

# Ann Widdecombe's latest novel, *Father Figure*

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## **Father Figure**

by Ann Widdecombe

Weidenfeld & Nicholson £14.99, pp352

It takes Ann Widdecombe virtually the first half of her new novel to get to the point, but when she does, it is summarized in just two words: 'The bitch.' One of the main characters is talking about Kat Kirk, the mother who has wrecked a 10-year marriage for some unspecified 'freedom', robbed a good father of his two young children, and turned the lives of children, parents and grandparents upside down with her arbitrary cruelty to her deserted husband, Jason.

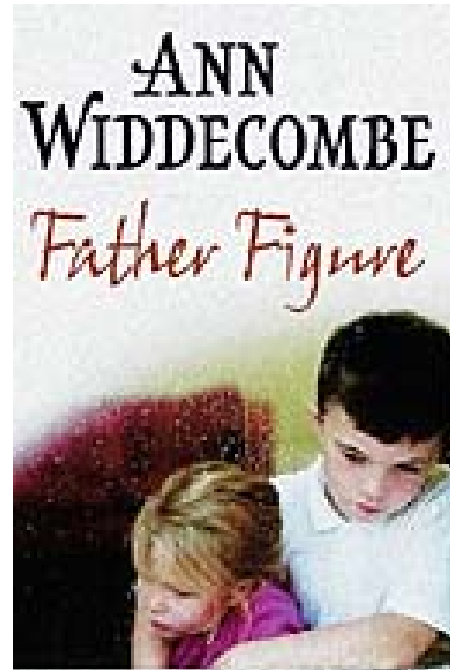
'The bitch' is what the heartless mother deserves to have been called from page one, but Jason, a thirtysomething history teacher at a declining state school in Somerset, cannot quite get round to delivering that verdict. He's too busy trying to understand why she left, why she's taken his children, why she won't let him see them, and what on earth he can do to make her change. Jason is a new man who finds his role so comfortable that he is unable for a long time to recognize that Kat has changed utterly in their decade of uneventful marriage and parenthood.

The rest of this engaging novel is the story of Jason's increasingly successful attempt to fight Kat's fire with fire. When he outsmarts her at the end, it is a triumph for old-fashioned good over evil, but also a triumph for 'new fatherhood'.

Jason loves his children, who are eight and three when the novel opens. They, in turn, love their father, and are bewildered when their mother uproots them from their cosy familial existence. Widdecombe captures well the sense of loss that Jason feels as his former wife tries every malicious trick in the book to stop him seeing them.

She lets fly at all her enemies in Blair's Britain - the unfeeling social services, the incompetent automatons at the Child Support Agency and the failing education system. She has harsh words, too, for a legal system that encourages confrontation to boiling point, then lets it subside into inaction, while all the while the fees meter is running at top speed.

Widdecombe tells the story with rattling good pace and creates credible and sympathetic characters. Apart from 'the bitch', that is. We never really know what Kat's motivation is, apart from a puerile desire to 'rediscover her life force'. Many mothers will object to the way they are portrayed via the evil Kat, and there must be more to maternal psychology than Widdecombe presents.



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