



**The Orange Broadband Prize For Fiction**  
**2007**

Ironing out the issues in women's fiction

## The Orange Broadband Prize for Fiction 2007

The [Orange Prize](#), first run in 1996, is the brainchild of a group of [reviewers, agents, publishers, librarians and journalists](#), who desired both to raise the profile of women's writing and to reach a large quantity of British readers. It's fitting that the criteria for entry are only two: one must only be a member of the fairer sex and write in English. But despite this elegance, the Orange manages to raise some provocative – and messy - issues.

Last year's prize, won by Zadie Smith with [On Beauty](#), saw Institute of Ideas director Claire Fox on the judging panel. Her [speech](#) at Orange's conference for librarians put forward the idea that fiction should be surprising and challenging, that it should take us somewhere new. And this year broadcaster and writer Muriel Gray, chair of the judges, carried on this theme, issuing a clarion call to women writers to stop limiting themselves to domestic situations and to start [making stuff up](#). As usual, the Orange challenges perceptions of women's writing and the role of literature, kicking up even more of a storm this year by having two books on the Longlist which between them have already won £75,000 in literary prizes.

Culture Wars is dedicated to doing more than just 'curling up in front of the fire' with literature, and seeks to explore the issues it raises and meet them head on. Covering the Orange Prize we hope to iron out the issues in women's fiction by engaging in debate and criticism.

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[The Inheritance of Loss](#) by Kiran Desai – SHORTLISTED p.11

The marketing kitsch-up describes the book as 'a radiant, funny and moving family saga'. Yes, there are various families involved, but there was little that was sweet or delightful about marital rape  
Anna Leach

[When to Walk](#) by Rebecca Gower p.13

The novel is like a 'taking your pencil for a walk' drawing: what's important is not where the pencil goes, but the picture it leaves behind, which is a portrait of Ramble in four dimensions  
Dolan Cummings

[A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers](#) p.14

by Xiaolu Guo – SHORTLISTED

Z has managed an emancipation which has enabled her to see all human interaction as belonging to discourse – merely a matter of choice  
Sam Haddow

[The Observations](#) by Jane Harris – SHORTLISTED p.16

Hmm, one is supposed to say, a real, vital, human voice has been found here. In actuality, Bessy's sense of speech comes across as no more realistic than that of Mrs Potts from Disney's Beauty and the Beast  
James Topham

[Alligator](#) by Lisa Moore p.18

If Moore had indulged in a plot I might have been able to see what was at stake for her characters and maybe given a damn  
John Dennen

[The Housekeeper](#) by Melanie Wallace p.20

Despite its final bleak humour, the book lacks a certain innovation: I feel like I've heard it all before and this isn't enough  
Sarah Boyes

[What Was Lost](#) by Catherine O'Flynn p.23

Striking the balance between a faux innocence and the 'truth' sensed by the reader is a delicate business and one which shows O'Flynn's writing ability to its greatest effect  
Beth James

[The Dissident](#) by Nell Freudenberger p.

it is a supreme irony that Cece Travers, in her eagerness to be understanding and welcoming to the artist, imprisons Zhao in the role of the Dissident by her own expectations, which are entirely incongruent with Zhao's view of himself.  
Andrew Wheelhouse

[Careless](#) by Deborah Robertson p.

Whilst these 'tiny family dramas' would most likely be exactly what Muriel Gray laments over in women's literature, what Robertson has done is turned them into a neat storyline that impacts more than those directly involved with the main plots.  
Kiranjeet Kaur Gill

[The Tenderness of Wolves](#) by Stef Penney p.24

Considered in light of the chair of judges Muriel Gray's plea that female writers 'dream bigger dreams', The Tenderness of Wolves stands tall as a work of considerable ambition  
Helen Birtwistle

[Afterwards](#) by Rachel Seiffert p.26

Isn't it weird how an oppressive military regime isn't just dehumanising to its subjects but, like, totally dehumanising to the oppressors as well?  
David Bowden

Ten Days in the Hills by Jane Smiley

p.27

Although Hollywood loves to satirise itself it's difficult to see how Ten Days could be filmed, even discounting the troublesome erections

David Bowden

Digging to America by Anne Tyler – SHORTLISTED

p.29

Like most of Anne Tyler's books, this one is well-observed, the characters are inconsistent in the way that real people are, and the details that tell the story are small, convincing ones

Timandra Harkness

Peripheral Vision by Patricia Ferguson

p.31

Be prepared for an education in the cringe-inducing arts of post-enucleation socket syndrome, conjunctival incisions and the revelation that if a kitten's eyelid is sewn shut the eye will go blind.

John L Rosewarne

Over by Margaret Forster

Forster is unable to sustain interest in this nuclear family fallout through the whole novel. Once the details of Miranda's death are revealed, the momentum evaporates. Forster's writing throughout is clean and crisp, resisting melodramatic perorations, but the lack of narrative strand does lead to dry, often lifeless text.

