



At Last

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As friends, relatives and foes trickle in to pay their final respects to his mother Eleanor, Patrick Melrose finds himself questioning whether a life without parents will be the liberation he has so long imagined. Yet as the memorial service ends and the family gathers one last time, amidst the social niceties and the social horrors, the calms and the rapids, Patrick begins to sense a new current: the chance of some form of safety – at last.

At Last Details

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Antonomasia says

Four or five stars? It seemed irrelevant after following the characters for so long. This doesn't *have* to be the end but *At Last* makes sense as a caesura or a finale. At his mother's funeral, Patrick Melrose is finally free of his parents but the legacy of problems they started is still to some extent with him.

I was so glad to find this compulsively readable as I had the first three Patrick Melrose books. I gave up on *Mother's Milk* somewhere in the first or second chapter: being presented with the intimate detail of a future you won't have is much more difficult than anything which echoes of a difficult past. The generality being further intensified because I originally began to read the series as a substitute for talking to a particular person who has some commonalities with the author and protagonist. (Albeit in his case the source of the villainy was public school, not his father.) From the very first, though, it was clear that St Aubyn - and Patrick - has very strong and richly layered voice all his own.

Such a very wise set of books, but not at all in the trite way that must be said thousands of times on this site of pull-your-socks-up self-help books and cheesy fiction with easy, pat, conclusions. This is far more rounded. There is all the understanding and intricacy here that comes from knowing the psychology, but with a minimal use of terminology and no need to castigate or categorise simply because of what is said in books. Instead how people feel and what they do is what matters; the English tradition of detached irony, of never really meaning anything, is constantly hauled up for questioning and roughing-up, yet there is still more than enough wit and humour here. The whole series is rather in the tradition of Carl Rogers, but it's also art for the sake of art, not for the sake of prescriptive examples and answers. (Those characters who are professionally supposed to provide such things, such as Johnny, now a classical Freudian analyst, also come in for a bit of a dig.)

Having missed out book four, I knew I didn't see the significance of absolutely everything, but it was still very much possible to follow the narrative. However, I really wouldn't recommend reading *At Last* before at least most of the preceding novels: this is a continuation of stories that would lose a lot without the background.

Due to the personal nature of some of the reviews I've posted in the last few months, and just anyway, I want to note that I'm rather glad of the brief mentions of Nicholas Pratt's daughter... She appeared earlier as someone who had been attending NA meetings, but whom Patrick didn't consider a proper addict with big problems, just a girl who sometimes got a bit upset or did a bit too much coke; here we learn she has done a lot of therapy and has barely spoken to her parents for years. Pratt is the symbol of a culture and attitude the books savagely attack, but he's clearly not a criminal and sociopathic sadist as was Patrick's father David. He is presented simply as someone who lacks empathy and has very fixed ideas about how things should be done ... It's as if the author also acknowledges that these things in themselves can cause enough complications to some people, though not on the rare headline scale of Patrick's experience. She is barely delineated as a character but I see her as a nod to all the people like me who could say, no it really wasn't great but on the other hand I'm no Dave Peltzer (or Patrick Melrose).

It's not all psychology here; there's even more philosophy here than in the trilogy books. Patrick's deliberations on a possible afterlife and the various characters' discussions on the nature of identity are the aspects of the series I connect with least. Though - as my lack of time for such stuff is because of experiences with neurological illness and consequent resolute belief that the brain and nervous system are the

substance of the soul and personality - I would be very interested to know what St. Aubyn did with these themes in *Mother's Milk* whilst Eleanor is suffering from Alzheimer's and the philosopher Erasmus Price is also a significant character. But what I would certainly say is that these ideas bring a very rare intellectual depth to such readable books, and a seriousness about ideas which, in the context, it's tempting to say is far more Continental than British.

Ruby Soames says

Fearless Writing.

Edward StAubyn has been one of my favourite authors since *Never Mind*, his first book which won the Betty Trask Award – the prize for under-35 years olds. St Aubyn is now into his fifties and I'm in my...let's not go there. So as I've grown up and the novel was followed by sequels, all of which won literary respect and acclaim, Patrick Melrose, the erudite, dry, damaged and damaging's central character, has grown up with me. Grown up, or just moved through time? This last novel of the series reveals whether we do or don't learn from life's experiences. And if something is going to teach Patrick about life, it's his mother's death. The novel is entirely centred around the events at Patrick's mother's funeral. Ironically it is in her death that Patrick is forced to appreciate the whole person that his mother was and from there he can become a man and father himself. As a child, his mother didn't intervene, protect or care for him, even when he was being physically and psychologically abused by his tyrannical, alcoholic father and nor did she offer anything to him when he was older and she was too preoccupied with her philanthropic causes – giving everything she could away – including the family home - to every other needy cause but her son's. Patrick has no choice if he wants to move on but to accept that during his mother's life, and now death, he will not get her love, and that she can't, as nor can any woman, really save him.

