IINJC Reviews

Tania Honey

CLOUDBUSTING IN PARADISE


At the “Write Up North” festival held in Townsville in 2006, Tara June Winch read a passage from her first novel, *Swallow the Air* (2006), which had won the David Unaipon award in 2004 and the Victorian Premier’s Literary Award in 2006. Her reading was exquisite and enticing. In the discussion that followed Winch shyly confessed that her life ambition was to be a dancer rather than a writer and the disbelieving gasp from the audience was audible above the passing life of inner city Townsville. This is understandable; Winch captures the pain and heartache of what it is to be lost as a child, the search for identity as a young woman and the attempt to unearth a disappearing Indigenous heritage with an intense and eloquent voice that resonates long after it is put down.

*Swallow the Air* is narrated by May Gibson, as she recounts her journey through childhood and into her adolescence (a *bildungsroman* of sorts). The suicide of May’s mother promptly sucks the childhood innocence out of May and her brother Billy, and their precarious paths unfold. May and Billy go to live with their Aunty, who, while loving and caring, is seduced into a world of gambling and violent relationships. While Billy turns to drugs to numb the pain, May sets out on a journey to discover her extended Indigenous family, the Wiradjuri people, and find her father of whom she has fond memories. The novel maps out the complex paths of a sad story, in which the unacknowledged parts of May’s life are revealed.

Winch’s ingenuous narrator, May, compels the reader to contemplate their own responses to fragmented hints and contradictions. The novel has an array of characters, some individualised, while others are highly stereotyped. The result is a collection of dynamic and static characters that signpost May’s self-discovery and search for belonging.

From the onset of the book it is clear that May’s family connections matter to her. May is aware of her mother’s fragility and paranoia, and while the stories are intertwined with her mother’s anxiety, May subdues this impression with recollections of contented and relaxed moments. From a very young age she is aware of how often her Aunty cries, and relates stories of how she suffered from bad luck, “Aunty drowned out, she faded from our safety” (17). May and her brother have an extremely close relationship which is shattered by Billy’s drug taking, “I could hear Billy pop the cone and cough on his heartache, lunging back unlove” (33). May begins her travels from the east coast up north spurred on by her
search for a father she idolises, only to discover that life is not “like the cartoons” (95). Her encounters with Australian stock characters such as Pete the truck driver, and Gary, typify traditional notions of the “Aussie Bloke,” leathery, steadfast and down-to-earth; representing what she expects in her father.

*Swallow the Air* can be read as a complete novel or a series of vignettes, with each story capable of standing alone. Indeed, Winch won the Queensland Premier’s Literary Award in 2004 for “Dust on Waterglass,” and “Cloudbusting” was published in *Best Australian Short Stories, 2005*. Winch’s vernacular and colloquial style captures the folkloric aspects of Indigenous dreaming and unearths the spiritual meanings concealed behind the literal. Her writing demonstrates her imaginative capacity for imagery and symbolism, and the analeptic account of events suggests that the reader makes the discoveries along with May. The taut precision of Winch’s figures of speech relay powerful images and her poetic writing conveys even the harshest of circumstances as a dance around words and images. Winch’s writing is chilly and witty, perceptive and subtle.

While May’s search is personal, the story speaks symbolically of the Indigenous collective struggle for recognition and belonging in a White Man’s Australia. It depicts the unremitting issues of rape, drugs, violence, lost children, racism, and the struggle for acceptance without being didactic. Often, May deliberately associates her experience with this collective cry, “I cried with the rest of us” (105). At other times it is subtly conveyed through voice or imagery, such as when May reaches the mission in Euabalong where things seem normal but the houses were “... a hasty construction of identical walls, devoid of emotion, shuffled off to the new suburbs like secrets in pockets” (166). This conveys the abstract displacement of Indigenous Australians. The story is reminiscent of such tales as Mudrooroo’s *Wild Cat Falling* (1965) and Alice Nannup’s *When the Pelican Laughed* (1992). It depicts the individual and Indigenous struggle for a real home, a real belonging. Like Nannup, Winch reveals the circular quest that takes place in a world where old cultures are forgotten and saturated, and where the search for belonging often ends, not with a place but with a sense of family and relationships.

This novel is hypnotically absorbing and extremely poignant. It is cogently expressed, suffused in anguish, capturing the intensity of complex relationships illuminated by childhood longing and candour. Winch creates her characters with tremendous delicacy and an adroit sense of style; the result is an assemblage of the raw events that construct the life and identity of May Gibson.

This novel is not easy to put down.
The characters are enticing and endearing, despite their flaws, and it is easy to understand their inability to cope with their world. Winch's style teases out the characters' plights, adding substance to their actions as May swirls around in stories of the past and the present; the good and the bad; breathing and not breathing. The imagery is exquisite despite the hard times, absorbed in childhood innocence and discovery, finding beauty, and ultimately making sense of it all. Swallow the Air is an accomplished first novel.

Gillian Barrett

REMEMBERING


Deborah Robertson's Careless is a novel full of death and loss. It should be a dark and daunting read, but it is not. Essentially it is an optimistic book which, while it explores the depths of grief and exposes a plethora of cultural inadequacies and clichés, still manages to convey an overall feeling of hope, a sense that grief can be endured and, eventually, survived.

Robertson interweaves the viewpoints of several characters to explore the experience of grief, how to support the bereaved, and the problem of commemorating those who are lost. Eight-year-old Pearl is the sole survivor of a murderous rampage by an estranged father. Her five-year-old brother Riley was one of eight victims: six children, including the man's twin sons, and two adults. Through Pearl's eyes we experience a child's view of grief, both her own and that of others around her, and are led to query many of society's ways of dealing with loss.

Pearl lives with her mother Lily in a state of chronic poverty and disorganisation. Pearl understands the finality of death: "There will be no new memories of Riley ... One day she will have remembered everything," (165), but Lily's grief is inarticulate, as chaotic in some ways as her life, but no less profound. Thus she sobs wordlessly, tells Pearl she knows Riley is still around and playing tricks on her, and keeps Riley's ashes under her bed, telling Pearl they will "do something nice with them one day" (80).

Through a victim's support group Anna Zanetti, whose twenty-two-year-old daughter, Tania, was murdered by her boyfriend, is appointed as the family's counsellor. She shows Pearl and Lily photographs of the Memorial to the Unrecovered, erected to remember those, like Anna's daughter, whose bodies were never recovered. Yet the one thing Anna wishes to do is to donate a wooden seat to the park where Tania played as a child, but the council will not allow her to do so. Others had made similar requests and "[w]e cannot meet one, without having to meet