



Diski's drive

Philip Watson enters the uncompromising, conflicting world of Jenny Diski

Nothing Natural, for example, looks at the dynamics of sado-masochism through a relationship forged very much by the willing participation of the woman, Rachel.

Although the book caused much controversy (the poet Anthony Thwaite called it "loathsome" in the *Observer*) Diski's defence of it is unequivocal. "I would reject completely the idea that *Nothing Natural* is the story of a man's power over a woman. It's about collusion, and shifting power games."

Her other novels have been equally uncompromising. *Like Mother* is the unsettling story of the symbiotic relationship between a mother and her literally brainless baby. *Rainforest* looks at the conflicts between natural/personal chaos and order. And *Then Again*, her fourth novel, deals with time and parallel lives, religions and cultures.

It's this cant-free intellectual agility that has made Diski resistant to literary pigeonholing, and she rejects any "feminist" tag. "Something that worries me about feminism is its refusal to look at certain things. I find it terribly difficult to have an absolute sense of what things should be; I'm terminally

open-minded because I'm in the business of seeing other points of view."

But for all their slipperiness, Diski's novels are much funnier than their complexity might suggest. There is a tone of detached irony, of tragi-comedy, that rings through her books, a black humour borne triumphantly out of suffering and pain experienced in her 44 years. Beneath her strong face lies the weight of the world and a very destructive past that includes an unsettled childhood, psychiatric hospitals and clinical depression.

Diski's fifth novel, *Happily Ever After* (Hamish Hamilton, £14.99), out this month, is, she says, her "jolliest" book yet. This is the intriguing story of the seduction of paunchy, brooding, middle-aged alcoholic Liam (a character first seen in *Rainforest*) by his 68-year-old "trainee baglady" sitting tenant Daphne, she says of the book: "Some people write about the idealised childhood they never had; maybe Daphne is how I hope my later years will be. Daphne is the ghost of my old age."

Happily Ever After also searches out the dark, secret places of childhood; Daphne's,

which are locked away in the house itself, and Divya's, the daughter of one of Liam's tenants, Silvie, a depressive.

It's a novel that will continue to confound her critics, many of whom accuse her of being far too calculated, of thinking too much and concluding too little. In support of such criticism, I paraphrase Duke Ellington's maxim and suggest that "too much think can stink up the place".

"Well, he's absolutely right, of course," she retorts, "but our task is to open our nostrils and smell what has to be smelt. Sometimes, you've just got to live with the stink."

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