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Elizabeth Jolly, ***The Georges' Wife.*** Ringwood: Penguin. 182 pp.

One of the most enchanting qualities of Elizabeth Jolley's writing is its apparently innocent subversiveness. *The Georges' Wife,* like so much of the rest of her *oeuvre,* invites multiple readings from multiple perspectives. As I read over my notes for this review, I find in several places, "Elizabeth Jolley invites the reader ..." and later, again in several places, "the reader is forced to ..." This combination of freely choosing to accept an invitation, and being forced (as a reader) into a particular action can be seen as a reflection of one of the novel's most powerful elements, the coexistence of polar opposites. Much of this review will be concerned with an exploration of the ways in which this seemingly innocent novel is profoundly, delightfully subversive.

In a sense *The Georges' Wife* can be read as the third novel in the trilogy, completing the picture begun with *My Father's Moon* and embellished in *Cabin Fever.* Certainly this novel repeats old themes: as in *My Father's Moon* and *Cabin Fever,* Elizabeth Jolley here explores life in the margins, and within this, the nature of families, their reconstruction and their dislocations; the nature of mothering; the power of the father; the nature of cultural reproduction and the breaking of taboos; the innocence of uninhibited passions versus the adherence to social conventions; the role of the imagination in recreating memory and in creating identity; the relationship between the real and the imagined, and further, the multiplicity of realities; the power of the word and the power of the sign, and the oscillation and fluctuation between the two; the value and dissolution of boundaries.

The sense in which this novel offers completion concerns temporal and spatial locations in the narrative. In *The Georges' Wife,* Vera, aged about 60, pushes the 82 year old Mr George in a wheelchair along the leafy streets of suburban Claremont, in Perth, Western Australia. In locating Vera so specifically in time and space, Elizabeth Jolley invites the reader into a retrospective and cumulative view of Vera's life. Running counter to this sense of temporal completion, though, is the imaginative beginning heralded at the end of the novel with Mr George's innocent query, "Is Father in?" Here is a new character of whom not even the imaginative Vera has previously thought. What this suggests about memory is that even at its most innocent and guileless, memory opens vistas that are boundless. For Vera, and for the reader alike, Mr George's innocent, three-word question is startling (as Vera the Narrator has promised us it will be) primarily because it denies/prevents the closure towards which the novel has been heading, evoking, as Vera observes, a whole new world about which she hasn't previously thought. Perhaps the most startling aspect of Mr George's memory is that it operates outside a coherence which we call sanity, and touches well-springs of creativity which can startle

us out of our complacency. The boundary between sanity and memory loss has been elided.

The simultaneous moves towards narrative completion and narrative opening up invoke Vera's observation from *My Father's Moon:* "I read somewhere that it was said of Chekhov that he 'shows us life's depths at the very moment when he seems to reflect its shimmering surface.' My father's moon is like this ..." (32).

The very narrative structure of *The Georges' Wife* can be seen to reflect simultaneous focus on the shimmering surface and on life's depths: on the surface narrative level, Vera's parents are both dead, Miss George is dead, Mr George is confined to a wheelchair and is, in his own words, "a silly old man" who can't remember what he had for lunch "which is a pity because it was nice and it's a pity to forget something nice," the rice farm Widow is dead and has left her fortune to Vera, and Helena and Rachel are adult professional medicos living in London. Vera, in the company of Mr George whose memory, by conventional standards, is failing, is alone with her memories. Of course none of this is revealed with such dispassionate and prosaic focus on the present: rather, the present unfolds seemingly incidentally, and the reader is forced, with Vera, to follow the "thin invisible lines of hoped-for coherence through which the writer moves with caution ..." (8).

Beneath this narrative surface, Vera's memory and imagination work together to conjure up an endless procession of people, events, sideways glances, and glimpses of epiphanous moments. As we would expect, memory eludes chronology, and glides effortlessly from scene to scene, constantly evoking remembered incidents from the earlier novels, sometimes repeating them precisely, sometimes significantly altering the context, sometimes embellishing, sometimes abbreviating, occasionally introducing new material entirely. The whole cast of characters from the earlier novels is reintroduced to the reader. Staff Nurse Ramsden, Dr Metcalf and Magda, the Georges, Gertrude, and Vera's parents are evoked; and new ones introduced, including Felicity and Noel, and the rice-farm Widow. In addition, the text is littered with excerpts lifted directly from the two earlier novels. For the reader the process of recall is multiple: the focus on memory is inexorable as Elizabeth Jolley forces/jolts the reader to recall the context of an earlier, perhaps fleeting, scene or reference which itself would have been presented either as one of Vera's memories, or as a reflection from her (then) current position as Narrator. Perhaps one of the most startling examples of this (startling because of its effortless change of context) is the paragraph from the very end of *Cabin Fever,* which reappears intact on page three of *The Georges' Wife:*

> Occasionally a warm fragrance in the days approaching summer prompts me to suggest to someone who is

> coming to my rooms to keep an appointment, that they take the path through the pines from the station. It is both a short cut and a pleasant little walk. A remedy.