Dean Nicholas

## The Orange Prize: Friend or Phony?

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Sarah Boyes  
posted 19 April 2007

What's the point of a women-only fiction prize if the utopian ideal the organisers and participants are all secretly aiming for is a world of gender-transcending publishing equality? Doesn't a prize that singles out women as a distinct group undermine the very autonomy desired and deserved by contemporary women writers?

In 2001 Anita Brookner made a similar point regarding the Orange: she remarked that if fiction is good it will get published, regardless (I infer) of whether it is written by woman, man or computer programme. If she wants equality, said Brookner, a woman shouldn't seek separate treatment. And this view shows an alarming yet heartening faith in the publishing system, I imagine invisible do-gooder publishing elves nosing out the good stories locked away in bottom drawers and magically setting them atop bookshop shelves. Because really, it's fair to say that the way to achieve equality isn't as easy as just treating things equally. And besides, not all good stories do get published and some seminal works have been rejected during the author's lifetime only to be published posthumously. And even when a book is shelved, it doesn't necessarily get read or generate any acknowledgement or revenue for the writer. So it certainly isn't the case that all good fiction gets published, hence the need to do something about it, hence the Orange.

Firstly, most of the longlist is pretty respectable fiction. And entrants must already be on the shelves – by their own merits - before they can be entered: what the Orange does is something above and beyond getting the books into bound and saleable copy. What the Orange does is contribute to a competitive fiction market, as well as providing a list of twenty of some of the best novels written by women today, critically stamped for the Concerned Reader.

At the launch of this year's longlist, the prize's co-founder and honorary director Kate Mosse made the oft propagated but rarely dissected point that great literature, like all great art, transcends temporary restrictions of culture, society and gender and has a necessary universal application and appeal. This view necessarily admits of an objective set of criteria for judging artworks that point beyond the immediate experiences and justifications of the narrow everyday. But the current publishing set-up, the fact that we are all now 'consumers' of fiction and that manuscripts are heavily spun and marketed, doesn't allow too much room for manoeuvre on this count. Today's climate is more about the fast-paced niche market, about tailoring for certain absurdly-labelled demographic groups, than about connecting with society or god-damn-it humanity en masse. Advertising campaigns normally have a specific target in mind and are rarely concerned with appealing to everybody. They suggest that fiction can only be judged 'right now' and only then by discrete groups of people, rather than pushing the somewhat braver notion that all kinds of fiction can be judged on equal terms by any person willing to learn how. There is an asymmetry between the ideal and the current situation.

This is most obvious when considering the horror expressed by the media, publishers and critics alike that two books on the Orange Longlist had already been nominated for other highflying prizes. Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* won the £50,000 Man Booker in 2006, and *The Tenderness of Wolves* by famous agoraphobe Stef Penney scooped the £25,000 Costa Book of the Year this February. The argument goes that prize money should be distributed fairly (read: relatively proportionately) between

writers, because storytelling is an under-a-bushel, hand-to-mouth activity, with one media burst and one windfall being sufficient to sustain even the most extrovert and extravagant of artists. If money is to be available it should be allocated according to a strict one-in-one-out policy.

But this misses the point about fiction prizes, that they're about the fiction and are awarded on the merit of the writing, not according to an equal opportunities monitoring form that cares about your bank balance. Arts prizes raise the standards of the arts, in many ways they help to provide those standards, and the standards are and should be high: they generate healthy competition that rewards genuine ability. Further, the fact that there are different prizes for different genres of fiction already ensures that no one person is scooping all the cash. If somebody is good enough to be nominated for two awards, well good for them, good for literature, and good that we have a good idea of what good literature is.

Kate Mosse's vision is therefore one born of practicality: she says we need a proliferation of fiction prizes to cover the entire sector, rewarding talent both financially and in terms of readership, in order to generate healthy and diverse competition both within and between types of fiction. And as anybody who has ever scratched their head over an Excel spreadsheet will know, there are many ways of typifying data, and which categories we choose to use are often a reflection of current thinking. And current thinking often cares about whether you're a woman or not and it cares about what you write about when you're a woman. Depressing example: one lady at the launch told how she was offered an extraordinary rise in advance for her book if she changed the main character from a man to a woman. Needless to say, she resisted and most likely earned less than she could have, and was read less than she deserved. Women's writing is a distinct category because people – readers, publishers and advertisers alike – regularly think about women as being fundamentally different (presumably from men) in a way that should define, and therefore confine, what they write about and how they write it. In a nutshell, we want women writing about women. This is a big reason why market is the way it is and why a women-only prize is appropriate. The whole racket about the Orange simply reflects our gender obsession.

