

'They can find me in all my books'

Joyce Morgan, *The Countess From Kirribilli*, Allen & Unwin, 2021, 344 pages, paperback ISBN 9781760875176, AUD \$32.99 (UK Kindle edition £7.34)

Writing a biography of Elizabeth von Arnim has its challenges. The enigmatic popular author was notoriously guarded when it came to her private life. 'Elizabeth wanted as little known about herself as possible,' Joyce Morgan writes in *The Countess From Kirribilli*: so much so that von Arnim's first book, *Elizabeth and Her German Garden* (1898), was published anonymously. Her subsequent books were simply accredited to the author of the first, and 15 of her eventual 21 books had already been published before she consented to give her first press interview in 1926. And then what did the disarming author say? That she did not understand the public's hunger for information: 'But *why* should they know? What is there to tell them anyhow?' she complained: 'They can find me in all my books.' The interviewer colluded over the tea table, writes Morgan, and the resultant article revealed little about Elizabeth's life not already known in a piece 'long on flowery descriptions... and short on insight' (p. 233). The same cannot be said for Morgan's book, which is a welcome addition to the handful of biographies already written about Elizabeth since her death in 1942; particularly the first, *Elizabeth of the German Garden* (1958), written by Elizabeth's daughter, Liebet, under the pseudonym Leslie de Charms, and Jennifer Walker's 2013 book of same name, subtitled *A Literary Journey* (re-released on Kindle this year).

Morgan's book has a very different flavour to its predecessors. Where the first offers both the benefits and drawbacks of having been written by a close relative, and the second is a detailed study peppered with literary insight gleaned from the relatively recent scholarly examination of von Arnim's work, this new biography celebrates Elizabeth's standing as a successful popular author – or, as Morgan describes her, 'the mysterious and free-spirited literary sensation who beguiled the world'. It is clearly aimed at a wide audience, from those already familiar with Elizabeth to those with only a cursory awareness of her writing; in the spirit of which it skips along apace through her formative years, her first marriage at age 23 to the 37-year-old widower Count Henning August von Arnim-Schlagenthin, and the delivery in quick succession of three of their eventual five children, to arrive (on page 44) at the publication of her first book at the age of 32.

Readers familiar with Elizabeth's story might not be surprised at this. Information concerning her early years is scarce and rather dependent on the journals and letters of her father who was prone to wanderlust, leaving the family on several occasions in the care of his wife for months on end while he travelled unencumbered. New readers, on the other hand – particularly those attracted by the allusion to Elizabeth's Australian roots in its title – might well be disappointed to find that though she was born on 31 August 1866 in Kirribilli, New South Wales, to London-born merchant Henry Herron Beauchamp and his Tasmanian-born wife, 'Louey' Lassetter (and, incidentally, christened Mary Annette, not 'Elizabeth' which became her penname), the whole family leave the antipodes for England (page 6) and Elizabeth never returns. Indeed, Morgan says Elizabeth 'did not retain any particular affection for Australia' and did not 'claim to be an Australian' (page 264). Perhaps this influenced Morgan's decision to relegate her maternal family history to an appendix when it is neither overlong nor would have made the book top heavy had it been included in the first chapter.

Once Elizabeth's pen starts to flow, however, so does this book. Morgan captures the excitement around publication of *German Garden* and press speculation as to the identity of its anonymous author. Though the decision to publish anonymously was necessitated by Elizabeth's position as the wife of a Prussian count, it quickly became an asset, giving the budding author freedom to express with acerbic wit her urbane observations that led reviewers to draw comparisons with Jane Austen and prompted writer Frank Swinnerton to comment that, though whimsical, her books were 'far from innocuous' (page 41). 'She mined her life for the raw material from which she constructed situations, characters and incidents,' Morgan explains (page 40), recognising this as a paradox in one whose desire for privacy bordered on secrecy.

