



The Soul of Kindness

Elizabeth Taylor , Paul Bailey (Introduction)

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' "Here I am!" Flora called to Richard as she went downstairs. For a second, Meg felt disloyalty. It occurred to her of a sudden that Flora was always saying that, and that it was in the tone of one giving a lovely present. She was bestowing herself.' The soul of kindness is what Flora believes herself to be. Tall, blonde and beautiful, she appears to have everything under control -- her home, her baby, her husband Richard, her friend Meg, Kit, Meg's brother, who has always adored Flora, and Patrick the novelist and domestic pet. Only the bohemian painter Liz refuses to become a worshipper at the shrine. Flora entrances them all, dangling visions of happiness and success before their spellbound eyes. All are bewitched by this golden tyrant, all conspire to protect her from what she really is. All, that is, except the clear-eyed Liz: it is left to her to show them that Flora's kindness is the sweetest poison of them all.

The Soul of Kindness Details

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From Reader Review The Soul of Kindness for online ebook

Chari says

3.5 ??

Hilary says

I found these characters a bit bland. The ending was abrupt and found this book dissapointing in comparison with some of the great Elizabeth Taylor books I have read in recent months.

Debbie says

This was originally published in 1964; the copy I read was the Virago Modern Classic with a 1983 introduction by Philip Hensher. This was my first sample of Taylor's writing and I was slightly disappointed: the writing is beautiful but the story didn't live up to the cover hype.

Yes, Flora is a spoiled brat masquerading as everyone's golden girl, "It's so miserable of everybody. I thought it would please them to be asked. It would please me. And if I were in their place, I'd do anything rather than spoil my happiness." but the cover and the intro promised something almost sinister.

I'll definitely try Taylor again, but I rate this 3½ stars.

Read this if: you feel you're being manipulated by someone in your life – perhaps looking at an objective situation will help you gain perspective – and tools to snip the strings.

I read this as this month's random pick from my TBR wish list spreadsheet of 2,323 items for the Random Reads Challenge hosted by I'm Loving Books.

Canadian Reader says

"she had always meant well. That intention had been seen clearly, lying behind some of her biggest mistakes."

"I've never done anything to harm anyone in all my life."

"No; of course not, darling. No one is kinder."

"Other people have to live with the truth about themselves."

Kindness is a virtue. Generally speaking, to be called "the soul of kindness" is high praise. However, Elizabeth Taylor isn't dealing in generalities in her ninth novel, *The Soul of Kindness*. Here she explores kindness as blindness, presenting us with a young, newly married protagonist, Flora Quartermaine (nee Secretan), whose compassion and seeming goodwill cause all sorts of trouble. In the early pages of the book,

Flora is a character straight out of Disney: a beautiful and saccharine young woman, on whose fingers doves gently alight. Before long, she's setting up her orphaned and unlucky friend, Meg, with a gay writer acquaintance, Patrick Barlow. Flora is apparently oblivious of his sexual orientation, in spite of the innuendo of others and his evident preoccupation with his "friend" Frankie. Equally unaware that Meg's brother, Kit, is hopelessly untalented, Flora encourages and "inspires" him to pursue a stillborn acting career, when his sister is clearly in need of his financial contribution to the household. Meanwhile, Flora's father-in-law, Percy, is given a cat as a companion he doesn't want, and he is urged to marry his long-time mistress, even though the two clearly prefer living apart.

Why does Flora meddle in this way? The author writes: "Flora's worries were other people's worries. With these she tirelessly concerned herself." She believes herself kind and desirous of the best for her friends and relations, while everyone else finds her naïve, obtuse, and even stupid. "Someone always has to look after Flora and let her think she's looking after them," observes one character. She is certainly "high maintenance". Mrs. Secretan, Flora's mother, regards her daughter's wedding day as a sort of ritualistic handing over—from mother to husband—of a "precious burden". Best friend Meg is a "nannie" to her. While Meg disapproves of cosseting, she recognizes "that it would be dangerous for it to be discontinued—like putting an orchid out into the frosty air." As for Flora's husband, Richard: he has the responsibility of preserving her face from any signs of stress—due to the loss of innocence: "it would surely be his fault if it were altered, if the Botticelli calm were broken, or the appealing gaze veiled." In short, everyone around Flora is more or less complicit in ensuring that she not be presented with "a glimpse of herself as someone she could never bear to live with."

