

*Life Class* by Pat Barker (Hamish Hamilton) R160

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In her previous novel, *Double Vision*, Pat Barker dealt with the ethics of the representation of the suffering of others, whether as war photographer, sculptor or, by implication, novelist. Here she deals with much the same theme, but now as applied to another abiding interest of hers, the Great War, the setting of her masterly *Regeneration* trilogy.

Once again we have a reflection on the relation between art and war, but whereas in *Regeneration* the art was poetry and in *Double Vision* it was photography, here it is painting. Barker's main characters are all students at the Slade School of Art: Paul Tarrant, a not particularly talented landscape painter, Elinor Brooke, wholly dedicated to her art, Kit Neville, successful as a painter of industrial scenes, and as such the counterpart to Paul: "These paintings were the fruit of a trip up north to seek out the same smoking terraces and looming ironworks that Paul had turned his back on every Sunday, cycling off into the countryside in search of Art."

We are given vivid glimpses of pre-war Bohemia, the artists and models gathering at the Café Royal in London. Readers of DH Lawrence's *Women in Love* will recognise the setting, the air of decadence and the general feel of the period; indeed, Barker drew partly on the Notebooks of Katherine Mansfield, on whom one of the characters in *Women in Love* was based. As in the trilogy, Barker blends her fictional characters with historical figures, in this instance the surgeon-painter Henry Tonks, the artist-about-town Augustus John, and the society hostess and pacifist Ottoline Morrel (of whom Lawrence includes an unflattering portrait in *Women in Love*).

Paul becomes involved with an artist's model, Teresa Halliday, though it is clear that his real interest is in Elinor – who, though, is also being pursued by Kit Neville. Teresa's abusive husband lurks in the background, emerging once to assault Paul, then disappearing from the novel, as indeed does Teresa.

When the War breaks out, Paul tries to enlist, but is turned down because of bad lungs. He volunteers instead to drive an ambulance in Belgium, and he is posted to a "hospital" in Ypres. Here he has to share a hut with a young man called Lewis, who is at first a burden, but gradually becomes a comforting presence. Paul also discovers that in painting the mutilated men he treats, his art achieves a power and truth it never had before.

This leads to some disagreement with Elinor, when she comes to visit him in Ypres. Elinor believes that war is no subject for art: "People peering at other's people's suffering and saying, 'Oh my dear, how perfectly dreadful' – and then moving on to the next picture. ... It's unchosen, it's passive, and I don't think that's a proper subject for art."

Elinor's argument is close to a reiteration of WB Yeats's reason for excluding war poetry from his *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*: "Passive suffering is not a theme for poetry." Barker would clearly disagree, since passive suffering occupies a central position in this novel, as in many of her others. As for exploitation, that is clearly not her aim, but it must be said that some of the descriptions of the mutilations suffered by her soldiers could, in a lesser writer, have seemed like sensationalism.

This is Barker's eleventh book, and she can by now just about write a novel in a fit of absent-mindedness. Unfortunately that is what she seems to have done in this case. Though the settings, both in London and Ypres, are as vivid and concrete as ever, there is something perfunctory and schematic about the characters, the plot creaks audibly, and the situations are ones she's done before and done better. The friendship with Lewis, who is evidently in love with Paul, is underdeveloped, and Paul's discovery after Lewis's death that he had loved the man, comes from nowhere and goes nowhere. In *Regeneration*, in the figure of Billy Prior, the bisexual working-class officer, sexual ambiguity was part of the outsider appeal of the man and an important plot driver; here it seems an extraneous after-thought. Even Kit Neville, who for a while shares centre stage with the others, simply fades into the background, although Paul is made to reflect, on scant evidence, that "Neville was one of the most significant figures in his life". We are given to understand that he has become a successful war artist, presumably purveying the kind of image of the war that the public is comfortable with, but this, too, remains curiously undeveloped. If Paul and Elinor had been substantial enough to take up the slack, the fading out of the secondary characters could have constituted a tactical sharpening of focus, but, emotionally detached, wary and unsure of each other, they convince us of their love as little as they convince each other. *Life Class* is an easy and pleasurable read, but it is, so to speak, in a different class to her other fiction.

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