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PICTURING WILL

By Ann Beattie

Random House

Since Margaret Atwood's now-famous 1982 comment, "A new Beattie is almost like a fresh bulletin from the front," Ann Beattie's books have often disconcerted readers. Her style evolves, her subjects change; where, they demand, is the old Ann Beattie.

She is right where she always was, at the front. It's the front that keeps shifting, and she stalks its movement. In *Picturing Will*, her stunning fourth novel, the front lies in the relationship of parent and child in a contemporary world where traditional family and sexual roles are newly fractured, where men speak proudly of emotional involvement in raising a child. Among the many things this book achieves so masterfully, it heralds into literature a liberation of the male's full nurturing capacity.

Beattie, as ever, concedes little to our expectations of fiction. She has no fixed protagonist and just a shadowy linear plot. By the last page, we may feel we have just experienced a photo essay as much as a novel. Five year-old Will is less a protagonist, more a photographic subject. As the ironic title suggests, the book reveals how Will is pictured by the people who stand in various degrees of parental relationship to him. Beattie shifts among their points of view as if changing lenses. Will lives in Charlottesville, Virginia with his mother, Jody. His natural father, Wayne, left them "unexpectedly and silently" years earlier and lives with his third wife, Corky, in Florida. Jody's lover and Will's hopeful stepfather, Mel, works in a New York City art gallery. Who of them will prove the most caring and responsible parent figure? Beattie's subtle indirection keeps us turning to find out.

Jody, the most sympathetic character of the book's first section, "Mother," appears likeliest. A sought-after wedding photographer aspiring to fame, Jody seems a passionately dedicated mother. In her art, she even shares some of Beattie's aesthetic, the same emphasis on the seemingly casual detail that illuminates the whole, "photographs that revealed what she knew about the world in 1989." Yet we wonder who in this mother-child relationship needs the other more: "Without [Will], she would have perished. Only a baby—someone who truly needed her care—could have made her rise to the occasion. Held tightly against her chest, Will became her buffer against the world."

Not for a second do we feel the child belongs with Wayne, the ostensible subject of the second section, "Father," who even reads books only "to reinforce the limits of what he believed." Painted in detail as a shiftless philanderer, Wayne is a self-absorbed misogynist. Having left two wives, he contemplates leaving the benign Corky. Meanwhile, he sleeps with one woman because he dislikes her son and another simply because, like Mt. Everest, she is there. Beattie uses Wayne's sexual prowess itself to divulge his character, as he commits at least one act impossible for any man with a spine. He sees his son merely as the "envoy" of his mother. When he had walked the floor with the infant Will, "it was the pacing of the prisoner in the courtyard." Even to the kind-hearted Corky, who desperately

wants to have a child with Wayne, Will is only "the small boy who would determine her future."

But then there is Mel, Jody's lover. Seldom has a character risen from tamer promise to nobler fulfillment. He is at the start a patient lover, attentive to Will, admired by Jody for being "genuinely gracious," as good but as flavorless as Galahad. An unsuccessful novelist, Mel, unlike Jody, distinctly does *not* share Beattie's aesthetic: "He had tried to write for the wrong reason: to exorcise demons instead of trying to court them and see if, in a fair fight, they won out or the writer did." He arranges the New York opportunity that launches Jody toward celebrity, he drives Will to visit his father, he marries Jody after she moves to New York, but we do not until the end come to fully appreciate Mel. Only then do we comprehend the parts of him we'd observed all along without realizing they were his.

And only then do we see the breadth of this novel's artistry.

Since her first two books were published in 1976, Ann Beattie has been both credited with and blamed for the current vogue of minimalism. Truly enough, her imitators have been guilty of a flat, banal prose that deals with the surface of things while hoping the reader will detect icebergs of meaning beneath, a style whose true roots lie in Hemingway.

Beattie's, however, is an elegant sparseness. Its artistic justification is perhaps best explained by Valéry, whom Beattie quotes: "It seems to me that the soul, when alone with itself and speaking to itself, uses only a small number of words, none of them extraordinary. This is how we recognize that there *is* a soul at that moment." Because it is easy to write flat, banal prose, there are shelves of bad minimalist writing out there masquerading as art. Many derivative photographers snap a street scene and claim that, like Cartier-Bresson, they have captured "the decisive moment" too. But, like Cartier-Bresson and Hemingway, Beattie is unique, and a painstaking artist. She places words in a sentence with a surgeon's care. In this novel she laces several italicized passages throughout the novel. These powerful meditations, composed with crystalline beauty and haunting truth, about the cares, joys, fears and purpose of raising a child, are the most skillful expression of a parent's inner world I have ever read.

We assume initially that these reflections, which turn out to be journal entries, are Jody's. But soon we are not sure. Jody shifts slowly from faithful mother to harried one, then from mother to celebrity. She grows increasingly ambitious and egocentric, and at the end, when Will tries to tell her of a traumatic experience involving her patron she refuses to listen.

So we are not amazed to learn that the most loving figure in Will's life has been Mel all along. The journal entries are his. He had originally seen Will as useful in wooing Jody—he claims no unwarranted virtue—but he, more than Jody, became the completely devoted parent: "I didn't see you as a hurdle," his journal states. "You were the simple stepping-stone to her heart. Then, to my surprise, I started to love you." The final picture in this photo essay comes clear and completes the puzzle. There are photos left over, many pieces that haven't fit, for Beattie remains photographically true to life even in conceding that life has no tidy unifying pattern. Chekhov, after all, was speaking of plays, not life,

when he declared that a gun introduced in Act I must go off before the end of Act III. Many guns in Beattie never go off but just lie around troublingly, as in life.

We are left at the close of this magnificent book with a mixture of joy and disquietude, its power only then beginning to shake us. For Beattie, so frequently cited as the pre-eminent writer of her generation, has not provided us with all the answers. She has performed a higher service, directing us toward the important questions.