With her sealed in a coffin, Patrick is free to lay to rest the rotting, scary and shameful skeletons that were trapped in the Melrose family cupboards. Patrick says at one point, 'the death of my mother is the best thing that's ever happened to me since...well since the death of my father'. It sounds callous, but St Aubyn's extraordinary talent is presenting the reader with what's buried under taboos and call for appropriate behaviour – in other words – what we really think and feel.

I felt real pain at times, reading this, but also laughed out loud on many occasions. St Aubyn is dreadfully, morbidly funny. There's not a word out of place. The sentences and scenes fluctuate between dark hilarity, bright insight and poetry.

I hope this description doesn't make the book sound like something you might see on the Jeremy Kyle show or Oprah. And it's easy to dismiss these books as 'just about posh people' – St Aubyn writes about inherited wealth but also all that we inherit from our families and the burden it leaves the next generation with.

I'm not the first to say Edward St Aubyn is one of the great writers of our times and reading this last novel in the Melrose series, confirms it.

Bart says

This is an exceptional novel that draws a clear line between the qualitative differences of contemporary British fiction and contemporary American fiction. Those who celebrate Jonathan Safran Foer, David Foster Wallace or Junot Diaz ought to study each of this novel's 270 pages (or at least the best 230 of them) and see how intelligent fiction looks when it is handled by an engaging adult narrator.

The end of *At Last* has its tedious moments, but they are tedious for being moments of honestly expressed ideas about death (as opposed merely to invoking empathy for one's tedium). There is no epiphany in this novel, or in its four predecessors. Rather, there is the adult matter of muddling through what events befall children, without a clashing of cymbals at every interval.

As before, St. Aubyn is best when satirizing the European aristocracy:

. . . the more or less secret superiority and the more or less secret shame of being rich, generating their characteristic disguises: the philanthropy solution, the alcoholic solution, the mask of eccentricity, the search for salvation in perfect taste; the defeated, the idle and the frivolous, and their opponents, the standard-bearers, all living in a world that the dense glitter of alternatives made it hard for love and work to penetrate. If these values were in themselves sterile, they looked all the more ridiculous after two generations of disinheritance. (p. 28)

And:

Above all, she was a baby, not a 'big baby' like so many adults, but a small baby perfectly preserved in the pickling jar of money, alcohol and fantasy. (p. 76)

And:

No doubt his grandmother and his great-grandfather had hoped to empower a senator, enrich a great art collection or encourage a dazzling marriage, but in the end they had mainly subsidized idleness, drunkenness, treachery and divorce. (p. 114)

If Patrick Melrose does not turn out a hero after 10 these 1,000 pages with him (*Never Mind*, *Bad News*, *Some Hope*, *Mother's Milk* and *At Last*), he at least turns out a workable human being. He is an unusual canvas for a writer to choose, and his wife, oddly, is the flattest of all his creator's characters. But the hours a reader spends with him, especially after the monstrous goings-on in the first two novels, are a refined and perhaps decadent sort of pleasure - the very thing Melrose might rail against.

Ilse says

Phew, done at last with the 5 Patrick Melrose novels. St-Aubyn's positively is a terrific writer - his prose bristles with stunning, brilliantly articulated reflections - but I confess to keep ruminating on this, having strongly mixed feelings on the whole set-up— I will come back to it.

Justin Evans says

Just to be clear, I'm not giving this book 5 stars, I'm giving the whole Patrick Melrose series 5 stars. You can read 'Mother's Milk' without reading the 'Some Hope' trilogy, but 'At Last' will make no sense whatsoever unless you've read MM, and probably only about 80% sense unless you've read the others too. Despite which this has become a 'national bestseller!', has been reviewed ravingly, and seems to have attracted goodreads readers who hadn't read any of the other novels.

So veteran readers will know, at least in part, what to expect: gorgeous prose, Wildean wit, a host of ridiculous characters, and a fixation on what it's like to become a person when surrounded by tremendous wealth and trauma. But here, Patrick actually becomes a person, rather than falling back onto a raft of different 'substitutions for substitutions' for personhood (love, sex, drugs, mental health problems etc etc). That doesn't make it a 'happy' ending, but at least it's not distressing.

