A. S. BYATT and IGNÊS SODRÉ

Imagining Characters

SIX CONVERSATIONS ABOUT WOMEN WRITERS:
JANE AUSTEN, CHARLOTTE BRONTË, GEORGE ELIOT,
WILLA CATHER, IRIS MURDOCH, AND TONI MORRISON

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Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot,
Willa Cather, Iris Murdoch, and Toni Morrison

EDITED BY REBECCA SWIFT

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Imagining Characters

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A. S. Byatt is the author of *Possession*, winner of the Booker Prize and a national bestseller. Her two novels that lead up to *Babel Tower*, tracing the fortunes of Frederica and her family through the 1950s, are *The Virgin in the Garden* and *Still Life*, and her other fiction includes *The Shadow of the Sun*, *The Game*, *Angels & Insects*, and two collections of shorter works: *Sugar and Other Stories* and *The Matisse Stories*. She has also published three volumes of critical work, of which *Passions of the Mind* is the most recent. Her latest book is titled *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye: Five Fairy Stories*. She has taught English and American literature at University College, London, and is a distinguished critic and reviewer. She lives in London.

IGNÊS SODRÉ

Ignês Sodré trained as a clinical psychologist in Brazil, before qualifying at the British Institute of Psychoanalysis in 1974. She is now a Training Analyst, and works in private practice in London. She has written on clinical psychoanalysis and literature; this is her first book.

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Books by A. S. BYATT

FICTION

The Shadow of the Sun
The Game
The Virgin in the Garden
Still Life
Sugar and Other Stories
Possession: A Romance
Angels & Insects
The Matisse Stories
Babel Tower
The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye: Five Fairy Stories

CRITICISM

Degrees of Freedom: The Novels of Iris Murdoch
Unruly Times: Wordsworth and Coleridge
Passions of the Mind: Selected Writings

Imagining Characters

For Antonio Augusto de Azevedo Sodré
and Maria Thereza de Azevedo Sodré

and

In memory of
John Frederick Drabble
and Kathleen Marie Drabble

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Preface

A. S. Byatt met Ignês Sodré when they came together to discuss *Middlemarch* at the Cheltenham Festival of Literature in October 1992, one of the chief themes of which was psychoanalysis and literature. A. S. Byatt is one of Britain's leading novelists and critics and for many years she taught literature at university. Ignês Sodré, a Brazilian psychoanalyst who has practised in England for over twenty years, participates in a poetry reading group for psychoanalysts and has written papers on literature, and in particular on George Eliot. George Eliot brought them together, and they quickly discovered that they shared the writer's view of art, expressed in her essay 'The Natural History of German Life', as a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow men beyond the bounds of our personal lot.

A. S. Byatt opened the *Middlemarch* conversation in Cheltenham by saying that while she did not in general like psychoanalytic criticism – because it tended to analyse the writer rather than the writing and be generally reductive – she had warmed to Ignês Sodré's work, which was unusually illuminating, passionate and generous. The conversation that followed was electrifying, informed not only by a mutual knowledge and love of literature but also by a deep interest in human development. Each speaker sparked the other with a challenging blend of sympathy and difference. It was soon after this that I approached them to see if there might be the possibility of a book. Delighted at the thought of working together again they readily agreed.

It was thought that, by choosing six major texts from different periods in history, starting with the early nineteenth century and Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, running through Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Willa Cather and Iris Murdoch to Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, one could not

only discuss the individuality of each work – what effect it has on the reader and an attempt to understand how it achieves that effect – but also look at the interesting relationship between the books, and think about what that has to say about the development of the novel up to the present day. As a result of this, despite obvious and tremendous differences, it became clear that really successful novels have elements in common, such as underlying archetypal structure, which echo the fairy stories with which we are all familiar. Some of the elements that the works have in common, along with an important discussion as to why stories and reading are so vital to us, are considered in the invaluable final chapter. This was recorded some months after the main discussions, with distance and some hindsight.

For the next two years A. S. Byatt and Ignês Sodré read and re-read their texts, and around the texts, contacting one another regularly about their thoughts, and in May 1994 recording began in earnest. Despite worked-out plans, conversations take on a life of their own, and, while it was important to edit, it was thought that to leave a certain amount of ebb and flow would be the most exciting way of presenting the material, recreating the atmosphere of spontaneity and the pleasure of joining in a live debate. The dialogue form is not, of course, new. Famously, it was a favourite of Greek philosophers, who used it as a means of making complex debate accessible, and of using dialectic to get to the core of a problem, providing opposing arguments in order to stretch the mind and enable it to think for itself. Here, likewise, one feels encouraged to think for oneself as a result of 'listening', not merely to the theories of an individual, but to the animated and original ideas that fly when two informed minds come together. As they testify in their conclusion, A. S. Byatt and Ignês Sodré were continually learning from one another during the course of their conversations.

