

Love and philosophy with a pinch of salt

Warwick Collins' impressive *The Marriage Of Souls* explores the eighteenth century through the old story of boy meets girl



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The Marriage Of Souls

Warwick Collins

Weidenfeld & Nicholson, £16.99, pp482

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Every now and then, a writer emerges who just gets better and better. These are the really exciting ones to encounter. Their novels carry the promise of so much more to come. Warwick Collins is one such writer. He is the author of several novels and each has been an extraordinary improvement on the last. The Rationalist marked Collins out as a writer who would be able to challenge the supremacy of Hilary Mantel, Rose Tremain and Ferdinand Mount. *The Marriage of Souls* confirms that he has arrived.

The Marriage of Souls, like *The Rationalist*, is an exploration of humanist philosophy wrapped between the delicate leaves of an eighteenth-century tale. The story of the two novels - and they should be read as a two-volume work - centres around the old war-horse of boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy finds girl. But what a boy and what a girl.

The Marriage of Souls is set in Lymington, on the Solent. The year is 1798. The French Revolution and its aftermath has filled the town with hundreds of French émigrés who bring with them money and foreign ways. The salt furnaces provide wealth and jobs but they destroy those who work in them. Although the town is picturesque, the forces maintaining it are dangerous and uncontrollable.

The novel begins with the disappointing information that the future happiness and reconciliation promised in *The Rationalist* failed to materialise. Silas Grange, the Scottish doctor who would prefer to live and die by David Hume, has suffered a mental and physical collapse. Mrs Celia Quill, the enigmatic stranger who seemed poised to unlock the constraints around his rational heart, has departed suddenly and without trace. Dr Hargood, Grange's best friend and mentor, carries inside him the burden of guilt and knowledge.

What makes *The Marriage of Souls* such a wonderful book is Collins's intricate reconstruction of the late eighteenth-century world. Simplicity and philosophy are the hallmarks of eighteenth-century art and architecture. The classically pure lines look deceptively simple and unburdened by heavy symbolism or imagery. But the unique accessibility of the eighteenth-century mind belies a complex and sophisticated philosophical framework. This is the essence of *The Marriage of Souls*.

The irony is that there are few eighteenth-century novels which succeed in capturing the eighteenth century as well as some twentieth-century writers can do today. The average eighteenth-century novel is, of course, of its time, but that is not the same thing as being able to capture the time. Fanny Burney's *Evelina* exemplifies the former, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* exemplifies the latter. The same goes for the modern novel. Some

novels simply emerge with the Zeitgeist, others shine a beacon of light across society. Today, we are fortunate that the historical novel has reached such extraordinary heights of technical mastery. The ability of society to connect with the past holds out the greatest hope for it being able to embrace the future.

The only criticism of *The Marriage of Souls* is that, like *The Rationalist*, the female characters receive less of the author's passion than the male. The men are fascinating, deep and sympathetic. The women do not sparkle or breathe with the same humanity. However, apart from this small caveat, *The Marriage of Souls* is a must read. The pacing is superb and the subplots ingenious. Lymington itself, with its foundry works belching fire and smoke, has never been so lovingly portrayed. Each street and house has its own character; even the sounds of Lymington resonate in the words.

The novel exudes a vibrancy and an embrace for life. The tragedy within the novel is that Silas Grange cannot feel it until it is almost too late.

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