For instance, nobody accuses new writing prizes of being 'newist', probably because they can see the need for both moral and financial encouragement for new writers. Nobody gets all hot under the collar about genre-based prizes, even if they think science fiction is the biggest rouse in history. There's even a fair amount of (begrudging) acceptance of prizes that have wheel-in celebrity judges with no more understanding of what makes a good novel than they do dress sense, of prizes that champion so-called 'low-brow crowd pleasers' (Richard and Judy) or are the callous intellectual equivalent of piranha fish on a purging mission (the Man Booker). So, why the big debacle about a prize that restricts entrants by sex – is this really the great unchallenged human rights abuse of recent times?

I'm tempted at this point to throw up my hands and say, 'so what?' I'm tempted to say that part of the problem, you know, with art nowadays is an obsession with discussing its function, with it even needing a function flush with political issues, with making sure it doesn't accidentally offend anybody by demanding it be proportionally representative of a constantly changing populace. I'm tempted to say that there are more important problems in the arts, and in fiction, than those about the gender of its creators, and that feminist fandango should hold no truck here. I'm tempted to say in response to Muriel Gray's clarion call to women to start making more stuff up, that nobody, just nobody, should be telling writers what they should and shouldn't be writing about. Isn't moralising about what women write just about the worst thing you can be doing to an artform already burdened with unreasonable expectations?

But I would have to rehash that to say dictatorially that art is for art's sake and nothing else's, that it shouldn't be used instrumentally to achieve the aims of certain groups, however just their causes, and certainly shouldn't be exploited for political or politicised (gender equality) ends. But I would be being somewhat naïve to think that this had never happened and never does, and that some good couldn't come of it. I would be flat-out wrong to argue that art can't be the vessel for dissenting views and a huge source of social change. But on the other hand, I do hate all that 'integrity of the artist' whinging. Despite having a secret belief that artistic integrity properly understood can probably save the world, I think what people often mean by 'artistic integrity' is something else entirely, and often something cowardly. They often presume (wrongly) that writers or what not are secreted safely away from the world, narcissistically obsessing about their small differences, narcotically cleansing the

windows of their perception and neurotically developing what Tessa Jowell calls the artistic 'sixth sense' (I don't know what it is either). All 'artistic integrity' means in this sense is being too sensitive to deal with the broader implications of your art and the cultural and political framework in which it is received.

And despite keying into the beautifully pungent stereotype of artist-as-aesthete, this way of looking at things misses the fact that art exists in the world and that artists are human beings like everybody else. Artworks are in many cases produced in response to stuff that's going on, culturally, socially and politically. This is seen especially with the new school of 'oh, look: here's a human rights abuse' art (see the soggy 'protest' in the Tate Britain), there because we're oh so boverred all of a sudden. Artists, writers, may be many things, but the good ones are rarely stupid. Shakespeare was a great publicist. And fiction, written to be read, is habitually shaped by its intended readership, it oscillates with the concerns of the times.

The problem is not as simple, then, as dividing the evil advertisers or prize organisers from the poor artistes attempting only to express themselves. It's not always easy to tease apart the 'integrity' or 'self-expression' of a book from the circumstances in which it was written, and who it is written for. And it may not be so easy to have a twin justification of the Orange, to say that on the one hand the ideal is a market with the content of books judged equally whereas on the other admitting that the market doesn't work like this and there should be a women's prize.

So what's going on? – when Muriel Gray diagnoses a certain self-censorship in women who concentrate on domestic themes, is she committing the secular sin of playing the censor herself, cunningly disguising this as an injunction to women to desist self-censorship? – that would be cool. But no, I think like anybody who has taken a step back from the whole process of publishing and prizes, she has become quite worried about its direction. The problem with her kind of view, I think, is that whilst its motivations are noble (stop whoring yourself around and do something worthwhile) and its sentiment pure (women are still being kicked-down and around and what's worse, they don't even notice), it seems premised on the most worrying idea of all, that the arts are there to be legislated about, that they have a moral imperative to deal with the injustices of our times. And whilst some art does do this and sometimes just can't help itself, politics certainly isn't all that art is, or should be, about.

The right thing to say is that great art is great because it's great art. And like most tautologies, this points to something bigger and better than itself. It means that really good stuff is fulfilling and satisfying in and of itself. It might make 'a point' but this isn't all it does or what justifies it, and is definitely not what moves us. It isn't what makes our bellies prickle. To treat art as anything less is to admit a monster of a debate that, whilst interesting, it seems will never end. It is to assume that, like everything else, books should be conforming to certain ideals and honouring certain definitions that in fact mean they can never properly cut through all the crap in the very way that only great literature can. And I suspect this is what Gray was getting at when she said women should be making more stuff up.

