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The Chymical Wedding

By Lindsay Clarke

Alfred A. Knopf. 544 pp.

By the time, say halfway through, when we start wanting to resist Lyndsay Clarke's absorbing novel it is too late. Clarke has already drawn us too deeply into the six intriguing main characters and the rich gothic folds of plot. We are willing by then to make concessions.

And concessions need to be made, for British novelist Clarke's *The Chymical Wedding* has ambitious intellectual and spiritual designs on us, many arcane and Jungian axes to grind. We suspect, in fact, that Clarke hopes to teach us how to live. Fortunately, he is far more intent on telling us a story.

Alex Darken, the narrator, arrives in the tiny English village of Munding seeking to rebuild his life. A poet who has "dried," teaching in a university position that is "a cage where the wild man in [him] fretted and chafed," he is just-cuckolded and just-divorced. Darken is ripe for the peregrine adventure offered him by the couple he first encounters in naked loveplay in the woods, the aged poet Edward Nesbit and Nesbit's beautiful young mistress, Laura.

Long before, Nesbit had been Darken's idol, a "half-legendary" poet whose lines, Darken says, "had seared across my sky like a prophetic shower of meteors." Now Nesbit is "a colourful and dissolute wordsmith whose early promise of grandeur had burned itself out into silence." Laura, whom others find pretty "but ill-educated, with an almost barbarous disregard for culture," mesmerizes and enchants Darken, both by her vibrant beauty and her gift for psychometry, her "ability to divine from an object the qualities of the person who has been most strongly in contact with it."

Nesbit and Laura are investigating and hoping to continue the alchemy studies conducted in Munding a century and a half earlier by Henry Agnew and his extraordinary daughter, Louisa. The plot doubles.

In alternating chapters, Clarke relates the stories of Darken, Nesbit and Laura and of Agnew, Louisa and the town's new minister, Edward Frere. Although separated by five generations, the stories of each trio are so closely parallel as to risk feeling contrived. Like Darken, Frere suffers marital torment and seeks redemption. Like Nesbit, Agnew is an aging poet too far into winter to get his most important work done. Like Laura, Louisa is stunning and possessed of occult gifts. Like that between Darken and Laura, the sexual tension between Frere and Louisa threatens to destroy a momentous project.

Henry Agnew struggles in the late 1840s to create his magnum opus, an epic poem drawing together the cumulative wisdom of alchemists through the ages. But he

cannot write it. His devoted daughter secludes herself in a nearby cabin to write a prose treatise that will serve as the preface, preparing the world for her father's work. She succeeds, too well. Unable to write his epic, her father finds Louisa's achievement "an insult to his dignity . . . endless reproach for his own unworthiness." He refuses to look at her finished draft. When he finally does read the published version, he feels she has given too much of the abstruse mysteries away and decides her book must be destroyed.

It is Louisa's book which Nesbit and Laura, joined by Darken, hope to find or recreate. Their quest generates compelling suspense. So, too, does wondering where the sympathetic attractions of Darken to Laura and of Frere to Louisa will lead. We have, then, a detective mystery and two love triangles, affectingly rendered and masterfully interwoven, a difficult book to lay aside.

We come closest to wanting to at those moments when the novel grows pedantic. As three of the six main characters are poets, Clarke's gaggle of poetic allusions becomes forgivable. But the esoteric references grow swampy. Clarke has researched alchemy thoroughly--which does not keep him from a slip or two, such as vastly oversimplifying the gnostics--but he shares obscure names rather than enigmatic wisdom and tells us more than we need or wish to know. His research creaks.

And he has a doctrine to advance.

Clarke joins the swelling number of contemporary seers whose dogma evolves from the seminal theories of Carl Jung. Clarke's characters examine dreams, explore their psyches for symbols and imagery, and heed moments of synchronicity. The strongest Jungian influence, the one that draws several characters toward their ultimate insight, is the goal of integrating the *anima* and *animus*, the feminine side of the male personality and masculine side of the female. Clarke, like Blake, sees the need for accommodating contrary states and finds in this integration a key to order in the universe, the re-union of our estranged body and spirit. This is "the chymical wedding of the androgynous human soul." That he labels the male principle "Idea" and the female "Mystery" opens him to feminist attack he will have to weather on his own, but his tenacity in preaching the goal of integrating our fragmented nature grows admirable.

The Chymical Wedding creates an engrossing world. At times, it may seem intended for classroom discussion (the allegorical quality of many names, its heavy-handed symbolism) or for Hollywood (the deft scene shifting between two gothic romances), but Clarke's description is opulent and his dialogue finely textured. However Aquarian his thought, Clarke's prose echoes the Victorians. The book reads like something we might expect from George Eliot after she'd spent a year interning at *The New Age Journal*. So, like its own plot, *The Chymical Wedding* exists in two eras simultaneously. And it wins its reader over, a gripping, atmospheric tale to cozy up with by a winter's fire.