Notes from an exhibition by Patrick Gale

Each chapter of the book starts with an exhibition note describing a piece of art created by Rachel Kelly or, in some instances, a personal item of Rachel’s that is thought significant for her life and career. These exhibition notes are almost invariably written in the somewhat impersonal and sexless style that seems typical of that genre - an accurate but dry description of the piece with a vague speculation of how it was created or when and how it was used. The often messy reality of the artist's life is left out entirely. The rest of the chapter then describes the memories, feelings, incidents and reactions that are associated with the exhibited piece. The chapter at times illuminates the reality behind the exhibition note, at other times contradicts it.

The reader is thus introduced to the concept that the official explanation, the history we learn at school or the stories we read in popularisations of important events, can be totally at variance with the internal experience of the people involved. Thus, for instance, one exhibition note mentions a brooch which Rachel Kelly insists was created by Dame Barbara Hepworth (a well-known English sculptor); the note treats this attribution with a certain amount of scepticism since Dame Barbara Hepworth was not known to have produced any jewellery. The chapter that follows this exhibition note describes how Dame Barbara Hepworth in fact fashioned a piece of costume jewellery for a fancy dress party and gave it to Rachel Kelly at the party after breaking part of Rachel’s costume.

Other chapters start with descriptions of small works which are in fact often birthday cards Rachel Kelly has made for her children. The chapter then goes on to describe the memories, feelings and reactions of Rachel Kelly and the child in question. The reader starts appreciating in depth the feelings that led to the creation of the particular piece, and how the recipient felt when given the card. An interesting way of explaining to the non-artist some of the feeling of being an artist.

Another very important theme of the book is the way an event cannot really be understood unless the background to that event is known. Patrick Gale uses a technique first (and most famously) explored by Marcel Proust in his "A la recherche du temps perdu" where the reader encounters parts of the story which are not clear until later chapters explore some of the feelings and incidents which illuminate the earlier chapter. In effect, the writer makes the reader read the book “backwards”, and until all of the book is read, any individual part of it cannot be really understood.

Very early on we are introduced to Rachel Kelly, a very creative artist who is subject to manic creative bouts at one moment, depressive suicidal feelings at another. A woman who lives almost entirely by feel, where logic and rationality are the Establishment forces which kill off artistic creativity. Her husband Antony, a Quaker, who is not in the habit of demonstrating spontaneous feelings, takes upon himself the task of making sure his wife takes the medicine that will iron out her manic-depressive cycle, while she does her best to avoid taking these medicines so as not to destroy her creative talents.

As the book progresses, we gradually learn how Antony first met Rachel after she had been rejected by a former lover. Later in the book we learn that the first child born after Antony and Rachel married was in fact the son of this former lover; the boy, now a married man, only learns of this through a letter his mother left him to be opened after her death.
In a similar manner, we read about incidents in the lives of her other children that are described in minute detail but that we do not always fully understand because the context is not really clear until other chapters have been read. To make it even more confusing, the chapters are not arranged in an inverse chronological order, but skip about in almost a random manner. The reader is thus forced to contemplate each chapter as an incident in itself, just as the viewer in a gallery looks at each picture in an exhibition as a self-contained item, whereas for the artist who created the piece each item is part of the continuing story of his or her life.

Normally the art lover looks at a painting as an object to be admired and enjoyed. The art critic and historian may illuminate some of the background, historic and personal, which led to the creation of the piece of art. Thus most of us learn of Vincent van Gogh's mental disturbances, some of us may have gone further and learned something about the life of the sensitive son of a vicar confronted with the poverty and suffering of the less fortunate citizens of his country but few of us (if any) will know of the actual feelings of Vincent as he painted each picture. It is the power of Patrick Gale's writing that allows us to get a feeling of what it must be like to be a flesh-and-bone artist and what sort of feelings and emotions such an artist has when creating.

Only towards the end of the book do we gradually learn the real background of Rachel Kelly, how she escapes from a mental institution together with another inmate who kills herself during the flight but leaves her precious passport behind in her luggage. Rachel (originally born Joan Ransome) appropriates the passport and uses it to escape from her native Canada to England. Rachel herself never talked about her childhood and we learn about it only after her death, when a long-lost sister comes forward with all these details.

Thus the book twists backwards and forwards, delving deeper and deeper into the antecedents that over the years led to the natural death of Rachel Kelly and how all these incidents helped to shape her, her art and the people around her.

A1
Was intrigued by the title, since he used to write exhibition notes himself. The book was quite different from what he had expected; he was not sure whether he really enjoyed it and at times found it scary because of the possibilities which always were there. The skipping backwards and forwards didn’t bother him but he found that it was a bit too random and some of the chapters were just bolted on without any good reason.

A2
Enjoyed a good read but had expected, partly from the cover description and partly from the first chapter that this was going to be a sort of psychologically oriented murder whodunnit. Intrigued by how her illness shaped Rachel’s personality, how husband and wife managed to make the marriage work – an excellent portrait of family life. Families are never uncomplicated and this is a good description. The exhibition notes were a little pretentious.