## Flushed with Orange

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Helen Miles  
posted 19 April 2007

By the time Patricia Ferguson found *Solidus*, her book *It So Happens*, had been rejected by many publishers despite her excellent track record. We loved it. We published it and submitted it for the Orange Prize. It was duly longlisted.

Life changed for everyone. We sold thousands instead of hundreds of Pat's books. Libraries bought it in bulk. Newspapers reviewed it enthusiastically. And most importantly, Pat once again considered herself to be 'a writer' and started writing again. She got an agent based on this success, and settled down to write the next novel.

You might imagine that the next book would be snapped up. It certainly got huge critical acclaim from the publishers who saw it – many paragraphs were devoted to the excellent quality of the work, before the final sentence that began 'but we are sorry ...'. The fear, you see, was that her book might not be a 'bestseller'.

So Pat returned to *Solidus*. We read it, we loved it, we published it and submitted it for the Orange Prize. It was long-listed, it was reviewed enthusiastically in newspapers and sold in quantity to libraries. With authors like Jane Smiley, Anne Tyler and Margaret Forster sharing the longlist, it is impossible for Pat not to understand that she is an author of considerable merit.

So this is what a book prize means to an author, and to a small publisher. It is our only way of fighting the massive machine of mainstream publishing, with its huge advances and even huger marketing machinery. It is the way in which an author can be ranked amongst her peers despite having the limited support that a house such as *Solidus* can offer.

This year, as before, there are charges that women's writing is in some way inferior, domestic, limited. And at the same time, there are charges of sexism; suggestions that, since women writers are now present in all major prize lists, they do not need the special treatment of a women-only prize. Surely we can't have it both ways? There are wonderful writers around of both sexes, and plenty of less wonderful ones too. But let's not forget that something like 70% of fiction is bought and read by women. If the men feel so strongly about it, let them create a men-only prize.

I was proudly showing off *Peripheral Vision* to a group of friends last week. Several women picked it up and examined it. Three men exclaimed 'is it fiction?', rather in the way they might ask 'does it smell of rotten fish?'. They resolutely left it untouched. This is sad, but it is the way of the world. Maybe if it had been written by a man called Garth Leadballs who had won the Ferrari Prize for Men's Fiction, things might have been different. But the prize would have meant just as much to Garth Leadballs as it does to Pat Ferguson.

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Helen Miles works at [Solidus](#), publishers of the Orange longlisted *Peripheral Vision* by Patricia Ferguson.

# Do we need the Orange Prize to support women writers?

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Munira Mirza  
posted 19 June 2007

One reason I have never been convinced that women writers need special awards to 'make it', is that they already feature pretty heavily in the literary canon. Most people will have heard of, if not read from the great store of British female novelists: Jane Austen, Charlotte and Emily Bronte, George Eliot, Virginia Woolf, AS Byatt, Doris Lessing, Iris Murdoch, Jeanette Winterson, Angela Carter, Zadie Smith (and that's only high brow; if we look at popular fiction, women easily dominate – Agatha Christie, Catherine Cookson, Danielle Steele, J K Rowling).

Perhaps it is too easy to point to the literary world of the past and assume a level playing field today. After all, the Orange Prize is for contemporary writers, rather than those who are established in the annals of history. But in reality, the publishing world is probably more skewed towards women's taste than men's anyway. Last year British women bought 188 million books compared to 128 million for men. Girls are three times more likely than boys to borrow books from public libraries, a trend which continues into their adult lives. Women populate the publishing profession.

It is therefore hard to see why female writers should need a leg up the fiction ladder when women already dominate the market as consumers. Even the organisers don't seem too convinced. When I visited the website for the Orange Prize for Fiction, I found that it hardly mentions the fact that the prize is exclusively for women. The whole point of the award - to give special recognition to women on the basis of their exclusion from the mainstream - seems so bizarre that even the sponsors seem faintly embarrassed by it.

That is why hardly anybody – not even Orange – seems to be interested in the pseudo-feminism of the Orange prize. I half suspect the Orange is not really taken seriously as a 'women's prize', but is instead just another device invented by publishers to sell books. Prizes have become a pragmatic strategy for the publishing industry to win column inches for authors, get a sticker on the front cover and win some literary credibility for the house. In this sense, the categories chosen can seem arbitrary - the veneer of feminist radicalism is pretty thin. In the Frequently Asked Questions part of the Orange site, the question ['Why isn't there a similar prize for men?'](#) is answered thus: 'Because no-one has, as yet, put in the time, creativity, effort and enthusiasm necessary to start one up and keep it going'. So, the Orange Prize is not about addressing gender inequality or promoting 'women's fiction', it is just a prize that happens to be for women, and could exist just as easily for men if someone bothered to make it happen.

