



FOREWORD
by Alison Lurie

Walter de la Mare's *Memoirs of a Midget* is one of the strangest and most enchanting works of fiction ever written. It is a *tour de force*: a grown man's fully imagined and convincing impersonation of a young woman between two and four feet tall. Like her creator, the narrator, Miss M. (whose full name we never learn) is independent, self-educated, sensitive, and fascinated by all natural phenomena from the distant stars to the tiny patterns of lichen.

We are never told the heroine's exact height: sometimes she seems very tiny, as when she fears that a cat might knock her over, or when she descends stairs by sitting on each step and jumping to the next; at another moment she is able to pass as a ten-year-old. The point, as with E. B. White's *Stuart Little* (the hero of another odd and brilliant classic, in which a mouse is born to human parents), is that though Miss M. may live in our world, she is not one of us.

Miss M. begins life as a sheltered only child, becomes an orphan, leaves home, falls in love with a beautiful, cold, ambitious full-sized woman called Fanny, and is courted by a male dwarf. Later she is taken up by a London society hostess and admired not only for her appearance but for her ability to recite verses. At first Miss M. is pleased by the luxury and flattered by all the attention, but soon she begins to suffer from the bad effects of sudden celebrity, becoming vain and fretful. Then, as her patroness begins to tire of her, she becomes disillusioned with her own role, realizing that essentially she is being treated like an expensive object or pet. At a banquet in her honor, Miss M. becomes drunk and insulting, and she is sent

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away to the country. Later, after she has given all her savings to Fanny, she joins a circus to recoup her fortunes. At the end of the book, like many other characters in de la Mare's poems and stories, Miss M. mysteriously disappears, leaving an account of her life neatly wrapped in brown paper.

Though *Memoirs of a Midget* first appeared in 1921, it has something of the air of an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century novel. It begins with a long Introduction by Miss M.'s executor, "Sir Walter Pollacke," a learned and benevolent gentleman who is an evident stand-in for the author. There are also three suggestive epigraphs, all from Elizabethan authors. The first, from a 1601 translation of Pliny's *Natural History*, describes a rare animal called the oryx (our oryx, a kind of African antelope) that according to report worships the Dog-Star Sirius. Miss M., of course, is also an exotic creature; she spends many nights gazing at the heavens and is deeply drawn to the same star. The second epigraph, from John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, compares the soul in the body to a lark in a cage, and thus suggests that Miss M., whose cage is so small, may be doubly imprisoned. The third, from Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, reads: "Provoke them not, fair sir, with tempting words: / The heavens are gracious." Here, de la Mare may be giving the critical reader a kind of ironic warning.

Miss M.'s creator was almost as unusual as she is. In his own time, he was famous as the author of poems and stories for both adults and children. Today much of his work seems old-fashioned, weakened by his conviction that only certain subjects, certain emotions, and a certain diction were truly "poetic." He believed in the existence of what he called "another reality," which could be sought through make-believe, daydream, empathy, and free association. From the beginning, he thought that this "other reality" should be described in a language different from that of everyday life: it demanded fine writing and a special vocabulary.

De la Mare's verses are full of inversions, of words already archaic at the time ('tis, aught, eve, amidst) and of capitalized nouns (Fate and Evening). He preferred the standard late-Romantic subjects: nature, the fleetingness of beauty, children, minor supernatural figures, and lost love. The subject for which he became most famous was the mysteriousness of empty landscapes and deserted or half-deserted buildings. And in spite of their old-fashioned diction, some of his verses still convey a dangerous if subtle thrill.

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In the last years of his life, de la Mare continued to write and publish, and to gather awards and honors—though he twice refused the knighthood that he had already covertly awarded himself by creating the benevolent and learned Sir Walter of *Memoirs of a Midget*. Other writers paid him tribute; for his seventy-fifth birthday, T. S. Eliot composed a graceful poem that shows a sensitive appreciation of what was best, and most haunting, about de la Mare's writing:

When the familiar scene is suddenly strange
Or the well known is what we have to learn,
And two worlds meet, and intersect, and change;
.....

When the nocturnal traveler can arouse
No sleeper by his call; or when by chance
An empty face peers from an empty house;

By whom, and by what means, was this designed?

