Helpless

*Enlightenment*, Sarah Perry (381pp, Jonathan Cape)

I seem to be one of the very few people who thought the cover of *The Essex Serpent*, Sarah Perry's 'breakthrough' novel, was awful and therefore avoided buying it for several years. My mistake, because when some persuaded me to ignore the cover and actually read it, I found an excellent, unsettling tale; and I also realised the same author had written *After Me Comes the Flood*, whose intensity and strangeness I had greatly enjoyed.

It does seem, however, that Perry's books are slowly becoming more staid and mannered since that first unruly, passionate novel. *Melroth*, the previous one to this was, well how shall I put it, a bit dull, a bit too Gothic for its own good. Whilst *Enlightenment* steers away from that somewhat forced mood, it retains both an uneasiness and a langorous, stately pace as it navigates a story of science and pseudo-science, love, sexuality, faith, doubt and certitude. And there's a ghost of sorts too.

It's 1997, although you wouldn't know it. Late 20th Century Essex in this novel is caught in a timewarp, full of Strict Baptists, suppressed gays, amateur astronomers and journalists at the local newspaper. Perry's characters amble through a world that is tainted by religion (as opposed to faith) and where transgressions and sins are tallied, and everyone is accountable to each other and God, every person full of guilt and anxiety, with secrets to hide.

Much has been made in other reviews of this book about how Perry herself was brought up in this kind of church and how she later rejected the faith she was tutored in and for many years embraced; how the rivers, towns and landscapes of her books are versions of the real Essex where she lives. I'm not sure biographical links like this add anything to any reader's experience of the novel; good authorial research could have produced the same results.

Certainly Perry sustains a very specific version of the Essex backwaters (pun intended – rivers and creeks, but also how Essex still remains out of mainstream orbit) but it is only one version, and not necessarily an accurate or 'real' one. Why should it be? She wants us to be haunted, to be caught up in the minor events of this claustrophobic place, to inhabit a world caught in a bubble, immune to changes in society, a world where manners and church hold sway, and science seems to only be relevant as evidence of something big and 'out there', a god who sprinkles stardust on his creation and every so often burns brightly as a comet, to remind us he is there.

There are lots of thresholds, astronomical facts, tortured emotions, awkward relationships and mundane visions. Here, characters still read *Pilgrim's Progress* and think things like 'she was not alone – that in fact she'd never been alone, because she was a child of God, and loved by him particularly'. The same character remembers a farm scene earlier, a bloody ewe nursing a lamb, and labels it as 'a miracle'. Thomas Hart, one of the main characters does not turn 70, he has 'attained at last his threescore years and ten'.

This simply is a given in Perry's book: this is how Bethesda Chapel has suggested people to see the world and this form of engagement seems to have seeped by osmosis into the whole community. The Bible and church are influential, living things here, that underpin society, even when being ignored or challenged. Hart's (and Perry's) final epiphany here, the immensity of time and matter, the wonder of starshine and creation, is seen in mystical terms, 'every part of it remarkable, essential to the whole.'

Science and time and humanity are somehow woven into a creation that both rejects and embraces the divine. At times I was reminded of Charles Williams' occult novels, where both magic and Christian theology co-exist, both part of divine order and human experience. In *Enlightenment*, Perry suggests that, whether of a scientific of religious mindset, we are 'helpless against the ordinary wonder of the world turning'. If at times this novel seems slow-paced and somewhat mannered, it is also carefully written, gently addictive and thoroughly enjoyable.

Rupert Loydell

(700 words)