



Classics in Short 193

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Brian Alderson on Russell Hoban's *A Mouse and His Child*

At Bowness on Windermere

is to be found a well-appointed 'visitor attraction', The World of Beatrix Potter. The name is apt since what you find there is a co-mingling of both characters and scenes from all BP's little stories, not in discrete groups according to their texts but scattered promiscuously through what is indeed their own 'world'. The visitors are mere intruders in what is essentially a people-free zone and who can tell what may go on ? what wanderings, strife, and cosy tea-parties ? when the doors are closed in the evening upon the departed guests.

*So too, in *The Mouse and his Child*.*

For sure, the book is not a set of tangentially-related tales, but rather a single history of several strange surprising events taking place in an anonymous countryside, but, as with the Bowness crowd, these events are of concern only to their protagonists ? toys and animals living their secret lives in a people-free zone. There's a toy-shop prelude (that surely owes much to Hans Christian Andersen) when we are introduced to the eponymous heroes whose adventures lie all before them: clockwork tin toys with the mouse father swinging the child up and down in directionless circles. They stand on a counter in front of a handsome dolls' house and alongside two associated wind-ups: a snooty elephant and a performing seal, and in his innocent liking for this company the mouse-child conceives a longing for permanence: for a home, with a family and a Mama.

Such dreams

can hardly be the province of shop-toys however. The goods are dispersed to their various purchasers, where the fate of all children's playthings awaits them. For the mouse and his child it comes fortuitously ? they are crushed by a falling vase and end up in the dustbin ? but they are rescued from its depths by the single human agent in the story, a wandering tramp seeking leftovers, and he repairs them to the extent that they are now able to move in a straight line rather than round and round. 'Be tramps', he says as he sets them down on the high road, and from that time forth they must make what way they can in a phantasmagoric world.

Manny Rat is their nemesis.

It is he who finds them when the tramp has gone ? Manny, the Godfather of the town dump with its rat-run bars, its greasy-bacon-rind stalls and its orange-box music-hall (no Ginger and Pickles village shops in those parts). He press-gangs the mice into his team of foraging wind-ups, but despite their degradation he is unable to subdue the mouse-child's rooted faith that a Home Territory awaits him out there somewhere or other and, against the fatalism of his pragmatic father, he nurtures the dream.

In the manner of a picaresque romance

and against all the odds, this is finally fulfilled. The wind-ups are unavoidably inhibited by the impossibility of taking much in the way of independent action ? someone must always be present to turn their key or, for good or ill, carry them aloft through the air and that is what engenders the story's episodic progress. Their escape from Manny Rat (thanks to a beneficent frog) takes them to the Caws of Art Experimental Theatre where a couple of crows are rehearsing **The Last Visible Dog**, a Beckettian drama not too distant from **Endgame**. 'The meadow isn't ready for this yet', says a local field-mouse critic to his wife ? a judgment soon ratified when mayhem is set up by the weasels in the audience, the windups' escaping, courtesy of the house parrot, to the den of an algebraist muskrat.

Promised a theorem

by this logical gentleman which will solve their pressing need to find a method of self-winding independence, they first allow themselves to be harnessed to a wildly ingenious tree-felling project (' $XT = Tf$ ' is the formula: 'X times Tree equals Treefall' with X turning out to be the mice harnessed to an axe). A catastrophe not calculated for at the start however, plunges the put-upon pair into a broken beaver-dam and a subaqueous encounter with C.Serpentina, turtle-thinker, scholar, and eminent author of **The Last Visible Dog** who treats them to a dose of linguistic philosophy. (With some justice, critics have complained that the satire in these central episodes makes few concessions to readerly inexperience, but that is to neglect its farcical character and the continuing energy with which it is bound in with the fate of the wind-ups.)

Contrivance follows contrivance,

bearing witness to Hoban's delight in designing ingenious mechanisms of rescue. Manny Rat however, obsessed by a desire for revenge on his escaped wind-ups, is never far away and in an extended denouement he becomes the unwitting agent of the drama's catharsis and eventually a reformed character ? *Uncle Manny* indeed. Bashed around by bitter experiences, the characters first gathered on the toyshop counter come together again, piece by fortuitous piece, and their secret history (imagined with consummate skill through the line-drawings of Lillian Hoban) comes to a climax with a grand Christmas party.

It is said

that Hoban was not entirely content with such a lenitive ending. The villain who had softened into a domesticated Uncle Manny had already overcome one reversion to type when he had tried to blow up the dolls' house, and could well revert again in the pages of some Manny Redux sequel. But Hoban recognized, I think, that there was a uniqueness about **The Mouse and his Child** and that no later ending could supercede its present one. For the hobo who set the story going to begin with returns while the party is in full swing and, peering through the dolls' house window, utters two further, all-conclusive words of human speech: 'Be happy'.

The Illustrations by Lillian Hoban are taken from the 2000 edition of *The Mouse and his Child* by Russell Hoban published by Faber & Faber (978 0 5712 0222 5) at £5.99.

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