

REVIEW

Janette Turner Hospital *Dislocations* Brisbane: Univ. of Qld Press, 1987, (Paper) 210 pp.

The stories in Janette Turner Hospital's first collection, *Dislocations*, at first appear to have little in common. Their settings are diverse, from North Queensland to India to Canada, and the characters are equally so.

The title, however, gives the clue to the collection's unifying theme. All the stories portray lives dislocated in some way, whether by geography, sudden loss, physical impairment or the death of another. In all cases the dislocation requires a psychological, spiritual or emotional adjustment, and the exploration of each character consists largely in revealing how well he or she manages this.

Mrs Phillips of "Moving Out" is perhaps the collection's textbook example of how to adjust. Her gracious way of life has given way before the onslaught of modern and not very accommodating profit-seekers. Faced with Mrs Wong, however, who has been in the country for 30 years and never been able to communicate with anyone outside her own family, she makes a vital discovery. As Mrs Wong has had her memories to sustain her, Mrs Phillips can preserve what is precious to her in her mind. Nothing can be destroyed if it is internal, and this is the final and most effective adjustment possible in the face of change.

The same story illustrates Hospital's knack of compressing meaning and sensation into a small space, rendering the effectiveness of her stories out of all proportion to their length. Descriptions are brief, subtly conveying the reality of the characters and calling forth the reader's empathy. The picture of dignity overcome with misery which is Mrs Phillips weeping on the Wongs' doorstep is calculated to bypass reasoning and appeal directly to the reader's emotions.

When Hospital turns her hand to purely visual images she is equally successful. The dust, the colour, the profusion of Cooktown orchids in "You Gave Me Hyacinths" are as vivid as photographs. In "Moving Out" her description of the "large fish pale bulge of thigh above [Ada's] garter" conjures up its subject almost too graphically to be borne.

In discussing geographical dislocation the continents of India and North America are used to good effect. Mr Matthew Thomas finds it very difficult to envisage his daughter's life in "Burlington Vermont" and to accept that she could be happy without servants or sweet mango pickle. He sees white women as ugly and colourless, beyond redemption.

Jennifer Harper in the same story presents a nicely opposing point of view. She finds Indians incurably, antagonistically foreign, objecting less to their appearance than to the way they look at her, to the impersonal, curious, impenetrable stares. Some dislocations are simply too great: Jennifer Harper is too alone and vulnerable to adjust to India. But then, learning one's limitations is also valuable. Once safely home, being able to say of India, "Yes. A remarkable country", is an adjustment of sorts.

Other characters refuse to adjust their lives because of fear, fear of the unknown, of facing their own powerlessness. Angela Carson of "The Dark Wood" is an excellent example of this. Because of her work in helping the dying she feels that she has power over both death and life, and fears neither. In fact she has become inhuman, detached from the realities of both.

Beatrice Grossetti's undignified, ungrateful exit from the world shows Angela that dying is a painful and ultimately a lonely experience: even Angela cannot help to overcome that loneliness. Logically, if she is powerless over death she is also vulnerable to it, a thought she has not previously had even in peak-hour traffic. The realisation is like an internal puncture, and could conceivably be fatal. It is difficult for anyone to face their own ineffectiveness against death: it is impossible for someone who really believes she has triumphed over it daily.

The nature of death itself is examined in "Some Have Called Thee Mighty and Dreadful". Cassandra's death brings frightening questions. The ultimate dislocation requires adjustment, but is it adjustment for the dead as well as for the living? How is one to cope if death does not bring peace or sleep or oblivion? The central character bravely answers these questions for her children, but trying to answer them for herself leaves her with a "terminal illness" of fear.

While death and fear are present in much of the collection, there are stories in which adaptability triumphs. There are even glimpses of happiness. "You Gave Me Hyacinths" shows an innocent teacher willing to adjust to a small sugar town's ways and to learn from the pupils she teaches. "Happy Diwali" shows a sometimes grotesque but ultimately realistic attitude to the compromises needed to preserve one country's rituals amid the constraints and the freedoms of another.