The consideration that 'art' is the nearest thing to life, as asserted by George Eliot and as broadly accepted by A. S. Byatt and Ignês Sodré for the duration of this book, has been hotly contested in recent theoretical literary debate about language, subjectivity, representation – arguments in which George Eliot herself would surely have been interested and engaged. These academic debates have not been forgotten, but have been set aside here. Philosophically complex literary theories such as deconstruction and structuralism have taught that we must take nothing for granted: all well and good – but a troubling side effect is that some readers now feel inhibited in their response to writing. If Ignês Sodré is right, and we actually need stories as we need to dream – to function

successfully as human beings – then surely we should be able, as we are with our dreams, to possess the material with confidence in a way that is both personal and of value, if communicated beyond ourselves.

It goes without saying that each of the novels discussed could have provoked a book by itself: many thoughts, observations and inspirations remain, of necessity, unsaid. There are probably also many which as yet remain unthought: for there is no end to the process of responding to a truly cherished novel. These six books were chosen because they are works that the authors have found themselves going back and back to in life; finding them infinitely rich and complex.

I hope the reader shares in the deep pleasure I had in listening to these conversations as they took place. *Imagining Characters* is a celebration of reading. It hopes to provoke, suggest, stimulate and ignite or re-ignite that love of the written word which so many people share and which, despite increasingly abundant alternative forms of communication, remains so vital and unique.

Rebecca Swift, 1995

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CHAPTER ONE

Jane Austen: *Mansfield Park*

Mansfield Park, the backdrop to this, Jane Austen's third novel (1814), is an estate in Northamptonshire owned by Sir Thomas Bertram: Lady Bertram was originally one of three Ward sisters. Sir Thomas takes into his family the young heroine, Fanny Price, who is one of too many children belonging to his sister-in-law who made a bad match. Deeply unhappy at first, largely because she is to be separated from her beloved older brother William, Fanny is coldly received by her cousins, uncle and aunts, particularly by cruel Mrs Norris, the third Ward sister, whose sense of Fanny's inferiority is articulated at every opportunity.

Only Edmund, Sir Thomas's sensitive younger son, is kind to her, and with him, Fanny falls secretly in love. Edmund, however, falls for the charms of the pretty, flirtatious Mary Crawford, a sister by a first marriage of Mrs Grant, who lives at the parsonage. It is agonising for Fanny to watch as he is seduced by the charms of Mary, whom she considers to be an unworthy match. Mary also has a dashing brother, Henry, who upsets the apple cart by flirting outrageously with Edmund's sisters, Julia and Maria, particularly with the latter, who is betrothed to the well-off but foppish Mr Rushworth. Mr Rushworth is the owner of Sotherton, a fine house and estate that Henry wants to 'improve' and modernise. In a famous scene during a visit to Sotherton, Fanny, who has unusually been included, quietly witnesses the complicated undercurrent of feeling in the young people around her.

Things come to a head when, in Sir Thomas's long absence as he attends to the problems on his estates in the West Indies, the young people decide to act in a play, choosing, after some deliberation, the risqué *Lovers' Vows*, which fuels 'romantic' feeling among them. Urged on by the interfering and disingenuous Mrs Norris, and ignored by their

lethargic mother, Fanny unpopularly refuses to take a part in the play; she is again the observer as they descend into confused excitement. Sir Thomas returns unexpectedly during rehearsals, is appalled, and puts an end to the theatricals. Henry's flirtation comes to nothing, and in the absence of advice to the contrary from her father, Maria marries Mr Rushworth. Henry decides to turn his attention to Fanny, partly because she herself has by now grown attractive, as Sir Thomas was quick to notice, and partly for sport.

William, now a midshipman, much to Fanny's delight, comes to stay at Mansfield, and becomes a firm favourite. Sir Thomas arranges a ball, despite the absence of his daughters, for Fanny and her brother. Crawford persists with Fanny, wooing her brilliantly and with energy. She, however, refuses his offer of marriage, much to the irritation of Sir Thomas who cannot understand her reticence. With the desire that she should learn the error of her ways, and see what she is missing if she refuses Crawford, he arranges for her to go back to her original family in Portsmouth. Fanny does indeed find the chaotic and impoverished life with her original family very disturbing: her siblings and mother unruly, her father drunken. Only Susan, despite surface disturbance, shows promise. Henry Crawford pays a visit, and is courteous and attentive. He offers to convey her back to Mansfield, her love of which has been intensely fortified. Meanwhile, Edmund's older brother, Tom, has fallen ill and Lady Bertram begins to long for Fanny's company and good sense. Just as we think that Fanny may have to accept at last that Edmund will marry Mary, and it is suggested that Henry may have persuaded her of a degree of constancy, she hears news from Mary that he has eloped, with Mrs Maria Rushworth. The frivolous way in which Mary responds to her brother's misdemeanour shocks Edmund, who is to become a clergyman, out of his infatuation with Mary once and for all The Crawfords are disgraced, and the path ahead open for Edmund and Fanny, who will now marry. Susan returns to Mansfield and takes up Fanny's redundant position as 'stationary niece'.