In all the novels I've read by Taylor, she shows herself to be keenly interested in the matter of self-deception. Her characters often tell themselves comforting stories about their own motivations, actions, and lives. They work to hide unpleasant truths from themselves as much as from others. In her seventh and ninth novels, *Angel* and *The Soul of Kindness*, Taylor appears to be interested in the role nurture plays in the development of unusually imperceptive, egotistical personalities. At the heart of both narratives, there is an indulgent, overprotective mother and a willful, pathologically oblivious daughter. The daughters, Angel and Flora, are extreme cases—even for Taylor; bordering on untenable and unconvincing, they are almost caricatures. Angel, a writer of third-rate potboilers, fancies herself a literary giant. (Fate strangely treats her kindly for a time, and she becomes enormously wealthy from her novel writing.) Flora, on the other hand, is blind to "otherness". Though reasonably capable socially, she is self-centred and incapable of perceiving that the needs, wants, and goals of other people differ from her own.

Taylor's novel, published in 1964, has an interesting resonance over fifty years later in this age of "helicopter parents", who wish to spare their children every discomfort and distress. The sheltering and coddling we see from Mrs Secretan (and from many modern parents) ensure that young people remain childlike and emotionally immature into adulthood. The untalented Kit's unrealistic aspirations are in part due to the excessive praise he received as a child for his roles in school plays. Such praise, Taylor intimates, is a "disservice" to the young. Meg speculates about the damage of parental indulgence, wondering "what, if anything at all, Flora knew about people. Her mother had encouraged only the prettiest view of human nature and no later aspects she may have come across seemed to have made an impression." Taylor also makes clear that too much investment in a child's life leaves a mother without an identity when the child leaves. Mrs. Secretan, we are told, planned everything down to the last detail. "But," in doing so, she realizes, "I forgot myself and the future."

Taylor often likes to provide her protagonists with foils. In this book, we have Flora—happy in domesticity, young motherhood, and innocence or obliviousness—and Elinor Pringle, who lives just down from Flora's crescent in affluent St. John's Wood. About the same age as Flora, Elinor is the lonely wife of an MP, who "doesn't give a damn" about what she does and who prefers to spend his limited spare time writing dull plays peopled with male characters. Lonely, childless, and bitter about her marriage, Elinor spends many of her days tracking down rare and costly pieces of furniture and objets d'art. She goes on solo trips, eats alone in

guest-house dining rooms with a book as her only companion, and walks deserted esplanades during the off-season. Having run into her several times in Mayfair, Flora's husband, Richard, becomes quite friendly with Elinor, keeping the relationship from his wife. His suppers with his new female friend, especially those that occur when Flora is in the nursing home after the birth of their daughter, lead him to compare the two women. On one occasion he thinks that loyal Flora, unlike Elinor, would be the ideal political wife, but after another visit with the intelligent, opinionated Elinor, he is troubled to have disloyal thoughts about Flora. When his wife later rushes to the door to greet him, he uncharacteristically observes that she's "far too tall" to be speaking in "such a little girl voice."

Taylor provides an even more dramatic contrast to Flora in the person of Liz Corbett, "a fattish young woman with untidy hair". Slatternly Liz is Patrick Barlow's friend and an artist. She lives in a squalid flat with all of her painting materials in disarray about her, but in spite of the mess, even filth, of her surroundings, she produces paintings of great delicacy and increasing originality. Unlike the other female characters in the novel, and in spite of Taylor's unappealing portrait of her, Liz is the only one to have an independent purpose, a vision of what she wants to accomplish. "I don't want to enchant people. I want to shake them up. . . . People under spells are half dead," she tells Patrick. "I've a lifetime's work in my head. . . . Some explorations to be made." Liz also happens to be the only character in the novel with the guts, the toughness, to confront Flora.

I found Taylor's *The Soul of Kindness*, a far more unified, mature, and accomplished piece than the many other novels by her I've recently read. Characters and plot are better controlled by the author, and all work well to develop, serve, and amplify a central theme. Reading this book was a rewarding experience.

