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The Narrowing Stream

By John Mortimer

Viking, 186 pages

Since its original publication in England 35 years ago, a new character has emerged as an antagonist in John Mortimer's *The Narrowing Stream*: time, three and a half decades of social struggle to provide wives trapped in mundane and chilly marriages acceptable routes of escape.

In 1954, when Julia Swinton's prissy daughter Susan announces that neither she nor her classmates intend ever to marry, she cites the case of "one girl at school whose parents are divorced and married again. Apparently it's absolutely marvelous, she has a birthday and a Christmas with each one." But in 1989, that girl is neither shocking nor novel. She sits in every other seat in our classrooms.

Yet *The Narrowing Stream* dodges time's scythe nimbly because Mortimer focuses, as he has done many times before and since, on how we fail at life's opportunities, not on how we escape the consequences of failure.

Julia lives in a world sterile enough for heart surgery. She has discarded her girlhood dream of becoming an actress to tend instead the lives of her remote businessman husband, two snobbish and moody daughters, and a son already given to commenting on his life in the third person. Still beautiful at 35, she now measures out her life in tea cozies.

Suddenly, out of the river Julia lives by, a vagrant stranger emerges, reigniting long-dormant passions in Julia, and telling her about his sister, Molly. The gossiped about pretty young sister had a flair for entertaining the village's men on her moored houseboat. Now, Molly has been found dead of a broken neck at the bottom of the houseboat stairs. In Molly's bedroom, the brother found half a cigarette case belonging to Julia's husband. Julia feeds the stranger, lets him linger most of the day at her house, then swims the river to find and remove the other half of the case before the police discover it. Returning home, she knows her old life has died but has no idea of what will take its place.

What appears to be a thin murder mystery becomes at its core a study of the yawning gap between what we hope for our lives and what we settle into. Passion can flicker briefly between Julia and her husband, but so slight an action as his reading aloud from the morning paper can snuff it out. They have been married so long that he no longer sees her beauty, seeing her instead "with the vague look of oppression with which he looked at accounts, bank statements, market quotations." Husband and wife now sleepwalk through each other's lives, bumping occasionally into their children.

There are no villains in *The Narrowing Stream*. Mortimer provides no excuse that easy for our anguish. He wants to show how life becomes, in Thomas La Mance's words, what happens to us while we're making other plans. Unlike the working class focus of his contemporary, John Osborne, Mortimer shows how the middle class repeatedly fails itself. They are seldom anything as dramatic as evil or even angry. Rather, they are insidiously, half-consciously compromisers. They settle. Their dreams die slow deaths.

Best known to Americans for his adaptations for stage and television (*I, Claudius*, *Rumpole of the Bailey*, *Brideshead Revisited*, and *Paradise Postponed*) and his original 1969 film script *John and Mary*, even Mortimer himself does not consider *The Narrowing Stream* among his finest work. It appeared in the ten-year period between his auspicious first novel, *Charade*, and his first published play, *The Dock Brief*. Mortimer has confessed elsewhere that this was a derivative phase when "I read too much Graham Greene and Raymond Chandler and Evelyn Waugh . . . so that I became more imitative."

And he became something worse. While so august a figure as Samuel Johnson observed that "no man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money," and money seemed motive enough even for Shakespeare, the need to garner quick and hefty advances has made more than one writer careless. *The Narrowing Stream* was one of several of Mortimer's novels to appear when he was under financial duress. "When the children were very young," he said, "I had to make a lot of money. Perhaps I wrote all those novels too fast just to get the money."

The Narrowing Stream is by no means a careless book, but it may have been a hastily completed one. Of its principal characters, only Julia Swinton achieves sufficient complexity and depth to elicit sympathy. Her husband, despite how credibly he personifies what has since been termed the male mid-life crisis, remains pale and unknowable to the reader as well as to Julia. Their children do not emerge at all, and Molly's brother has barely enough eccentricity to nudge him beyond a caricature of the mysterious stranger.

Gifted and versatile, Mortimer gives us in *The Narrowing Stream* an intriguing, suspenseful but thin story expanded into a short novel. He hits with merciless candor some of the more painful truth of our age. He creates a world we can recognize and with which we may uncomfortably identify but not one able to make us feel viscerally engaged.