

Vast alchemies : the life and work of Mervyn Peake, by G. Peter Winnington

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*VAST ALCHEMIES : THE LIFE AND WORK OF
MERVYN PEAKE*, BY G. PETER WINNINGTON

For some, Mervyn Peake was the creator of the grotesque and compelling illustrations that pictured their childhood ; for others, he is known only as the author of the Gormenghast novels, serialized last year by the BBC, with arguable success. Peter Winnington's biography, *Vast Alchemies : The Life and Work of Mervyn Peake*, is a reminder that Peake was a remarkable artist whose career was prolific and wide-ranging, if not always commercially successful, covering painting, illustration, novels, poetry, drama, and costume design, as well as teaching.

Mervyn Peake was born in 1911 in China, where his parents were missionaries, but the family returned to England permanently in 1923. Study at the Royal Academy Schools and a sojourn on Sark, where he was one of the earliest members of the artists' "colony", made him a familiar face in artistic circles. Among his contemporaries, it was his art, particularly his illustrations, that won him critical praise, often enthusiastic, but not always enough to sustain him and his family — his marriage to one of his students at the Westminster School of Art, Maeve Gilmore, in 1937, produced three children. Although Winnington's later unexplored reference to Peake's extra-marital affairs suggests another side to the devoted husband (who had already drawn over 750 portraits of his beautiful wife after only a year of married life), the Peakes' relationship was a close and supportive one. Neither of them seems to have been terribly practical, although Winnington questions Maeve Peake's later portrait of her husband as the unworldly genius.

Peake's almost farcical military service during the Second World War creates a clear impression of a man who felt he was being denied the opportunity to help in the best way he could, by recording what he saw. Peake's commission to Belsen in 1945 was undoubtedly a shocking experience, yet his reaction is not explored. The impulse to begin work on *Titus Groan* is also unclear, but Winnington's account of Peake's approach to the work is illuminating, showing that the discipline Peake applied to his

illustration was initially very much lacking in his prose writing (and, some may feel, remained so). The botched editing of *Titus Alone*, when Peake was too ill to manage the work himself, is a sad end.

Winnington's account of Peake's life is factual, sympathetic, and moving in its treatment of Peake's decline in the grip of Parkinson's. The actual date of the onset of the disease, which was not diagnosed until 1958, is uncertain, but Peake's breakdown in the army in 1942 and subsequent depression are suggestive of early instability. Occasionally, the sparseness of Winnington's text is frustrating. Brief references to the young Peake punching a man who suggested he was homosexual (due to his piratical affectation of long hair and a gold earring), or to his reputation as a Don Juan, even during his apparently happy marriage, are left undiscussed. Peake's application to go to China as a war artist in 1945 (which was refused) is described as "the only instance" of Peake expressing a wish to return to the country of his early childhood, without further elaboration on this surprising information. However, Winnington must have been hampered by the very limited access to illustrative material, both pictorial and literary, granted him by the Peake estate — ironically, given Peake's own views on the unity of writing and illustration. Perhaps making virtue of necessity then, he avoids trying to trace the extraordinary imagination of his subject in the sum of his experiences. *Vast Alchemies* leaves us with a clearer picture of the facts of Peake's life, while the workings of his mind remain unfathomable — here, we would be best to turn to the artist's own works.

Lucy HAY

G. Peter WINNINGTON, *Vast Alchemies: The Life and Work of Mervyn Peake*, London & Chester Springs: Peter Owen, 2000. 263 pp. ISBN 0-7206-1079-6.