Jane says

Spoiler alert:

Can a book largely about a woman who is spoiled, narcissistic and immature be a satisfying read? The self-deluded Flora goes about doing "good," thinking she is perceived as "the soul of kindness" and instead causes harm.

In fact, the actual soul of kindness is Patrick, a gay man who is lovable, kind, sensitive and mature. Perhaps the book is really about the contrast between Flora and Patrick after all.

Roger Pettit says

From time to time I mentally compile a list of those writers whose work I believe is unfairly neglected or under-appreciated. Top of my list is someone whom I consider to be a marvellous novelist: Barbara Pym. Others on the list include EF Benson, Ellery Queen, Patrick Hamilton and Michael Gilbert. I feel I must now add another name to the list: Elizabeth Taylor. Perhaps her writing is better known than I realise. But before recently picking up a copy of her novel *The Soul of Kindness* in a charity bookshop I had never heard of Elizabeth Taylor the writer. (Until then, the only Elizabeth Taylor of whom I was aware was the late great British film actress!) What a discovery I seem to have made. This is a simply wonderful novel.

Set in London and the Thames Valley during the early 1960s, *The Soul of Kindness* is a comedy of manners. Its principal character is Flora (who reminds me of Jane Austen's *Emma*). Flora is beautiful, sweet-natured and seemingly in control of everything and everyone around her. As the book opens, she is about to marry

Richard, who owns a factory. Other characters include Meg, Flora's best friend and bridesmaid; Kit, Meg's brother, who is a budding actor; Patrick, a writer; Liz, an artist; Elinor, an unhappily married neighbour of Flora and Richard, who strikes up a friendship with the latter; Percy, Richard's father; Barbara, who is Percy's other half (and who eventually marries him); and Mrs Secretan, Flora's widowed mother. Flora is quite unaware of the impact that her innocently selfish behaviour has on the lives of these various characters. She subtly pressurises her father-in-law Percy into marrying Barbara - but they were, in fact, much happier before tying the knot! She fails to realise that Kit dotes on her and that her encouragement of his pursuit of a career as an actor is completely misguided. In fact, it has near fatal consequences. And Flora is quite comically unaware of Patrick's homosexuality and cannot understand why he does not get together with Meg, who is looking for love.

The Soul of Kindness is beautifully written. Its prose is precise and elegant; and its characterisation is excellent and deadly accurate. The interweaving plot is engaging and very entertaining. This is a superb novel about loneliness and about ordinary middle class life of the time in which it is set. I cannot recommend it too highly (and I now fully intend to make every effort to get hold of some of Elizabeth Taylor's other novels). 9/10.

[One sub-editing point I should make: there is a reference (on page 172 of my 2010 paperback version of the novel) to West Indians as "coloured people"! That may have been acceptable in the 1960s, but it is, I think, a term that causes offence these days. Its use adds little or nothing to the plot and it could therefore have been removed. (I accept that, given the period in which The Soul of Kindness is set, it might not be possible simply to amend it.) I suspect that, given the often woeful quality of sub-editing in modern publishing, its inclusion can be ascribed to an oversight rather than to a conscious decision!]

Aida Lopez says

? Poco que contaros de su argumento, realmente apenas sucede nada.

La historia gira entorno a su protagonista Flora, su entorno y su familia. Con descripciones detalladas de la vida cotidiana.

?Flora: Un personaje que intenta ser tan perfecto que me resulta insoportable. Tanto como los que le rodean y de constante la consienten.

?Me costó mucho terminarlo , me resultó soporífero... no pasaba nada!

Barbara Pym, tiene un estilo parecido, pero se diferencia por su ironía y las acciones sencillas que desbaratan lo cotidiano. Quizás fueron mis expectativas ... me esperaba algo similar a mi querida Pym.

?Es mi humilde opinión, para todos hay un libro y este no era para mí .

♥?Seguiré a la editorial con otros muchos títulos que me interesan de su catálogo, pero no pienso leer nada más de la autora. Generalmente suelo dar una segunda oportunidad a los autores, pero en este caso y con mi experiencia lo tengo claro .

