

The world according to the diminutive Miss M.

By Michael Dirda

Sunday, February 29, 2004; Page BW15

MEMOIRS OF A MIDGET

By Walter de la Mare

Paul Dry. 379 pp. Paperback, \$14.95

If you know Walter de la Mare's Peacock Pie -- and really you should, as it's one of the half-dozen best books of poetry for children ever written -- you will remember poor Jim Jay, who "got stuck fast/ In yesterday." No matter how hard his friends pulled, Jim slowly slipped away from the present. When last glimpsed, he had become a mere speck and soon would be "past crying for." "Do diddle di do,/ Poor Jim Jay!"

And do diddle di do, poor Walter de la Mare (1873-1956). Except for that classroom standby "The Listeners" and the poems of Peacock Pie (" 'I'm tired -- oh, tired of books,' said Jack,/ 'I long for meadows green' "), the public has forgotten most of de la Mare's work. In the mid-1920s, though, he was frequently regarded as one of the three or four greatest living English writers, admired by such eminences as T.S. Eliot (who wrote a poem for his 75th birthday, praising his "conscious art practised with natural ease"). Now de la Mare seems -- if only to those who've never read the work -- solely a period author, "stuck fast in yesterday" with, say, John Masefield, Ellen Glasgow and James Branch Cabell. But like these others, de la Mare is in fact far more original and appealing than commonly believed.

Fans of the English ghost story rank his uncanny tales among the best ever written. "Seaton's Aunt" -- about a psychic vampire -- is probably the most famous; his other strange and dreamlike masterpieces, all evocatively titled, include "All Hallows," "The Riddle" and "Crewe," not to mention the full-length novel of possession *The Return*. For many years de la Mare's anthology *Come Hither* was the standard introduction to poetry for young people, just as his *Stories From the Bible* may still be the only children's version of scripture an adult might read for pleasure. I myself cherish copies of *Desert Islands*, with its introductory essay on that romantic topic, and *Behold, This Dreamer*, another idiosyncratic anthology, about reverie and poetic inspiration.

In his prose de la Mare sometimes surrenders to a lyrical, even long-winded chromaticism; he recalls German romantics like Novalis, hymning the night while his soul yearns after something it cannot name. "The protagonist of a typical de la Mare story," the critic John Clute has aptly written, "will discover that his life is a journey in which signposts point always to boundaries lying at the edge of his perception and beyond which may lie death, or a world of the imagination, or the fields of his true home. But whatever lies beyond the borderline, he will long for it. Shaken to attentiveness by dreams, reveries, hauntings, shocks of memory, or landscapes shaped to bring him to himself, the de la Mare protagonist will be seen to succeed, or fail, in a quest to make sense of the journey of life through an act of perception by which finally he is enabled genuinely to see the higher, true world."

Not too surprisingly, de la Mare's most fervent modern admirers have tended to be themselves explorers of the liminal, writers who pitch their stories on the shifting boundary between the real and the imagined -- that master of spiritual disquiet Robert Aickman; the linguistic surrealist Harry Mathews; the great English practitioner of magical realism Angela Carter, whose phantasmagoric *Nights at the Circus* clearly takes some of its inspiration from de la Mare's masterpiece, *Memoirs of a Midget*.

First published in 1921, this long novel offers the partial autobiography of Miss M. -- no full name is ever given -- who, at least physically, never grows up. Most of the book takes place during her 20th year, when Miss M. appears to be no more than two feet tall and sometimes even smaller -- she can be easily carried by a servant, and children sometimes mistake her for a doll; at one point she worries that a ripe pear falling from a tree might crush her. She is an only child, doted upon by her parents and relatively at ease with her small size, except when threatened by strangers or thwarted by adult-sized doors, utensils, porch steps. But the novel is only partly about Miss M.'s unusual perspective; it's a study of character and social mores, and of how damaged people confront the unyielding world.

In recent years we've had novels narrated by heroes with Tourette's syndrome and autism, so readers should quickly adjust to de la Mare's unexpected heroine. It's also useful to remember that the 1920s were, in Britain, a period when writers dabbled with literary fantasy and unusual perspectives. For instance, Aldous Huxley's *Crome Yellow* (also 1921) contains a chapter -- originally a short story, "Sir Hercules" -- about the disastrous effect of a full-sized and loutish son on refined and cultivated dwarf parents. David Garnett's *Lady into Fox* (1922) describes a man's attempt to carry on with his marriage after his wife is transformed, literally, into a vixen, a theme reprised, with a twist, by John Collier in his sardonic masterpiece, *His Monkey Wife* (1930). In effect, the age rebelled against the conventional Biedermeier tastes of the Edwardians.

