

Harriet's fears

Glasgow in 1888 was a culturally rich city, the scene of an international exhibition of art and technology, and home of the influential Glasgow Boys. To this group of painters Jane Harris adds a fictional figure: the charismatic Ned Gillespie, an ambitious but impecunious artist, an affectionate family man, and the unwitting object of an infatuation on the part of Harris's narrator, Harriet Baxter. By a mixture of chance and design, Harriet is admitted to the Gillespie family circle and shares with them a series of disturbing experiences. Forty-five years later, at the age of eighty, she constructs her account of these events.

Gillespie and I has a stealthy power. The initial impression is of a detailed and evocative chronicle by a narrator whose main qualification for the task is a refined intelligence. (This is a far cry from the bawdy, ebullient reminiscences of the Irish servant girl, Bessy, in Harris's first novel, *The Observations*, 2006.) Through steady increments of insinuation and foreshadowing, however, Harriet's character develops a fascinating complexity, and her story gradually becomes gripping. Future excitement is constantly hinted at ("When I think of that moment now, I shiver"; "Given what happened, in the end"; "If only we had known then what the future held in store") and the pace of the narrative is tantalizingly controlled: "But I am getting ahead of myself", remarks Harriet, exercising a narrator's right to withhold what her "dear Reader" is longing for her to disclose.

Any early fears that an old lady's nearly

ALISON KELLY

Jane Harris

GILLESPIE AND I
506pp. Faber. £14.99.
978 0 571 27516 6

choking to death on her dentures in Chapter One will be the most dramatic occurrence in the novel are quickly dispelled by the promise of thrilling violence among Glasgow's late-nineteenth-century artistic elite.

One reason the novel is so compelling is that Harris also introduces tension into the narrative present, set in London in 1933, when Harriet is working on her memoir under the care of a taciturn and faintly threatening paid companion. Cutting between the past drama surrounding the Gillespies and the present intrigue involving the enigmatic Sarah Whittle, the novel makes compulsive reading. Both sections contain a mystery, with the added frisson that past and present mysteries seem to be linked.

Gillespie and I uses features from Gothic fiction, the sensation novel and psychological thrillers such as Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*. It deploys erotomania, physical abuse, emotional cruelty and female incarceration. There are elements, too, from early detective fiction: a baffling crime, a bumbling police investigation, false conjectures, blind alleys. Harris reproduces the atmosphere of Victorian fiction by borrowing motifs, such as fog, spies, informers and watchful neighbours; a distrust of servants,

foreigners and homosexuals. At the same time, the Victorian portions of *Gillespie and I* are refracted through a more modern sensibility. Writing in the 1930s, Harriet reminds the reader of the social changes that have taken place in the decades since she lived in Glasgow:

remember that these events took place almost fifty years ago, when the world was a very different place. Not only was I horribly female, but also, I was horribly unmarried; at thirty-six, too old to be of use to anyone, and although the newspapers referred to me as a "spinster" this was no more than a euphemism for "witch".

A self-styled free-thinker and apparently a proto-feminist, Harriet is also malicious about women and often snobbish.

It is age, not social constraints, that confine the octogenarian Harriet to a domestic existence. Apart from an excursion to Hampstead Heath and a sortie for a "medicinal" libation, she stays indoors with her caged finches, her fears of Miss Whittle and her memories. Between-wars London is only sketchily presented; the particulars Harriet gives us are those of late Victorian Glasgow: street names in Woodside and the East End; the architecture of crescents, squares and gardens; the labyrinthine geography of "wynds and venees".

In a novel about art, viewpoint is important, and Harris endows Harriet with a painterly perspective, especially as it applies to her beloved Ned, whom Harriet portrays in beret and poncho at work on a canvas, or strolling with her through the International Exhibition grounds: "We might almost have been two figures promenading in a verdant landscape painting". Almost, but not quite. In this cunningly crafted novel, appearances are deceptive.

The facts of life

HENRY POWER

Alan Bennett

SMUT

Two unseemly stories
182pp. Profile. £12.
978 1 84668 525 5

These two short stories are not, in truth, that unseemly. Rather, they are both concerned with people for whom propriety is paramount, and the fun lies in watching the characters trying to maintain their proprieties under pressure. In "The Greening of Mrs Donaldson", a prim, sprightly widow of fifty-five has her sexual imagination awoken by a pair of young lodgers. Since her husband's death Mrs Donaldson has worked as a "simulated patient" at a university hospital, feigning illnesses to be diagnosed by medical students. She throws herself into the sessions, relishing the opportunity to play a part and as things take an unexpected turn at home she acknowledges to herself that the classes at the medical school had been "a softening-up for what was to come and an unlooked-for initiation into candour even though the candour was put on". The world of simulated patients is vividly realized, and the interplay between the story's two strands nicely judged.