Like Foster Wallace's 'Infinite Jest,' 'At Last' sees the hero coming to accept the wisdom of addiction program cliches. Obviously the two works are very different, but I think reading them side by side could be very fruitful, particularly the different way they treat the problem of mental stability (in St Aubyn it's the intellectual sophisticate who comes to some kind of individuality, while the less intelligent wallow in the substitutions for it; in Wallace the sophisticate goes crazy, while the adorable but thuggish Don Gately is the one who finds piece), and the way they treat the problem of other people (in St Aubyn, they're necessary for stability; in DFW, they seem to be mostly obstacles to it). Also, St Aubyn is funnier.

I could go into ever greater depth on this (e.g., what's expected of 'the best writer of his generation' in England vs in the U.S.; the different treatment of different philosophical traditions; the silly/quirky nature of DFW's humor vs the biting, satirical nature of EStA's), but really, you should be out there reading all of the Melrose novels, not reading my review.

Phrynnne says

This is the last in the Patrick Melrose series and I enjoyed it very much. Edward St. Aubyn writes so beautifully and this book was funny,sad and thoughtful all at the same time. The whole book takes place in one day or actually at one event, the funeral of Patrick's mother. It is a really clever way to round of the series as we get to see all of the main characters gathered together, witness the changes that have occurred to all of them over time and find out what they all think about life, death and each other. And the ending is just perfect. There seems to be hope for Patrick after all.

LeAnne says

A quarter way through but pausing to start with the first of this series instead.

Lauren says

Amazing.

I hardly know where to start. I loved the five Patrick Melrose books that much. But perhaps I should just write down what I've been saying over the past month to anyone who will listen to me...

Edward St. Aubyn is a British writer who has published five books as part of the "Patrick Melrose series" over the past 22 years. He initially envisioned the series as a trilogy, and he published the first three books between 1992 and 1994. The fourth book started out as an entirely different work, with a protagonist named Mark. But St. Aubyn soon realized that Mark was, in fact, Patrick. And so, the fourth Patrick Melrose book was born. And then came the fifth novel earlier this year. And St. Aubyn claims that this book is the last one,

but he has been "living with the Melroses" for 22 years now, and he agrees that his claims of finality are suspect because experience has shown that his unconscious will decide whether the series continues...

Another thing to know about the series is that Patrick Melrose is Edward St. Aubyn's alter ego, and many of the characters and events in the book are based on real people and events, many of which are the stuff of more lurid novels. St. Aubyn was born into an extraordinarily wealthy British family, although his mother, who was an American heiress, appears to be the primary source of his family's wealth. His father was charismatic... and sadistic and abused both Edward and his mother. And I believe that writing these novels was a sort of introspective and cathartic experience.

My husband insists that I liked these books because they were non-fiction, and I cannot emphasize enough that (a) I do not particularly enjoy reading nonfiction because I read almost solely because I appreciate the craft of fiction too much, (b) I never read memoirs, (c) I am almost completely disinterested in books about abuse and drug addiction but despite that I devoured these books (and the addiction book was one of my favorites -- he so vividly recounted the minute-to-minute existence of his life as an addict), and (d) finally and most importantly, St. Aubyn is a BRILLIANT prose stylist, a brilliant wit, amazing at character development and thematic development, and thus, these truly are among the best novels I have ever read.

The subject matter is difficult, but the most upsetting scenes take place quickly, and the books are largely concerned with the aftermath... the ways in which people grapple with trauma and painful experiences. But there's more to it than that even. Other subjects include: drug addiction (handled BRILLIANTLY -- did I just capitalize that word again?), wealth & the aristocracy -- a class of people who in this novel treat the most serious things frivolously and the most frivolous matters seriously, inheritance and disinheritance, motherhood and self-sacrifice, how people become trapped in their own personalities, and so forth...

Despite the serious subject matter, the books are hilarious and filled with witty ripostes. And St. Aubyn is just as brilliant (that word again) and witty in interviews -- which I recommend listening to, as well.

Even though any of the novels can be read standalone, it is such an experience to start with "Never Mind" and finish with this one, "At Last." I have spent the past month with the Melroses, and it was well, well worth it.

Steve says

How much wit, wisdom and fine writing can an author stuff into a novel yet still be, for me, less than fully satisfying? In the case of Edward St. Aubyn and the last of his Patrick Melrose novels, quite a lot. In a more perfect world, where denouements are de rigueur and the ones you're rooting for triumph in glory, Patrick would have used his keen intellect and insights into human nature to find an engaging space for himself. But I guess *At Last* was too true to life for that, or at least too true to St. Aubyn's life. (The book mirrors the author's world very closely.) What could have been galvanizing events -- his unsupportive mother's funeral, his social milieu exposed for its superficiality, and his boys becoming better versions of himself -- nudged him closer to mental well-being, but were lacking in punch. Instead, we get cleverness as an end in itself, humor as bitter as radicchio, and self-reflections that bordered on solipsistic.

