

A Particular Man by Lesley Glaister review

– 'an old black-and-white movie in words'

Set in the wretchedly poor and battered England of 1945-6, this novel about a soldier returning home from a Japanese prisoner of war camp throbs with loss, writes Allan Massie

Lesley Glaister's new novel is refreshingly different. It may be called old-fashioned, and is all the better for being so. It has well-imagined characters, a convincing setting, and a good and often moving story. There is nothing extravagant, nothing fanciful. Set in 1945-6, it may seem to many a historical novel, or period-piece. Perhaps it is that, for it certainly evokes and re-creates an **England** foreign to most readers today. It does so, I should add, extremely well.

It begins with the return home of a damaged young man. Lennie Starling – he prefers to be called by his surname – is a survivor of a Japanese prisoner of war camp where he suffered horribly from repeated bouts of malaria and the amputation of his left hand. It's not, as was common, something he can speak about except to his fellows. Home is no place for him. His mother adores him but he can't speak to her. His father has always despised him, calling him a sissy. He heads back to **London**, where he has friends. He has another reason, a duty to perform. His closest friend in the camp, Edgar, a medical student, died before the war and entrusted him with a little box to give to his sister, Aida. He finds out where she lives, walks the streets, can't find the nerve to ring the bell. Later he makes his way to Edgar's home in Suffolk, where he is able to introduce himself as a friend from the camp. This, however, leads to a misunderstanding.

Glaister adroitly shifts the point of view between the three characters most wounded by Edgar's death – Starling, Aida and her mother Clementine – with first-person passages for each. Starling is a bird with a broken wing, utterly

unsure of himself. Aida, a lively girl working in a boring government office, is not short of admirers. Clementine is locked in a cold marriage to a doctor and now dismayed by the loss of domestic staff; she is an acutely drawn character, more sympathetic than she may appear at first. Glaister develops each of these characters as the story unfolds.

There is deep feeling in this novel, and an understanding and sympathy for the damaged characters. It throbs with loss. The dead Edgar – Eddie – is in a sense the central character and, though dead, is a still living presence. Death takes much away, but there are things it cannot take, chief among them the way the dead still live on in memory and conversation.

Not the least of the pleasures of this novel is its evocation of the wretchedly poor and battered England in the months after the war: the electricity failures, the mean shops, the rationing, the cold steam trains. It is a very fine period piece, an old black-and-white movie in words. One finds oneself mentally casting the characters: the young Dirk Bogarde for Starling, the very young Jean Simmons for Aida, Valerie Hobson for Clementine, Donald Sinden for her husband. There can of course be no actor for Eddie, though he is in a sense the most vital character in this thoroughly enjoyable novel.

A Particular Man, by Lesley Glaister, Bloodhound Books, £9.99