

# Janette Turner Hospital's dark matter

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## Dark matter

Australian writer Janette Turner Hospital reads from her new book, 'Forecast: Turbulence'

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Searching for the path out ... Janette Turner Hospital sits by the lake at home. Picture: Jason Ayer *Source: The Australian*

**JANETTE Turner Hospital is a rare species of Australian writer: one better known, and perhaps better appreciated, overseas than at home.**

Like Shirley Hazzard, but more prolific. Not like Peter Carey, though: no matter how celebrated he becomes overseas he will almost be more famous, some might say notorious, in the country he left 20 years ago. Like Carey, Hospital tries to teach would-be writers the art and craft of fiction: would-be American writers mainly, he at the City University of New York, she at the University of South Carolina.

When I mention to a well-read friend that I'm interviewing Hospital and that her new book, *Forecast: Turbulence*, includes a beautiful memoir set in Brisbane, she says, "Oh, she's Australian?" Yes, she is, as Australian as Hugh Jackman, who features as an object of desire in two of the short stories in Hospital's new book. As Australian as Patrick White, in whose name a literary award is given each year to an important writer the judges consider to be under-recognised. Hospital picked it up in 2003.

If Hospital presents as something of an enigma, she is partly to blame, or credit, for that. Late in our interview, when I mention the topical debate about the under-representation of women in literary culture, especially on the prize circuit, it's news to her.

"It's been a long time since I worried at all about what happens to the book," she says. "I'd rather not do interviews, I would rather not be profiled, I'd rather live my private life and enjoy the pleasures of writing."

As I count my blessings that I didn't ask that question first, Hospital goes on: "So, it doesn't matter to me personally, but then after all I've had a weird career."

By weird, she means immediately successful, so it's a good choice of word. When her first short story was published, in American magazine *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1978 when she was 35, it won an award. Four years later, her first novel, the south India-set *The Ivory Swing*, won a \$50,000 Canadian prize for debut fiction. And the critical acclaim, and the awards, have flowed steadily since, across a dozen works of fiction that roam far and wide, as their creator has in her 69 years, from illegal immigration on the Canadian-US border in *Borderline* (1985), to a messianic cult in outback Australia in *Oyster* (1996), to the aftermath of an Air France hijacking in *Due Preparations for the Plague* (2003), to a post-9/11 take on that most heart-breaking of Greek myths in *Orpheus Lost* (2007).

"Yes, so I guess I got all of that [recognition] front-loaded," Hospital says. "The literary world has always been male dominated and the prize world has always been male dominated, and of course you could say this about indigenous writers . . . there are all kinds of under-represented groups in the literary establishment."

"It's good that there are people who point this out and fight it, but it doesn't worry me, it's not what I'm interested in."

What Hospital is interested in will be apparent to readers familiar with her writing, and it's there in the blackest of spades in her new book, which is comprised of nine short stories and the aforementioned memoir. The themes recur in story after story, and the cumulative effect is stunning and traumatic: absent fathers, abandoned wives, troubled children, isolated adults, catastrophic, unrecoverable loss and the subsequent struggle for psychological survival.

In *Weather Maps*, two teenage girls share their need for self-mutilation while visiting significant male adults in their lives -- a father, a stepfather -- in prison. One matter-of-factly reports the fate of the little boy who used to live next door, whom she used to babysit: "My stepdad's dogs got through the fence. The dogs ate him. He was three and he flew to heaven before anyone could stop him." In *Afterlife of a Stolen Child*, a brilliantly creepy story I wish I'd never read, a two-year old boy is snatched from his pram while his mother buys bread and "two little strawberry tarts".

When I point out that the darkest stories in *Forecast: Turbulence*, headed by these two, are new (others have been published previously), Hospital resists further analysis. "It's not as though I have not written dark stuff. All of my writing career is about how human beings negotiate dark matter," she says. "I am extremely interested in how people negotiate catastrophe, not because I'm morbidly interested in it but because I'm interested in the secret of resilience, that's what I'm always exploring in the stories and the novels."

In the immediate, physical sense, we are worlds away from such dark materials. When I reach Hospital on her mobile phone, she's in New York City, on holiday, and just back from catching a performance of a Mendelssohn piano trio at the Frick on the Upper East Side. It's 11pm but she is uplifted by the music, and by the city, which she finds "celebratory" in the shadow of the 10th anniversary of the September 11 attacks.