That said, I enjoyed the writing so much that it almost made up for any aversion I felt from the scant drams of growth. See from these examples if you agree.

Patrick's abusive father, David, is revealed for who he is in this passage:

David sat in his dark glasses smoking a cigar, angled away from Patrick, a jaundiced cloud of pastis on the table in front of him, extolling his educational methods to Nicholas Pratt: the stimulation of an instinct to survive; the development of self-sufficiency; an antidote to maternal mollycoddling; in the end, the benefits were so self-evident that only the stupidity and sheepishness of the herd could explain why every three-year-old was not chunked into the deep end of a swimming pool before he knew how to swim.

Patrick felt that his mother, Eleanor, who was ill-equipped to protect him as a child, was drawn to (quasi-) Christian charity instead.

Eleanor had expected to meet Jesus at the end of a tunnel after she died. The poor man was a slave to his fans, waiting to show crowds of eager dead the neon countryside that lay beyond the rebirth canal of earthly annihilation. It must be hard to be chosen as optimism's master cliché, the Light at the End of the Tunnel, ruling over a glittering army of half-full glasses and silver-lined clouds.

David's friend Nicholas was almost as bad as David himself, but sometimes he made me laugh and cringe. Here he is opining about *Porgy and Bess*.

How nauseating, thought Nicholas, a Jew being sentimental on behalf of a Negro: you lucky fellows, you've got plenty o' nuthin', whereas we're weighted down with all this international capital and these wretched Broadway musical hits.

In a later exchange, Nicholas and Patrick drew different conclusions about David.

'Oh, I disagree,' said Nicholas. 'He saw the funny side of *everything*.'

'He only saw the funny side of things that didn't have one,' said Patrick. 'That's not a sense of humour, just a form of cruelty.'

Finally, fragile though it may be, Patrick settles into a new equilibrium.

This flat, the bachelor pad of a non-bachelor, the student digs of a non-student, was as good a place as he could wish for to practice being unconsolated. The lifelong tension between dependency and independence, between home and adventure, could be resolved only by being at home everywhere, by learning to cast an equal gaze on the raging self-importance of each mood and incident. He had some way to go. He only had to run out of his favourite bath oil to feel like taking a sledgehammer to the bath and begging a doctor for a Valium script.

With this last quote, there were aspects of the new Patrick that rang true; ones that said maybe he really was on the right track. St. Aubyn confessed to writing this as a form of therapy. Patrick's recognition that his parents were themselves products of bad parents and unhappy lives, deserving of as much understanding as blame, confers a certain magnanimity. Maybe it wasn't so stunted after all. I hope some of you read the series to form your own views. It's entertaining, smart and possibly even enlightening.

I wrote about the four prior Patrick Melrose novels here. That was a more thorough review, meaning long-winded and overbearing. Please feel free to disagree, though.

Jessica says

Patrick Melrose's gothic New Age Mrs. Jellyby of a mother has finally died and in *At Last* we attend her funeral, presumably (and for this reader, hopefully) ending the cycle.

I have to say that while the first three Melrose novels are unquestionably among the best books I've read in years, I wasn't so crazy about the last two. The repetitive analytic musings just get to be a bit much, and the wise little moppets dispensing adorable yogi-like aphorisms just go way too far in sugaring up the acrid sourness I'd loved so much in the beginning.

Still, I wolfed this volume down with an enthusiasm I haven't felt for reading in awhile, because Edward St. Aubyn is a fabulous fucking writer. While I don't think this book or the one preceding it measured up to the ones that came before, they're still a million times better than most other books out there. And so St. Aubyn can commit whatever the authorial equivalent is to wrecking our marriage with his nihilistic substance abuse and cynical affairs, and I will continue to stand faithfully by him! If his next novel is a saccharine children's book about a precocious little boy philosophizing cutely about the nature of evil and man, I'll complain a bit but I'll still suck it up with the famished and unquenchable greed of an addict.

