

Characters who try to be good

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Patrick Gale was steeped in Anglicanism as a child. His novels deal with morality and mortality, says **Sarah Meyrick**

UNTIL last year, the author Patrick Gale had been quietly publishing novels for more than 20 years for a small but appreciative audience. His consistently well-crafted books explore the knotty fabric of family life, especially where it frays around the edges. In his time he has been compared with Iris Murdoch, Alan Hollingshurst, and Joanna Trollope.

All that changed when *Notes from an Exhibition*, his 14th title, was picked up by the Richard and Judy Book Club, which brought him to the attention of a wider reading public. He says it has brought him “at least 100,000” new readers, many of whom are now happily working their way through his backlist.

There is nothing cosy about his subject matter. *Notes from an Exhibition* told the story of Rachel, an artist, who has bipolar disorder (its cover carried an endorsement by Stephen Fry, who also has the condition). She is rescued by Anthony, a postgraduate student, when she is pregnant and suicidal. The novel explores the story of their turbulent life together, and the tangled web of secrets that unravels after her death. In earlier books he has tackled issues such as Alzheimer’s and disability.

His new title, *The Whole Day Through*, published this month, is a bitter-sweet love story. Forty-something Laura Lewis finds herself obliged to pack up her glamorous, independent life in Paris to move to Winchester to care for her elderly mother who, although mentally alert, is crippled by osteoporosis.

By chance she runs into Ben, the great love of her student days, who has taken a temporary job in Winchester after the death of his mother, in order to look after his much younger brother who has Mosaic Down Syndrome.

Ben is unhappily married to the girlfriend who followed Laura. Their youthful relationship had ended badly (although Laura and Ben’s memories of the circumstances are somewhat different), and their chance encounter suddenly presents them with the possibility of a second chance at happiness together.

Central to the story is what it means to be a carer, and the burden of duty that that presents. But Gale insists he does not set out with “issues” in mind. “I start with the characters,” he says. “The plot grows out of the juxtaposition of those characters, because that’s how real life happens. The family is the starting point: any family will have its tensions and secrets, and that’s what gives it a narrative energy.”

The action of the book takes place in the course of a single long June day, punctuated at regular intervals with an almost monastic rhythm. “Nothing much happens — it’s a wilfully tedious day,” he says. “That reflects the terrible tedium of what it means to be a carer, and, of course, offers a wonderful excuse to explore memory.”

THE BOOK is about memory and regret, and about mortality. The fact that Laura’s mother, Professor Jellicoe (“who started off as a minor character and gradually took over”) is a lifelong

naturist provides a visible memento mori through her ageing body. There are a couple of cruel plot twists — a forgotten conversation and a misdirected letter — which completely skew the outcome, echoing Thomas Hardy and owing a debt to the film *Brief Encounter*.

“It’s about trying to be good,” Gale says. “Although it’s an adulterous love story, I try to make the reader forget that sporadically. People are now made to feel that it is their duty — almost a medical necessity — to be happy; never to put their needs and wants second. But there are a lot of people out there who do still try to do the right thing, and make themselves unhappy in the process.”

He has woven illness into a number of his books. “I am fascinated by medical crises and the effect they have on family — how that will change the power structure, and introduce a burden of duty,” he says.

His own mother suffered a terrible car crash when he was a child, and also now has osteoporosis, and he has drawn on that experience, although Laura’s mother is nothing like his own, who is, he says, “appalled” by the problematic mothers portrayed in his novels.

“I’ve written a string of difficult mothers, although I’m horrified when people say that there’s something misogynistic about that. It’s because being a mother is so difficult. Rachel’s character [in *Notes from an Exhibition*] looks at the challenges women face in being a mother and having a career, which is taken to extremes for artists and musicians because they tend to work from home, and odd hours, and there’s something obsessive about that kind of work.

“But Anthony is abusive, too, in the way he puts Rachel and her needs first and gives the children no spiritual space to grow.”

In contrast, his own mother was “not an easy mother, but wonderful”, he says, “extremely present and wilfully old fashioned”. Although bright, she had missed out on education, and longed to go to university. She made up for it by educating herself through her children, providing them with rich cultural experiences.