But before we dismiss the Orange Prize as unnecessary for putting forward female authors, is there still a place in today's literature for the category of 'women's fiction'? About 'women's issues'? This is a notion that still exists in academia. My own university tutors specialised in 'feminist literature' and the 'hidden stories' of women through the ages. I recall a section in my

school library called 'women's literature', which seemed to store books about growing up, lesbianism and family life.

It is certainly true that women's experiences have been different to men's throughout history and their literature may well reflect this. The highpoint of the English novel was during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a time when women occupied tightly defined social positions, bound to the private, domestic sphere. This would suggest that they automatically had a distinctively different perspective to men, who spent little time in the house. In Victorian Britain, women writers were well equipped to observe the emotional drama of domestic life. They had a unique insight into the events of family and home, and only a brief glimpse of the public world from which they were excluded.

Yet interestingly, this confinement produced a genre of romantic and horror fiction by women, which were a staple of Victorian female readers. Ann Radcliffe pioneered the genre in *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and *The Italian* (1796). Later of course, Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* (1818), a novel of ideas and intellect, as well as terror and the sublime. These were not gentle, 'feminine' books but gory fantasies which signalled imagination and depth.

The confinement of women also delivered women novelists who were able to get beyond the clichés and see into the social contradictions of their time. Like post-colonial writers who can see western societies from the outside inwards, women's external position gives them a unique perspective on the average and normal, bringing to life the pains and struggles of life and making them truly universal.

Hence, the best women writers have been those who present the private sphere as profane, rather than as idealised boudoir. Jane Austen wrote perceptively about the eighteenth century rituals of marriage and the 'little rubs and disappointments everywhere' (*Emma* 1816). Her novels were hardly romantic epics but were steeped in the grubby business of marriage contracts and negotiations, so much so that the sociology professor, Mary Evans, has named her the first anthropological writer. Indeed, Austen takes to task her own sex and its preoccupations with the fanciful, as she parodies gothic fiction in her own *Northanger Abbey* (1803). By contrast, the most toe-curling clichés of romantic Victorian fiction have been produced by male writers (just think of Dickens' irritatingly sweet Esther Addley in *Bleak House*, who the reader wishes would die from almost her first introduction).

At the same time, 'women's issues' have been thoroughly explored by men. Possibly the most convincing portrayal of a woman's broken heart is Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1873-77), followed quite closely by Henry James' *Portrait of a Lady* (1880-1881). The interior life of a woman is not incomprehensible to men.

Women writers today are less confined to their homes and have greater opportunities to explore the inner life, as well as the social and political world. They are free to discuss more ideas and challenge convention (think of Lionel Shriver's superb 2005 Orange Prize-winner [We Need to Talk About Kevin](#) which broke the ultimate taboo by saying that sometimes mothers regret the decision to have children).

If women writers today are stuck in their homes and cannot get away from the trivial affairs of the heart as Muriel Gray, a judge for this year's Orange Prize, has suggested, perhaps this is a problem that afflicts all literature. At the same time, the affairs of the heart should not be dismissed too lightly as 'unserious'. I return to possibly the greatest novel of all time - *Anna Karenina*. No-one would dare to say that was just about a woman with 'boyfriend trouble' now, would they?

# Half of a Yellow Sun

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

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Emily Turnbull  
posted 19 April 2007

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's second novel describes the outbreak of the 1967 Biafran War, and tells the story of those caught up in the conflict. The novel traces the political and social forces that triggered the war - the religious strife between the Muslim-dominated north and the Christian Igbo of the south, their mutual suspicion and wrangling over control of national resources. The eventual massacre of the Igbo by Muslim forces in 1967 engendered an attempt at secession on the part of the south, and a consequent besiegement of the new Biafran state by Nigeria. The conflict lasted three years and serves in the novel first as the broader background against which the lives of the main characters are set, and then as a source of all-encompassing and entirely inescapable turbulence which tears these lives apart.

Privileged twin sisters Olanna and Kainene hold the story together, their fractious relationship, fraught with mistrust and misunderstanding, used by Adichie to examine the shifts of loyalties and loves in times of peace and then of war. Olanna and Kainene, in many respects polar opposites, are eventually united by their common suffering; when they do speak, it is of the horrors they have witnessed and the torments suffered by their people. Their reunification is finally brought about only in part by love; Adichie suggests that communicating shared experience or heritage can also be crucial in bringing a fractured people together, and in rebuilding a broken nation.

Olanna and Kainene, different in physicality and temperament, are attracted to very different men: Odenigbo, the intellectual and pan-Africanist for whom Olanna abandons her life with the Igbo elite in Lagos, teaches at a provincial university and holds stimulating after-hours discussions in his living-room. Inspired by the end of colonialism and initially hopeful for the newly seceded Biafran state, his ideals become tarnished as the war progresses. Kainene's lover, Richard, a shy British writer who takes up the Biafran cause, similarly finds himself, by the end of the novel, having to come to terms with the loss of what he had reckoned indestructible.