Jane says

I imagine that anyone who picks up this novel will know someone like Flora, the soul of kindness of the title. Someone who is attractive, charming and accomplished, but without insight, self-awareness or a great deal of empathy; someone who is popular but can drive her friends and family to distraction.

She is the woman that Jane Austen's Emma Woodhouse might have become – albeit in another age – had she not been guided by, and desirous of the high regard, of Mrs Weston and Mr Knightley

The story opens on Flora's wedding day, and from the very first paragraph Elizabeth Taylor draws her wonderfully well:

'Towards the end of the bridegroom's speech, the bride turned aside and began to throw crumbs of the wedding cake through an opening in the marquee to the doves outside. She did so with gentle absorption, and more doves came down from their wooden house above the stables. Although she caused a little rustle of amusement among the guests, she did not know it: her husband was embarrassed by her behaviour and thought it early in their married life to be so; but she did not know that either.'

Flora was the carefully protected only child of widowed mother, and almost everyone she knew would follow that example, would love and protect her too. It was to her great credit that she hadn't been irredeemably spoiled, that she realised she had been blessed and that she wanted to do everything that she could with the people she loved.

Her intentions were always good, she always charmed the recipient of her kindness into accepting her ideas, but she never saw that they were never as happy as she thought they would be.

Take the letter that she wrote to her mother on her wedding day.

'Mrs Secretan took the letter and opened it. 'You have been the most wonderful mother,' she read. 'I had a beautiful childhood.' So it was to be regarded as finished? The words were the kind which might be spoken from a deathbed or to someone lying on one. If only, Mrs Secretan thought yearningly, if only Flora had written 'You are such a wonderful mother.' That would have made all the difference, she thought – would have made it seem that there was still a place for me.'

When she read the letter through again, her mother realised that Flora had meant well; she knew that she always meant well, even when she made terrible mistakes.

That insensitive choice of words had no serious consequences, but other acts of kindness would.

Flora encouraged her widowed father-in-law to marry his lady friend, not realising that they were both quite fond of their own homes and that the set-up they had suited them very well indeed.

She said quite firmly that her friend Meg's younger brother, Kit, who had always idolised her, must pursue his dream of becoming an actor; even though his sister and everyone who had seen his efforts saw that he did not have the necessary talent.

Flora decided that her mother should find a housekeeper/companion so that she wouldn't be lonely without her daughter. She failed to understand that her mother needed more than that, and that she should be more than a guest in her home.

It didn't help that nobody told her the their real feelings; that accepted that her intentions were good and

carried on.

Richard, her husband, is guilty of this; but he sees the consequences of his wife's kindnesses and he is often able to smooth over some of the damage that they do. But as he seeks to protect her he cannot tell her of his growing friendship with a near neighbour

Flora is a wonderful creation, an utterly believable, fallible human being; and it says much for Elizabeth Taylor's skill as novelist that she can draw readers into her story even as she is revealing her flaws and the unhappy consequences of her many kindnesses.

Her writing is beautiful, it is subtle and it has a lovely clarity. She has the insight and understanding of people and their relationships that Flora lacks in abundance, and she knows exactly which details are worthy of notice and will illuminate her story.

That story has a serious theme but it there is a smattering of wit and humour.

The dialogue is particularly fine; there are some memorable quick exchanges and longer conversations that really ring true.

Every character and every relationship is distinctive, and – as is almost always the case with Elizabeth Taylor – the supporting cast is wonderfully well done.

I particularly liked Mrs Secretan's housekeeper/companion, Miss Folley:

'The next day, there was more church in the morning. Social church, with hats. Richard was left with Miss Folley, whom he watched with a wary eye, tried to avoid. She kept offering him things — a mince pie, a glass of her sloe gin, a dish of marzipan strawberries.

He did not quite like to get out his briefcase and set to work again on Christmas morning, so he looked about for a book to read. No newspapers: no market prices. Mrs. Secretan was reading Elizabeth and her German Garden — 'for the umpteenth time,' she said. 'Such a beautiful book. How much one would have liked to have known her.

