

Elizabeth Taylor [1912-1975] was born into a middle-class family in Berkshire, England. She held a variety of positions, including librarian and governess, before marrying a businessman in 1936. Nine years later, her first novel, *At Mrs. Lippincote's*, appeared. She would go on to publish eleven more novels, including *Angel* and *A Game of Hide and Seek* (both available from NYRB Classics), four collections of short stories (many of which originally appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, and other magazines), and a children's book, *Mossy Trotter*, while living with her husband and two children in Buckinghamshire. Long championed by Ivy Compton-Burnett, Barbara Pym, Robert Liddell, Kingsley Amis, and Elizabeth Jane Howard, Taylor's novels and stories have been the basis for a number of films, including *Mrs. Palfrey at the Claremont* (2005), starring Joan Plowright, and François Ozon's *Angel* (2007). In 2013 NYRB Classics will publish a new selection of Taylor's short stories.

Hilary Mantel is an English novelist, short story writer, and critic. Her novel, *Wolf Hall*, won the Man Booker Prize in 2009. *Bring Up the Bodies*, a sequel to *Wolf Hall*, is due out in May 2012.

OTHER NYRB CLASSICS OF INTEREST

A Game of Hide and Seek

by Elizabeth Taylor (introduction by Caleb Crain)

The Vet's Daughter

by Barbara Comyns (introduction by Kathryn Davis)

Great Granny Webster

by Caroline Blackwood (introduction by Honor Moore)

A House and Its Head

by Ivy Compton-Burnett (introduction by Francine Prose)

The Slaves of Solitude

by Patrick Hamilton (introduction by Susanna Moore)

ANGEL

By Elizabeth Taylor

Introduction by Hilary Mantel

\$15.95 US / 978-1-59017-497-5 paperback | 978-1-59017-511-8 ebook

“With piercing irony and sly wit, she [Taylor] conveyed and dissected in her often-bleak social comedies the prevarications and self-justifications inherent in friendships, marriages, and family relations.” —*The Atlantic*

“One of the best English novelists born in this [the 20th] century.”—*Kingsley Amis*

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Haughty, vain, preposterous and irrepressible, Angel Deverell is like a character sprung whole out of her own perfervid imagination. How on earth did her trudging, meek mother, proprietress of a grocery shop, give birth to a daughter like *this*, one with such a fanciful imagination that her lies have made the two the laughing stock of the village? Refusing to accept a job as maid with her aunt's employer at grand Paradise House, Angel instead resolves to become a writer, channeling her passion for the fantastic into a vocation. Her purple-prosed novels, extravagantly romantic and rich with anachronisms and inaccuracies, draw criticism but also crowds: she becomes rich and famous, marries the man she wants, and promptly ensconces herself in Paradise House, peacocks and all, the site of her girlhood dreams.

Funny and sharp, Elizabeth Taylor's *Angel* documents the rise and fall of Angel Deverell's fortunes through time, chronicling how a charmless, stubborn girl in Victorian England, living above her mother's grocery store, could willfully force herself into existence as a successful novelist, self-made woman, and the oddest of heroines.

FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) Angel is often portrayed as a ridiculous figure: everyone from her mother to Theo view her with bewilderment, and some even say she is mad. Despite Angel's self-aggrandizement, vanity and lack of empathy for others, is she wholly unsympathetic herself? Do you see the fictions that Angel creates about herself a “necessity, an ingredient of genius” [p. 122], as Nora does? Is Angel a sociopath on some level, in that she does not care about others, even when she is ostensibly doing charity work [p. 176]? If Angel were born in a different time, and women's rights were more firmly established, do you think she would not have to lie as much? Do you think her class has anything to do with her lies?
- 2) A cactus metaphor is made twice in the novel: on page 77, Theo, Angel's publisher, sees a cactus plant in a flower-shop window, and notices “From one unpromising, barbed shoot had sprung a huge, glowering bloom. It looked solitary and incongruous, a freakish accident; and he was reminded of Angel.” And when Angel and Esmé first step into the abandoned Paradise House before they marry, Angel notices “a great cactus, which had surprisingly survived...it looked as though it could keep itself going on its own succulence for years to come” [p. 148]. In what many ways is Angel “incongruous?” Why is the cactus such an apt metaphor for Angel?
- 3) Angel is unaccepting of corrections from anyone regarding the factual inaccuracies found in her writing [pp. 55-56, pp. 185-186]. Do you think she is incapable of being embarrassed? Why does she refuse to fix any of her mistakes?
- 4) Angel is humorless—she never laughs, rarely smiles, and even says she doesn't like Shakespeare when he tries to be funny [p. 54]. Do you think this lack of humor is in keeping with someone who writes elaborate fantasies? What do you think the basis of a sense of humor is? Is this something that is missing in Angel?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

The Other Elizabeth Taylor
by Nicola Beauman

ALSO OF INTEREST

Angel, a 2007 film directed by François Ozon, is based on the Elizabeth Taylor novel.

