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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ HUMOR FICTION

Alls Well at Wellwithoute

Mick Drake
Softcover $17.99 (407pp)
978-1-4259-6679-9

…would he do whatever he could — even at the sacrifice of his own happiness?

The lot of the English nobility isn't what it used to be, we learn from this highly comedic first novel. As the House of Lords is reduced in size, families with little active stake in the evolving economy are forced to become tenants of the National Trust in order to keep a toehold on their estates. Some build gaudy theme parks on site, or like the Dangwells of Wellwithoute, they seek out new capital infusions through the time-tested method of the loveless marriage.

Harold Dangwell, an unemployed portrait restorer and presumptive heir to flat-broke Lord Frederick is informed that he is expected to fall on the sword of matrimony. The spousal candidates are "A poetess with her head stuck in the clouds, or a huntress mooning about on horseback…" As he is nearly deaf and Veronica Entwisle (the poetess) cannot murmur above a whisper, she seems the more sensible choice. A handshake bargain between fathers is jeopardized by Harold's ridiculously modern idea that love should be the mortar that binds.

All's Well at Wellwithoute is quite funny as farce and also more slyly (example: the "Literal Thinkers Progressive Alliance"). Foibles, limitations and peculiarities butt awkwardly against the changing world. Keenly conceived, wickedly satirical jokes are doled out in both descriptive passages and dialogue. Eccentric speech patterns are featured, from Lord Frederick's fractured indirection, to household manager Cicilly Hindmarsh's malapropisms, to third person self-referentials. The English are parodied as being just as much smitten with their rituals as they are prisoners of them. Many scenes are set in a pair of architectural monstrosities. The Dangwells boast "the only Mock Moghul mansion in the British Isles," whereas Entwisle Hall manages the dissonant combination of a Rococo interior with an exterior "miasma of Mock Gothic revivalism."

But the focus too often meanders into eye-catching background material and founders on amusing aspects of the culture that don't advance the central story line. "From now on things get a little complicated, but fortunately our minds dwell but little on plot." The awareness of digression reflects a metafictional stance at times, addressing perceived reader concerns, even suggesting use of the "fast forward button."

Mick Drake has a nearly unused art education and a respectable resume of practical work in the fields of economic redevelopment and conservation. He resides in Lincolnshire, where he's on the lookout for new figures to affectionately skewer in an upcoming sequel. Fans of traditionally structured fiction will be less fulfilled by this book than those bent on curing a drought of laughter. Even so, Drake's lighthearted presentation of a largely outmoded way of life provides a fresh diversion for readers on both sides of the pond.
(August 21, 2009)

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