GALE is the youngest of four. His father was a prison governor, first of Camp Hill and subsequently Wandsworth, where he remembers chatting to prisoners through the windows of the mail-bag workshop. His mother’s father had also been a prison governor, and he grew up with a strong sense of duty and service. (His 2000 novel, *Rough Music*, is loosely about his parents’ marriage.)

His parents were also stalwart Anglicans. At the age of seven, Gale became a chorister at Winchester Cathedral, and was educated in the “rather archaic circumstances” of the cathedral close. He went on to Winchester College and New College, Oxford, where he read English, and is steeped in the choral tradition.

He describes himself as “genetically Christian”. His grandfather and great-grandfather were priests. “I think they were all hoping that I would become a priest, in the old tradition of what you did with the gay child of the family,” he says.

“It was such a strong inheritance from both my parents that even at 47, I can’t think for myself. It’s just there. I’ve stopped fighting it, and it’s a great comfort.”

He entirely agrees with the former poet laureate Andrew Motion, who recently lamented the fact that students were coming up to Oxford with no knowledge of the Bible. “It’s depressing that we

have a generation without that basic level of culture. If you don't get that culture under your mental belt at school, it's hard to pick it up later on.

"I never cease to be grateful to my parents for giving me that grounding. The joy of going to choir school aged seven or eight is that you imbibe great slabs of this culture — the King James Bible, the Psalter, that wonderful repository of the English language, those cadences. That's an incredibly strong resource to have if you are going to be a writer."

THERE IS a beautiful scene in *The Whole Day Through* where Laura and her mother attend evensong at Winchester Cathedral. Laura is surprised, because religion has played no part in her upbringing: indeed, she was raised "in carefully scientific godlessness, and sent to schools where RE was judiciously ecumenical and thus deeply confusing and dull".

But, late in life, her mother has acquired a habit of slipping into evensong, a luxurious taste "like good-quality chocolate biscuits and George II side-tables". The chapter conjures up a tender mix of longing and mystery, and groping for the transcendent.

"Choral evensong is one of the cornerstones of English culture," Gale says. "It's one of our great artefacts. Let alone the meaning, the words are so beautiful. In the book, it is also a reminder of last things, of mortality."

At the same point, Gale sends Ben to a memorial service, conducted by a cheerful woman priest — which was, in part, about giving each central character a parallel experience, but also an excuse to include another of his favourite Winchester churches.

He goes occasionally to church in Cornwall, where he lives with his partner, a farmer. But his real spiritual injection comes through music, which plays a continuing important part in his life through the St Endellion Festivals, in Port Isaac, which first drew him to Cornwall.

"The festivals are hand-in-glove with the church. We provide the music for church services as well as concerts, and my Christianity is based inextricably within my music."

Gale chairs the summer festival, and is now involved in a joint project with the church to raise £1.5 million. The aim is to create a campus to provide a proper centre for the festivals, and a community facility for artistic and spiritual expression — something he says is particularly important, given that the diocesan retreat house has recently closed.

GALE's success with Richard and Judy may have something to do with the letter he wrote to the couple once he had made the shortlist. Knowing that they spent their weekends in Cornwall, he argued that if *Notes from an Exhibition* prospered, it would be good for the county. He was right: he often sees readers with his book in hand, following the walk around Penzance that is in the story. (There is a similar walk in *The Whole Day Through* around Winchester).

The book had another positive spin-off. Gale made Anthony, Rachel's husband a Quaker, to provide some ballast in Rachel's unstable life, and presents a well-researched and appealing picture of Quakerism. Friends House reports that this has led to a surge of enquiries from interested readers wanting to find out more about the Quaker life.

"Apparently, it's still having an effect — new people are still showing up at Quaker meetings as a result of reading the book. It's awe-inspiring," he says.

Last year, he found himself becoming an unlikely spokesman for National Quaker Week. “My grandfather would turn in his grave,” he says, although he also lets slip that his father would have been thrilled to bits by his appearance in the *Church Times*.

***The Whole Day Through* by Patrick Gale (HarperCollins, £7.99 (£7.20); 978-0-00730-601-5). It will be BBC Radio 4’s Book at Bedtime from 10-14 August.**

See also www.endellionfestivals.org.uk