

The further artistic battles of Pat Barker

# Things we choose to love

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Pat Barker

LIFE CLASS

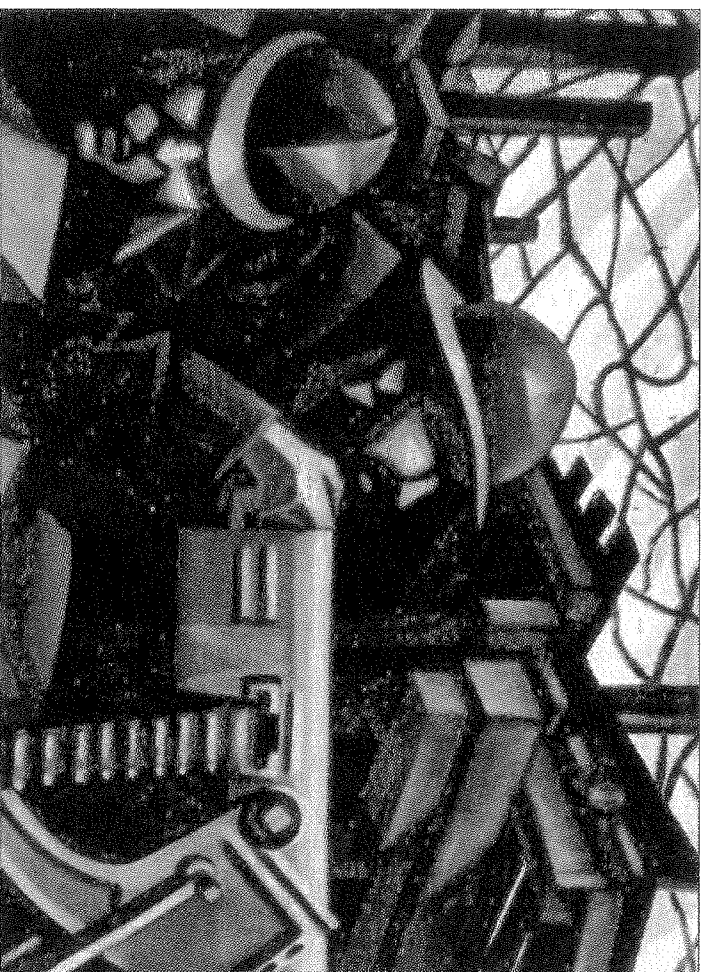
248pp. Hamish Hamilton. £16.99.

978 0 241 14297 4

In her fourth novel since the completion of her *Regeneration* trilogy, Pat Barker has returned to the time, and the event that dominated those books: the First World War. While *Regeneration* and the two novels that followed it plunged into the middle of war-time, beginning in 1917 and running up to the Armistice, *Life Class* takes in the last few months of peace before Britain entered the war in August 1914. The title is a reference to the daily drill of students at the Slade School of Art, drawing a nude model "from life", trying to please their exacting Professor and "explicate the form". But *Life Class* is also, of course, a nod towards the *Bildungsroman* theme, a chronicle of education in what, after the outbreak of war, becomes a very hard school indeed.

One of the most admired aspects of the trilogy was Barker's smooth integration of real and fictional characters, her ability to inhabit the worlds of Siegfried Sassoon and her own creation, Billy Prior, with equal skill. The three characters at the heart of *Life Class* – two students at the Slade, Paul Tarrant and Elinor Brooke, and one recent graduate who is making his way as a Futurist painter, Kit Neville – are all more or less inventions. Although historical figures do appear – the demanding professor, Henry Tonks, was the dominant personality at the Slade in this period, and had previously, as Barker explains, been a surgeon, a profession to which he returned during the war; Augustus John figures as a sort of presiding deity at the Café Royal; Lady Ottoline Morrell draws Elinor into her orbit – they are kept in the background. Tonks's later involvement in pioneering plastic surgery work might in any case have made too close an analogue with the psychiatric innovations that W. H. R. Rivers was embarked on at Craiglockhart Hospital, and which formed the core of Barker's earlier war novels.

There is a temptation to dwell on elements of known artists in the characters of the three young painters Barker portrays. Kit Neville, son of a war correspondent, and a misogynist abtracer of Futurism, seems loosely based on C. R. W. Nevinson. Elinor has many of the physical characteristics – in particular the "gigantic blue eyes" and bobbed hair – as well as the social circle, of Dora Carrington. Paul Tarrant is more completely Barker's own creation, though one whose roundabout route to the Slade – via a legacy from a grandmother, "a slim landlord of quite astonishing rapacity" – is no less unexpected than that of some other Slade students of the time, such as Isaac Rosenberg, paid for by three female



"A Mitralleuse" (detail; 1915) by C. R. W. Nevinson; from *British Art: A walk round the rusty pier* by Julian Freeman (Southbank Publishing; 978 1 904915 05 8)

Jewish benefactors, or Edward Wadsworth, heir to a worsted spinning business who defied his family to study painting. But the tracing of historical precedent can only take the reader so far, and merely goes to show that, as with her other historical fictions, Barker is able to recreate a past world without any signs of strain (save Paul's description of someone as a "robot", a word only conceived in 1923).