.....
By the delicate, invisible web you wove—
The inexplicable mystery of sound.¹

Like many other famous writers for children, de la Mare had an idyllic early childhood that was cut short too soon. His first nine years were spent in a large, happy family in the outer suburbs of London, at the edge of the countryside he loved. But this changed when at ten he became a chorister and boarding student at St. Paul's Cathedral School in central London, where he had to study and practice and perform seven days a week, with only one hour of freedom a day. Soon memories of his early life began to fade, as they did for Miss M., who says of her own childhood that "those happy, unhappy, far-away days seem like mere glimpses of a dragon-fly shimmering and darting."²

There was no money to send de la Mare to a university; instead he became a low-ranking clerk in London, overworked and underpaid. For eighteen years he toiled fifty-seven hours a week in the statistical department of the Anglo-American Oil Company, adding columns of figures and copying documents. He hated this organization and lived as much as he could in the world of his imagination. After his office closed he would often stay on for many hours to work on his poems, stories, and essays.

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When *Memoirs of a Midget* first appeared, de la Mare was forty-eight and had become successful enough as a writer to leave his job. He was respectably married and the father of four, an outwardly conventional family man who seemed to be at home in everyday London. Yet the world of his books is very different. It is mysterious, dreamy, and strange: full of haunted houses and ghostly presences. The central characters are almost always lonely old people or children, and very often the stories and poems are told from the viewpoint of a child coolly observing the passions and tragedies of adults, or by an uninvolved narrator to whom strangers confide odd or dreadful histories. And when de la Mare speaks as a child, it is usually as a special kind of child: solitary, imaginative, half-frightened and half-fascinated by what he sees around him. In his most-often anthologized story, "The Riddle," seven children, singly or in pairs, vanish into an old oak chest in a house deep in the country—perhaps into death, perhaps only into adulthood.

De la Mare's sense of time often recalls that of a child. Hours, days, and seasons seem to go on forever, or telescope suddenly. Many of his characters appear to live in an eternal present, where they are almost unaware of time passing. Miss M. can lose herself for hours in contemplation of a flower, or a sky filled with stars. What adults might call "daydreaming," de la Mare suggests, is in fact an intense, self-forgetful absorption in something outside the self: a condition of mind made famous by Keats, who called it "negative capability." In one of de la Mare's stories, for instance, the child Maria looks so intently at a fly on the wall that she in effect merges with it. "She seemed almost to have become the fly—Maria-Fly. . . . When [she] came to, it seemed she had been away for at least three centuries."³

Even as an adult de la Mare continued to live as much as possible in his dream-world and to believe that it was better to be a child than an adult; like Wordsworth, he saw childhood as intrinsically superior not only to adulthood but to boyhood. Two years before *Memoirs of a Midget* appeared, he declared that:

The child divines, the boy discovers.
The child is intuitive, inductive, the boy logical,
deductive.
The child is visionary, the boy intellectual.
The child knows that beauty is truth, the boy that
truth is beauty.⁴

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In this sense, de la Mare remained a child all his life, preferring intuition and vision to logic and reason. In his stories and poems, he views the world with the intensity, innocence, and credulity of childhood.

A half-deserted, vaguely haunted house is the subject of de la Mare's best-known poem, "The Listeners," which I learnt by heart as a child:

"Is there anybody there?" said the Traveller,
Knocking on the moonlit door;
And his horse in the silence champed the grasses
Of the forest's ferny floor
.
Never the least stir made the listeners,
Though every word he spake
Fell echoing through the shadowiness of the still house
From the one man left awake:
Ay, they heard his foot upon the stirrup,
And the sound of iron on stone,
And how the silence surged softly backward,
When the plunging hoofs were gone.⁵

In *Memoirs of a Midget*, this central situation appears several times, but in reverse. Miss M. finds herself alone in an old house, listening to someone knocking on the door, but she does not answer. It is as if de la Mare has taken what was clearly a significant situation for him and imagined it from the other side, the side of the unknown Listener.

The apparently deserted house with its silent occupant suggests a withdrawn, very private person: someone who knows that others are trying to make contact but chooses not to respond, or cannot respond. The house, then, is a body, and Miss M. is the soundless but intensely aware consciousness within.

According to his biographer, Theresa Whistler, de la Mare always spoke of Miss M. as a real person, a kind of imaginary companion. There are many interesting connections between the writer and his character: both are partly of French descent, and both have a solitary, happy rural childhood that is abruptly cut short. Miss M.'s description of her own face, with "the eyebrows faintly arched. . . the lips rather narrow, and of a lively red,"⁶ could recall de la Mare's own

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portrait, and he shared her love of solitude and her fascination with nature. Even when she is with a friend in the countryside, Miss M.'s consciousness is fixed on flowers and birds rather than her companion:

Cuckoos were now in the woods, and we talked and talked, as if their voices alone were not seductive enough to enchant us onwards. Sometimes I spelled incantations in the water; and sometimes I looked out happily across the wet, wayside flowers; and sometimes a robin flittered out to observe the intruders. How was it that human company so often made me uneasy and self-conscious, and nature's always brought peace?⁷

De la Mare, like Miss M., saw himself as isolated and peculiar, and like Miss M., felt both pleasure and revulsion when he was lionized by London society; like her, he both enjoyed and resented being petted and taken care of.

