
The disappointing thing about this book is the fact that although it is described as a ‘novel in five parts’ it is really a collection of very long short stories, or short novellas, each dealing with different characters, and time period, with no thread to link them except that they are about people who struggle in life, one way or another. Some do succeed in finding fulfillment and success, while most come to a resigned acceptance that this is all there is in life and they might as well make the most of it. Had it been described as such a collection rather than a novel, readers would approach it with a different frame of reference and expectations.

Faulks is a master of writing in different voices. While there may be similarities in style and subject matter between *Birdsong* and *The Girl at Lion D’Or*, we find a harsh cynicism in *Egelby* and echoes of Graham Green in *On Green Dolphin Street*. The five stories in *A Possible Life* cover a wide geographical, temporal and emotional span, with enough twists and turns within each story to engage the reader.

Geoffrey Talbot (Part I) is an unexceptional man who, failing to gain entrance into the Diplomatic Corps, settled for the life of a schoolteacher at Crampton Abbey where he also coached cricket. His mundane but satisfying life is changed completely through his experiences in the army and as a prisoner of war, and he returns as a broken shell of a person, who finally finds a peace of sorts.

In the ‘Second Sister’ (Part II) time has moved back to the time of the workhouse in England. It’s a dark, stark story, coming to a far from neat conclusion.

In Part III, set in the future, there is an intriguing reminder of *Wuthering Heights*. A man brings home a young boy as a companion for his daughter, Elena. She, unimpressed, names him Bruno because ‘he’s brown with dirt all over’ (122). Later they become inseparable, roaming the countryside as children, and obsessed with each other as adults. Given the chameleon nature of Faulk’s writing, I doubt if this is just a coincidence.

Jeanne, (Part IV), a woman said to be ignorant, serves a French family, bringing up their children in the only way she knows how, with firmness. ‘Clémence and Marcel were frightened of Jeanne, but they also laughed at her coarse voice and her face with its watery, short-sighted eyes (174). To observers Jeanne remains ignorant to the end of her life. She would never claim any importance for herself, although ‘each experience affected her idea of what the world was’ (192), and she never shares the decisive experience that fashioned her future.

The last story describes the relationship between a successful musician and a young singer whom he encourages and nurtures until she leaves him far behind. Faulks has captured the voice of the era, the casual sex, the drugs, the chasing after contracts, the frustrations and betrayal.

Leaving classification aside, is *A Possible Life* worth reading? I would say yes. The prose is crisp and unembellished. The stories are well crafted, although the last one is too long. Jack who narrates this story through its rites and passages, concludes: ‘I’m an actor playing a part I’ve never mastered’ (294).

Perhaps that could be said of the various characters in this collection of stories; perhaps that is the link that binds them together. Perhaps it is just that life deals us all, whenever we are born, and into what circumstances, a varied hand. It could be, as the blurb on the back tells us, the novel ‘journeys across continents and time to explore the chaos..."
created by love, separation and missed opportunities.’ None of these is, however, enough to mould these five separate stories into a single novel. They can stand alone as a collection.

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