

BOOK REVIEWS

Edward St Aubyn, *At Last*

Picador, London, 2011, £16.99; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York, 2012, \$25

The Patrick Melrose Novels: *Never Mind, Bad News, Some Hope* and *Mother's Milk*
Picador, New York, 2012, \$20

by Jeffrey Manley

At Last is the fifth, and said by its author to be the last, of his series of novels about Patrick Melrose. But he has said that before and has nevertheless kept on writing. For example, in an interview he once explained that he wrote the first draft of *Mother's Milk* about what he intended to be another character. When he reread it, however, he realized that the hero was still Patrick Melrose, and it was rewritten to become the fourth novel in the series. Some reviewers have also noted that his two non-Melrose novels had some very Melrosian overtones. For example, *On the Edge* (1998) is a satire in which several English characters visit a New Age resort on the US West Coast for a consciousness expansion/enhancement session. More than one of the characters in this novel shares Patrick's age, nationality, class and ironic outlook and could have easily been written in as Patrick himself. In the other novel, *A Clue to the Exit* (2000), about a writer (Charlie Fairburn) who is informed of his imminent death from a seemingly incurable disease, Patrick Melrose does in fact make a cameo appearance in the quoted excerpts from the novel-within-a-novel that Fairburn is writing as his last work.

Because the Melrose novels form a series of books extending from Patrick's childhood to his middle age, they have inevitably been compared to Powell's *Dance*. There are, it should be said from the outset, some fairly basic differences.



While Patrick is the hero of the novels, he is not the narrator. Much of the text is written from Patrick's point of view but some sections (especially in *Mother's Milk* and *At Last*) contain extensive passages written from other characters' perspectives. And the story of the novels is about Patrick and his family, unlike *Dance* where Nick Jenkins is less the subject than an observer. The Melrose novels also contain fewer references to the times in which they occur than do the *Dance* novels. Finally, the central theme of the books is the trauma of child abuse suffered by Patrick at the hands of his sadistic upper class English father and the neglect inflicted on him by his wealthy American mother, hardly something that would seem to interest Powell or his narrator.

Because, however, Patrick and St Aubyn share the ironic outlook of Nick Jenkins and Powell (in St Aubyn's case, often in even more extreme and unexpectedly comic forms), the books avoid becoming the usual victimization or dysfunctional family saga and exhibit a strong Powellian aura. Moreover, St Aubyn uses extended set pieces that bring the characters together to describe the action at a particular point of time in much the same way Powell does. Except for *Mother's Milk*, the action in the novels all occurs in a single day or two, much the same as happens in *A Buyers Market* and *The Soldiers Art*. *At Last* is the description of the funeral of Patrick's mother, *Some Hope* takes place over a weekend involving a country house party in the South of England, *Bad News* describes a two-day visit by Patrick to New York to collect his father's ashes and *Never Mind* describes one day during a summer vacation in France. *Mother's Milk* consists of a series of four sections describing from different characters' perspectives the events of Patrick's holidays each summer over a four-year period from 2000 to 2003.

The simultaneous publication of all five novels in the US, followed by the April republication of all five in the UK in individual uniform paperback editions, make it appropriate to consider them as a complete work. *Never Mind* sets out Patrick's childhood which begins with 5-year old Patrick enjoying seemingly idyllic happiness on his summer holiday at the villa in the South of France bought with his mother's inherited money. His father, David, is an upper class Englishman but seems to have inherited nothing from his family except his arrogance and cruelty. He married Patrick's mother, Eleanor, more for her inherited American fortune, which has survived but dwindled into its fourth generation, than for the love of

which both he and she seem incapable. Her attraction to David seems to be like a snake for a mongoose. He was trained as a physician but no longer needs to practice. Signs of cruelty appear in the early pages and culminate in his rape of Patrick halfway through.

