

## FOREWORD

In her dedication for *Pigeon Pie* Nancy Mitford asks the reader to remember that it was written before Christmas 1939 and published in May 1940 – the implication being, I think, that with hindsight she would not want anyone to think that she was belittling the sufferings of the Second World War.

She need not have worried. Her satirical take on the British upper classes and politicians at the outbreak of war is spot on in its portrayal of arrant humbug – and she wields her scalpel wit upon the early organisational absurdities of the British Home Front with delighted relish. The First Aid Post, in its hierarchical splendour, is perfectly judged and – in those early days – very probably accurate. In times of national strife you can trust the British to enact the rules of war by invoking the rules of class and Nancy Mitford is at her beady-eyed best with that. She is also fearlessly unapologetic for the luxury in which her heroine, the dashing Lady Sophia lives, which adds to the delight. It is high satire, almost surreal in parts, and gloriously free from any taint of realism.

The fiendishly absurd plot centres around a dead body, a spy ring and the First Aid Post where great jars of medical specimens containing twins, brains, stomachs and more, provide a backdrop that is both sinister and funny. Sophia, Lady Garfield, becomes a spy (not a very good one), shows courage in the face of the enemy – and triumphs in the end. It begins at the outbreak of war, Sophia drives home from the north of England in her chauffeur driven Rolls Royce. She is due in London to help with evacuees.

She finishes her journey by train, and of several people in her crowded carriage a nasty lady speaks. “You mark my words,” she said, “This will mean a shilling on the income tax.” Sophia/Nancy has nailed her colours to the mast; this is an honourable war in which such selfishness has no place. Mind you, our heroine does live in a fine London house, dine in the best restaurants and like to go nightclubbing after a hard day in her First Aid Post. When her demoted friend, Fred, ‘... could no longer afford oysters or pink champagne... they had smoked salmon and claret instead.’ But Sophia is no air-head and recognises the politics of the day. To her husband, Luke, one of those English grandees who thought Hitler was not so bad, that the only real enemy was Bolshevism and who is somewhat shocked to find Russia and Germany as allies, she says ‘...There’s never been a pin to put between the Communists and the Nazis. The Communists torture you to death if you’re not a worker, and the Nazis torture you to death if you are not German. If you are they look at your nose first...’ Unsurprisingly, since one of her sisters declared herself in love with Hitler and another married the leader of the British Fascists, Nancy Mitford knew at first hand the insidious nature of such politics and *Pigeon Pie* mocks them with joyful gusto.

This strong moral line does not extend to her characters. This is a world where life is gay and feelings seem flippant – except, perhaps, for the loss of a dog. Unapologetically Sophia has a lover, Rudolph, and Luke has a darkly suspect woman in his life whom he brings to live in the marital home. The couple are terribly fond of each other, but that’s as far as marriage goes.

The fun of the book is in the characters, the settings, the brilliantly drawn Sophia and her constant puncturing of pomposity. Though it was written more than seventy years ago it is still fresh as a Mitford daisy.

*Mavis Cheek*