

Do we need to read books when real dramas are enacted for us by those to whom we give particular roles? I'd intended to reflect here on the relationship between mother and daughter featured in recent novels. Then came the death of the Queen Mother, after that of one of her daughters; now the other looks back on fifty years spent in her role. Mothers and daughters, especially in the face of death, have to acknowledge the bond that exists between them, whatever changes history brings. Historical awareness is in their bodies: exasperation and loyalty can be intense. The Queen Mother had unique experiences of history — the transition from Queen Victoria to Queen Elizabeth II, whose reign has been uniquely difficult, her role assaulted from all sides. The 'historical novel' about it all is being written already.

Anita Brookner's most recent work focusses on this relationship. The Bay of Angels is her twentieth novel; the characters are familiar: middle-class, Londoners, having to stretch their means, sheltered from physical violence, and from their own violent histories, passion found perhaps in short continental encounters, then the return to the relief of depressing grey skies. Unusually, this novel has a first-person narrative. Zoe tells of her life with her mother Anne, widowed when Zoe was four — two intelligent unhappy beings having to endure attention from vulgar well-meaning relatives. Zoe fantasized from early childhood that one day, as in stories, a fairy or prince would come and put everything to rights. In reality the two had always to subordinate, even

humiliate themselves in relationships, in order to have a life.

A rich man does come — and carries Anne off in marriage, to his romantic home in Nice. Everything changes, but at his early unexpected death catastrophe and disillusionment follow. Anne, in shock, ages prematurely and goes slowly to her own death. Zoe, bereft of financial and emotional resources, struggles with the tragedy, hindered by her own blindness, which we can see. Ultimately she accepts life, as her mother had, and accepts partial fulfillment alongside an affectionate, realistic, not romantic 'hero'.

The novel is written with Brookner's inimitable perceptive subtlety, her uncomfortable and compassionate truthfulness. The indignities and messiness of death have to be confronted by both women, and the others around them. Religion, (like antiseptic nursing) becomes necessary even for unbelievers. Similarly, our royal family provide a ritualized fantasy of order and sanity. Zoe says, thinking back, that her mother did know the difference between fact and fiction. Yet this wasn't communicated. Brookner's characters live in that uneasy world between fact and fiction, in which the fact of death is a major threat to personhood. Women's experiences of childbirth, which brings them close to death, connect them with the family's past and future. Even for women who are not mothers the awareness of this kind of sacrifice is there.

The theme of being trapped recurs in the novel. Just before Anne's life ends Zoe has a vivid disturbing dream - a frightening black hole experience. She understands it to be about the impending death, but I see it as a birth dream also, as they are both released from their merged relationship. I sense too that it's about the world souls struggling to be freed of its worldly constrictions.