Such overt intertextuality foregrounds the notion that this is a constructed work of art; it draws attention to the power of the author, at the same time giving the power of authorship to the reader in forcing her/him to make narrative connections. The passage reflects back on to *Cabin Fever,* filling in one of the gaps and spaces in that novel by providing a fixed work/life location for the Vera who, in *Cabin Fever,* is suspended in a timeless, spaceless, cocoon. In addition, it throws light on the earlier life experiences of the now 60 year old Vera, who becomes positioned through this passage at the end of *Cabin Fever* in a new way, as a healer, as someone powerful who is able to break out of the stasis implicit in the stuck Vera of *Cabin Fever.* Presumably this new strength holds for Vera in *The Georges' Wife* as well. And yet, one paragraph later, we read another paragraph direct from *Cabin Fever,* which begins: "I am a shabby person. I understand, if I look back, that I have treated kind people with unforgivable shabbiness ..." The two qualities, healing and shabbiness, coexist.

One of the ways in which Elizabeth Jolley's writing can be seen to be subversive is in this elision of boundaries, its refusal to cast experience into dichotomous pairs. Her work constantly, playfully contests the existence of boundaries between written and told stories; between life and art; between fact and fiction; between an experience and one's memory of it.

Part of Elizabeth Jolley's desire is surely to express the inexpressible, to write the unwritten realities. Psychoanalytic post-modernist feminist critics write of the need to overcome binary oppositions on which patriarchal writings and thinking are based. Irigaray writes of the boundless plural circular and aimless vaginal/clitoral libidinal economy of women, compared with the singular, linear and teleological phallic libidinal economy of men. Like Cixous and Irigaray, Elizabeth Jolley appears to be much taken with the multiplicities that female sexuality implies. If we read Jolley's work in this context, we begin to understand just how powerfully subversive her writing is.

Consider, for example, the opening passage of the novel:

> "Tell me about yourself, Migrant," the rice-farm widow says to me. So I tell my widow things about myself. When I tell her about Felicity and Noel her mouth is so wide open, as she listens, I can see her gold fillings. At that time, I think her whole fortune is in her mouth.
>
> "You mean to tell me!" she says, "Oh, I can't believe ..." she says, that they, I mean, *together.* You can't mean *that.*
>
> "Yes, that's right," I tell her.
>
> "Oh, Migrant. You poor child, poor poor child."
>
> "Oh no, your widowship, not at all.

> Nothing like that. They were very gentle and considerate. They were intellectuals, don't you see. The whole thing was more of an *idea*. And It was quite a joke thing between us, every time. Their very good manners, don't you know."
>
> "More than once! Heavens, child!"
>
> "Please, please — don't be concerned. Do not concern your gracious self; it was funny, really funny. They were, unlike us, so very polite."
>
> "You mean *'after you'* and 'Oh no, *after you'*."
>
> "Well sort of, not quite, but yes, rather like that."
>
> "What an *experience* you had."
>
> "I suppose so."
>
> "You *suppose* so. My dear Migrant, do you realise that plenty of people would give their eye teeth ..."
>
> "But what would anyone *do* with someone else's eye teeth?"

In this passage we have it all: it's about the subversion and mocking of patriarchal institutions ("your widowship" mocks the "Your Worship" of the Law); it's about the power to name; it's about dislocation ("Migrant"); relationships ("rice-farm Widow") and inheritance ("fortune"). It's also about abolishing cultural taboos (sexual threesomes); and about different ways to read/interpret experience ("You poor child, you poor poor child./Oh no, your widowship, not at all.") It can be read, too, as a playful comment on literary processes, foregrounding the relationship between metaphor and literality ("eye teeth"), and drawing the reader's attention to the gaps and spaces, the secrets and understated phenomena, so creating the desire to move both forward and backward in the narrative. For example, who are/were Felicity and Noel? What was it they did? thrusts the reader backwards; while "At that time, I think her whole fortune is in her mouth" encourages the reader to look forwards to discover what it is that Vera has subsequently discovered.

