

THE
RADIANT
WAY

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Margaret Drabble

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Ivy Books
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Critical acclaim for *The Radiant Way* . . .

“One of the pleasures of her fiction is the companionship, on every page, of a lively mind showing its incidental erudition, its epigrammatic flair, its quick-witted impatience and impudence. But all this would be brittle were it not for her earthiness—her love of our species and its habitat—and her ability to focus on the small, sweaty intersections of mind and body, past and present.”

John Updike
The New Yorker

“She puts on quite a show. . . . It has its full share of the author’s caustic social wit. It displays her up-to-date skewering of styles and appetites, her careful tracing of the mined frontier between English affections, and her irresistible flashes of comic absurdity.”

Los Angeles Times Book Review

“[She] manages to take us by surprise, to entertain. . . . She can give us that old pleasure of reading in her novel of three friends, their false hopes and loss; she can even enchant us with the hard news that the continuing effort of redemption is troubling and deep.”

The Boston Globe

“[A] brilliant paean to friendship . . . With economy and wit she takes their story forward and back through three decades in shapely, trenchant vignettes. These short takes dovetail subtly into a smooth narrative. And her characters pass the stiffest test of fiction—they become real to the reader.”

Houston Chronicle

“Margaret Drabble is the real thing—a novelist in the great tradition of English writers. . . . Throughout *The Radiant Way*, Drabble’s strong suit is richly imagined people whose interior thoughts are as vividly dramatized as the exterior movements of their daily lives. . . . Drabble comes up with a series of bravura twists [in this] sad, brilliantly wrought tale of the decline of contemporary Britain.”

USA Today

“As a novelist, Margaret Drabble is the acknowledged heir of Jane Austen and Barbara Pym, the precise chronicler, through close observation of telling detail, of contemporary British middle-class society. . . . *The Radiant Way* is composed of sure, often brilliantly constructed layers, and long after the book is done we ponder their complexities, recognize their passions, their blindnesses, in ourselves.”

San Jose Mercury News

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MARGARET DRABBLE is the author of nine previous novels and a biography of Arnold Bennett. She lives in London.

“Drabble has written a sobering, important, immensely readable chronicle that sounds a resonant note of alarm for her native land. Its significance crosses the ocean intact and will not be lost on American readers.”

The Cleveland Plain Dealer

“*The Radiant Way* is nothing less than a chronicle of life in England during five years of Thatcher government. . . . Drabble’s observations of contemporary life are both witty and fascinating in their detail. . . . I predict that if you decide to gaze into this mirror, you’ll be biting your lower lip during moments of recognition, but you’ll be smiling at the same time.”

Dallas Morning News

“*The Radiant Way* is valuable indeed for its illuminating insights into the society it depicts. When it comes to social commentary, Margaret Drabble has no equal, and, if her description is a somber one, there is no doubt about the admirable accuracy of her eye.”

The Washington Times

Also by Margaret Drabble:

A SUMMER BIRD-CAGE
THE GARRICK YEAR
THE MILLSTONE
JERUSALEM THE GOLDEN
THE WATERFALL
THE NEEDLE'S EYE*
THE REALMS OF GOLD*
THE ICE AGE
THE MIDDLE GROUND*

Nonfiction

A WRITER'S BRITAIN
THE OXFORD COMPANION
TO ENGLISH LITERATURE, 5th Ed.
ARNOLD BENNETT

*Published by Ivy Books

New Year's Eve, and the end of a decade. A portentous moment, for those who pay attention to portents. Guests were invited for nine. Some are already on their way, travelling towards Harley Street from outlying districts, from Oxford and Tonbridge and Wantage, worried already about the drive home. Others are dining, on the cautious assumption that a nine-o'clock party might not provide adequate food. Some are uncertainly eating a sandwich or a slice of toast. In front of mirrors women try on dresses, men select ties. As it is a night of many parties, the more social, the more gregarious, the more invited of the guests are wondering whether to go to Harley Street first, or whether to arrive there later, after sampling other offerings. A few are wondering whether to go at all, whether the festive season has not after all been too tiring, whether a night in slippers in front of the television with a bowl of soup might not be a wiser choice than the doubtful prospect of a crowded room. Most of them will go: the communal celebration draws them, they need to gather together to bid farewell to the 1970s, they need to reinforce their own expectations by witnessing those of others, by observing who is in, who is out, who is up, who is down. They need one another. Liz and Charles Headleand have invited them, and obediently, expectantly, they will go, dragging along their tired flat feet, their aching heads, their over-fed bellies and complaining livers, their exhausted opinions, their weary small talk, their professional and personal deformities, their doubts and enmities, their blurring vision and thickening ankles, in the hope of a miracle, in the hope of a midnight transformation, in

the hope of a new self, a new life, a new, redeemed decade.