Melbourne-born, Brisbane-reared Hospital, who once described herself as an "unintentional nomad", has been settled in South Carolina for the past 12 years. She and her husband Clifford, a retired academic, live on a 2.5ha property by a lake that, it will come as no surprise to hear, is "a great place to write".

Water is an elemental presence throughout *Forecast: Turbulence*, and weather, usually bad weather, is a constant metaphor for extreme emotion. Some characters drown in happiness, others in desperation. Dreams fall like rain, "sometimes like hail". Just before the toddler is taken from his pram, he feels a shadow fall over him, an "abrupt change of weather". In *Salvage*, a lonely young man, the son of a whaler, runs a whale-watching ship and remembers with horror a childhood visit to the flensing deck of a whaling station.

In *Hurricane Season*, a boy and his grandmother face a tempest. In a wonderful passage, the grandmother watches her grandson talking on the phone to his worried parents, "his whole body engaged in the listening": "She would like to bolt plywood sheets around the delicate outer edges of his days. She would like to wrap him in silk."

Hospital, who has two adult children, says: "Extreme weather has indeed been very prominent in my life and my Brisbane family's life over the past few years, and that of course intruded on my consciousness.

"Just last weekend on the evening of getting ready to come to New York, and having dodged two bullets with two hurricanes that wreaked havoc up the east coast, we had three days of absolute deluge . . . the basement of our house, where my study is, was flooded. And of course Brisbane was flooded this year."

No fear then, that writing students at the University of South Carolina, where Hospital is distinguished professor emerita of English, will be discouraged from using meteorological metaphors. Hospital, who has taught at the university for a dozen years, describes herself as a writing addict.

"The act of writing surprises me all the time," she says. "A miraculous thing happens when you have an idea and you want to convert it into words . . . and then you start to create a work of art, and that's another miracle, and it remains mysterious to the writer, or to this writer anyway." She says that when she is "full steam on a book" her routine is to work "10 hours a day, six days a week in a state of obsessive pleasure".

Hospital started her teaching career in outback Queensland, the territory that informs *Oyster* and, in her new book, a (relatively) light-hearted secessionist love story called *Republic of Outer Barcoo*. She had married Clifford Hospital in 1965, the year she graduated from Queensland

University with a BA, and it was with him that she moved to the US and then Canada. She has also lived and taught at various times in Britain, France and India. Hence a first novel set on the subcontinent winning a Canadian literary prize.

She speaks with an accent that is more American than Australian, but it's not one that can be easily placed. She returns to Brisbane at least once a year to visit family and friends, including her three brothers and particularly her father Adrian, who is "very frail but as well as can be expected for someone who's 96".

Like anyone with an aged parent, especially one half a world away, she is anxious about him. "Any time the phone rings, I think: 'Oh, it's Dad,' " she says. "I'm poised to go at any time." When the phone rang in December 2007, it was about her father. He'd fallen and broken his hip. Hospital flew home on New Year's Eve. Her father was a long time in hospital, then rehabilitation, but recovered. When the phone rang four months later, it was her mother, Elsie, survivor of two cancers, who had fallen and shattered her hip. This time the medical advice was to come urgently, that Elsie had perhaps 48 hours to live. Hospital and the rest of the family, children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, gathered.

"My mother was so happy, so absolutely delighted to see us all at one time, so energised," Hospital writes, "that she lived for another 20 days purely on joy and adrenalin."

Hospital describes her mother's final days in Brisbane's Wesley Hospital in the moving *Moon River*, which concludes her new book. The memoir was first published in a small anthology in 2009, soon after her mother's death, but this republication will see it reach a wider audience, which it deserves to do.

The Wesley is on the banks of the Brisbane River, and Hospital opens the memoir with a quote from Heraclitus: "You cannot step into the same river twice." It's a metaphor for our lives, inexorably moving, never still, lived just once, flowing to the end. Hospital first sees this confronting truth in the faces of others. "Behind me," she writes,

*on the hospital walkways, gurneys and orderlies and anxious relatives move to and fro, not speaking of what they fear. Here and there, in rooms at either end of the corridor, nurses close doors, and sheets are gently pulled across faces that are still turned toward the river that flows down to a sunless sea.*

And then it is her turn:

*When the frail bark of Elsie Morgan Turner crossed the bar and put out to sea -- that last great sunless sea -- on the morning of May 23rd, compassionate nurses left me alone with her for an hour.*

*I held her still-warm hand and read to her, for the final time, her favourite psalms: the 23rd and the 91st. I kissed her goodbye. And then, tear-blind, I went walking on the bicycle path by the river.*

That repeated "sunless sea" is from Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*, and is one of the frequent reminders of Hospital's high-literature bent. *The Prince of Darkness* is a Gentleman, a disturbing story about an overdemanding father, takes its title from *King Lear*, and Shakespeare's play is central to the family drama that unfolds.