In *Bad News* it is 1982 and Patrick is 22. He travels to New York to collect his father's ashes. This novel is even darker than *Never Mind* as Patrick, while relieved by his father's death, is in the grip of a drug and alcohol habit that seems to include every variety of addictive substance known to man. In *Some Hope*, eight years later, Patrick is studying to be a barrister and has brought his substance abuse problem under some degree of control. He has also developed some normal relationships with friends of both sexes. These are revealed in the course of a weekend party attended by Princess Margaret – depicted as an immature, self-centered, snobbish bore – and a legion of other guests from the margins of the English upper classes that provide ample opportunities for St Aubyn's satire.

In *Mother's Milk*, Patrick's inheritance diminishes year by year as his mother hands over her assets, including the estate in France, to an Irish New Age charlatan named (appropriately) Seamus Dourke. Patrick, now in his early 40s, has become a barrister living in London with his wife, Mary, and two young sons. Mary is insecure and overly attentive to her younger son, while ignoring Patrick, who is pursuing a number of affairs that he blames on her inattention, while she blames her obsessive attachment to her son on his infidelity, and so on. His substance abuse problem has resolved itself into alcoholism. By the end of the book his alcoholism explodes on a vacation trip to the US to visit members of his mother's

insufferable family as an alternative to the previously accustomed trips to France.¹

In the final novel, *At Last*, Patrick and Mary are living separately but still married after his treatment in the suicide observation unit at the depression wing of a London hospital. He is still a barrister but earns only enough to support his family in modest London housing, with his own relegation to a bed-sit. His mother's funeral, organized by Mary, brings together most of the leading characters from the previous novels who serve to remind Patrick of the miserable life which he has somehow survived. He withstands various temptations to drugs, drink, and infidelity and at the end seems to have controlled if not conquered his demons. Since, however, one cannot conceive of a Patrick Melrose novel with an entirely happy ending, there seems at least the possibility that he may yet lose that tenuous control in the future. In which case, we might well enjoy (if that's the right word in this instance) another sequel or at least a coda to the series.

The most Powellian of the novels are probably *Some Hope* and *At Last*, although parts of *Mother's Milk* would also be a contender.² These three are less dark and depressing than the first two (*Never Mind* and *Bad News*). One US reviewer has compared the funeral of Eleanor Melrose that takes up the whole of *At Last* to the Akworth-Cutts wedding in *Hearing Secret Harmonies* since it constitutes a roll call of the surviving characters from the earlier novels [James Wood, "Noble Savages," *New Yorker*, 27 February 2012]. But one could make the same comparison to the opera performance in *Temporary Kings*, the funeral of Erridge in *Books Do Furnish a Room* or the Victory Thanksgiving Service and diplomatic reception in *The Military Philosophers*, and so on back

through the *Dance* novels. Perhaps the Akworth-Cutts wedding is more like the funeral in *At Last* than are earlier *Dance* set pieces if only because they are both the last such gatherings to occur in each series.

It is equally true that the weekend country house party in *Some Hope* could be compared to any number of gatherings in the *Dance* novels such as parties at Lady Molly's, Mrs Foxe's reception after Moreland's concert, the "Seven Deadly Sins" weekend at Stourwater in *The Kindly Ones*, the "night of the three parties" in *A Buyer's Market* and the Café Royal dinner in *The Soldier's Art*. St Aubyn and Powell use these set pieces in much the same way, and even where a single event does not take up the whole novel, as in *Mother's Milk*, they afford the opportunity for reopening, resolving or continuing action begun, or revisiting characters introduced in earlier books or chapters.

Bad News and *Never Mind* are, on the other hand, so dark that whatever comic relief and irony manage to escape from the story are at risk of getting lost in the gloom. Nicholas Pratt and Victor Eisen, friends of David Melrose, provide most of the comedy in *Never Mind*, while Patrick's ironic reactions to his father's death somewhat lighten the pages of *Bad News* as well as all succeeding novels. Even the dreariest scenes are capable, however, of engendering some degree of irony. For example, just after his horrific beating and rape of Patrick, David Melrose thinks to himself that he may have

pushed his disdain for middle-class prudery too far. Even at the bar of the Cavalry and Guards Club one couldn't boast about pedophilia, homosexual incest with any confidence of a favorable reception. Who could he tell that he had raped

his five-year-old son? He could not think of a single person who would not prefer to change the subject – and some far worse than that. The experience itself had been brutish but not altogether nasty. [*Never Mind*, 55]