Alix Bowen has always known that she will have to go to the party, because she is one of Liz Headland's two closest friends, and she has pledged her support, for what it is worth. She has promised, even, to go early, but cannot persuade her husband, Brian, to go early with her. A couple of hours of any party is enough for me, Brian had said, and we'll have to stay until midnight, so I'm certainly not turning up before ten. All right, I'll go alone, said Alix. She thought Brian was quite reasonable not to want to go early. She herself is not a reasonable person, she suspects, a suspicion confirmed that evening in the bathroom as she tries, out of respect to Liz's party, to apply a little of a substance called Fluid Foundation to the winter-dry skin of her face. This is what people do before parties. She has seen them doing it on television: indeed, she used to do it herself when she was young, when she had no need of such substances, before she reverted so inexorably to her ancestral type.

The Fluid Foundation comes in a little opaque beige plastic container, and is labelled, in gold lettering, *Teint Naturel*. She bought it a year ago and recalls that it cost a great deal of money. She uses it infrequently. Now she cautiously squeezes the container. Nothing happens. Is it dry? Is it empty? How can one tell? She squeezes again, and this time a great glob of *Teint Naturel* extrudes itself from the narrow aperture onto her middle finger. She gazes at it in mild dislike. It glistens, pinky brown, faintly obscene, on her finger. Common sense, reason, tell her to wash this away down the wash bowl, but thrift forbids. Thrift is one of Alix's familiars. Thrift does not often leave her side. Thrift has nearly killed her on several occasions, through the agency of old sausages, slow-punctured tyres, rusty blades. Thrift now recommends that she apply the rest of this blob to her complexion rather than wastefully flush it away. Thrift disguised as Reason speciously suggests that an excess of Fluid Foundation on one's face, unlike a poisoned sausage, will cause no harm. Thrift apologises, whingeing, for the poisoned sausage, reminding Alix that she ate it twenty years ago, when she had no money and needed the sausage.

Alix hesitates, then splats the rest of the glob onto her face and begins to work it in, angrily. She blames the manufacturers for the poor design of the container: probably deliberate, she reflects, probably calculated to make people splurge out far more than they need of the stuff. She is slightly cheered by the

thought of how little reward they would reap from their dishonesty if all consumers were as moderate as she. (She wonders, in parenthesis, how much of the nation's income is spent on cosmetics, and whether the statistics will be provided in the New Year issue of *Social Trends*.) She is more cheered, although at first puzzled, by the fact that as she works the excess of Teint Naturel on her skin, her appearance begins to improve. Instead of turning brick red or prawn cocktail pink, as she had feared, she is turning a pleasant beige, a natural beige; she is beginning to look the same colour that people look in television advertisements. A pleasant, mat, smooth beige. It is remarkable. So this, perhaps, is what the manufacturers had always intended? She apologises to Thrift for having been angry, then remembers that it was Thrift that had dictated her previous parsimonious, sparing applications, and is confused.

She gazes at herself in wonder. Vanished are her healthy pink cheeks, her slightly red winter nose, her mole, her little freckles and blemishes: she is smooth, new made. She dabs a little powder on top, and stands back to admire the effect. It is pleasing, she decides. She wonders what it will look like by midnight. Will she be transformed into an uneven, red-faced, patchy, blotchy clown? An ugly sister? Alix has always felt rather sorry for the poor competitive disappointed Ugly Sisters. Indeed, she feels sorry for almost everybody. It is one of her weaknesses. But she does not feel sorry for her friend Liz Headleand. As she struggles into her blue dress, she wonders idly if she is so fond of Liz because she does not have to feel sorry for her, or if she does not have to feel sorry for her because she is so fond of her? Or are the two considerations quite distinct? She feels she is on the verge of some interesting illumination here, but has to abandon it in search of Brian, to ask him to fasten the back of her dress: if she does not leave soon, she will be late for her early arrival, and moreover she has promised to meet Esther Breuer at eight-thirty precisely on the corner of Harley Street and Weymouth Street. They plan to effect a double entry.