The setting of Elizabeth's first two books was her own home – the remote Pomeranian *schloss*, Nassenheide, that Henning inherited from his father. All inhabitants and guests she considered fair game; most notably, her husband, who appears simply as the Man of Wrath and to whom she dedicated her second book 'with some apologies and much love' (page 47). The arrival soon after its publication of two soon-to-be-very-well-known authors – E. M. Forster, followed by Hugh Walpole – as tutors for their children, provides early evidence that her penchant for teasing – tormenting, even – was not merely restricted to print. Elizabeth has three moods, said Walpole: Charming – 'like her books only more so'; Ragging – 'Now she is unmerciful – attacks you on every side ... until you are

reduced to idiocy'; and Silence – 'the most terrible of all' (pages 76-7).

Morgan relays all this without attempting to explain, sugarcoat, analyse or interpret. She makes effective use of Elizabeth's private journal to describe events that informed and influenced her writing. Many of Elizabeth's books tackled issues pertinent to women of her time: 'she repeatedly challenged women's position in society as well as marriage and domesticity as a woman's life goal,' Morgan tells us (page 59), giving nothing more than the briefest sketch of their plotlines and avoiding analysis that can be found elsewhere. Morgan also draws from the journal evidence of Elizabeth's perpetual self-doubt in her writing abilities ('Mixed feelings – chiefly disgust' (page 47)) – a demon she struggled with throughout her career – which is juxtaposed effectively with the largely positive reviews of her books. After Henning's death in 1910, Morgan notes, Elizabeth symbolically 'shed the outer skin of Mary; the name she had been given at birth' and took on the name of her fictional creation, both publicly and privately as she increasingly moved in London's literary and social circles.

The widowed Elizabeth sold Nassenheide and built herself a chalet in the Swiss mountains where she could write and entertain and where her conflicting need for company and solitude constantly clashed. Friendship with cousin Katherine Mansfield, a tempestuous relationship with H. G. Wells, and disastrous marriage to Bertrand Russell's older brother, Frank, followed. Here in particular – if not, indeed, through much of Elizabeth's adult life – Morgan had paths to navigate as dicey as the one leading to Elizabeth's chalet door which she mercilessly mocked Frank's objection to, with plenty of opportunities to slip up: the 'embroidered and fabricated' (page 276) version Elizabeth presented of her life in her autobiographical *All the Dogs of My Life* (1936); the frankly saucy and possibly exaggerated tale of their affair written by Wells and published posthumously as 'The Episode of Little e' in *Wells in Love* (1984), and a 1986 biography containing errors and embellishments that would have horrified Elizabeth, which Morgan, discretely, does not name. On the whole, Morgan manages well, correcting errors and highlighting differences between these published accounts and Elizabeth's private journal. Occasional slips (Frank 'dabbled with cocaine' (page 108) and 'ran munitions factories' during the Great War (page 159)) are forgivable, given the magnitude of others she effectively sidestepped. As Frank Russell's biographer, I admit, I approach new accounts of their relationship written by Elizabeth enthusiasts with a certain amount of trepidation. This one is essentially fair; yet perhaps their mutual attraction might have been more

understandable if Frank's more appealing tastes and qualities had been recognised. All the men in Elizabeth's life appear here as rather shadowy figures: Henning is the Prussian Count, Frank the Wicked Earl – necessary shorthand, perhaps, but potentially misleading – and the relationship with her father, so influential, is not examined. Surely Elizabeth's comment that she needed a war and a second marriage to really grow up, and her subsequent very different relationship with publisher Alexander Frere, invite greater inquiry. Likewise, passing friendships – such as with Bertie Russell, who played an important part in Elizabeth's life (as she did in his during his incarceration in Brixton Prison) as her marriage with Frank fell apart – are fairly quickly dispatched. This is in keeping with the pace of the book, but may well leave readers wanting more. Morgan mentions but does not comment on Elizabeth's habit of revisiting old haunts – even those with bad memories. Elizabeth falls silent, she tells us, in the darkest moments of her life; and Morgan makes no attempt to intrude. As such, one is left with the impression that this is a biography that might have delved deeper but is nevertheless thoroughly entertaining, and one of which Elizabeth herself might well have approved: plenty enough levity; just enough barbs. 'They can find me in all my books'? They can certainly find her here.

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Author of *Bertrand's Brother* (Amberley, 2021)

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