Most intriguing of all is Ugwu, the conscientious adolescent who leaves his rural village to take up a position as Odenigbo's houseboy, and who is consequently catapulted into a world of education and informed opinions. As Ugwu gradually acclimatises to his new position, Adichie is able to lever open the cracks between the Nigerian social classes, highlighting the gap between university life and rural poverty. Soon immersed in his new surroundings, the outbreak of war troubles Ugwu less than the rifts he can see appearing in Olanna and Odenigbo's relationship. His forced conscription into the Biafran army reveals the brutalising effects of war on the young - the cruelty perpetrated by the fearful; the way in which Ugwu is by the end of the novel the unofficial scribe of the conflict is perhaps a comment on the inability of any but the survivors to fully comprehend the war, or to do justice to its telling.

In telling of the forces which combined to instigate and perpetuate the war, Adichie's characters are never sacrificed for advocacy's sake. Instead, an explanatory thread runs through the novel, at times somewhat stilted, but rarely heavy-handed. Insights into the political turmoil are gained from snatches of conversation; behind the text lurk Western governments, their presence casting a shadow over the speech of the Biafran soldiers. In this way meddling foreign foes, whose interests impact on the lives of ordinary people in the most disastrous way, are criticised for their arrogance and ignorance in sustaining the conflict.

Adichie tells of both the political and the personal, in a way that leaves the reader feeling that neither has been diminished. The first quarter of the novel, for example, at times has the feel of a social

comedy: the politics with which the characters are most often concerned those of family feuds and love interests. As the novel progresses, the focus shifts onto the various masculine forces which, in both public and private, are shown to be most destructive and destabilising, with male irresponsibilities and inconsistencies bridging the gap between the personal lives of the main characters and the fate of Biafra as a whole. Time and again it is the female characters who are caught up in the fallout from male weakness and betrayal, forced to climb out of the emotional wreckage, dust themselves off, and endure.

Yet none of Adichie's characters are free of humanising flaws, and in this, perhaps, lies her greatest strength as an author. She is merciless in pinpointing the prejudices that can divide not only whole nations, but classes, villages, and even families, and she creates characters that are superbly human in their biases and cruelties. Adichie may not always be poetic in her prose, but in detailing the inner lives of the people who populate her novel, she creates characters who stay with the reader long after the final page has turned.

# Poppy Shakespeare

Clare Allan

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Brenda Stones  
posted 20 April 2007

Poppy Shakespeare is one of the Orange longlist titles that didn't make it to the shortlist, which must have been a disappointment for author Clare Allan, but is nevertheless a fine achievement for a first novel.

Poppy Shakespeare joins the great tradition of novels that describe the impact of 'stranger comes to town', or rather 'memorable new character joins the institution' – reminiscent of Barbara's obsequious observations in [Notes on a Scandal](#), or Francois Seurel's hero-worship in *Le Grand Meaulnes*. In the case of Poppy Shakespeare, it is N the Narrator who records every event involving precocious Poppy, the glamorous new arrival at the Dorothy Fish daycare centre in north London.

Poppy wows them all with her short skirt and snakeskin heels, and her insistence that she alone is completely 'normal', admitted by some kind of mistake. We follow her through the farcical 'communication classes', the insider trading in medications in exchange for cigarette butts (or vice versa), and the applications for 'MAD money' to keep her on in the institution – all opportunities for political side-swipes at the bureaucracy of the mental health business, and who or what is really 'sane'.

But it is the voice of N's narration that ultimately carries as much significance in the novel as the rise and fall of Poppy's reputation. Deliberately it is not 'Middle-Class Michael' or even 'Astrid Arsewipe' who is chosen from amongst the inmates as our guide, but poor sad N, who never had a hope after her mother jumped under a train at Mill Hill East. N speaks to us throughout in her head-banging vernacular ('ain't my fault is it, do you know what I'm saying'), and it takes some pages before you can bear these crashing cadences in your ear. But by the end of the book N's voice has become a totally familiar part of your experience, and you almost miss her monologues when she walks out of the Dorothy Fish and hides her head under a blanket for twenty pages.

Which is what the novel is clearly saying to us all: put any 'sane' person or reader into an institutional environment, and subject them to all the pettinesses and paranoia of that institution; can you be surprised when in the end you too become absorbed into that life?

As Chekhov's epigram quoted at the beginning of the novel says, 'Since prisons and madhouses exist, why, somebody is bound to sit in them'.

# The Inheritance of Loss

Kiran Desai

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Anna Leach  
posted 3 May 2007

The chief judge of this year's Orange prize, Muriel Gray, launched the prize's long-list with a controversial speech about how contemporary female writers were failing to write imaginatively. Instead, she claims, they were churning out 'thinly veiled' autobiography about the dead babies and broken relationships in their Middle England lives. 'There were lots of books we rejected – about personal female issues, the loss of a child, the break-up of a marriage, thinly veiled autobiographical things of no consequence – because they weren't expansive enough'.