Esther Breuer has decided to walk to the intersection of Harley Street and Weymouth Street. She often walks alone at night. She walks from her flat at the wrong end of Ladbroke Grove, along the Harrow Road, under various stretches of Motorway, past the Metropole Hotel, where she calls in to buy herself a drink in the Cosmo-Cocktail Bar (she is perversely fond of the Metropole Hotel), and then through various

increasingly handsome although gloomy back streets, until she arrives at the arranged corner. As she approaches it, she cannot at first see Alix, but she believes that Alix will be there, and indeed momentarily she is: they converge, Esther from the west, Alix from the south, and moderate their pace (Esther accelerating slightly, Alix marginally slowing down) so that they meet upon the very corner itself. They are both delighted by this small achievement of co-ordination. They congratulate themselves upon it, as they walk north towards Liz's house in Harley Street, towards the invisible green of Regent's Park.

Liz Headleand sits at her dressing table in her dressing room. Her gold watch and her digital clock agree that it is nineteen minutes past eight. At half past eight she will go downstairs to see what is happening in the kitchen, to see if Charles is in his place, to see if any of her children or stepchildren have yet descended, to prepare to receive her guests. Meanwhile, she has eleven minutes in hand. She knows that she ought to ring her mother, that there is still a faint possibility that she might ring her mother, but that possibility is already fading, and as the admonitory red glare of the clock clicks silently to 20:20 it gasps and dies within her. She will not ring her mother. She has not time.

Instead, she sits there and for a moment contemplates the prospect of her party, the gathering of her guests. She knows them, their reluctance, their need, their larger hopes. She can hear their conversations, in cars, in bedrooms, in restaurants, at other parties, as time draws them nearer to her, to one another, to her house. She eats a pistachio nut, and fastens her locket. New Year's Eve. A significant night, at least in journalistic terms, and there would be journalists here this evening, no doubt comparing their analyses of the bygone seventies, their predictions for the 1980s. And for her, too, significant in other, superstitious ways. Since childhood, since her early school days, New Year's Eve had possessed for her a mournful terror: she had elected it to represent the Nothingness which was her own life, the solid, cheerful festival which had seemed to be the lives of others. New Year's Eve in those early years had possessed a dull religious sheen, a pewter glimmer, which by much effort and polishing and dedication of the will could bring her a little light, a little hope, a little

perseverance; but she had longed for the flames and the candles, the cut glass and the singing. Disproportionately she had longed, in the interminable wastes of adolescence, in the grey and monotonous steppes, and some of the longing had attached itself to this night, this one night of the year, when others (she knew from school friends, from the radio, from novels), when others went to parties and celebrated whatever was about to be. She had longed to be invited to a party, a longing which presented itself to her as a weakness and a wickedness, as well as an impossibility. She had comforted herself with her own severity. Finally, after long years, she had become a party goer. How those oblong cards with her own name upon them had delighted her! Crazily, disproportionately. And now she was a party giver as well as a party goer.

Her dressing table glitters and shimmers, it is festive like the night. It is white and gold, quietly ornate. Beneath the protective glass lies, imprisoned, flattened, a circle of Venetian lace, elaborate, fine, rose-embossed, cream-coloured, expensive, hand-worked, beautiful, useless: a gift, though not of this year's giving. On the table lie a silver-backed hand mirror, a silver-backed brush, an ivory paper knife with a silver handle. Over a little carved corner of the large oval mirror into which she absently stares, not seeing herself, hang necklaces: amber, pearl, paste. She rarely wears them: she wears her little locket, superstitiously. The blonde shells of the pistachio nuts, with their seductive little green gleaming cracks, repose in a small Sheffield plate dish on a stem, an oval dish which echoes, satisfactorily, elegantly, the shape of the nuts; the surface of its lining is tinely scratched, pitted and polished, golden, antique, dull but shining. Behind the dish stands this year's Christmas gift, from her eldest stepson, Jonathan: a tiny, cut-glass snowdrop vase which holds a posy of cold hothouse snowdrops, white and green, delicately streaked, fragile, hopeful, a promise of futurity. Liz Headleand is known to like cut glass, so people give it to her, on occasions, pleased to have their gift problem thus simply solved.