In the construction of the character Vera we encounter a fluidity which is not possessed by other characters. In sexual terms, she moves from male to female lovers with no apparent dislocation, no guilt, no sense of having crossed any border or of having transgressed. She moves fluidly from class to class within what are apparently still fairly rigidly defined class structures, particularly in Britain. It is possible to construct a pairing of characters for comparison and contrast purposes. The Widow, vulgar and showy, contrasts with the dignified and scholarly Mr George; Gertrude contrasts with Felicity and Noel; the nurses at the hospital contrast with the Metcalfs. Such easy elision of boundaries is both admired by Mr George and at times jealously resented by him. Vera straddles the two worlds — the vulgar earthiness of the woman-identified relationship. One of the finest examples of this is at the novel's conclusion: Vera's use of the Widow's word "couples," causes Mr George to admonish her with "Why do you bother, Vera, with such

an ugly word?" Clearly, this conclusion raises many issues around the power of patriarchal ownership of words and their meanings; manners; class; access to privileged ways of knowing and being. But the apparent authority of Mr George's admonition is undercut by our recall that it's to the Widow that Vera speaks her most precious memories: she reserves for the Widow her observation, made years ago while listening to Staff Nurse Ramsden's music, "about the downward thrust of the cello and about the perfection in the way the other instruments come up to meet the cello" (171). The complete fluidity of memory is evoked when we read, "As I am telling her this I am not sure if I am being truthful or not. But this ceases to matter when she says, in her ordinary voice once more, that women are *better together* at measuring and controlling. I am grateful for the emphasis" (172).

In her exploration of Vera's capacity to straddle the worlds of both Widow and Mr George, Elizabeth Jolley examines, too, the power of the father. In *My Father's Moon* the father attempts to comfort the child Vera with the idea that the moon is his, but his desire to protect and connect with her does not ultimately override her loneliness. In *The Georges' Wife,* Vera-the-one-in-need-of-comfort becomes Vera-the-comforter for the lost Mr George. While Elizabeth Jolley plays so skilfully with the elision of boundaries, she similarly invokes them. "Somedays Mr George, not remembering, feels he is lost. Watch the hedges I tell him ... You are not lost I tell him, I am with you." We come to see clearly that Vera's hedge-watching recalls the earlier closely watched hedges of *My Father's Moon* and *Cabin Fever,* occurring when she is bordering on panic or hysteria: it springs from a desire to be enclosed within secure boundaries, to avoid the broader view, and that this runs counter to her processes of remembering. The fluidity and defiance of time and space implicit in memory contrasts strongly with the limitations and rigid boundaries of the material world. But Vera needs the comfort of these boundaries (hedges, roads, patterns) in the material world, as well as the comfort of remembering previous boundaries (repetitive quartets, the evergreens, the laurel and the privet, the rhododendrons and the holly) from another life.

In *My Father's Moon* we read:

> Every day I am seeing people living from day to day, from one precarious day to the next, without any vision of any kind of future. It does not take me long to understand this because ... I have seen my own life, at a particular time in that life, from one narrowed day to the next, from cramped week to cramped week, at ground and hedgeroot level, unable to see anything beyond the immediate. (7)

This is echoed directly at the beginning of *The Georges' Wife:* "I understand that I ... have been unable to see ... beyond the immediate." (4)

Boundaries are both freeing and limiting: Vera, who would protect the vulnerable and innocent Mr George

by suggesting he watch the hedges, is as homeless, as lonely, inside her closely watched Australian hedges of rhododendrons, plumbagos and roses as she was aboard ship in the middle of a vast and lonely ocean.

Another of Elizabeth Jolley's concerns in this novel is to foreground the dissolution of boundaries between written and told stories, between life and art, fact and fiction, author and subject:

> As I begin to write now a feeling of peacefulness comes over me as if I need not for inexplicable half-ridden reasons refrain from writing any longer. Three things emerge; one is that a mother always forgives. The second is that it is often not possible to write about events until they are sufficiently of the past, that they can be regarded as being in that twilight between the fact and the imagined. There are tremulous and fragile boundaries; thin invisible lines of hoped-for coherence through which the writer moves with caution aware, all the time, of an emerging nakedness for which conventional clothes are too transparent. And thirdly; secrets, if they are revealed completely, become mere facts. Secrets, if partly kept, can be seen as relating not to some kind of imitation but to something extra to real life.

But who is speaking here? Is it Vera, the 60 year old narrator, reflecting with a kind of fragile serenity upon the events of her life? Or is it Elizabeth Jolley herself, tentatively and courageously signalling that some of the experiences out of which she writes are still so raw as to expose an "emerging nakedness for which conventional clothes are too transparent?" The extent to which this is autobiographical can perhaps be inferred from the naming of the streets, which recurs like a beautiful refrain throughout — and yet its serenity is undercut by the inference from earlier closely watched hedges passages that Vera only watched hedges when she is in a state bordering on panic or hysteria, for example, at the Hilda Street Wentworth. All but one of the street names are real. But it is this fictitious name with which we begin on the oft-repeated journey around the streets of Claremont: "from Harold Avenue we turn left into Hammond." Fascinatingly, Harold is the fictional substitution for the real George. We begin in the fictional space but turn left into reality? This may alert us to the inevitable blending of life and art, but also might indicate how close this is to her own reality, and may be the clue to uncovering the nature of "an emerging nakedness for which conventional clothes are too transparent.