



Elizabeth Taylor (1912–1975) was a short-story writer and novelist. Her first novel, *At Mrs. Lippincote's*, came out in 1945. She would go on to publish eleven more novels, including *Angel* and *A Game of Hide and Seek* (both available from NYRB Classics). In 2014, NYRB published *You'll Enjoy It When You Get There*, a selection made by Margaret Drabble of Taylor's short stories, many of which first appeared in *The New Yorker*.

Roxana Robinson is the author of eight works of fiction, including the novels *Cost* and *Sparta*. She is also the author of *Georgia O'Keeffe: A Life*. A Guggenheim fellow, she edited *The New York Stories of Edith Wharton*, published by NYRB Classics in 2007.

A VIEW OF THE HARBOUR

by Elizabeth Taylor

Introduction by Roxana Robinson

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“Like her stories, [Elizabeth Taylor’s] novels are stitched together out of a series of fragmented scenes. They are remarkable . . . for their implacable evenness of sympathy and lack of a unifying consciousness. . . *A View of the Harbour* may be Taylor’s most nuanced study of the push and pull between domestic and artistic labor.” —Namara Smith, *The New Yorker*

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Self-deception and betrayal are Elizabeth Taylor’s great subjects, and in *A View of the Harbour* she turns her unsparing gaze on the emotional and sexual politics of a seedy seaside town that’s been left behind by modernity. Tory, recently divorced, depends more and more on the company of her neighbors Robert, a doctor, and Beth, a busy author of melodramatic novels. Prudence, Robert and Beth’s daughter, disapproves of the intimacy that has grown between her parents and Tory and the gossip it has awakened in their little community. As the novel proceeds, Taylor’s view widens to take in a range of characters from bawdy, nose-y Mrs. Bracey; to a widowed young proprietor of the local waxworks, Lily Wilson; to the would-be artist Bertram—while the book as a whole offers a beautifully observed and written examination of the fictions around which we construct our lives and manage our losses.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. How do Elizabeth Taylor’s descriptions of characters watching the harbor town through windows mirror the way in which Taylor structures and narrates the novel?
2. Bertram and Beth are both artists—one a painter, the other a writer. In what ways do their attitudes toward their work and “the life of an artist” differ?
3. *A View of the Harbour* is set in the years following World War II. Did you feel that the post-war setting affected the mood of the novel?
4. Where in the novel did you find Taylor’s use of irony most effective?
5. On page 186, Beth contemplates the responsibilities of women versus the duties of men. ‘A man,’ she thought suddenly, ‘would consider this a business outing. But then, a man would not have to cook the meals for the day overnight, nor consign his child to a friend, nor leave half-done the ironing, nor forget the grocery orders as I now discover I have forgotten it. The artfulness of men,’ she thought. ‘They implant in us, foster in us, instincts to which, in the end, we feel the shame of not possessing’ (186). Does the above quote (and the novel as a whole) give you a sense

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of the author's thoughts on art vs. domestic life? Is there any character in the book who seems to succeed at both?

6. In the introduction to *A View of the Harbour*, Roxana Robinson writes, "A quietly subversive strain runs throughout [Taylor's] work." In what ways did you find the novel subversive?
7. Do you find Robert to be a sympathetic character? Did he become more or less so because of the way he handles the affair with Tory?
8. How does the harbor town itself act as a character in the book?
9. Prudence, often described as "poor Prudence," is stuck between school, and finding work and marriage. To what degree do you think Prudence's condition is influenced by her family, the time period in which she lives, and her own personality?
10. What were your impressions of Tory? Did you sympathize with her at any points in the novel? In what ways does Taylor make Tory a complicated character? Did you find the return of her ex-husband, Teddy, to be a satisfying end to the novel?