Later in that novel, after his mother has allowed David to bully her into withholding any consolation from the distraught Patrick, she makes out a check to her favorite charity, the *Save the Children Fund* [*Never Mind*, 72]. In *Bad News* [194], one of his father's friends remarks to Patrick, in an attempt to speak well of the dead, that he never knew Patrick's father to lose his appetite, to which Patrick replies, "No, it was the one thing about him that was reliable". When the mortician's assistant opens his father's coffin for identification, Patrick's reaction is recorded with the irony that is typical of his attitude whenever his dead father is mentioned:

They had covered the body with tissue paper. It lay in the coffin like a present some one had put down halfway through unwrapping. 'It's dad,' muttered Patrick incredulously, clasping his hands together and turning to an imaginary friend. 'You shouldn't have!'

After several pages in which Patrick ingests and injects overdoses of cocaine, heroin, amphetamines and tranquilizers, not to mention several strong alcoholic cocktails, he has an attack of nausea in which he

recognized traces of last night's dinner and, with his stomach already empty, knew that he would soon be bringing up that sour yellow bile which gave vomiting its bad name.

St Aubyn also shares Powell's ability to build irony into dialogue as another means of relieving tension. These dialogues are most frequent in the dinner party in *Never Mind*, the country house weekend in *Some Hope* (which is almost entirely made up of such dialogues), and the reception after his mother's funeral in *At Last*. They are also scattered throughout *Mother's Milk*. One of the best of these is the scene in that novel [181-85] where Seamus comes to greet Patrick at the French villa that Patrick's mother is gradually making over to Seamus's control. Patrick has learned that Seamus intends to house some of his staff in the villa where Patrick's family had expected to spend their holiday. He begins by offering Seamus a coffee, which Seamus declines. Patrick then responds:

"Well, I hope you don't mind if I go ahead and abuse some caffeine without you".

"Be my guest," said Seamus. "Is that what I am?" asked Patrick, like a greyhound out of the slips. "Or are you in fact my guest this time of the year? That's the crux of the matter. You know the terms of my mother's gift included letting us have the house for August, and we're not going to put up with having your friends billeted on us".

"Well, now, 'terms' is a very legalistic way of putting it," said Seamus.

"There's nothing in writing about the Foundation providing you with a free holiday. I have a genuine sympathy for the trouble you've had in accepting your mother's wishes.

That's why I've been prepared to put up with a lot of negativity from your side".

"We're not discussing the trouble I've had with my mother's wishes, but the trouble you're having with them. Let's not stray from the subject".

"They're inseparable".

"Everything looks inseparable to a moron".

"There's no need to get personal. They're inseparable because they both depend on knowing what Eleanor wanted".

"It's obvious what she wanted. What isn't clear is whether you can accept the part that doesn't suit you".

"Well, I have a more global vision than you, Patrick. I see the problem in holistic terms. I think we should all do a solution together ... Perhaps we could do a ritual expressing what we bring to this community and what we expect to take from it".

And so on for three more pages. Despite Patrick's eloquence and irony, Seamus (who manages to sound Irish even without the help of an accent) prevails as the result of Eleanor's spineless senility (or senile spinelessness) and she disinherits Patrick from even the summer holidays at the villa. As soon as Eleanor has signed everything over to him, Seamus dumps her out as well, forcing her to return penniless to England where she is placed in a nursing home to live out what is left of her life.

