

FEUDING SISTERS....LITERARY GIANTS : A.S. Byatt and Margaret Drabble

A tale of two estranged sisters, both internationally famous and scaling the heights of their writing professions, sounds like a plot from their latest bestsellers. But this time it's real life. MOIRA HOLDEN reports.

Club member Rachel van der Wilden gave a superb talk at the beginning of February about top authors A.S. Byatt and Margaret Drabble. Few of us had known beforehand that these two literary powerhouses were sisters...and what's more...they don't have a great deal of contact with each other. Rachel outlined the background of these two leading writers who have sold millions of books and garnered long-lasting praise from critics and readers.

A.S. Byatt is known as 'Sue' in family circles and Margaret Drabble is 'Maggie'. They were two of four children whose father, John Drabble, was a QC and whose mother, Kathleen, was a teacher. Brother Richard followed in his father's footsteps and became a QC while sister Helen became a distinguished art historian.

Sue and Maggie were born in Sheffield, but the family moved to York on the outbreak of the Second World War. The girls were sent to a Quaker boarding school. Sue was the eldest sister, born in August 1936, while Maggie was born in 1939.

'Their mother was determined that her daughters would attend Cambridge University as she had done,' says Rachel. 'Maggie had a rather uncomfortable relationship with her elder sister. Unfortunately, Sue had had her father all to herself before the war and resented that he now had to pay attention to another daughter when he returned. Relations with her mother were also difficult – after the war, their mother turned into a frustrated woman suffering from depression and uncontrollable fits of rage. She was confined to domesticity and did not enjoy it.'

Maggie originally wanted to become an actress; she joined the RSC in 1960 and was understudy to Vanessa Redgrave at one point. But she left the company and turned to writing instead, and, despite writing being somewhat a second choice, it began to consume her and she likened it to 'an illness'. Her first novel, *The Summer Birdcage*, was published in 1963 and explored the relationship between two sisters. 'By the 1970s, she was increasingly interested in social problems,' says Rachel. Her books have an 'introspection' and concentrate on 'the behaviour of her characters and what makes them tick'. She announced she wouldn't be writing any more novels, but changed her mind because 'I just found myself restless without a book on the go'. Maggie married the actor Clive Swift – best known as the beleaguered husband of Hyacinth Bucket in *Keeping up Appearances* – and they had three children before the marriage broke up in 1975. Later, she married the writer and historian Michael Holroyd, and became Lady Holroyd. From 1963 to 2013, she penned 18 novels and several biographies, as well as being editor of the *Oxford Companion to English Literature*.

Her rivalry to her sister intensified from their childhood 'sibling stuff', but both sisters were similar in that they clashed with their mother over her domineering ways. Antonia Susan, or 'Sue' as she was known, wasn't happy during her schooldays because she found it difficult to make friends at the Quaker boarding school and felt she never had the chance to be alone. At the age of 13, she began to think of herself as a writer. 'But she felt it difficult to express herself and was torn between the Quaker duty of service and her own creative needs,' says Rachel. She suffered from asthma and spent long periods in bed, so this gave her opportunity to read. She left Cambridge University with a first class honours degree, which annoyed her sister who'd left with a 2:2, and took several academic posts. She published her first novel in 1964 with *The Shadow of the Sun* (she was annoyed her sister was published before her) but didn't devote herself to writing full time until 1983.

Her private life has been hit by tragedy. She had two children with her first husband, Ian Byatt, but her son, Charles, was killed in a motor accident at the age of 11 in 1972. She divorced and later married Peter Duffy and had two daughters. Her standout novel is *Possession*, which won the Booker Prize in 1990, and *The Children's Book* is also considered a major work. The sisters are not thought to read each other's novels, and Margaret Drabble does not enter her books into competitions. In December last year, A.S. Byatt was presented with the Erasmus prize by King Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands, the most prestigious prize for art and culture. She describes her novels as 'about joining thinking and feeling together'.