly into 'the hidden life of Putney'. Paula lies awake in bed next to her sleeping husband, who is due the next day to confront their twin son and daughter with the fact that he is not their biological father. It is he who will make all the speeches tomorrow, but Paula spends the night composing her own silent address to her children, a slowly unfolding history of the time before they were born, and the first years of their lives.

This is – potentially – an excellent framework. Swift has always been alert to the vigils we carry out as a matter of course, the way people stand guard by each other. So he makes Paula a willing guardian, protectively watching over the man beside her. He also makes her a kind of defendant, called upon to explain her choices in the domestic courtroom of her family home. Her father is a judge; there is much talk of judgement. 'I won't be the one on trial' she thinks, anticipating that tomorrow her children will give their verdict on her husband, 'but in any case I'm giving you now my testimony in advance'. Not once does she turn over and try to get to sleep: these are her hours as archivist and elegist, setting the record straight.

The idea of parental narratives passed down to the next generation brings to mind the long, memoir-like letters written by nineteenth-century fathers to their children. Virginia Woolf received one from Leslie Stephen - a thing of such morbidity that it was known as 'The Mausoleum Book'. This is a kind of writing that thrives on guilty outpourings and cathartic revelations. Swift, however, has made it the vehicle for a story about a contented family, told by a woman with not much to feel guilty about. And he cheerfully emphasises the fact that Paula has no great talent for outpourings by making the occasional nod to Molly Bloom, her great forbear in the art of night-thinking. One chapter ends with Molly's words, 'Yes, I said, oh yes, yes, yes': an odd advertisement for Paula's particularly unorgasmic relationship with language.

Paula is not going to provide us with anything like the incantatory, onomatopoeic word-play of *Waterland*, or the risky, robust jokes of *Last Orders*. But she is worth listening to. She is a natural maker of patterns, a keen collector of life's way-markers: a memorable bottle of champagne on Brighton beach leads to other bottles, other places.

Because she is terrified of randomness and wants each small event to be meaningful, she joins things up, measuring out her years in sequences: houses, pets, picnics, doctors. She wends her way from the doctor she consults about contraception to the doctor she consults about fertility treatment, via the vet who points out that her cat is a child-substitute and obliges her with a brief, experimental affair.

This is all vaguely comical and slightly sickening. At least Paula knows it: 'Did I say I can be sentimental?' Sentimentality is such anathema to most writers that it is intriguing to see it examined head-on, and Swift is a diligent student of its rituals. He draws attention to the little ceremonies we hold on a daily basis and which seem too minor to deserve much notice: 'the first of this', 'the last of that'. Paula and her husband meet for lunch in the park simply 'to mark' the fact that this is the day before the eponymous 'tomorrow'. This is a novel which bothers to articulate such silent pacts, and which accords gravity to the sentimental but necessary process of 'marking'.

Training his eye on the small stresses and strains that register on the barograph of long relationships, the challenge Swift has set himself is to describe a sustained, day-to-day sort of family happiness. It's a brave thing to do since, as Swift observed in a rare radio interview, 'happiness is the thing it's supposed to be difficult, if not impossible, to write about'. Sadly his novel doesn't prove the supposition wrong, but the difficulties it exposes are its fascination. Swift asks what matters when everything is going right. The intriguing thing about the central revelation, when it comes, is that it is not especially momentous; it is not, apparently, worthy of the teasing suspense-ploys that build up to it. So rather than sending us reeling, Swift demands that we take a magnifying glass and look hard at this problem of parentage.

Paula feels that tomorrow, the day of the announcement, will mark the end of the twins' childhood. It will be, she is certain, the defining moment in their lives and in hers. As she probes for the accruing implications, the widening circle of people who will be touched by this news – news which seemed at first not quite enough of a pin to hang a novel on – Paula begins to convince us that she is right. Her anxieties are not about the ethics of playing God, and they are not couched in the terms of public debate. They are the family dilemmas (who to tell? when to tell? has granny guessed?) that can be overlooked when the 'big questions' are asked.

Paula wonders at how often the subject of conception is simply passed over: It's another notion we all have, perhaps, then dismiss it, leaving it surprisingly unpursued, considering how totally relevant it is: the notion of tracing ourselves back to the actual moment of conception. It involves a taboo, an intrusion, like entering the parental bedroom unasked.

Tristram Shandy could not be accused of any such negligence, but the taboo remains largely unbroken. Swift suggests that this 'tracing back' is no queasy joke but a solemn responsibility.

Swift has always been convinced that people's origins matter; he has written again and again about fateful quests to understand them. His brilliant early novel *Shuttlecock* recorded one man's obsessive search for the facts about his war-veteran father who may or may not have escaped heroically from captivity as a prisoner-of-war. 'I was a product of those times', says Prentis, and he lives, unheroically, in their aftermath. Paula and her husband in *Tomorrow* were born in the same historic year as Prentis: they are products of 1945. As they lead their happy lives, and face their less-

than-apocalyptic ‘tomorrow’, they hold constantly in mind the image of Mike’s father in wartime, jumping from a burning plane. This is their personal history, and that of their children (despite biology); this is the scale against which things must be measured. Scale is important here: Swift is writing, again, about how extremes of experience and unremarkable lives might be made to connect. It is the staunch process of ‘carrying on’ that fascinates him. Mike’s father does not die in battle, but many years later while out walking his dog. The dog is a hero called Nelson who waits dutifully by his master’s body (as in Landseer’s painting *Attachment*). Like Paula lying awake, the dog keeps its vigil.

Swift’s people often take their cue from animals. He will always be associated with eels, but it is snails, in this book, which are the order of the day. In one of those inadvertent blunders to which Swift is superbly alert, Paula’s veterinary lover orders snails for dinner, not realising that her husband is an ex-specialist in this particular mollusc. Paula thinks fondly about Mike’s snail investigations, his ‘long-term, patient cycles of experiment’. She reflects that, since things happen gradually in the world of snails, his research ‘didn’t seem to involve sudden life-changing discoveries’. Paula’s own work for the night is to piece together the slow, snailish histories surrounding the announcement to be made in the morning. *Tomorrow* is not Swift at the height of his powers, but it is a wise, humane study of those ‘patient cycles of experiment’ that lie behind decisive events, and the long lines of inheritance that make life-changing discoveries make sense.

Oxonian Review of Books, 2007. © Alexandra Harris