The "consciousness" sessions that Seamus offers through his New Age "Transpersonal Foundation" are part of a theme that runs throughout the Melrose novels in much the same way that the charismatic occultism of Dr Trelawny, Mrs Erdleigh and Scorp Murtlock keeps cropping up in the *Dance* novels. Consciousness is the special subject of Victor Eisen, the social-climbing philosophy don who is David Melrose's token Jewish "friend". He is working on a psychobabble text book in *Never Mind* and has become a guest professor at Columbia when Patrick visits his wife Anne in *Bad*

News. Unlike David's other friends, Victor and Anne seem to see through him after observing his behavior toward his wife and child at the villa in France. Patrick's best friend (and former fellow drug addict) is Johnny Hall, in the later novels a practicing psychoanalyst and a fairly solid source of support on which Patrick can depend. In *Mother's Milk*, however, the New Age consciousness quack Seamus has no redeeming features. While Seamus lacks the charisma of Dr Trelawny and Scorp Murtlock, he is nevertheless possessed of their skill at manipulating his followers by other means. In Eleanor's case, he plays on her guilt at possessing a fortune she did nothing to earn and on her weakness for spending it on good works. With a sap like Eleanor, who needs charisma? (as Patrick himself might have put it). In *At Last* [69], Patrick's wife has an affair with a lugubrious Cambridge philosophy don named Erasmus Price who has written a book entitled *None the Wiser: Developments in the Philosophy of Consciousness*. Patrick discovers their liaison when he sees Price's book by her bedside, concluding that she wouldn't "be reading that book unless [she] was having an affair with the author". Mary

realized with vague disgust that [Patrick] was pleased to have the huge weight of his infidelity alleviated by her trivial contribution to the other side of the scale.

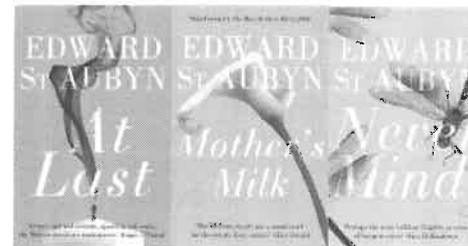
Victor Eisen has a near death experience which he feels compelled to describe in terms of his consciousness theory, and Patrick delivers drunken lectures on consciousness to Mary. Even his six-year-old son Thomas begins to spout consciousness jargon.

This near obsession with consciousness is not confined to St Aubyn's Melrose

novels. In *A Clue to the Exit* the characters in the novel-within-the-novel (including Patrick, as well as Crystal who first appeared in *On the Edge*) meet on a train from Oxford where they have been attending a consciousness conference. In *On the Edge*, St Aubyn does for Los Angeles and the California consciousness "industry" what Evelyn Waugh 50 years earlier had done for that same city and its film and mortician industries. Here's how one of the British characters participating in a consciousness seminar describes Los Angeles:

One day the whole world was going to look like Los Angeles, he decided, not a city or the absence of a city, but ruined countryside, with houses squeezed between highways which never tired of whispering the lie that it was more interesting to go somewhere than be here. The entire westward move of American history seemed to have piled up on the beach, and the descendants of wagon-crazed pioneers, refusing to accept completely the restraint of the world's widest ocean, frantically patrolled the edge of the West, like lemmings in therapy. [*On the Edge*, 77-78]

St. Aubyn continues his satirization of America (more Waugh than Powell) in the "August 2003" section of *Mother's Milk*. Having been ousted from the villa in France, Patrick takes the family for a holiday in the New England homes of his mother's family. When they arrive in New



York for a stopover, the hotel has no room service so they have to forage in a grocery:

I couldn't find any oats that taste of oats or apples that taste of apples, only oats that taste of apples. And cinnamon to blend with the toothpaste. A less sober man might end up brushing his teeth with oats, or having a bowl of cinnamon for breakfast – without noticing ... If there aren't any additives they boast about that too. I saw a packet of camomile tea that said "Caffeine Free". Why would camomile have any caffeine in it? [*Mother's Milk*, 204]

When the family stays with Aunt Nancy in Connecticut, Patrick consumes too much of the Maker's Mark bourbon from the drinks tray, leaving a gap in the bottle too large to be ignored:

