

Fay Weldon, now eighty-seven, a published writer for more than fifty years, and one of the *grandes dames* of English literature, is technically a “crumbly”, the nickname given by the millennials in her latest novel to anyone born in the “pre-computer age”. However, judging by *After the Peace*, the second and final in her “Spoils of War” series (and the fifth to chronicle the lives of the aristocratic Dilberne dynasty), her virtuosity remains undiminished with age.

Rozzie Smithson (the great-granddaughter of Vivien Ripple, the protagonist in *Before the War*), was born on the very cusp of the new millennium at one second past midnight, and it is her life which is supposedly the focus of this self-referential narrative. Indeed, barely a chapter goes by without reference to Rozzie’s conception via some anonymous, though aristocratic (Dilberne), twenty-year-old sperm of questionable quality and therefore half-price. However, the first two-thirds of the novel mostly relate the lives of Rozzie’s parents, Xandra – a hard-working, underpaid nurse, and Clive (not Rozzie’s biological father), an out-

of-work actor, as well as Gwinny Rhyss (Lady Gwyneth Petrie) their next door neighbour, whose life becomes inextricably bound with theirs, mainly on account of the limitless depths of her wallet, and her obsession with them one day producing a baby – and preferably a girl.

In fact, the real protagonist – and narrator – is Gwinny, sometime model, courtesan and former wife to two very elderly, wealthy men, who leave her a couple of million pounds richer on their deaths. From the outset, Gwinny informs us, brightly, “I have done my course in creative writing. I will do my best to

Crumblies

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be a reliable narrator”; she then proceeds to spend the rest of the novel confounding such a statement. We soon learn that she has apparently been diagnosed as having “a defensive paranoid personality disorder cluster complicated by a distorted thinking pattern”. She spends a good deal of time talking to us in the first person, then sometimes changes tack and continues in the third, still as herself – or even, occasionally, as someone else. Never mind. As she explains,

My hope is that the reader will overlook Gwinny’s occasional descent into schizotypal personality disorder, with a hint of paranoia Gwinny is the only narrator available who knows or can imagine the totality of this rather startling story about sperm banks, the druggy life, the guilt of the past and the revenge of the Millennials.

As if that wasn’t complex enough, another – more judgmental, though hilarious – voice

creeps in: that of the “Writers’ Huddle”, a local creative writing group Gwinny joins following her decision to pen her story, and whose comments on the drafts she sends them are left in the text:

[Writers’ Huddle: ‘Gwinny, are you sure about all these timeline changes?’], or “[Writers’ Huddle: Do you think this is the right group for you, Gwinny? These days you don’t seem willing to take our advice. Can we recommend the Hampstead Huddle? It’s much more experimental!’].

By the end of the novel we are left hypnotically perplexed; uncertain what to believe having been faced with continual asides such as “I implied earlier that there was never latterly anything sexual between me and Clive but I lied”. It’s all part of the author’s artful game plan. Weldon has created a thought-provoking, condition-of-England novel for the new millennium. The crumblies may well have “fucked up” the millennials’ world, but one of them is still showing the generations of authors following her how to excel at the craft of novel-writing.