
THE SATURDAY AGE, MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA

BOOK REVIEW

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STORIES

Infinite riches in a little room

FORECAST: TURBULENCE

By Janette Turner Hospital

Fourth Estate/Harper Collins, \$73.99

REVIEW PETER CRAVEN

JANETTE Turner Hospital is one of the most formidable writers to hail from Australia and she is also one of nature's storytellers. Her work has a narrative momentum and an effortless dramatic vibrancy that make her a deeply traditional entertainer at the same time that she is unmistakably a writer of gravity and power.

Both her prophetic novel, *Due Preparations for the Plague*, and *Orpheus Lost*, another dark-angled take on terrorism, with its own redemptive twists, were serious works of art. Now, in a slender book of short stories, which includes a memoir of Brisbane and the passing of the author's mother, she gives her own take on the Shakespearean phrase, infinite riches in a little room. These stories exhibit a masterly control of tempo and an ability to compel the reader to see the life they unfold. Each packs the punch and yields the poignancy that only a master of the art of fiction can deliver.

A blind boy is waiting for his sister's wedding and, more particularly, for the return of the much-loved father who deserted the family and is despised by wife and daughter. In the next story, a boy whose mother was killed by sharks and who has not spoken for years broods on the brutality of the killing of whales and remembers the stories of American World War II servicemen killed at sea.

In another story, a girl whose father runs a sect and has set up his own republic in rural Australia generates a tangle with a handsome stranger. Elsewhere, two sisters listen to the heavy breathing on the phone that torments their mother. Only gradually do we become aware of what's been done by their missing father to generate this savage response.

Turner Hospital is especially powerful in the way she can evoke the longing that comes when young women who love each other are separated. In another story, two American girls at the cusp of adolescence, one black, one white, both subjected to the abuse of "fathers" now in prison, confess rhapsodically on the harm they inflict on themselves and decide with lyrical abandon on the idyll of running away together.

The central story, Hurricane Season, is about the prospect of a hurricane descending on South Carolina and the way a little boy and his grandmother decide to last it out. He dreams of pirates and she hears the voice of an old love. It is a beautifully poised story in which the chirp of childhood and the ripeness of age sing together but there is no hint of sentimentality because Turner Hospital's narration has such emotional reality.

The thing about Turner Hospital is that she can take an almost conventional subject and turn it, with the flick of the wrist, into, among other things, a ruthlessly observed exchange between mother and daughter and a strange vision of how the faces of transexuality and 1950s domesticity could come together.

The final piece of fiction is about a little boy whose mother is snatched while in a bakery and never returns. We get the story, in marvellous miniature, from the points of view of the parents and then from the perspective of a sinister bystander.

Then there is the intrusion, years later, of someone who thinks he is the lost boy and who also seems, at some level, to be making up the story. Is this needlessly arty? You wonder but Turner Hospital is so wizardly that you accept her whether she is being straight or tricky. She can bend whatever narrative strategy to her will and make it work.

This small and superb volume ends with an essay that details the death of Turner Hospital's elderly mother, who began to lose her memory but in the elation of seeing her family assembled at her deathbed sparkled with vivacity and stunned everyone by reciting *The Man from Snowy River* in its entirety.

It is a beautiful piece of elegiac writing and Turner Hospital brings her own childhood and her memories of her parents the book is dedicated to her 96-year-old father to the story of her drunken rogue of a great-greatgrandfather who thrice disowned his son and was thought to have drowned in a river. And it is the river and its capacity to flood that broods over this beautiful little book. Janette Turner Hospital packs the punch and poignancy of a master storyteller.

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