Richard thought that for his part we would have tried to run a mile in the other direction, if such a risk had risen. He had 'picked' at the book once, as he put it; and had been vaguely repelled, but because he could never justify his reactions to art and literature, he kept quiet. I'm a businessman, he thought. This bolstering-up reflection he also kept to himself. ...

Ageing ladies' books filled the shelves — My Life as This or That — he skipped the title — The English Rock Garden, Rosemary for Remembrance, Down the Garden Path, The Herbaceous Border Under Three Reigns.

'If you're looking for a nice, pulling book,' Miss Folley began, coming in to bully him with Elvas plums.

'No, no," he said, straightening quickly, backing away from the shelves. 'I never read.'

He would have his little joke, she thought; and laughed accordingly.'

This is such an accomplished novel, but it hasn't left as strong an impression on me as I thought it would. I can't quite explain why, but I think it might be because the characters were quite scattered this book feels less 'whole' than others.

It was love again though, I appreciate that all of Elizabeth Taylor's novels are distinctive and yet they have

enough in common to sit together as siblings.

I'm looking forward to picking up another one soon, to read or to re-read.

Diane says

After just reading Taylor's early work (At Mrs. Lippincote's and Mrs. Palfry at the Claremont) I was disappointed in *The Soul of Kindness*. The earlier books had an edge to them, some real anger at the limitations of women's lives, which broke through the veneer of politeness (or kindness). Illusions about marriage and relationships could be dispelled--even though the result would be harsh and painful. In *The Soul of Kindness*, however, characters soldier on, resigning themselves to "lives of quiet desperation."

Hilary says

Masterly study of a well-meaning monster. Deliciously venomous. Echoes of 'Emma' - I think the heroine, Flora is a study in how Emma might have turned out, if she hadn't grown up and learnt about other people.

<http://vulpeslibris.wordpress.com/201...>

Aharon says

The British have been writing the same book for 200 years. Lucky for us, it is a good book.

Helen Jackson says

I sped through this little book, fascinated by the characters and carried along by the flowing prose. I may have read it too quickly -- it would certainly be worth re-reading.

I enjoyed Taylor's deft touch: she says a lot about her characters in their most throw-away lines of dialogue. I also liked the way she explored the various lives open to both women and men in this period (the early 1960s), the choices open to them and, by implication, the options not available... all while keeping the narrative moving forward.

Thanks to Ali who introduced me to Elizabeth Taylor, and who's hosting a *The Soul of Kindness* readalong on her blog.

Veronica says

I haven't read any Elizabeth Taylor for many decades. This was a short, quick read. As a number of other reviewers have said, Flora is what Jane Austen's Emma would have been if she hadn't grown up. Like Emma, Flora meddles in people's lives with no inkling of what makes them tick or what harm she is doing. Yet the

people around her constantly humour her and are terrified of upsetting her, so they go along with her stupid schemes. I felt sorriest for Percy and Ba, who were getting along quite happily as a couple living in separate houses, but got grumpy and fed up after Flora insisted that they get married. Great characterisation here; they feel like real people. The only character I felt didn't completely work was Liz; she's said to be the only person who sees through Flora, and yet she never meets her.

JacquiWine says

I've been itching to get back to reading Elizabeth Taylor for a while now, an author whose work I adore. First published in 1964, *The Soul of Kindness* was one of Taylor's later novels, and I think it shows. There is a sense of precision in both the writing and the characterisation that suggests it is the work of an accomplished writer, one in full control of her material. Much as I loved the last Taylor I read – her first, *At Mrs Lippincote's* – *The Soul of Kindness* seems a more rounded novel, possibly up there with *Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont* as my favourite so far.

The storyline in *The Soul of Kindness* revolves around Flora Quartermaine, a beautiful young woman who seems to have the perfect life. She is married to Richard, her loving husband and hard-working businessman, manager of the family-owned factory passed down from his father, Percy. In addition to Richard, Flora has a close circle of friends upon whom she lavishes her own unique brand of kindness: there is the long-suffering Meg, her closest friend from school; Patrick, the writer who looks forward to Flora's company as a respite from his work; and Kit, Meg's younger brother, who quite literally worships Flora, looking up to her as a sort of benefactor or mentor.

