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**Editor's Choice | Moving 'Memoir' of a Midget
A 1921 novel takes an original perspective.**

**By Frank Wilson
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Memoirs of a Midget

By Walter de la Mare
Paul Dry Books. 379 pp. \$14.95

Originality is routinely touted as essential to artistic merit. So why isn't Walter de la Mare's *Memoirs of a Midget* better known? It's certainly original enough. Indeed, there's nothing else quite like it.

It may have something to do with how hard it is to put your finger on what exactly makes it so. It has nothing to do with either the form of the narrative or the style of the writing, neither of which is in any way innovative. In fact, though first published in 1921, *Memoirs of a Midget* reads as if it were written decades earlier - which is altogether appropriate, since the story is set during one of the later decades of the 19th century.

Nor does the novel's individuality have anything to do with the unusual stature of its protagonist. To be sure, Miss M. is quite small. Her exact dimensions are never given, but she is clearly a miniature, for whom ordinary stairs - and books - are hard to manage, and who frequently is carried about on a padded tray. I think it is safe to estimate her height at about 30 inches.

Her memoirs cover only the first 21 years of her life. They are found among her papers - "sealed up with her usual scrupulous neatness in numerous small, square, brown-paper packages" - after she suddenly disappears, leaving behind a brief and cryptic note: "I have been called away. -M."

Actually, that description of the neat packaging of the memoirs gives a clue as to what accounts most for the book's originality: the precise and profuse detail of its imagining. There is, for instance, a walk Miss M. takes with Mr. Anon, the dwarf who falls in love her:

We climbed the green-stained scaling steps from terrace to terrace, tufted with wallflower and snapdragon amongst the weeds, cushioned with bright moss, fretted with lichen. Standing there, side by side with him, looking up - our two figures alone, on the wide flowerless weed-grown terrace - hale, sour weeds some of them, shoulder-high - I scrutinized the dark, shut windows.

From the closeness of the moss and lichen to the shoulder-high weeds, the reader shares the perspective of two very small people who are climbing those terrace steps in a way quite different from how the rest of us would. De la Mare manages, quite subtly, to

maintain that perspective throughout, and by so doing makes it all seem utterly believable. De la Mare is said to have spoken of Miss M. as if she were a real person. He writes of her that way, too.

Most of the story takes place in the year following the death of Miss M.'s father, a loving but eccentric and financially imprudent man who squandered most of his fortune and left poor Miss M. with only a modest income. She rents a room from a Mrs. Bowater, whose husband is always away at sea and whose ambitious, heartless daughter, Fanny, becomes the object of Miss M.'s adoration. Miss M. soon discovers that she has been observed from afar by Mr. Anon, a misshapen dwarf, whose love for her she cannot requite.

In the meantime, wealthy Mrs. Monnerie has taken a fancy to Miss M. and has her come live with her in London. Miss M. becomes something of a star in society. But after a while, being a sort of live, performing piece of bric-a-brac causes her to become irritable and petulant. She is banished to Mrs. Monnerie's country house, runs away to join a circus, and ends up back with Mrs. Bowater.

So who was Walter de la Mare? Remembered nowadays, if at all, mostly as a poet, de la Mare (1873-1956) was a well-known literary figure in his day. Among his admirers was T.S. Eliot, and C.K. Scott-Moncrieff took the title for the sixth volume of his translation of Proust - *The Sweet Cheat Gone* - from de la Mare's poem "The Ghost." He is probably best-known today for his poem "The Listeners," about a "... Traveller, / Knocking on the moonlit door" of a house in a forest, while "only a host of phantom listeners... stood listening... ."

About 10 years before *Memoirs* was published, de la Mare fell in love with a woman named Naomi Royd-Smith. Theirs was a romance, not an affair, but no less passionate for that. *Memoirs*, too, is filled with passion and romance, but sex is altogether absent from it, would indeed spoil it.

Yet it is deeply moving. The love of Miss M. for Fanny is limned with an almost Proustian subtlety. The love of Mr. Anon for Miss M. is simply heartrending. De la Mare - who toiled for years as an accountant - is adept at dealing with the imbalance of payments that tends to characterize the economy of the heart. As Miss M. wonders toward the end, "What a strange thing that one must fall in love, couldn't jump in it."