Hospital wrote *Moon River* in the raw aftermath of the loss of a parent. Three years on, she suggests that grief is not simple, an observation that has long permeated her fiction. "Everyone who deals with grief and shock finds it comes and goes, in waves," she says. "You come to accept the grief but then little things happen -- a childhood memory returns, something about my mother -- and suddenly it feels much more intense again. Certainly I miss my mother."

At the same time, Hospital expresses relief. It might have been worse if her mother had been forced into a high-care nursing home, living apart from her husband, or if she had died not recognising the loving family all around her. "It's a whole rollercoaster feeling one has about it," she says. In the memoir, she writes: "The failure of memory seems to me a far more devastating loss than death. I would have found my mother's death unbearable if she had no longer known who I was."

An intriguing, elusive character in *Moon River* is Hospital's great-grandfather, Charles Henry Turner, a barrister who fled London in 1875, "abandoning a wife and infant son" and turned up in Queensland. "The family has never know the reason for this sudden defection (crushing debt?, sexual scandal?, embezzlement?)," Hospital writes, "though money was sent back from Australia for my grandfather's grammar school education."

When that grammar school boy grew up and tracked down his father in Brisbane 15 or so years later, he was rejected, again. Given the proliferation of rogue fathers and hurt and confused children in the stories of *Forecast: Turbulence*, it seems fair enough to draw a line from Hospital's life to her art. In *Blind Date*, a father says to his young son on the days he walks out: "I'm sorry, mate. But I can't breathe. I'm drowning, mate . . ." In the title story, which has a twist you may see coming just in time to make the necessary preparations, a man writes to his wife and daughter: "I do love you . . . but I won't be coming back."

Again, however, the author resists the couch. When I observe that renegade fathers seem to be a bit of a theme in the new book, she says: "These are not things I'm conscious of but I guess you must be right. Other people see these things that one doesn't see oneself, but obviously it is there in the family history . . . that's all I can say."

Hospital prefers to acknowledge the influence of *The New York Times*, which she reads every day. Many of her stories have their genesis in real events reported in its pages. "You read a lot of distressing things," she says. "Indeed, I don't think fiction can hold a candle to *The New York Times* when it comes to dark things happening on the world stage, but the artist's job is to try to figure out what it was like in the minds of the people involved."

And the stories can be a long time in gestation, waiting for their moment. *Weather Maps*, for example, about the teenage girls who cut themselves, is based on an experience Hospital had while teaching at a women's prison in Canada a quarter of a century ago. Something one of the

self-mutilators said stuck with her: "She said, 'It doesn't hurt, there's just so much pain inside of you that you cut yourself for it to get out, to escape.' That quote has stayed in my mind for 25 years but it took me this long for me to figure out how to write a story about it."

Yet the story differs from the reality in a crucial way, one that goes to the heart of Hospital's ethos as a writer: it ends on a hopeful note, one that suggests the narrator will escape her dreadful life and stop slicing into her own skin. In the original version, 25 years ago in that jail in Kingston, Ontario, the story ended in suicide.

When you learn that, you notice something else: most of the absent fathers in Hospital's short stories come back, bringing with them the possibility of a new beginning. Great-grandfather Turner didn't come back, and family lore has it that he drowned in the Brisbane floods of 1893.

At a time when some authors complain that publishers -- and readers -- push too hard for novels to have redemptive endings, Hospital is a champion of them. She stresses that no author "should be required to provide happy endings or not provide them . . . it's ludicrous to ask that of a work of art", but adds that she always will offer the light.

"Every short story, every novel ends with the belief that there is a path out of there, you just have to find it," she says. "It's just what I insist on believing in, otherwise life is too dark. I insist on believing in hope and redemption, and I am drawn to characters and stories to find it.

"To give up believing in hope would be, well, just not a viable way to live. Not for me anyway."

Forecast: *Turbulence* is published in hardback and as an e-book on November 1 by Fourth Estate, \$23.99.