The first third of the novel follows Paul, his struggles to convince himself that he can be a real artist, and his affair with an artist's model, Teresa. The year is never stated in the text, and apart from a brief reference to the "decapitated heads, limbless torsos, amputated arms and legs" of the Antiques Room the students sometimes draw in, there is not much in the way of portentous dramatic irony about the slaughter to come. The first mention of the "crisis in the Balkans" arrives eighty pages into the book. So, despite the propaganda poster dust-jacket, we are compelled to think about the lives of young men and women conducted not "in the shadow of", but in disregard for, the coming conflict. What preoccupies these characters are sex and art, though not always in that order. Paul, the strikingly handsome northerner whose draughtsmanship does little to impress Professor Tonks, is at ease with women, drawing Teresa out, talking to her about her failed marriage and violent husband. Kit Neville, on the other hand, is making a success of his work.

Futurist studies of the Underground, all "streaks of light, advertisements, perpendicular lines", but his attempts to charm Elinor are clumsily ill-judged: "'Your eyes aren't for looking. They're for being looked at.' She'd stared at him for a moment, then burst out laughing".

For her part, Elinor, around whom both

men revolve, but who initially seems attracted to neither, is the most serious about her art, as well as the strongest willed. We are privy to her self-doubt, her "constant trying on of other identities" as she tries to establish her own, but to Paul and Kit, she presents a confident front, the prizewinning artist who can keep men at arm's length.

Being students of the Slade, the three are able to talk about their principal obsessions with relative freedom. And Barker shows that, unsurprisingly, their views of sex and of art are intertwined. Kit, the would-be manly Futurist, "holding forth about the need for virility in art", tries, when his doubtful charm fails him, to bully Elinor into sleeping with him, seeing her as a "barrier he had to break through". And yet, as Paul understands, this dislikeable character is capable of "very fine" painting, displaying a "maturity of vision", despite being in other respects "distinctly childish. Living at home, spoiled, self-pitying, moaning on because his mother didn't pay him enough attention".

To Elinor, art is everything, and it has nothing to do with sex, as Kit understands: "She was so utterly self-centred. Nothing mattered except her talent and whether she was fulfilling it or not". Elinor's views of the perils of marriage for a woman who values her independence are strikingly modern, and again, they chime with her ideas about what makes art. To her, "marriage changed everything. It had its own logic, its own laws, and they were independent of the desires and intentions of those who entered into it", a description which makes marriage sound oddly like war. As for art, it is the exercise of will, its proper subject "the things we choose to love". Barker, who has written not just about the horrors of war, but about child- and mass murder in peacetime, obviously thinks very

differently about what constitutes the artist's subject, at least if writers are not to be excepted. Yet it is a mark of her range of empathy that she makes Elinor and her certainty in the opposite direction appealing as well as convincing.

As for Paul, he is as confused as a man as he is as an artist. He falls in with Teresa, doubting the whole truth of her story about a violent marriage (only to be violently corrected himself), but it is she who has to tell him that he loves Elinor. When it comes to painting, his resolute rejection of his industrial background, the "smoking terraces and looming ironworks . . . Paul had turned his back on every Sunday, cycling off into the countryside in search of Art", has resulted in work that Professor Tonks tells him "seem[s] to have nothing to say".

For Kit and Elinor, war only intensifies their positions. Kit, like Nevinson in reality, finds a role as a war artist. His intention is to go "as close as I can get" to the fighting, which he frankly admits to seeing as an "opportunity". Elinor takes the absolute contrary view, determining not to volunteer for nursing or any part of the war effort, but to keep on painting. She writes to Paul that "More than anything I resent the way the war takes over all our lives. It's like a single bullying voice shouting all the others down".

Only Paul fulfils the more traditional model of the hero of a *Bildungsroman* and actually seems transformed by the scale of his experiences. He is turned down for the army and volunteers for duty as an orderly and ambulance driver for the Belgian Red Cross. There he is confronted by the carnage of the Antiques Room made flesh. A surgeon "notifies an amputated leg that hasn't been cleared away fast enough and, in a sudden burst of fury, kicks it across the floor". No longer turning his back on his real experiences, Paul begins to draw something of what he has seen from memory, though he cannot imagine that anyone else will ever want to look at this work. And he is briefly able to persuade Elinor, despite her objection – more aesthetic than conscientious – to the war, to be his lover.

*Life Class*, which might be taken as a kind of prologue to the *Regeneration* trilogy, has many of its qualities: a sense of exact and unsentimental description of what war does, but also a real desire to mine the complexities and contradictions it throws up in those who are faced with it. But this is not "just" a war novel. It is a novel about the value of art and the confusions of reflective youth. Its strongest voice is not that of the shell-shocked or war-weary veteran, but of Elinor, the woman who refuses to give in to it: "If painting matters you have to give your life to it and that's what I'm doing". From a novelist who has devoted so much time to recreating the worst moments of human experience, it is an unexpectedly uplifting sentiment on which to focus.