The logical thing to do was to take the bottle upstairs and pour the rest of it into the depleted bottle hidden in his rucksack, and then nip into town and buy another one for Nancy's drinks table. He would of course have to make convincing inroads into the new bottle so that it resembled the old bottle before he had almost finished it ... [The liquor store] had three sizes of Maker's Mark. Not knowing which one he was supposed to replace, Patrick bought all three... Practically anything was less complicated than being a successful alcoholic. [*Mother's Milk*, 227, 229]

The importance of irony, such as that evidenced in the foregoing quotations, is something on which the characters of the novels also themselves offer comment. In *At Last* [60-61] Patrick confesses to his former mistress Julia that irony

is the hardest addiction of all ... Forget heroin. Just try giving up irony, that deep-down need to mean two things at once, to be in two places at once, not to be there for the catastrophe of a fixed meaning.

When Julia pleads with him at least "to leave her a little sarcasm," Patrick responds, "Sarcasm doesn't count. It means only one thing: contempt". In *Never Mind* [71], the American Anne Eisen is disturbed to recall, after the stressful dinner party at the Melroses, having herself been lured into making an ironic reference to the showers at Auschwitz:

She felt she had been perverted by the slick and lazy English manners, the craving for the prophylactic of irony, the terrible fear of being 'a bore', and the boredom of the ways they relentlessly and narrowly evaded this fate.

Both St Aubyn and Powell are careful to set their extended stories in actual time by inserting markers in the text that identify the amount of time that has passed from one novel to the next. In both cases they track the ages of the characters as the story progresses. St Aubyn also makes frequent use of Powell's device of mentioning a song, book, or painting (or often, in St Aubyn's case, a film) which may provide a reference point to fix in place the current or an earlier time or may have some less serious purpose. In *At Last*, Gershwin's *I Got Plenty of Nuthin'* from *Porgy and Bess*, identified in an earlier novel as one of Eleanor's favorite songs, is played at her funeral, the words quoted at length so as to impress on the reader's mind their ironic applicability to Patrick's disinheritance. When her coffin is dispatched to the furnace, Frank Sinatra's

voice is heard singing, with equal irony, *Fly Me To the Moon*. In both cases the performance of these songs is followed by the thoughts their quoted lyrics evoke in the minds of various characters who are present at the funeral. In *Some Hope*, there is a subplot involving the authentication of a painting as an original by Poussin, which may be intended as a playful allusion to *Dance*.

St Aubyn fabricates satirical book titles in a few instances that remind one of Powell's much more extensive use of this device. For example, Victor Eisen writes two books on consciousness theory: *Thinking, Knowing and Judging* and *Being, Knowing and Judging*. He says that the similarity of the titles is intended "to keep his students on their toes". The title of Erasmus Price's book (*supra*) is another example. St Aubyn extends this device to drug names and labels. Johnny Hall in *At Last* [202] refers to a new drug called

Xywyz, a breakthrough medication that employs only the last four letters of the alphabet ... Do not take Xywyz if you are using water or other hydrating agents. Possible side effects include blindness, incontinence, aneurism, liver failure, dizziness, skin rash, depression, internal haemorrhaging, and sudden death.

St Aubyn makes fewer references to historical events (the 9/11 attacks being one exception – he needs those to enable Patrick to start an argument with his Cousin Henry). He is also less inclined than Powell to give specific place references, although he does mention Patrick's London residence before his marriage as Ennismore Gardens which may be intended as another Powell reference (more likely a coincidence).

That is the location in SW7 of All Saints Church where the Powells were married in 1934. In *At Last* (Chapters 9-10), the car journeys of the characters from the crematorium somewhere in Kew or North Sheen over the Chiswick Bridge to the fictional Onslow Club (in the real Onslow Gardens) in South Kensington, pass various real-life London landmarks that bring up memories of past events or ironic thoughts about the present. For example, as they pass the Fulham and Hammersmith and then the Chiswick cemeteries, Patrick thinks of the

Acre upon acre of gravestones
mocking the real-estate ambitions of
riverside developers. Why should
death, of all nothings, take up so
much space? [*At Last*, 168]

Sometimes, however, St Aubyn's grasp of geography seems a bit shaky. For example, his New York cab driver crosses the Williamsburg Bridge from Long Island to Manhattan when taking Patrick from JFK Airport to the Pierre Hotel on East 61st Street at Fifth Avenue, when the 59th St Bridge would seem a much more obvious choice. Perhaps the driver was lost or was running up the meter. Patrick was, I believe, sober at the time.

