

FOREWORD

C*hristmas Pudding* – so very delicious a title. Extraordinary really that it hadn't previously been nabbed by P. G. Wodehouse (although later he did publish *Plum Pie*). Actually, it is tricky to avoid the invocation of the name Wodehouse when introducing Nancy Mitford – and with this novel in particular, because it does seem rather as if he and that other great contemporary master Evelyn Waugh had been passed through a not-at-all raucous and really very caring blender ... and here, with the piquant additions of individual pitch, heightened éclat and a very witty woman's perspective, is the slaveringly appetising result.

This 1932 novel is the second and possibly least known of the eight produced by Nancy – who was, of course, one of the famous Mitford sisters, daughters of Lord Redesdale, who together took extreme delight in communicating by means of a private and very deliberately exclusive, self-invented, and constantly embellished sort of upper class patois – alternately arch and reminiscent of the nursery – which either was enchanting or blood-curdlingly maddening, according to taste. A great deal of this sort of thing spills over into *Christmas Pudding* – together with the added green shoots of what would much later mature into the flowering of her notorious deliberations upon U and non-U, both in language and behaviour. Her characters are a considerable delight: all of the young ladies are under pressure to make a good marriage – i.e. to a gentleman of title

and wealth, and if he is not actively vile and obnoxious, this is seen to be something by way of a considerable bonus – while the young men are uniformly Etonians, and spiritually bound by a disinclination to any sort of exertion. Very Bertie Wooster, then – although while Waugh might easily have dared, Wodehouse could never have written of the beautiful forty-five year-old Amabelle Fortescue, a retired and rich courtesan, nor of a pair of juveniles who scour the births announcements in *The Times* in ceaseless quest of ‘still-borns’. Mitford, apart from exceedingly funny, is waspish at the very least.

And of course because this novel is liberally peppered with all the bright young things – not to say the mandatory and gorgonesque matriarch Lady Bobbin (something of a cross between Lord Emsworth in her devotion to all things rural, and Aunt Agatha in her stentorian opposition to just about everything in general, and socialism in particular) – much amusing play is made upon the contrast between the townies and the landed gentry. For the plot, such as it is, centres upon the gathering over the Christmas period of a motley crew in a rented house in Gloucestershire – a mock Tudor pile called Mulberrie Farm, whose name and pretensions are found by all to be perfectly hilarious. Amabelle bemoans the fact that “there seem to be twice as many hours here as there are in London” and so what on earth do people *do* ...? She is told that you can “grow a lot of bulbs in the winter, in a dark place”. Meanwhile, due to an outbreak of foot-and-mouth, the hunting is off – this leading one of the protagonists, aspiring author Paul Fotheringay, to comment thus:

“So wretched for the poor cows, too.”

“What cows?”

“The ones with feet and mouths.”

The business of Christmas itself is actually skated over rather quickly: the real purpose here is the gathering together of all these disparate though practically incestuously connected beings

– variously lovebirds, the forlorn, the desperate, the pompous, the idiotic and a quartet of musical obsessives by the names of Squibby, Biggy, Bunch and Maydew – in a generally unsuitable milieu, and over a given stretch of time. The scintillating dialogue which makes up much of the novel carries you along upon a pink and joyous balloon of poshness and daftness, and a good deal of chortling is absolutely guaranteed. It is, in truth, less of a pudding than a master chef’s soufflé ... into the utter scrumptiousness of which I urge you now to very eagerly dig in.

Joseph Connolly