

What a joy to read JB Priestley's novels for the first time. I started with *Angel Pavement* (1930) in 2010, having bought a signed copy on eBay. A memorable and moving book with its evocation of London life during the Depression. It centres on the comings and goings of a cast of sad players, lost souls, connected to the firm of Twigg & Dersingham, agents for the supply of inlays and veneers to the furniture trade. Cleverly woven stories of characters seeking connection with each other, looking for happiness whether in work or in falling in love.

I thought JBP's description of the women's hostel where Miss Matfield lived sad and wonderful:

'the downright spinsters in their 30s, early 40s who had grown grey and withered at their typewriters and telephone, who knitted, droned interminably about dull holidays they had had, took to fancy religions, quietly went mad, whose lives narrowed down to a point at which washing stockings became the supreme interest.. You met them drooping about corridors, kettle in hand and they seemed to think about nothing but hot water.'

How did Priestley know this? In 1968 I was a student living at the YWCA in Hampstead and remember we girls were obsessed with getting hot water, queuing for a bath and then finding no hot water left; washing our tights in basins and carrying kettles to each other's rooms to make coffee. We weren't, of course, downright spinsters but who knows what would have happened to us if we had not been transient lodgers working towards qualifications and jobs which would make us independent women with opportunities and choices, only dreamed of by 1930s women.

Another gem of observation was Smeeth on his children:

'They were the children of the Woolworth Stores and the moving pictures. Their world was at once larger and shallower than that of their parents.'

It reminded me of George Eliot's writing in *Middlemarch* about Dorothea and Casaubon's marriage:

'Having once embarked on your marital voyage, it is impossible not to be aware that you make no way and that the sea is not within sight -- that, in fact, you are exploring an enclosed basin.'

I went on to read *The Good Companions* (1929) –a delightful and optimistic book, picaresque in style. The anticipated happy endings for the members of the travelling concert party of the title were tempered by the narrator's gentle, wry voice in the Epilogue. Priestley writes beautifully and displays a wonderful sense

of place and understanding of human nature and the workings of the human heart.

I know some of Priestley's plays. I have seen a few on TV and at local amateur theatres (but not for a long time). Although JB is still considered rather old fashioned, the success of Stephen Daldry's production of *An Inspector Calls* and the recent revival of *Time & the Conways* at the National have helped to renew interest in his work. There was a time when his plays were very popular on BBC radio. I remember *Dangerous Corner* (his first stage play in 1932) on the Home Service's 'Saturday Night Theatre' (1960-70) in 1968 with Flora Robson, David March and Gudrun Ure. I can hear the gunshot and girl screaming even now in the opening, echoed at the end as events come full circle. Very chilling.

I taught *An Inspector Calls* for many years to GCSE students, and I still enjoy the play as it seems as relevant as ever with its themes of social injustice and private and public responsibility. I would like to see more amateur productions, particularly those rarely performed such as *The Linden Tree* and *Eden End*. Sadly, I couldn't get up to the West Yorkshire Playhouse, which revived some of JB's lesser known works a few years ago, including *Eden End*.

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