



Word of Mouth - 'Teeth for life'

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The subject of dentistry is a recurring minor theme in "Earthly Powers", Anthony Burgess's epic novel. The hero, a literary lion in his eighties, is the son of a dentist and early in his career wrote a play set in a dentist's waiting room. The story, first published in 1980 by Hutchinson, is told in the first person. It has been described as a thinly disguised portrait of Somerset Maugham although the similarities possibly do not extend to oral health. The setting is Malta.

"It was the tooth that had begun to twinge at the Ovingtons' dinner party. It was now aching intolerably, and the gum above it was swollen and tender. The tooth itself was loose. An abscess, probably. Cognac quietened it, also some essence of cloves that AH brought me from Grima or Borg the pharmacist, conveniently next door to my house. Toothache was, I supposed, a kind of luxury to a man of my age. My father had been a dental surgeon; he had lectured his children on the importance of healthy dentition as other men lectured theirs on the importance of getting on in the world and being discreet where they could not be moral. For all that, I had never taken special care of my teeth, yet here I was in my eighty-second year with twenty-six of them, discoloured but sharp and sound, except for this rebellious premolar."

Comment:

Anthony Burgess's hero seems somewhat surprised at his good fortune in having kept his teeth, but nowadays an increasing number of elderly people can boast of possessing good teeth. This may be due to better and universally available dental care, better diet, and fluoride toothpaste. Those now in this age bracket have also lived through the Second World War when the availability of sugar was much reduced and a much more basic diet was the order of the day.

At one time it was accepted that teeth came and went during the normal lifespan, and because of this it was not worth spending time and money on looking after them. This attitude has now changed: gone are the days when most people refused anything but extractions when they had toothache. Now they are aghast if told that a tooth cannot be saved.

Burgess's hero denies looking after his teeth but comments that his father was a dentist and spent much time lecturing children on the importance of a healthy dentition. Good teeth depend on many factors. First, genetics: carefully pick your parents because a sound genetic basis is of considerable value. The arrangement of teeth in the mouth is also most important since crowded and misplaced teeth decay easily; and diet is critical. A totally neglected dentition is unlikely to survive so it is unlikely that Burgess's hero completely neglected his father's advice.

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