Liz Headleand stares into the mirror, as though entranced. She does not see herself or the objects on her dressing table. The clock abruptly jerks to 20:21.

She and Charles have never given a party on New Year's Eve before. They have given many parties in their time, but on New Year's Eve they have always gone out to the gatherings of

others—sometimes to several gatherings in the course of the evening, and some years separately, not always meeting even for the magic chimes. A modern marriage, and some of its twenty years had been more modern than others. Maybe, Liz reflects (for this is what she contemplates, through the oval mirror), maybe this is why they decided to have such a party, this year, at the end of this decade: as a sign that they had weathered so much, and were now entering a new phase? Well, why not? After twenty years, one is allowed a celebration. Charles is fifty, she herself is forty-five. There is a symmetry about this, about their relationship with the clock of the century, that calls for celebration. And therefore grumbling couples complain in cars on their way to Harley Street from the Home Counties and beg one another not to let them drink too much; therefore Esther and Alix meet and laugh on a street corner a few hundred yards away; therefore stepchildren muster and stepparents-in-law assemble; therefore Liz Headleand's mother sits alone, ever alone, untelephoned, distant, incomprehending, incomprehended, remote, mad, long mad, imprisoned, secret, silent, silenced, listening to the silence of her house.

Charles and Liz, naturally, did not construct the notion of a New Year's Eve Party in this spirit, as a portent, as a symbol, as a landmark in the journey of their lives. As far as Liz can remember the idea came upon them rather more casually, one Saturday morning in early November before breakfast. Charles and Liz rarely breakfast together, they are both far too busy: Liz often sees patients at 8:00 in the morning and Charles's working hours are wildly irregular. But at weekends, they attempt to rendezvous over the Oxford marmalade, and on this occasion had succeeded. Charles, eating his toast, opening his mail, had suddenly exclaimed with a parody of fury, "*Christ*, it's the Venables again!" "What have they done to you now?" she had mildly enquired, looking up from a photocopy of an article, "The Compulsion to Public Prayer: A Study of Religious Neurosis in a Post-Christian Society," which she had just received in her own post, and Charles had said, "Asked us to a New Year's Eve party."

"What, *now*, in November?"

He pushed the invitation over to her. She regarded it with mock distaste.

"It's got pictures of little cocktail glasses and tinsel spots on," she observed.

"I could see that for myself," said Charles.

"I refuse to invite them to dinner," she said.

"Of course we don't have to invite them to dinner. Ludicrous couple. Ludicrous."

Liz smiled. She enjoyed Charles's little displays of anger, especially when she was in sympathy with them—as, on matters such as the Venables, she usually was. A good judge of character, Charles, she would sometimes with surprise reflect.

"I think we should retaliate," she said, a few minutes later, after skimming through public prayer and the leaders of the *Telegraph* and the *Guardian* (*The Times*, it will be recalled, was on strike at this time). "I think we should have a New Year's Eve party of our own. That would serve them right."

"It certainly would," Charles agreed. "Yes, it certainly would." And they smiled at one another, collusively, captivated by this broad new concept of social vengeance, and began to plan their guest list. They owed hospitality to half London, they agreed; it was time for a party, it would kill many birds with one big stone. A vision of dead, flattened, feathered guests rose in both their minds, as they plotted and planned.

That was how it had been, perhaps, that was where it had started, thought Liz, as she stared into past and future, before jerking herself back into the present, which now stood at 20:22. The red clock from the bedroom reflected in the dressing-room mirror, at an interesting, an unlikely angle. Her eyes focussed upon her own image. She looked all right, she concluded, without much interest. She bared her teeth at herself, pointlessly. Her teeth were quite large, but there was not much she could do about that now. Her interest in cosmetics, like that of her friend Alix Bowen, was minimal, but, like Alix Bowen, she decided that it was after all a festive occasion, and she began at this late moment to apply a little mascara. Her mascara container, like Alix's Fluid Foundation, was rarely called upon, and appeared to have dried up. She licked the little curved brush, and tried again. A big black dry grainy nodule stuck itself unoblingingly to her lashes. Impatiently she reached for a tissue and wiped it off. It left a small black smear. She licked the tissue and removed the black smear, restoring herself to her former state, which had been, and still was, in her own view, quite satisfactory.

