

Book Review

The Dragonfly Pool: Eva Ibbotson: Macmillan Children's Books, £10.99

The Dragonfly Pool is for children about the age of Tally, the heroine, who is eleven. It is in three parts. The first deals with Tally's experiences when she is sent to a boarding-school away from London in 1939 because of the fear of war. This school turns out to be Delderton Hall, in Devon, a thinly disguised version of Dartington Hall School. The second part is a tense story of assassination and escape in Bergania, a fictitious European state under threat from Hitler and the Nazis. The last involves a second escape and a joyful reunion.

There are a number of serious themes that recur throughout the book, ranging from the threat and the reality of war to relationships between parents and children, but most prominent is the contrast drawn between repressive and progressive education. Tally's cousins, for instance, go to schools with elaborate and expensive uniforms; when Tally first sees her future fellow-pupils she is surprised by the great variety of mostly rather shabby styles, including a boiler-suit, a tattered jersey and bare feet. Her cousin Roderick is not allowed to write for the first week, and when he does write his letters are censored. "Just as well," says his father. "One doesn't want to get oneself upset by any nonsense the boys can come up with." Tally writes to her father on her second day at school.

In part two the story of Karil, the young prince of Bergania, offers a different example of enforced conformity. He has to attend boring official functions in elaborate uniform and is supervised every moment of the day to make sure that he remembers his position and does not make friends with his inferiors. Routine duty even prevents his father, the king, from having much contact with him.

Tally and the Deldertonians are invited to Bergania to take part in an international festival of folk-dancing. The children from the different

countries, including Germany, make friends and enjoy themselves. Karil watches enviously from a palace window, until the First Lady of the Household angrily pulls him back.

Educational theory emerges from the story quite naturally. When Tally is first welcomed to the school by the headmaster she asks, "Is it true that we don't have to go to lessons?" "You don't have to," replies the head, "but I hope you will. We have some excellent teachers." "So it's all right to go to lessons? We don't *have* to be free if we don't want to be?" "No, Tally," he says. "You don't have to be free."

Not all the children like this. One new boy has been sent to Delderton because his parents have been advised that he is repressed. He says, "I don't mind being repressed. I don't like it when people tell me I can do what I like. I want to be told what to do."

And people who do not know the school dislike it very much. One critic describes the teacher in charge of the folk-dancing group as "a man who travels with a group of mad children, without discipline or restraint." Another, who has nothing to go on but what he has heard from other people, describes the children as, "those disgusting delinquent brats . . . those nudist anarchists . . . those gutter rats."

Even Tally herself, a much milder critic who loves the school, comments, "Of course, being free can be exhausting, but you soon get used to it." More positively, she tells a prospective pupil that the school is "a place where you can find out who you are."

The book emphasises over and over again that enforced duty denies the possibility of sincerity and personal responsibility. Adults see a smart appearance as an element of duty, but superficial elegance goes with snobbery and arrogance. One of the children from the shabby Delderton group advocates a duty of a different kind. "Duty exists," he says, "and it's real. It means sharing what you have with other people who need it. It means not being afraid or selfish or tight - but open."

Eva Ibbotson herself was at Dartington in the 1930s, and she describes the school as she knew it. The story is both exciting and moving, and at times extremely funny, but what makes it important for adult readers is this authenticity. Anyone can write exciting but unconvincing fiction about children running wild in a situation where they are free from adult control (think of *Lord of the Flies*), but it is only someone who has experienced a school like Dartington who can tell the truth about what really happens in such an atmosphere.