While Flora considers herself to be the very soul of kindness, in reality this is far from the truth, her good intentions often causing more harm than good. Kit, an aspiring actor, has very little real talent, but Flora encourages him terribly, building up his hopes and dreams with the best of intentions even though everyone else can see how futile and potentially damaging this is proving to be. Flora, however, always thinks she knows what's best for her friends, even if they can't see this for themselves. Here's a typical example of Flora in action – in this scene, she is talking to Ba, Percy's level-headed lady friend and prospective partner in life.

'Why don't you have a cat?' Flora asked.

'I don't want a cat.'

'But it would be lovely for you. Percy likes cats.'

'Well, Percy's got a cat.'

Flora, in fact, had given it to him and he had been obliged to take it in. In four years, he had found that Flora was not biddable at all. Although as good as gold, she had inconvenient plans for other people's pleasure, and ideas differing from her own she was not able to imagine. (p. 18)

Right from the start, Flora's mother, the well-intentioned Mrs Secretan, encouraged her daughter (an only child) to adopt only the rosier view of human nature; and none of Flora's experiences since then have succeeded in altering this mindset. To a certain extent, Flora has been shielded from the harsh realities of life by those around her. First by her mother in those early years, then by Meg who recognised that the protective environment nurtured by Mrs Secretan could not be broken down without consequences. Now the bulk of the responsibility for preserving Flora's happiness has passed to Richard, a task he clearly acknowledges as presenting difficulties from time to time. In this scene, Richard is wondering why he has not told Flora about

a chance encounter with one of his neighbours, the rather lonely Elinor Pringle, a woman with whom he has developed a close friendship. While Elinor is not in love with Richard, she values his companionship, someone to talk to and have a drink with every now and again while her busy politician husband is caught up in his own world.

To have kept quiet about it, had given it the significance of a secret arrangement. Now it was too late, and if Flora came to hear of it, as more than likely she might, a little puzzled frown would come between her brows – the expression she wore when she was bewildered by other standards of behaviour than her own. But we've preserved the face pretty well, between us, Richard thought; not fearing ageing lines, but the loss of innocence. So far, and by the skin of his teeth, he felt. The face was his responsibility now and it would surely be his fault if it were altered, if the Botticelli calm were broken, or the appealing gaze veiled. (p. 71-72)

Slowly but surely over the course of the novel, Elizabeth Taylor reveals the true extent of Flora's lack of self-awareness and her rather blinkered view of the lives of those around her. Flora has very little understanding of the real impact of her acts of 'kindness' on her closest friends and family, a point that hits home to Mrs Secretan when she finds this letter from her daughter at the end of the wedding.

Mrs Secretan took the letter and opened it. 'You have been the most wonderful mother,' she read. 'I had a beautiful childhood.' So it was to be regarded as finished? The words were the kind which might be spoken from a deathbed or to someone lying on one. If only, Mrs Secretan thought yearningly, if only Flora had written 'You are such a wonderful mother.' That would have made all the difference, she thought – would have made it seem that there was still a place for me. (p. 13)

She read the letter through again, telling herself that Flora had meant well, meant very well, poor girl. In fact she had always meant well. That intention had been seen clearly, lying behind some of her biggest mistakes. (p. 15)

Mrs Secretan is a typical Elizabeth Taylor character. There is a sense of despondency about her, knowing as she does that a life of loneliness almost certainly lies ahead now that Flora has flown the nest. There are some priceless scenes between Mrs Secretan and her slightly dotty housekeeper, Miss Folley, a woman whose pride is wounded when she discovers she is the source of some amusement and frustration in the Secretan household.

To read the rest of my review, please click here:

<https://jacquiwine.wordpress.com/2017...>

Ali says

I read this book a couple of weeks ago in fact – and have simply saved this review to post now. Hopefully I have avoided any spoilers – as I know a lot of people will still be reading.