Kiran Desai's 324-page novel cannot be accused of shying away from 'expansive' issues. The *Inheritance of Loss*, set mostly in India, partly in New York and partly in England, encompasses colonialism, a revolution, multi-ethnic nationhood and illegal immigration in the US. But while Muriel Gray may be focusing on the 'issue-scape' of Desai's book, it is not the feature of the novel that is emphasised by her publishers. Marketed on the front cover as – 'Affecting and endearing, full of laughter and tears' – *The Inheritance of Loss* comes across as more of a traditional female novel.

If Desai is caught in any box, it is one that has been constructed by her own publisher. The marketing convention that women's writing has to be likeable and about crying fits only superficially with Desai's book. The novel I read was nihilistic and bitter, where characters and readers are caught out by their pleasures and hopes and thrust into sticky sordid muddles. This sort of publicity puts women's literature back into an old clichéd place that Muriel Gray is campaigning to take it out of. Sure, people laugh and people cry in the book but it is often more interesting when people don't cry; for example, like the abused wife who withdraws into emotional vegetablism.

The marketing kitsch-up continues in the official publicity release, where *The Inheritance of Loss* is described as 'a radiant, funny and moving family saga... described by reviewers as "the best, sweetest, most delightful novel"'. Yes, there are various families involved, but there was little that was sweet or delightful about marital rape, racism and street massacres.

But it is neither the 'big issues' vaunted by Gray, nor the 'family saga' side to this novel that make it what it is; rather the fraught boundary line between the two: where political allegiance impacts on love affairs, and where the reality of life in a grubby New York basement reshapes the American Dream. The neglect, disappointment and accidental cruelty exposed by the novel's exploration of dying colonialism and the exploitation of the third-world, bleed into the lives of the characters. Desai uses rich, mannered, even cutesy language to delineate a bleak universe.

One of the most powerful threads in the narrative is a tale of domestic abuse. A standard of kitchen-sink stories and almost certainly one of Muriel Gray's 'personal female issues' but here a story that resonates with the larger international issues, including the exploitative relationship Britain exercised over a subservient India. The narrator points up this implication, describing the couple's mutually destructive union, 'they had tapped into a limitless bitterness carrying them beyond the parameters of what any individual is normally capable of feeling. .... Experienced rage with enough muscle in it for entire nations coupled in hate' (p173).

Ostensibly the main characters are the two Indian youths: Sai, an Anglicised, independent-minded teenager living with her cranky grandfather, and Biju, son of Sai's cook who has made it to America and works exploited and illegal in New York. Sai's grandfather, usually referred to as 'the judge', is a dislikeable retired member of the judiciary, and the husband in the abusive marriage mentioned above.

Remote, twisted and Cambridge-educated, the judge's presence distorts the lives of those around him. Inset into the stories of Sai and Biju runs the story of the judge's own youth and marriage. A good student, he is sent off to Cambridge University, where he is misunderstood, ignored and casually humiliated. He returns, having not spoken to anyone for three years, acutely isolated with a hygiene hang-up. 'His new ideas of privacy were unfathomable' (p.167) Baffled and disgusted by his Indian wife, he rapes her in a violent, gruesomely-described sex scene, is then revolted by the whole thing and orders the servants to wipe the whole house down with Dettol. From then on he ignores her, hits her and, on one occasion, thrusts her head down the toilet, 'One day he found footprints on the toilet seat – she was squatting on it, she was squatting on it! – he could barely contain his outrage, took her head and pushed it into the toilet bowl, and after a point, Nimi, made invalid by her misery, grew very dull, began to fall asleep in heliographic sunshine and wake in the middle of the night' (p173).

His quest for purity takes a perverse lodging in hatred: 'the hate pure, purer than it could ever have been before.... Just the fury remained, distilled, liberating.' (p161) This is the sordid mess a failed man ends up in. It is not just the parallels with international relations that make an interesting tale out of this perennial 'female issue'. It is told from the point of view of the man. And having seen this man as a victim of humiliating, character-deforming racism and isolation in 1930s Cambridge, we can't fully wrest our sympathy away from him.

His abuse of his wife replicates, tellingly, the off-hand scorn and occasional malice he experiences in England. In titling her book *The Inheritance of Loss*, Desai emphasises ideas of inheritance and transmission. Loss, like abuse, can be transmitted from person to person or society to society. It is not an excuse but it is a complicated moral picture. A picture that Desai wafts in lightly and passes over quickly, just as we pass over the wife, Nimi – invalid and invisible.