Yet, for all its strangeness of perspective, *Memoirs of a Midget* may be regarded as one of the best novels that Henry James never wrote. Its narrative voice is often severe, formal, elliptical (and diffuse), so much so that the book might well have been called "What Miss M. Knew." A reader who fails to pay attention may overlook, for a long while, that Mrs. Bowater is not Fanny's real mother; that Mr. Anon is a hunchback; that Fanny herself probably needs money for an abortion; that the Reverend Mr. Crimble is going insane; and that Miss M. thinks a bit too well of herself. It is also, as in so much James, a book saturated with death, violence, madness and grotesquerie. "The world," writes Miss M., "wields a sharp pin, and is pitiless to bubbles." When her mother falls down from a seizure or stroke, the tiny Miss M. is helpless: She can't navigate the steps to wake her father for help. A man dressed as a woman dies when a horse falls on him at a circus. Another man cuts his own throat. In the end, as we learn in a foreword to the main narrative, Miss M. herself simply disappears, leaving a curt note in which she says, enigmatically, "I have been called away."

The harshness of life appears early on, even in Miss M.'s most pampered early days:

"As one morning I brushed past a bush of lad's love (or maiden's ruin, as some call it), its fragrance sweeping me from top to toe, I stumbled on the carcass of a young mole. Curiosity vanquished the first gulp of horror. Holding my breath, with a stick I slowly edged it up in the dust and surveyed the white heaving nest of maggots in its belly with a peculiar and absorbed recognition. 'Ah ha!' a voice cried within me, 'so this is what is in wait; this is how things are.' " From then on Miss M. often meditates on mortality: "It's only when the poor fish -- sturgeon or stickleback -- struggles, that he really knows he's in the net." Because of her size and sensitivity, she is forced to think unremittingly about life and the nature of things.

But all isn't gloom in this odd and disorienting book. Seeing Miss M., a small boy on a train asks, "Mamma, is that alive?" The mother, embarrassed, tries to divert the child's attention. But her little son insists, "But she is, mamma. It moved. I saw that move." Soon he is enamored and descends to pleading, "I want that, mamma . . . I want that dear little lady. Give that teeny tiny lady a biscuit." As Miss M. comments, it was "the only time in my life I actually saw a fellow creature fall in love."

After the death of her parents, Miss M. goes to live with Mrs. Bowater in a small town, where she at first stays largely to herself, except for wandering about at night to look at the stars or visit an abandoned, possibly haunted manor. Despite her efforts, townspeople sometimes glimpse her:

"Indeed, from what I have heard, the ill fame of Wanderslore acquired a still more piquant flavour in the town by reports that elf-folk had been descried on its outskirts."

At her new lodgings she eventually meets Fanny Bowater, at home from her job teaching in a provincial school. Fanny is beautiful, outspoken and wonderfully alive -- she's my favorite character, an unscrupulous Elizabeth Bennet ("Socialism, my dear, is all a question of shoes") -- and Miss M. falls desperately in love with her. Note that Miss M. is not a child; she's 20, roughly the same age as Fanny, but absolutely clear-eyed and pitiless. Miss Bowater toys with Miss M., whose passions are awakened to such a pitch that today's readers may be astonished at frank avowals of something far more than girlish friendship. But what do you expect from two young women who read *Wuthering Heights* together?

In due course, Fanny returns to her job, and Miss M. is taken up as a curiosity by the local gentry. She soon gets to know Mr. Crimble, a young clergyman infatuated with Fanny; an unnamed hunchback with whom she behaves as callously as Fanny does with Crimble; and the delicious Lady Pollacke:

"Every day I make a personal effort to commit some salient fact to memory -- such a fact, for a trivial example, as the date of the Norman Conquest. The consequence is, my husband tells me, I am a veritable encyclopedia. My father took after me. Alexander the Great, I have read somewhere, could address by name -- though one may assume not Christian name -- every soldier in his army. Thomas Babington Macaulay, a great genius, poor man, knew by heart every book he had ever read. A veritable mine of memory. On the other hand, I once had a parlour-maid, Sarah Jakes, who couldn't remember even the simplest of her duties, and if it hadn't been for my constant supervision would have given us port with the soup."

Though Miss M. remembers happy evenings with Mrs. Bowater ("the days melted away"), her life gradually grows more complex and dark. She is taken up by a grande dame in London who collects miniatures of all sorts. "The dews of her loving kindness descended on me in a shower, and it was some little time before I began to feel a chill." This Mrs. Monnerie's crass nephew calls her "toadlet" or worse, and she soon learns that "people actually suffered and endured the horrible things written about in cheap, common books." In the end, Miss M. loses, in one way or another, almost everyone she cares about. But then don't we all, sooner or later? As she eventually says of her beloved Fanny, "We were never again to be alone together, except in remembrance."

This semi-forgotten classic -- once regarded by more than one critic as, in Edward Wagenknecht's words, "the most distinguished novel that has come out of England in our time" -- is now again available, with a fine introduction by Alison Lurie. The publisher, Paul Dry Books, emblazons its publicity material with the motto "Books to Awaken, Delight and Educate." Walter de la Mare's *Memoirs of a Midget* certainly lives up to those words: It acts upon the reader like a ghostly visitation, at once unsettling and revelatory. •

Michael Dirda's email address is dirdam@washpost.com. His online discussion of books takes place each Wednesday at 2 p.m. on washingtonpost.com.