BYATT: *Mansfield Park* has been described as one of the great works of Western European literature, and has also been described as a novel in which nobody can manage to like the heroine. Modern criticism has picked on it from all sorts of angles. It's been used to prove that Jane Austen was secretly concerned to make a point about slavery; it's been used to illustrate her involvement with Tory high politics. Feminist critics see it as a critique of patriarchy. What I want to talk about here is

the novel I read as a child, and the novel I now read as an adult, as a writer.

SODRE: I think we read novels primarily for the pleasure of being told a story and being able to imagine new worlds, and the different ways in which we relate to these very 'real' imaginary people, the characters in fiction. The first time we met, you joked about reinstating 'the pleasure principle' in novel reading!

BYATT: I think it struck both of us that in this novel the family structure is at the centre. We both felt, didn't we, that this is clear from that very first paragraph about Lady Bertram?

SODRE: Yes, I think it is interesting that Jane Austen starts with the three Ward sisters, because sibling relationships are going to be of central importance throughout the novel: definitely one of the things she wanted to explore, and we want to explore.

BYATT: 'About thirty years ago Miss Maria Ward of Huntingdon, with only seven thousand pounds, had the good luck to captivate Sir Thomas Bertram, of Mansfield Park, in the county of Northampton, and to be thereby raised to the rank of a baronet's lady, with all the comforts and consequences of an handsome house and large income' (Ch. 1). The structure's like a fairy story, there are three sisters, and the word 'captivate' suggests things we shall be talking about – enclosure and imprisonment – although at the superficial level it just means to charm and to attract.

SODRE: In the case of Miss Maria Ward we soon feel it must have been to captivate in the first way you imply, because there isn't anything tremendously charming about her personality at all! She had only external beauty and an extreme passivity which, it is implied, was pleasing to men, or to that man, Sir Thomas. But immediately after that Jane Austen brings in the world, everybody's opinion on this marriage: 'All Huntingdon exclaimed . . .' – she brings the satirical point of view.

> All Huntingdon exclaimed on the greatness of the match, and her uncle, the lawyer, himself, allowed her to be at least three thousand pounds short of any equitable claim to it. She had two sisters to be benefited by her elevation; and such of their acquaintance as thought Miss Ward and Miss Frances quite as handsome as Miss Maria, did not scruple to predict their marrying with almost equal advantage. But there certainly are not so many men of large fortune in the world, as there are pretty women to deserve them. Miss Ward, at the end of half a dozen years, found

herself obliged to be attached to the Rev. Mr Norris, a friend of her brother-in-law, with scarcely any private fortune, and Miss Frances fared yet worse. (Ch. 1)

BYATT: How do you think the structure of the Ward family relates to the structure of the Bertram family and the Price family – and for that matter the Norris family – with which we then become concerned, which the three sisters build?

SODRE: Well, the three Ward sisters together create a new set of three sisters when Fanny, through being adopted at the suggestion of Mrs Norris, becomes the third Bertram sister: the child of the poorest, least successful Ward sister eventually becomes the favourite, and by far the most successful of the three new sisters. But Jane Austen makes it clear that in this world most marriages are built on a false basis; this is going to be explored in much greater depth in the generation of the children, in terms of their choice of partners and their mistakes.

BYATT: Yes, it's as though the narrator of the first paragraph and the first chapter is a kind of gossiping social commentator speaking from a distance, and then she moves into the emotions of people after she's set out this satirical portrait of a society. It interests me very greatly, when we get into Lady Bertram's own family, just how much and how little we are told about what is quite an extensive group of people. Fanny is adopted from the Price family into the Bertram family as you say and becomes automatically in a sense the fairy princess. She's number three, and she's the stepsister; it's not that she's got ugly stepsisters, it's that she's the pretty or the good stepsister. And her first relationships that are described, her first intense relationships are with the brother she's left behind, and with Edmund, the second brother of the two sisters she's joined, with whom she falls in love. When Edmund finds her crying and says to her 'You are sorry to leave Mamma', she doesn't correct him, but makes it clear that what she really wants is to write to her brother. And from that point he becomes her brother but also at that point becomes the hero of the novel, because of brotherly affection – because of noticing her feelings. The whole novel in a way is about people who don't notice other people's feelings, and the extraordinary rarity of people who do notice other people's feelings, or who can act on this noticing. And in that sense Edmund's first act of kindness is a central act that reverberates throughout the whole book.

SODRE: And this establishes what their love is based on, which is kindness and interest in the feelings of the other person. But of course, as you say,