Janette Turner Hospital evidently has an affinity with her subject. An expatriate Australian, she has lived in India and the USA and now lives in Canada, and knows the adjustments required by such changes. Her writing has also benefited: vivid, carrying personal conviction without being obtrusive, it lacks the *gaucherie* which marks so much Australian writing. There is something in the collection for all readers, and it is

certainly thought-provoking: in all, *Dislocations* is a triumph for Hospital and must enhance her reputation as a writer of international standing.

Georgia Savage *The Estuary* Brisbane: Univ. of Qld Press, 1987 (Hardback) 216 pp.

*The Estuary* is a lively and entertaining portrait of Vinnie Beaumont, her suffering and survival. She does a *lot* of suffering, necessitating a lot of survival, but it all turns out well enough. On the way to a happy ending she has quite a few adventures and learns all about people and love.

Vinnie is a fully-rounded and convincing character. She narrates the story, and the combination of her thoughts and actions is a happy one. By the time the first few chapters have passed we feel that we know her, that she has a reality beyond the novel, and our sympathies are fully engaged.

Vinnie's goal is to come to terms with love and suffering and the all-too-frequent connection between the two. There are many relationships in the novel, and they are all flawed by too much or too little giving. Georgia Savage guides Vinnie through these relationships as both observer and participant until she finally strikes the balance needed for contentment.

Vinnie's childhood sets the pattern for her later mistakes. Her mother's rejection precipitates her into an almost idolatrous and extremely dependent relationship with Brook: his death leaves her without supports and with nothing at all to offer their daughter, who desperately needs her. So history begins to repeat itself: Clare, rejected by Vinnie, withdraws entirely and falls an easy victim to the predatory Pandora Hunt.

Savage leaves us in no doubt that submerging one's identity in another is a Bad Thing. Vinnie does herself and Clare harm by depending so much on Brook. Pandora Hunt smothers her husband, and when he leaves is reduced to "stealing" Clare to replace "the [baby] who got away to Ireland". Faith is drained by Victor and influenced to such an extent that she has no perception of right and wrong and no loyalty to anyone else.

The lesbian-feminist taxi-driver Marcia animadverts upon the same theme many times, but Savage does not espouse her more radical view. She is sympathetic to the need which prompts women to submerge themselves in others, and advocates a peaceful and moderate reconciliation within relationships rather than a definite and perhaps unsatisfying independence. Savage also acknowledges that it is not only women who

suffer within relationships. Vinnie's father is not an exemplary character, but he has certainly suffered from his wife's inability to love and give at the same time.

Vinnie realises the danger of loving too much, and settles for a relatively meaningless relationship with Duffield. Its ending causes her no pain, but its positive benefits have been very few. Such relationships are clearly inadequate, and do very little in any case to protect one from vulnerability. Vinnie is still able to fall in love with the debonair and unreliable Jan Tadic, and not having the courage to act on her feelings also hurts her.

Fortunately the novel ends in a satisfactory manner, with Vinnie able to give Clare just the right kind of love, and Clare able to receive it. We know that Clare will not make Vinnie's mistakes when she refuses to give up her own career to satisfy the scruples of the man she loves. All the lessons about loving and giving have been learnt, and the sins of the fathers — or mothers — very definitely stop at Clare. To crown Vinnie's happiness, her former unacknowledged love, Beauregard, returns to her, and presumably they all live happily ever after.

It's a nice ending to a thoroughly entertaining book. Certainly it has its faults: some of Vinnie's early sufferings and some of her insights are a little glib. Some of the characters are stereotypic, and there are *too* many relentlessly colourful characters. It is improbable that one could reach Vinnie's age at the end of the novel without having met a single ordinary or even remotely sane character. The names, too, are unlikely in such a predominantly Anglo-Saxon country as Australia, and they have that jarring, ineptly-made-up ring to them.

But these are mere quibbles. *The Estuary* is a good read, and not just a light one. It has a lot to say, and does it in a very palatable way.