Through the Magic Door: Ursula Moray Williams, Gobbolino and the Little Wooden Horse

Books Reviewed:

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Colin Davison was interviewed on Woman's Hour about this book a few weeks ago when an extract of an interview with Ursula Moray Williams was also played. She came across as a feisty and independent woman who would have been great fun to meet and this is the portrait which emerges from this biography. Born in 1911 one of twins (her sister Barbara was also hugely talented), the girls and their brother Alan grew up in an ruined house in the Hampshire countryside, part of a clever extended family, which included their mother's brother, Sir Stanley Unwin the publisher. Their unconventional upbringing in the ruined and very cold house whose rooms they often had to vacate, tutored at home, not very well off but always aware of their station in life, made for two singular girls. Both drew and Ursula wrote stories from a very early age. Barbara became a well known artist and moved to Iceland with her husband; Ursula married Peter John. This very happy marriage which produced four sons, gave her the financial security to write and from 1931 to 1987 she wrote 68 books, including the critically acclaimed Adventures of the Little Wooden Horse and Gobbolino the Witch's Cat, both of which I well remember reading to my own children.

Colin Davison covers extensively the writing of all of these titles alongside the events of Ursula's life. These include the war when she appears to have refused to let her husband rejoin the RAF. Peter was in a reserved occupation but evidently wanted to fight. There are glimpses of the strict regime at home which he ran, but also of the very happy marriage which ended with his death in 1974. Typically Ursula carried on her life, with writing, visits to and from friends, although she could be outspoken and forthright which upset people sometimes. One of the most interesting episodes in the book is her involvement with Kaye Webb and the Puffin Club. Ursula was an enthusiastic supporter and joined in all the fun. In fact fun is the word which comes to mind on reading this book, as she never lost the sense of being a child and more importantly intuitively understanding what a child would like, both in her stories and in her relationships with them.

Inevitably this understanding could not move with the times, but Ursula Moray Williams will be remembered for the two books which appear in the title and on the splendid cover of this book. There are one or two typos in the rather dense looking text, but some lovely illustrations of her drawings which remind the reader of her talent in this direction.
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