

FICTION

ON PIRATES & ROCK THYME

Sophie Dahl describes how evocative childhood days on blustery British beaches shaped her first children's book



Literary fiction abounds with love by the sea-side; lovers roll in with the waves. I grew up on romance in the Riviera, print-style, devouring it in the confused, hot way teenagers do. *Tender is the Night*, *Bonjour Tristesse*, Hemingway's *The Garden of Eden*—where, in the jasmine-scented glare of a European summer, a couple bring a third person into their road trip and bed. (*But why?* I asked, aged 15, *why a third?*)

All of this European heat was compelling, but so, in a different way, were *Jamaica Inn* and *To the Lighthouse*, books that were soaked in rock thyme and cold salt spray. And, to a shy English girl, they were far more relatable; I never made it to the Riviera. Instead, I spent the school holidays shuttling between the houses of my two grandmothers with blissful consistency: one on the choppy east coast of America, the other in West Sussex – vast of sky, grey of sea.

And of the two, it was the windswept shingle of the Sussex coast that found its way into my first children's story, *Madame Badobedah*. For me, there is something haunting and nostalgic about England's beaches in winter – the wild, *French Lieutenant's Woman* longing of them, waiting for summer to come and unbutton the serge.

My adult books had each begun life as a picture in my head, and this was no different: a little girl in dungarees walks barefoot on the beach, a fishing net in hand. She is on her way home to a tumbledown

Regency B&B, where she lives with her parents, the managers. This is the Mermaid Hotel, a place full of secrets. The next picture was of an enigmatic old lady – imagine an elderly, feather-clad, Eastern European version of Auntie Mame – who is surrounded by all her worldly possessions when she meets Mabel, the forensically curious girl protagonist, an only child. Mabel immediately fancies the old lady (the Madame Badobedah of the title) to be an international jewel thief. And so on...

In the book, the curved beaches of my childhood were made flesh by the talented artist Lauren O'Hara, as was my grandmother's dressing table, which seemed when I was young to have hundreds upon hundreds of drawers full of mystery (now that I own it, they come in at a demure nine). The feel of thistles on a bare foot, the smell of a Guerlain perfume: so many snapshots from childhood and beyond have found themselves embedded in my fiction, surrounded now by mermaids and jewels, or held in the raspy, rolling R of a 'Darlink'.

In her wonderful seaside novel *Rebecca*, Daphne du Maurier wrote: 'If only there could be an invention that bottled up a memory, like scent. And it never faded, and it never got stale. And then, when one wanted it, the bottle could be uncorked, and it would be like living the moment all over again.' For me, that's fiction – the ability to take our stories, and have them play with pirates. *'Madame Badobedah'* by Sophie Dahl, with illustrations by Lauren O'Hara (£12.99, Walker Books), is published on 3 October.

EXHIBITIONS

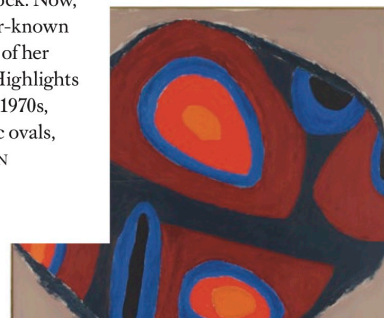
DUAL PASSIONS
A London show celebrates the gallerist
Betty Parsons as an artist in her own right



'Buzzing' (1965)
by Betty Parsons.
Right: her 'Seeds'
(1970). Bottom
right: her 'Midnight
Flute' (1968)

Recognised first and foremost as a mid-century dealer, Betty Parsons made a seminal contribution to the post-war New York art scene. Her eponymous gallery, which opened in 1946, promoted the work of emerging artists of the era, including Helen Frankenthaler and Jackson Pollock. Now, an exhibition at London's Alison Jacques uncovers Parsons' lesser-known role as an abstract painter and sculptor, charting the evolution of her signature bold, colourful style throughout her six-decade career. Highlights of the show, which focuses on her paintings from the 1960s and 1970s, include *Midnight Flute*, with its crimson and cerulean concentric ovals, and the dynamically composed *Buzzing*. MEG HONIGMANN

'Betty Parsons' is at Alison Jacques Gallery
(www.alisonjacquesgallery.com) until 9 November.



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