The Soul of Kindness of the title is Flora Quatermaine, a beautiful young woman, who as the novel opens is getting married. Flora is simply adored by everyone, which she feels is her due. As time moves forward four years, Flora has everything she wants; her husband Richard, a baby and a lovely home in St. Johns Wood. She also has an array of loyal adoring friends, Meg who she knew as a child, Meg's brother Kit, whose theatrical ambitions Flora encourages, and writer Patrick who appears regularly at her house. She also has Mrs Lodge, her housekeeper, of whom Flora has made a special friend, and without whom she refuses to imagine her life. These people, who surround Flora, conspire to protect her, from herself, the truth of what

she is. For Flora is a quiet monster. Flora only sees what she wants to see, hears what she wants to hear, she lives in a self-imposed bubble. She has her own ideas about the people around her, and is blind to any alternative. Her father-in-law, Percy thinking her biddable when she first married Richard, revises his opinion.

“Well, Percy’s got a cat,”

Flora, in fact had given it to him and he had been obliged to take it in. In four years, he had found that Flora was not biddable after all. Although good as gold, she had inconvenient plans for other people’s pleasure, and ideas differing from her own she was not able to imagine”

As so often with Elizabeth Taylor’s novels her minor characters are just as rounded and explored as the central characters. Percy has a lady friend Ba, whom Flora is certain he should marry. Percy is a rather marvellous character, a bit grumpy; he hates the idea of foreign travel, and sulks like a child when Ba goes to France for a week to see relatives. Flora’s mother Mrs Secretan lives in the country with her companion/housekeeper Miss Folley, Miss Folley invents old love letters to read out to Mrs Secretan, and makes spice cakes when Flora is expected to visit, these visits are always greatly anticipated by both women. Meg and her brother Kit have to move to Towersey in the Thames Valley where they meet the bohemian painter Liz Corbett. Liz hears all about the wondrous Flora, but unlike everyone else, she refuses absolutely to believe in Flora’s goodness. Flora continues to encourage the adoring Kit in his theatrical ambitions, Flora believes he has a wonderful talent, everyone else knows that this is not the case, and fear that continuing to encourage Kit could be detrimental to his future.

Readers of Elizabeth Taylor’s novels are used to her humour, her brilliantly sharp observational wit, and there are flashes of that in *The Soul of Kindness* too. I am always so impressed with how she knows people, in their small private moments – how she does this is utterly brilliant, I find myself nodding – saying to myself “God yes people are just like that” This excerpt again about Percy - made me howl.

“A quiz programme. Two rows of people facing one another. A pompous, school-masterly man asking the questions. Those answers that Percy knew he spoke out loudly and promptly; when he was at a loss he pretended (as if he were not alone) that he had not quite caught the question, or he was busy blowing his nose to make a reply, or had to go to help himself to whiskey.”

God how brilliant!

The subtlety of Elizabeth Taylor’s writing is masterly. She could have made Flora a screaming maniac of a monstrosity, yet she is a more benign presence for most of the novel. Flora’s true personality creeps up on the reader as the novel progresses in quite subtle ways. Liz, whose attitude to and view of Flora - who she never really meets - is key, is kept as quite a minor figure. As Paul Bailey explains in his introduction to my edition:

“Liz is a counterpoint to the ultimately dismal glow that Flora causes to radiate about herself.”

It would seem that *The Soul of Kindness* was not the best received of Elizabeth Taylor’s novels, nor the most successful. In *The Other Elizabeth Taylor*, the biography by Nicola Beauman, the author suggests that *The Soul of Kindness* is too long, that it would have made a very good short story or novella.

“It is in this novel more than in any of her others that she suffered from being forced, according to the conventions of English and American publishing, to spin things out to seventy or eighty thousand words.”

I didn’t think it was too long. Possibly Elizabeth Taylor felt she needed to stretch the novel to fit the expected word length, but to me it doesn’t read like a novel that has been padded out, I really enjoyed it. Certainly Elizabeth Bowen, a long-time friend and champion of Elizabeth Taylor apparently liked it a good deal and I for one wouldn’t want to argue with Ms Bowen. Also apparently the writer and critic Philip Hensher described *The Soul of Kindness* as “so expert that it seems effortless.” I am prepared to admit that there are better Elizabeth Taylor novels, and some of her short stories – I have only read some as yet – are masterly – but for me at least *The Soul of Kindness* is a good novel, a very good novel. It might not be the best one to begin reading Elizabeth Taylor, but I would hope there is nothing in it to put anyone off reading more.