First do no harm: introduction to a new series

SMUT: TWO UNSEEMLY STORIES
ALAN BENNETT
Profile Books, 2012
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Despite the sex, these two short stories are trademark Bennett; darkly amusing tales of English ladies keeping a lid on a boiling undercurrent of suburban desires. The first story is about a widow, Mrs Donaldson, who discovers a new talent as a simulated patient for medical students (fun scenes of students taking dodgy histories). The twist comes when her lodgers can’t pay the rent, and suggest payment in kind (nudge, nudge). She surprises herself — and us — by accepting, and rather enjoys it. The second story is a bed-hopping farce about Mrs Forbes, and her stupid (and gay) son who she feels has married (a woman) beneath him. There’s blackmail, a policeman, and pseudo-secrets.

The blurb says the stories are ‘naughty, honest and very funny’. They are naughtyish, although the sex is more saucy seaside postcard than shocking. A few Bennetian turns of phrase and barbed asides made me smile. And there is honesty in the character portrayals, and the observation that we are all performing. But I wasn’t convinced by the premise of either story and the backdrop (on and off wards) seemed more 1950s than 2012. I’d recommend it if you enjoy Bennett, or want a short, easy read.

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