De la Mare had an idiosyncratic view of love, and so does Miss M. "What a strange thing that one must fall in love, couldn't jump into it," she says.⁸ When he was thirty-eight and beginning to be well known, de la Mare fell or perhaps jumped into love with the literary editor of a magazine to which he was a contributor: a lively intelligent woman called Naomi, who had always wanted to be the soul mate and muse of a great writer. But the affair remained platonic; though de la Mare wrote her nearly eight hundred letters, he preferred the idea of love to the reality:

I long to get things over, to have them safe in memory [he wrote to Naomi]. . . . Even you are almost best in memory, where I cannot change you, nor you yourself.⁹

Miss M., too, prefers a romantic to a physical love: she says at one point that she was born to be an Old Maid.¹⁰ She refuses Mr. Anon, the dwarf who wants to marry her, telling him "I share my secretest thoughts—my imagination, with you; isn't that a kind of love?"¹¹ She shrinks from physical contact even with Fanny, the young woman she adores. Fanny, fickle and self-centered though she is, becomes angry and hurt by this rejection.

"You said you loved me—oh, yes [she says]. But touch me, come here"—she laid her hand almost fondly on her breast—"and be humanly generous, no. That's no more your nature than—than a changeling's."¹²

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Like most good novels, *Memoirs of a Midget* can be read in many ways. It can be seen as an inversion of de la Mare's psychological situation: Miss M. is an adult in a child's body, while de la Mare is in some ways a child in an adult's body. It also works as an allegory about the position of middle-class women in the late nineteenth century: petted and minimized when weak, condemned when they sought independence. Except for the few days when she is displaying herself in the circus, Miss M. never earns a shilling; people take care of her because she is helpless and cute. For most of the book she lives on inherited money.

Miss M.'s friend Fanny, on the other hand, has to earn her living as a teacher; at one point she comes to Miss M. desperate to borrow money (probably for an abortion, though de la Mare does not spell this out). Hard as she tries, Fanny cannot survive on her own. She ends up making a loveless marriage and blaming all her troubles on Miss M., whom she accuses of having been her enemy for years. In terms of the story, this accusation is cruel and unreasonable, but it works symbolically. Rich, childish, dependent Victorian women were in a sense the enemies of poor working girls like Fanny. If the author of *Memoirs of a Midget* had been a woman, the book might now be acclaimed as an early feminist classic.

Classic or not, it is impressively well written. De la Mare cared about prose, and his is often brilliant; no one can set a mood or describe landscape and weather better:

Soon after six . . . a storm, which all the afternoon had been steadily piling its leaden vapours into space, began to break. . . . The very air seemed to thicken, and every tree stood up as if carved out of metal. Of a sudden a great wind, with heavy plashing drops of rain, swept roaring round the house, thick with dust and green leaves torn from the disheveled summer trees. There was a hush. The darkness intensified, and then a vast sheet of lightness seemed to picture all Kent in my eyes, and the air was full of water.¹³

Above all, *Memoirs of a Midget* is a book written by a poet, in which words and images weigh as much as character and plot. As the contemporary American writer Harry Mathews has said, it is "a perfect, utterly original novel, and no one but a poet could have written it. . . . The book is totally idiosyncratic and yet there isn't a line you couldn't identify yourself with."¹⁴

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Notes

1. T. S. Eliot, "To Walter de la Mare," in *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1963), 219–220.
2. *Memoirs of a Midget*, 23. (All references to *Memoirs of a Midget* cite pages in this Paul Dry Books edition.)
3. Walter de la Mare, "Maria Fly," in *The Magic Jacket* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962), 75.
4. De la Mare, "Rupert Brooke and the Intellectual Imagination" (1919), in *Pleasures and Speculations* (London: Faber and Faber, 1940), 176.
5. De la Mare, *The Listeners, and Other Poems* (London Constable and Company, 1912), 69–70.
6. *Memoirs of a Midget*, 15.
7. *Memoirs of a Midget*, 201.
8. *Memoirs of a Midget*, 351.
9. Theresa Whistler, *Imagination of the Heart: The Life of Walter de la Mare* (London: Duckworth, 1993), 123.
10. *Memoirs of a Midget*, 265.
11. *Memoirs of a Midget*, 260.
12. *Memoirs of a Midget*, 223.
13. *Memoirs of a Midget*, 42.
14. Harry Mathews, interview by John Ash, *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 7, no. 3 (fall 1987).