NYRB Classics is an innovative list of outstanding books from many eras and all around the world. It includes both acknowledged masterpieces and hidden gems of literature with introductions by distinguished contemporary authors. NYRB Classics offers a wide-ranging and endlessly surprising selection of books including novels, short fiction, mystery, suspense, history, autobiography and memoir, and poetry. Visit www.nyrb.com to learn more about NYRB Classics and to discover, or rediscover, a host of wonderful books.

- 5) Theo recognizes how rude, vain and indomitable Angel can be, and states that she is “abnormally touchy” [p. 65]. Why does he tolerate her so much, even indulge her? Is it because, given her upbringing, he admires her and thinks she is brave, [p. 64]? Is it pity? Or is it because he is cowardly? Is the invention of Mr. Delbanco an easy, non-confrontational way for Theo to voice his criticisms of Angel’s work, or does he see it as the most effective way of delivering criticism?
- 6) Angel is, for the most part, friendless. Toward the end of her life, she counts five: Nora, Lady Baines, Theo, Marvell, and Clive Fennelly [p. 204], the latter three added with uncertainty. How would you describe the relationship Angel has with each of these people? Are the attachments intimate? Would you characterize them as friendships? Do you suppose that one of these people might have a different perception of their relationship than Angel does?
- 7) Esmé tells Theo that Nora is in love with Angel [p. 141]. Do you think this is true, and that Nora’s love for Angel is more than that of a good friend, or even fan? We are told that she “had a great capacity for worship—especially adoration of her own sex” [p. 112], but Nora identifies her feelings as unsettlingly maternal [p. 119]—do you think this is accurate, or misidentified? “She was miserably put out at the sight of Angel’s nakedness and Esmé’s presence. This was part of the life under that roof which she chose to ignore” [p. 188]. Do you think this is so because Nora has been jealous of Esmé since childhood, or because there is in fact a homosexual subtext in the novel?
- 8) Both Esmé and Theo are mortified when they discover that Angel has planned to unveil a portrait of herself at her party, and they escape. Theo realizes this is an undignified and vainglorious act, but why is Esmé so embarrassed? From the description on page 138 of the portrait, do you think that Esmé is actually very perceptive, but simply not fashionable? When he gives up painting, is it because he lacks confidence in his own work, or because he is unserious? Consider “unattractive” portraits taken today, and how they can be appreciated. Honor aside, would you want your portrait to be painted or photographed by someone such as Lucian Freud, Chuck Close, or Esmé?
- 9) Animals play a large role in Angel’s life, and she treats her pets better than she treats most people. The house stinks, the cats have free rein, and her dogs are undisciplined. The author notes that Angel was “often violent about people, as are so many animal lovers” [p. 223]. Do you think that Angel’s love for animals stems from prior disappointments and possible fear of human friendship, or is it the limited relationship that she can have with her pets that suits her nature?
- 10) Her relationship with Esmé is the only one Angel really pursues or tries to make work, risking “all” to confess her love [p. 150]. She decides that he is the man for her after meeting him just once, and even accepts Nora into her household as a lure: “She had cast out her silken thread and months later had drawn back her prey” [p. 111]. Angel thinks: “so much coming my way,” [p. 112], but it takes years for Esmé to reappear [p. 119]. How is it that a brief introduction, years earlier, could inspire such devotion? Are we to find this occurrence so unusual, or does it “humanize” Angel—have you ever had such a strong impression of someone stay with you for years at a time? Angel comes into Esmé’s life when he is exhausted with himself, but he does also find her interesting and is curious about her internal life. Love is often about timing; is this the case here—does Esmé love Angel? Or is he indeed interested in her for her money only?
- 11) Perhaps Angel’s chief characteristic is her hardheadedness—an unstoppable will. As a child, she was “willing myself towards the truth....Nothing shall stop me” [p. 148]. Theo, exasperated at Angel, asks “Do you always have your own way?” [p. 100]. In what ways has her inflexible, absolute belief in herself helped her succeed, and how has it caused her harm?
- 12) Angel’s writing scandalizes and elicits ridicule, but is also devoured by readers—including those who look down upon her. Is she a good writer then? What makes good writing? Is it snobbery that fuels Angel’s denouncers? Esmé notes that the reason why Angel’s work is so popular is that she writes for herself: “I think the secret of your power over people is that you communicate with yourself, not with your readers” [p. 133]. How can this be fascinating to others? Do you think that this power can be applied to the way Angel behaves outside of her novel-writing?
- 13) During Angel’s delirium, when she is dreaming of her life on Volunteer Street, she thinks “It is to be done all over again,” but then her panic lifts [p. 249]. Her last words—though unvoiced—are “I am Angel Deverell,” loud and triumphant. Do you think Angel lived a good life, eccentric as her waning years in Paradise House were?