20:23. In a few minutes she would go down. She could have borrowed some mascara from her daughter Sally, but it was too

late. She should have rung her mother in Northam, but it was too late. Seven minutes of solitude she had, and then she would descend. As she sat there, she experienced a sense of what seemed to be preternatural power. She had summoned these people up, these ghosts would materialize, even now they were converging upon her in their finery at her bidding, each of them willing to surrender a separate self for an evening, to eat, to drink, to talk, to exchange embraces, to wait for the witching hour. Soon their possible presences would become real presences, and here, under this roof, at her command, patterns would form and dissolve and form again, dramas would be enacted, hard and soft words exchanged, friendships formed, acquaintances renewed. The dance would be to her tune. A pity, in a way, that the dancing would be merely metaphorical: this was a house large enough to accommodate dancing, but their friends were not of the dancing classes, would gaze in astonishment, alarm, sophisticated horror, intellectual condemnation, at dancing in a private house . . . another year, perhaps, for the dancing. This year, the dying year, the social dance would suffice.

It would be a large assembly: some two hundred had accepted, and more would come. She had encouraged her stepchildren and her daughter Sally to invite their friends: they would add colour, diversion, eccentricity, noise. She liked the mixing of ages, she even liked a little friction, and friction there would be: Ivan Warner alone was usually enough to raise the temperature of any social gathering to conflagration point, and Ivan in conjunction with Charles's Fleet Street friends and television moguls, with a few publishers and poets and novelists, with an actress or two, with a clutch of psychologists and psychotherapists and art historians and civil servants and lawyers and extremely quarrelsome politicians would surely manage to set the place on fire. Surely this night the unexpected would happen, surely she had summoned up the unexpected. She had, of late, felt herself uncannily able to predict the next word, the next move, in any dialogue: she could hear and take in three conversations at once; she could see remotely as through a two-way mirror the private lives of her patients, sometimes of her friends; she had felt reality to be revealed to her at times in flashes beyond even the possibility of rational calculation, had felt in danger (why danger?) of too much knowledge, of a kind of powerlessness and sadness that is born of knowledge. For these reasons, perhaps, was it that she had

decided to multiply the possibilities so recklessly, to construct a situation beyond her own grasping? A situation of which not even she could guess the outcome? Had she wished to test her powers, or, a little, to lose control and stand aside? To be defeated, honourably, by the multiplicity of the unpredictable, instead of living with the power of her knowingness? With the limits of the known?

She had thought, back in November, that the party was merely a celebration, a celebration of having survived, so long, with Charles: twenty-one years, unique in the circle of their acquaintance. Battle and bloodshed and betrayal lay behind them, and now they met peacefully in this large house, and slept peacefully in their separate rooms, and met at weekends over the marmalade, and would continue to do so until Charles's new appointment took him, in a couple of months, to New York. He would return to visit her, she would fly out to visit him, they would speak on the telephone, they would not miss one another. This was understood. Nobody expected Liz to uproot herself, like a woman, like a wife, and follow her husband to America: she was expected to stay where she was, pursuing her own career and pursuing her own inner life, whatever that might be. A modern marriage. Charles and Liz Headleand. Liz knew how they were regarded: as a powerful couple who, by breaking the rules, had become representative. They represented a solidity, a security, a stamp of survival on the unquiet experiments of two decades, a proof that two disparate spirits can wrestle and diverge and mingle and separate and remain distinct, without a loss of brightness, without a loss of self, without emasculation, submission, obligation. And the image, the public image, is not wholly false, although naturally its firm talismanic outlines conceal a great deal of past pain and confusion, of dirty bargaining, of occasional childishness, of outright disagreements; and the present is not wholly peaceful. If it were, it would be dead, Liz tells herself. Conflict is invigorating, it renews energy. So she tells herself. She disapproves of a great deal of Charles's life, these days. She thinks his ambitions misplaced, his goals suspect, his methods dangerous, his new political alignments deplorable; but she is loyal to Charles, to Charles himself, to the man that these manifestations in her view misrepresent. She believes in Charles, in her own fashion, and believes that he believes in her. Their past, with all its secrets, is solid behind them, and cannot be disowned. Their union has a high,