????? ??????? says

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Jim Coughenour says

Even with at least one spectacularly wry observation on every page; even with abstruse theological asides that are both plucky and pithy – *The idea that an afterlife had been invented to reassure people who couldn't face the finality of death was no more plausible than the idea that the finality of death had been invented to reassure people who couldn't face the nightmare of endless experience.* – yes, even including the transcendently arch nastiness of a chattering coven of acidulously articulate, sublimely spiteful relatives cannot quite redeem the doldrums of St. Aubyn's final novel in his quintet. There's too much of the same blasted bloodied patrimony to be recovered again, surrendered again, then extinguished as a flailing echo for this book to have the feel of anything more than a brilliant coda to the novels which have come before.

Even so I couldn't stop reading it, richly enjoying it, howling with hateful laughter even when subjected to

sharp shocks of self-recognition (and never in good way). I kept going right to the barely bitter end. And it was only as I was reading *At Last* that I realized I'd missed the first two novellas. Years ago I started with *Some Hope*, which turns out to be the midpoint. Fortunately there's a freshly-published omnibus, which I promptly ordered so I can jump into the terrible, ruthless, child-sacrificing story from its very first assault. Bad, bad Daddy.

Beth Bonini says

The 'action' of this novel spans a single day: the day of Patrick Melrose's mother's funeral. But the effect is almost one of time-lapse, as key events from the parental past play in the background of our protagonist's consciousness. In this novel, the reader is treated to the comic-tragic spectacle of Eleanor's skimpily attended funeral and drinks-party wake, whilst her relentlessly analytical son tries to get to grips with both the finality and ongoing emotional turbulence caused by his mother's death and life.

There are some wonderful moments of sharp dialogue in this last novel - and I do have a soft spot for the completely horrid snob Nicholas Pratt, who makes a welcome entrance and exit - but at times the storyline does get rather bogged down in Patrick's solipsistic head. Still, it was an emotionally disturbing pleasure to read - and one can't help but hope that Patrick makes some kind of peace with himself. The novel ends on a hopeful, even light, note, and at the very least one feels that Patrick's children will have a happier life than he has managed.

"'It's the hardest addiction of all,' said Patrick. 'Forget heroin. Just try giving up irony, that deep-down need to mean two things at once, to be in two places at once, not to be there for the catastrophe of a fixed meaning.'"

Roman Clodia says

Set on the day of Eleanor's funeral, once again the Melrose family is brought together with friends and hangers on for the finale to this 5-book series (quintet?). For me, there's too much of tiresome Nicholas Pratt, the last of the adults left alive from the opening book, and too little of Patrick himself - until the end.

But what a quietly wonderful ending! Orphaned at last, separated from his wife, Patrick finally opens himself to the possibility of healing: 'he suddenly wanted to see his children, real children, not the ghosts of their ancestors' childhoods, real children with a reasonable chance of enjoying their lives.' For those of us who have followed Patrick through the tribulations of five books, this is triumph indeed.

Looking back on the series, it's the second book *Bad News* which remains my favourite: the writing stings but St. Aubyn finds the blackest humour in his account of desperate junkie-dom. Nevertheless, and despite the unevenness and occasional longeurs, this is a must-read series: some glorious writing, corrosive and caustic, and a story unlike anything else I've read.

David says

St. Aubyn saves the best for last with this concluding PM book - and that needs to be qualified. The end of the series is a game-changer, and a particular challenge in that almost the entire book takes place at Patrick's mother's funeral. (~aside from a few flashbacks and a coda.)

One wouldn't think such a choice would be sustainable non-stop but it all works immeasurably well. It also serves the argument that, although both parents were shown to be monstrous, mom seems to bear the bulk of the responsibility, the penalty of saying 'No' time and again to opportunities for change and growth and maternal redemption. (Being hellbent on destruction of everything in his path, dad was a satanic lost cause.)

By the time we reach this book, we have seen Patrick through variations of external/internal abuse. We have watched him take various necessary steps in coming back around to the land of the (normally) living. We have witnessed one step forward, two steps back. Even though the advances are admirable, we're made to understand just how deep emotional scars run and how long they hang around. ~especially when closure is not going to be part of the deal.

It's a particular relief to note the concerted effort Patrick makes in filtering his personal hell for the sake of his two sons (drawn adorably) - and even for the sake of his refreshingly intelligent wife (somewhat tenuous though their relationship is, they weather storms with sufficient trust).

In wrapping up this series, St. Aubyn is quick to equate a funeral with circus atmosphere, thus allowing a rather entertaining path to the finish line. Many characters we have previously met (along with a significant new one) are here gathered together for comic effect, reminding us of Patrick's almost-complete immersion in social folly.

If all doesn't end exactly well, at least (which is all that might be believable) Patrick begins to genuinely let go - which finally allows him to breathe more freely.
