

Found in the attic

FELICITY SCOTT

Jane Harris

THE OBSERVATIONS

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This first novel by Jane Harris moves with assurance and pace. Bessy Buckley, aged fifteen, is deflected from her journey to Edinburgh by the prospect of a post at Castle Haivers, which she believes is a grand estate. Once employed, she is the only servant; she acts as housekeeper and does outdoor work too. The mistress, Arabella Reid, is a mixture of friendliness and autocracy. She measures Bessy from head to toe and gives sudden, fierce commands that are at variance with her everyday manner. Learning that Bessy can read and write Arabella lends her books and gives her lessons in punctuation in return for Bessy's agreeing to produce a daily journal. The girl is puzzled, but feels a growing affection for her mistress and a wish to please. Her role in Glasgow has been as a "housekeeper" of a very different sort, and she reveals some of her wretched past in flashbacks. She tells her own history in parallel with the plot and it becomes clear that Arabella's care for her is the nearest thing to maternal love she has known. However, once "Master James" comes home, Arabella becomes more aloof.

Exploring the attic, Bessy finds Arabella's notes for a book about the "Habits and Nature of the Domestic Class". It is clear that the measuring and the obedience training are to do with

this treatise. She also discovers that a previous maid, Nora, Irish like herself, has disappeared under mysterious circumstances; her loss is an increasing cause of concern to Arabella. Bessy's background as a prostitute is catalogued in the notes, and she is hurt by this. To get her own back Bessy pretends the attic is haunted by the dead Nora. Arabella is completely taken in and becomes mentally ill. Overcome by guilt, Bessy determines to find out the truth about Nora's death and completes her own story. These threads are woven skilfully together, and Arabella and Bessy are finally reunited in very different circumstances.

Harris's research into the lives of servants in the 1860s is impressive, as is her knowledge of the experimental and haphazard treatment of mental illness at the time. Her creation of a voice and a vernacular for Bessy is one of the novel's pleasures. The lilt of the Irish girl's speech is distinguished from the Lowland speech of the farmhands, but the dialects are never impenetrable; Bessy's language is straight from the Glasgow ghetto and is robust and entertaining. She deals with hypocrites and would-be seducers swiftly and dispassionately. But although she was born into prostitution and has been sold as an old man's toy, she shows a natural delicacy in the writings she has been asked to produce.

Harris has created a character with innate moral values who refutes the notion, cherished by some Victorians, that the lower classes were brutish and incapable of refinement. By contrast, in Arabella we see an intelligent woman, who had hoped to research and write in London, frustrated and confined to a remote corner of Britain. Her "Observations" have become obsessive and lead to madness. Jane Harris, already established as a writer of short stories and films, skilfully addresses the nature-and-nurture question in this accomplished novel.