While that story offers a detailed sketch of one woman's curious situation, "The Shielding of Mrs Forbes" is high farce. Mrs Forbes is unhappy that her good-looking son Graham has married plain Betty. Hen-pecked Mr Forbes finds Betty attractive. And Graham is being blackmailed by the policeman with whom he is having an affair. A beautifully engineered clockwork plot ensues.

What the stories have in common is a concern with secrecy: almost everyone we meet has something to keep under wraps. Mrs Donaldson has a great secret to keep, and part of the narrative energy comes from her uncertainty as to who else knows. In the second story, characters blunder on in ignorance while the audience sees all. Whether Bennett wants to satirize this is unclear. The cosily challenging moral of "The Shielding of Mrs Forbes" is that "everybody, while not happy, is not unhappy about it. And so they go on". Mrs Donaldson's more complicated story is the more compelling of the two as her behaviour is prompted by conflicting desires.

The stories are set in the here-and-now, with people talking about their "carbon footprint" and using the internet, but the situations belong to another age. Mrs Forbes reproves her husband: "I heard you say 'tits' the other night at the Maynards". The vicar is a steam engine enthusiast "and the version of the facts of life which he had been dispensing over many years relied heavily on the piston, the furnace and the eccentric rod, helpful did one want to travel from London to Darlington but no preparation for the rigours of modern marriage". All this is enjoyable and exactly what some Bennett enthusiasts will be looking for, but it does feel like a kind of historical fiction.

Marlowe's web

Where is the weight in the term "historical fiction"? On the history, or on the fiction? Robert Edric, in his twentieth novel, comes down firmly on the "fiction" side, even as a summary of his plot might suggest otherwise. Charles Webster is a photographer eking out a precariously middle-class living recording the costumes, props and sets of Henry Irving's Lyceum productions for Bram Stoker, the theatre's manager. He has also been quietly lending the same objects to Marlowe, a mysterious impresario of pornography who uses them to create settings for erotic photographs.

Webster is aware that he is risking his job – Stoker is a controlling character, and also has an unspoken connection with Marlowe himself; should it be discovered that the costumes have gone missing, and where, Webster will be sacked. His home life is equally on edge, as his wife, who believes she has psychic powers, has, at the behest of their teenage daughter, set herself up as a medium, while the household servant seems to be taking an unusual personal interest in Webster. Then Webster discovers that a child prostitute, probably supplied by Marlowe, has died during a sex game with an aristocratic friend of Irving and Stoker.

The material for a melodramatic explora-

JUDITH FLANDERS

Robert Edric

THE LONDON SATYR
376pp. Doubleday. £16.99.
978 0 857 52000 5

tion of nineteenth-century London is therefore here: theatre, prostitutes, pornography, séances, blackmail. And yet, this is not Edric's focus. He has a good knowledge of Victorian London, for the most part scattered lightly (with only the odd awkward sentence, as when Webster reminds himself of the age of sexual consent, or when men call each other by their first, rather than their last, names). The essence of the novel is its glancing, elliptical dialogue. It is talk, not personalities, that interests Webster. Marlowe, the spider at the centre of the web, barely speaks, and is hardly described; he is "a dark and sudden outline against the blossoming light".

Webster is on the periphery of the action. He does not act, but is acted on, and all he can do is examine each sentence the more important actors utter, attempting to worry out their meaning. He mulls over one remark, pondering what it implied, or what it

intended to imply, and what it might have intended. Webster knows he is a small component of Marlowe's schemes, and that if necessary he will be exposed without hesitation or remorse. He explores the worlds of betrayal – business betrayal, represented by Marlowe; marital betrayal, represented by his wife who is presenting a sham to the world with the encouragement of their surviving child, a betrayal of their dead daughter.

All of this is delicately done, but the nuts and bolts of the story appear to have been something of an afterthought. The death of the prostitute occurs halfway through the novel, but long before that Marlowe and his minions are worried that Stoker may be aware of the pornography sideline, anxious out of all proportion to the trouble it might cause them. When, late in the day, Webster is threatened with blackmail, this barely thought-through plan is given undue weight. It would be one person's word against another; Webster is middle-class and respectable, his accuser working-class and without a "character". There is no question who would win, but this never occurs to Webster.

Had Edric not given his characters, especially Webster, such questioning intelligence and sensitivity, this would not seem so jarring. In a novel concerned with exploring all that each action "might have been intended to imply", the characters' failure to notice such basic disjunctions is particularly troubling.