

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.

Caleb Crain is the author of *American Sympathy: Men, Friendship, and Literature in the New Nation*, and has written for *The New Yorker*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The London Review of Books*, *The Nation*, the *New York Times Book Review*, *The New Republic* and *n+1*. His novel, *Necessary Errors*, is forthcoming in May 2013.

OTHER NYRB CLASSICS OF INTEREST

Angel

by Elizabeth Taylor (introduction by Hilary Mantel)

The Pumpkin Eater

by Penelope Mortimer (introduction by Daphne Merkin)

School for Love

by Olivia Manning (introduction by Jane Smiley)

A Month in the Country

by J.L. Carr (introduction by Michael Holroyd)

The Go-Between

by L.P. Hartley (introduction by Colm Tóibín)

A GAME OF HIDE AND SEEK

By Elizabeth Taylor

Introduction by Caleb Crain

\$15.95 US / 978-1-59017-496-8 paperback | 978-1-59017-510-1 ebook

“Taylor has the genius of making her characters understood, sometimes with an almost frightening clarity, perhaps because she is compassionate as well as relentless in her delineation of them.” —*The New York Times*

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

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Having known each other since early childhood, Harriet and Vesey, in the summer of their 18th year, suddenly fall in love. But why, and how is it that they can come to this conclusion? Harriet is awkward, inarticulate, meek; Vesey is cynical, ungenerous, and affected. Every day, Harriet chronicles in her diary each interaction and observation she makes of Vesey, but aside from a few kisses, Vesey does little to demonstrate any affection for Harriet. In fact, he lobbies cruel remarks at her in between clandestine kisses. By all appearances, they are an ill-matched pair. When Vesey's distasteful ways and bad behavior escalate to an unacceptable level, he is sent away from his aunt's country home, where he and Harriet have been meeting daily. Harriet hopes that Vesey will write; he does not. In the ensuing years, they see each other only a brief few times.

Almost twenty years later, Harriet and Vesey meet again. She runs a household, employs servants, is mother to a histrionic daughter, has a calm, comfortable marriage, and yet, has never stopped thinking of Vesey. Vesey re-enters down-at-the-heels, seemingly humbled by life, and ready for love. This time, however, the prospect of romance between the two is hampered not just by the adults around them, but also by themselves. Harriet and Vesey grapple with what they will do, weighing the consequences of their actions, all the while nostalgically recounting the past as their indecision sets everyone around them on edge. Love can be powerfully disruptive, and disruption may be precisely what Harriet and Vesey crave in their lonely adult lives.

Rich with the sharp wit and careful observation for which Elizabeth Taylor is so well-known, *A Game of Hide and Seek* is a finely rendered tale of youthful love, as well as of the quiet melancholy of an adulthood that too often does not surprise enough.

FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) The novel begins with a game of hide and seek that Harriet and Vesey pretend to play with Deirdre and Joseph, engaging only half-heartedly so as to prolong their time alone together. Hide and seek also describes the “game” Harriet and Vesey play when it comes to showing their feelings for one another at age 18. Can it simply be fear of rejection that prevents the two from being open and honest with one another, especially since they clearly want to spend time together? Are they a well-suited pair? What draws them together?
- 2) Harriet is among the most sympathetic figures in the novel. Why is this? Is she always cast as the weaker participant in all of her relationships, someone who just reacts, deflects, and humors?
- 3) Vesey is aware of how he is perceived by others—cruel, affected, self-indulgent, and dreadful—and seems to almost compulsively fulfill such expectations. Why do you think he does all of this? Do you think his lack of physical vigor represents anything? Why is it remarked upon so often?
- 4) Charles' mother, Julia, is a comic figure, portrayed as a fairly despicable character who always seems to be performing, dismissing those who won't “play” along with her. When Julia meets Lilian and Harriet for the first time, Lilian finds Julia “subversive.” How so? Why does her hunger-strike question embarrass Lilian [p. 64]? Why does Charles call his mother “impertinent”?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

The Other Elizabeth Taylor
by Nicola Beauman

Madame Bovary
by Gustave Flaubert

Persuasion by Jane Austen

ALSO OF INTEREST

Goodbye First Love, a 2011 film directed by Mia Hansen-Løve. This French film depicts the departure and return of a serious and possessive young girl's first love over an eight-year period, and how she moves into adulthood, with and without him.