A3
Liked the different perspectives of the characters, found herself sympathetic to all the characters. Liked the way the exhibition notes were linked to the chapters. Found the description of Quaker life very interesting.

A4
It can’t be easy to write about a painter. Was not convinced by the story of mental illness, or
about Rachel’s stay in a mental home. Knew that people who have genius or talent are all a bit crazy. Felt that although the picture of family life was convincing, the illness was not.

A5
Didn’t like Rachel, can’t understand why Anthony is attracted to Rachel in the first place. Why, if she is mentally ill, does she have four children – felt sorry for the children. Felt that Rachel was not supportive as a mother.

A6
Impressed by how much sympathy and patience the author uses to describe his characters. At no point does she hate Rachel, however unsympathetic she could be at times. There are two levels of sympathy – at one level it is a description of a woman suffering from a mental illness and yet able to bring up four children, and at another level it is a woman who wants to devote herself to her art. Did not like the way the author more or less forces the plot so as to bring in Rachel’s sister and the passport substitution – that didn’t seem a natural part to the story.

A7
Felt that, although the writer describes emotions in great detail, the characters do not become alive and sympathetic. The book was rather the literary version of clinical notes made by a psychiatrist. Felt that most of the characters seemed to suffer from an inadequate personality. Thought Antony was, in his own way, as mentally ill as Rachel since he is absolutely incapable of showing his feelings. We cannot get any idea of what he is really like as a person, he only exists as a carer for Rachel. Thought the backwards-and-forwards-style of the book was interesting in principle but used way too excessively here and therefore rather unnerving.

Discussing the relationship between Rachel’s illness and her creativity, one reader commented that she seemed to be most creative when she stopped taking her medication, another that this seemed to be when she was pregnant and a third wondered whether she deliberately became pregnant as an opportunity to be creative. One comment was that manic depressives can be charismatic and fascinating in their manic phase. The overall impression was that you couldn’t separate Rachel from her illness.

The next part of the discussion focussed on the origin of Rachel’s illness. One reader felt that the book strongly suggests that Rachel was declared mentally ill by her parents, another that Rachel had an independent mind that just didn’t fit in with her family’s norms and that she wasn’t so much ill as just rebellious.

The group considered how Rachel’s husband and children coped with her illness. One reader felt that both husband and children treated her with great consideration; some of us felt very sorry for the children having to tread so carefully around her. One member of the group felt that the portrait of Anthony was not very realistic; this was contradicted by another member who felt that Anthony was so likeable because he took everything so calmly, takes the load on his shoulders, and in fact is the person who raises the family.

We next turned to the question of why Anthony takes on the responsibility of Rachel in the first place. One response was that he was presented with a fait accompli and just accepted the burden; another was that he had been drifting and now was taking on a responsibility that gave him purpose in life. A third reaction was that looking after Rachel allowed him to give her an opportunity to have “a room of her own” and to create. One reader proposed that Anthony loves her out of a sense of his (Quaker) duty.
Why did Rachel turn to Anthony and eventually stay with him? One possibility was that she just accepted what was offered at any given moment and stayed with the flow. Another possibility was that she came with Anthony to his home, fell in love with the region, the house, the grandfather, the feeling of calmness and security and the absence of pressure and then felt relaxed enough to learn to love Anthony.

That the relationship was one of love and caring was clearly shown by the description of their stay in New York, after all the children but Petroc had left home, just before Petroc dies.

The group next discussed the Quaker aspect of Anthony. The book shows that Quakers consider it their duty to help others — an attitude that was of considerable benefit to Rachel. It was felt that Rachel was attracted by the way Quakers avoid interference with other people’s lives, by their calm acceptance of people the way they are. Through his Quaker background, Anthony was felt to be a well-developed personality, who didn’t create a fuss when his wife did her own thing — maybe Rachel needed the plainness and sobriety of the Quakers to calm her down.

However, one member of the group felt that the Quaker habit of always telling the truth as well as not holding anything back could at times hurt and even damage people. We discussed the usefulness and limits of such rules and were unanimous in that such rules are just guidelines that need to be “flexibly” applied, depending on the situation in question.

The group felt it to be very strange that Rachel had cut off her past in Canada completely, not even mentioning any of the usual “innocent” incidents of any person’s childhood that would not have revealed her real background. Instead of not mentioning it at all, some of us would have expected her to at least invent a fictitious background so as to seem more normal. Both husband and children respected this “no go” area and never pressed her or expressed any curiosity.

Lastly, the group considered the general style of the book. The general reaction was that the method of introducing each chapter with a note taken from an exhibition and then showing the real background to the exhibit was an interesting one. The notes themselves were an extremely good pastiche of the genre.

There were a lot of loose ends that the writer didn’t tie in with the rest of the book — just somehow introduced them as a non sequitur and then failed to develop them, e.g. Garfield’s meeting with his biological father and sister. In other instances, matters of major importance were described in the odd sentence almost casually dropped into the body of various chapters so that unless the reader had a photographic memory the import was missed. As one reader remarked on being told that the car that killed Petroc was driven by his sister’s boyfriend, with his sister sitting in the car beside him: “Gosh, I missed all that”.