St Aubyn also sometimes designs a character's name to convey some hint of his personality, as in Seamus Dourke or Nicholas Pratt, but makes less use of this practice than does Powell. Fewer of St Aubyn's characters, aside from Patrick's immediate family, develop fully over the course of the novels than is the case with Powell's. This is especially true of Patrick's numerous girl friends or mistresses whose appearances are somewhat fleeting (as they were perhaps in Patrick's life). Two other women, Bridget Watson-Scott (first seen as a

Sloane-ish girl friend of Nicholas Pratt) and Anne Eisen (Victor's American mistress and later his wife), offer interesting possibilities but neither realizes what would seem to be her full potential. There are no Jean Templers or Gipsy Joneses or Pamela Flittons in St Aubyn's Melrose novels.

A few secondary characters reach Powellian proportions through their reappearances over time. These would include the snobbish, gossipy Nicholas Pratt (who is unable to gain admission to the London club of that name), the social climbing Victor Eisen, and Patrick's Aunt Nancy who shares with Uncle Giles a resentment over her inheritance (limited unfairly in her mind to \$15,000 per month which she sometimes runs through on the way home from the bank), as well as a political quirkiness and a tendency to offer on every appearance an occasion for comedy. And the somewhat enigmatic Fleur, a manic-depressive who arrives uninvited and unmedicated at the reception after Eleanor's cremation, could have stepped right out of a Powell novel. Her appearance in Chapters 12 and 13 of *At Last* sets off two of the most comic passages in the book as she asks Nicholas Pratt what mental illness he suffers from and indirectly deprives Aunt Nancy of her expected ride home in Pratt's limo, increasing her sense of unfair deprivation.

Over all, there is much besides the fact that the Melrose novels were written as a series over a period of nearly 20 years that would recommend them to Powell fans. The satire and the irony work to lighten the darkness of the child abuse, substance abuse and familial dysfunction that drive the plot. The main problem is to get past the first two books, or really the second (*Bad News*) which is much the darker of the two. In the final analysis, I would

suggest that if the detailed descriptions of the injections of controlled substances into the “unhealthy canvas” of Patrick’s arm and the painful effects of the overdoses on his body become unbearable, simply skip ahead after Chapter 5 and go straight on to *Some Hope*. You will miss some good passages but you can always go back and pick those up later. I don’t believe there is anything in those chapters that is essential to the plot (such as it is – you already know Patrick will make it home because of there being three more volumes) or that any characters are introduced that later become important. Perhaps a special edition of that novel aimed at the hopelessly squeamish would suggest itself as a marketing tool. But I’m squeamish and I survived. And I actually enjoyed *Bad News* much more the second time (as was the case with *Hearing Secret Harmonies*) because I knew what was coming and could easily avoid the worst of it. I would not suggest skipping *Never Mind*, however, because the early years of Patrick and his hideous parents are what the story is about. That book is dark but not unbearable. And you will get over it, just as Patrick did, and can then luxuriate in the Powellian splendours of the last three novels.

¹ A feature film of *Mother’s Milk*, written and directed by Gerald Fox, was previewed at the May 2011 Hay Festival and shown again in Autumn 2011 at the Cornwall Film Festival, but no release date has been announced at this writing (March 2012).

² In the US the first three novels appeared together in 2003 as *Some Hope: a Trilogy* in a combined paperback edition. Page references to those novels are to that edition. They were apparently never published separately in the US as they were in the UK where those three books were published in 1992, 1993 and 1994, respectively. Page references to *Mother’s Milk* and *At Last* are to the first London editions. ■