

## Helen Allan

Elizabeth Jolley, *Miss Peabody's Inheritance*. University of Queensland Press. 157 pp. Cloth \$12.95. Paperback \$7.95.

This is one of two recently published books by Elizabeth Jolley, a writer of English/Viennese descent, though for some years a Westralian. Like its predecessor *Mr Scobie's Riddle*, *Miss Peabody's Inheritance* has attracted much attention. This is due to the originality and excellence of both books, but to some degree also to the fact that they make an important contribution to that small store of good Australian literature that deals with the thoughts and dreams of older people. In a greying world, this focus on life-after-wrinkles is spot on.

Elizabeth Jolley herself is not young — in years. However the unblinking eye with which she observes her characters and the devastating candour with which she sets down their foibles remind one of youth — of childhood: of a time when one had not learnt to tell the polite lie, but would blurt out awful truths. If the family we meet from time to time in this writer's short stories, notably in *Woman in a Lampshade* (first published 1972) and *Stories* (1984) is as nearly autobiographical as Katherine Mansfield's Stanley Burnells, much is explained.

In *Miss Peabody's Inheritance* Elizabeth Jolley introduces a gallery of very candid camera shots, and indeed we are encouraged by her multidimensional writing to do more than look. We must smell, feel, taste. In the case of Miss Edgely, parasitical secretary and lover-in-residence in Miss Thorne, we are asked to share the problems of the constipation that besets her when she travels. There is an immediacy about Elizabeth Jolley's detail that is quite remarkable — the more so as it is economically achieved.

The book's central character is not actually Miss Peabody, whose zero-like personality is quite overpowered by the brilliant, the goddess-like Miss Thorne, headmistress of Pine Heights Boarding School. Miss Thorne has brains, money, wit, power. She can make things happen. She dreams of passing on her exquisite culture, the life of the mind — after all she cannot pass on the life of the flesh! She is capable of careless generosity, such as sweeping up one of her Australain school 'gels' and carrying her off to an 'absootely' marvellous holiday in Vienna

. . . . she is a *dea ex machina*.

But Miss Thorne is vulnerable. She is vulnerable to pity for Miss Edgely, the poor, plain, dependent secretary whom she once thought she loved, and whom she now must love forever. She is vulnerable to her need to love others — for instance her motherless, but bosomy schoolgirl protégée, Gwendaline Manners, the opening of whose bud of life entrances her. She is even vulnerable to the provocative teenager Debbie Frome, with her ‘ferocious sensuality’. And she is vulnerable because she is no longer young.

Elizabeth Jolley’s account of the Viennese holiday of Miss Thorne and her fantastic entourage is priceless. The writer is said to be a satirist and a producer of black comedy and this may be so, yet to this reviewer the description of this episode is simply truth itself, seen by the beady eye of that *enfant terrible*, our author. What with Miss Thorne, in the full flush of her crush on Gwenda, and Gwenda with a tremulous crush on Miss Thorne, and Miss Edgely (Edge) obsessed with love, jealously and her bowels; what with the fourth traveller, Miss Snowdon, watching enigmatically from the sidelines, there is scope here for farce or tragedy. But Elizabeth Jolley walks on eggshells, and avoids both. We get less, but in a way, more.

It is interesting to notice that this theme — that of a brilliant and capable woman who once allowed herself to love an adoring dependent and can never extricate herself from the fatal entanglement — has been worked on several times by Elizabeth Jolley. It occurs in this book, and particularly strikingly in a short story *The Libation*, in the collection *Woman in a Lampshade*; and less obviously in *Mr Scobie’s Riddle*. In no instance did the author find a workable solution to the problem — one can hardly call suicide, as in *The Libation*, a workable solution. The structure of *Miss Peabody’s Inheritance* is subtle and clever. We are shown three stories, that of Miss Peabody, a simple, drab existence until that fateful moment when she wrote to Diana Hopewell, the Australian author of ‘Angels on Horseback’; the shadowy, elusive story of Diana Hopewell herself, one more guessed at than told; and the story of Miss Thorne, Edge, and the ‘gels’, which is after all only a creation of Diana Hopewell’s

mind. Elizabeth Jolley juggles the stories with amazing skill, and like a magician makes what is real seem unreal, what is unreal, the very fabric of reality.

This book, *Miss Peabody's Inheritance*, is not the easiest of reads — that is, if you expect to do it justice. This may well be true of much of this author's work. However, in terms of seeing and understanding not only her characters, but ourselves, as we really are, and without apology, her books are devastatingly relevant.