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- 5) Harriet can be viewed as having taken the path of least resistance: she marries Charles, and is now bourgeois and a partner in a passionless marriage. Vesey is a second-rate actor. Are you surprised by how Harriet and Vesey have turned out as adults? How else could they have turned out? What do you imagine would have happened between Harriet and Vesey if Vesey had not been sent away from Caroline's house?
- 6) Female friendships abound in the book, yet the only true, untainted relationship in the novel is that between Lilian and Caroline. Do you think the mutual support found in their friendship is due to their having forged their relationship as comrades for the same cause, or are there other factors? What prevents Harriet and Kitty from having the same kind of bond? Do "fat and forty," "the other woman," and the rest of the gown shop crew serve more as a warning to Harriet, or do they provide companionship for her? Do you believe that the easiest and most supportive relationships are between women friends, or do you think that's a common misconception? Do you think that some of the most destructive relationships are those between women?
- 7) Enforced gender roles and the prevalence of sexual inequality during the period are acknowledged throughout the book: Hugo, Caroline's husband, has the attitude that Caroline "was a good wife, though a bore" [p. 22]; Vesey sees that Harriet is "oppressed by the ideals of an older generation, enduring boredom and an enforced childishness and loneliness" [p. 30]; and Charles is comforted when he thinks of the women sitting around eating cakes, while he is at work – "It gave him a feeling of safety" [p. 212]. When Harriet expresses her worries about the future, Vesey knows it's cruel to respond, "Someone will marry you" [p. 21]. Is Vesey's enlightened view due to his age, or his perspective as an outsider? Do you think it is happenstance that, for the most part, those who step outside of conventional domestic roles—such as Julia, or Barbara, Vesey's mother—are portrayed in a negative light?
- 8) Kitty is the closest friend that Harriet has, but is not the supportive confidante she would like. When Kitty attempts to warn Harriet off Vesey, she speaks matter-of-factly, almost as if she is preventing Harriet from committing a faux pas. Do you think that Kitty is actually practical, given her life circumstance, when it comes to the institution of marriage, saying that one person is as good as another? Or is she indeed trying to stop Harriet from having something she'd never had herself [p. 210]? What are her motives?
- 9) The passage of time, regret, and the power of memory are key themes in this novel. Harriet and Vesey hanker after their youth [p. 174, p. 236, p. 290], even weep for it [p. 159], yet Vesey can hardly remember much about Harriet and the events of that time [p. 175, p. 196]. Jealous of what he believes to be the shared memories between them, Charles interrogates Vesey on Harriet, believing Vesey to have "undermined" Charles' married life [p. 178]; we know from the same passage that Vesey has always been in Harriet's mind. Do you think there is truth to Kitty's suggestion that Harriet's idea of Vesey never changed, and that "He led a perfect life in your brain" [p. 209]? What could be so attractive about Vesey to the adult Harriet? And what of Vesey—do you have the impression that he has been thinking about Harriet all of these years? As a teenager, Vesey concedes, "Only Harriet showed approval....He needed Harriet for his own reasons, to give him confidence and peace" [p. 30]. Do you think he really loves her this second time around?
- 10) Julia was terrified by the thought that Charles, so like his father whom he never met, was formed whole in the womb [p. 90], and simply "unfolded." She would like to think that people evolve on their own. The similar concept of "unrolling" [p. 157] occurs to Harriet when she thinks of Betsy—who more resembles her grandmother Julia than either parent [p. 273]. Do you think that the characters in this novel evolve? If so, in what ways? If not, how do they essentially remain the same in character?
- 11) Harriet and Vesey cannot manage to have a proper affair. Who is the more reluctant partner? What is it at stake for either of them? Is their inability to follow through on their plans a result of their being more "adult," making difficult decisions despite their desires, or is this a perpetuation of their childhood games?
- 12) The ending of the novel is ambiguous. Why would Vesey lie to Harriet about going to South Africa? What can he mean when he asks his mother "Why is it so much against people to have known them a long time?" [p. 303]? Do you think it more likely that Vesey has been unscrupulous about Harriet, or that he is dying?