The story of the judge's failures, disappointments is mirrored in the story of Biju who sets off to New York to make his fortune in the land of plenty, with the high hopes of his father riding on his shoulders. Scorned, isolated, bored and scared, his life is a miserable chain of illegal jobs in cheap restaurants. The book ends in a cruelly bathetic climax. Sordid, muddled and bereaved, the characters gather to console, betray, or hit each other with slippers. Couching these harsh narratives is a rich, sensual language, revelling in details and lists to the point where the writing almost has a sticky feel to it, becoming cloying and humid at points.

The novel is rife with the sort of messy common details that disgust the judge. The two teenage lovers, Gyan and Sai, 'would have melted into each other like pats of butter' (p129). The judge has been powdering his face before he forces himself on his wife, and is described as 'Ghoulishly sugared in sweet candy pigment' (p169). Food comes up a lot in the narrative: dumplings, chutney, dahl, beef-burgers ('the blood beaded on the surface' p136). Returning from a trip out, Sai throws up: 'a mordant bile rose up in her throat, frizzling her system, burning her mouth, corroding her teeth – she could feel them turn to chalk as they were attacked by a resurgence of the chilli chicken' (p215).

There is as much that is intentionally nauseating in this conversational style of Rushdiean excess as there is anything 'endearing'. I have to confess I found this quite a sordid bitter book; this richness leaves a queasy feeling, making for a nihilistic poverty beneath the wealth of language and the fertile detail.

# When to Walk

Rebecca Gowers

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Dolan Cummings  
posted 16 May 2007

I must be completely mad: this book is in seven chapters, one for every day of the week starting with Saturday, but I started it on a Thursday. It might be nice for you to start on a Saturday and read one chapter a day for the next week. But that's just a suggestion; it's not important.

The week in question belongs to Ramble, a first-nameless, mildly-disabled copywriter whose husband has just left her. That's perhaps not terribly important either. The stuff of the novel is Ramble's beguiling narrative voice. Ramble likes to make random observations about language, for example how the word 'dust', when used as a verb, can have one of two opposite meanings: 'dust this cake' calling for something very different than dusting the mantelpiece. Occasionally she bursts into illiterate advertising copy-speak, usually in the spirit of laughing not crying: 'Antidotal evidence reveals that most marriages excels people's lowest expectations a much amount more than realised. But why hark on your troubles?'

Ramble's troubles include figuring out what happened to her marriage and how she is going to cope (not least financially), hacking out an article about ice sculptures for a travel magazine, and coping with the ever-increasing pain of her hip. She also claims to be partly deaf, but I'm not convinced about that. Over the course of the week, she goes to the library a couple of times, befriends a downstairs neighbour who seems to know more about Ramble's husband than she does, visits her demented grandmother, and sleeps with her gay best friend. Then her husband comes back.

I don't think I'm giving much away: if you read the book to find out what happened next, you're going to be disappointed. Ramble is more concerned with what happened in the past, sometimes the distant past of her relatives, sometimes her own past, sometimes cooky Victoriana; she is especially keen on bad jokes. Much of the time it is difficult to distinguish passing trivia from meaningful information. When she receives an email that looks to the reader like spam – 'Dear Ramble, I will confide the below to Professor Cohen before I send it, but please could you have another opinion about my English. I should like you to consider this letter as a confidential matter' – it turns out to be a genuine request from Ramble's friend Beata, but beyond being mildly diverting for a while, this doesn't go anywhere either.

The novel is a bid like a 'taking your pencil for a walk' drawing: what's important is not where the pencil goes, or where it ends up, but the picture it leaves behind. And what is left behind is a portrait of Ramble in four dimensions: her character is actually quite quickly established and immensely likeable. By the end, though, I found I'd gone off her a bit: you know how you can warm to someone with a self-deprecating sense of humour, but after a while it's more like low self-esteem and you start to share their estimation? I suppose part of the problem is that everyone else in the book is so awful.

Ramble's gay best friend Johnson is the only character who really doesn't ring true: he seems more like a fantasy friend, all unconditional love and whatever, and that contributes to Ramble's unattractive pathos; though it is through this relationship that Ramble's mother is portrayed, and made impressively real despite the fact that she never appears in her own right. The neighbour Mrs Shaw only contributes to Ramble's confusion, making her seem increasingly helpless. Ramble is probably at her best with her grandmother Stella Ramble, whose lack of awareness allows her to relax and stop worrying so much.

Ramble's husband Con stands in (or walks out) for Ramble's general dissatisfaction with life, and his absence does open the possibility of a new life for Ramble, except that it wasn't her choice, so for much of the book she is just bewildered. That possibility is always there though. Reading *When to Walk* is a bit like finding a row of photos left behind outside a photo booth, showing a possibly attractive but rather gormless woman who has now moved on anyway.

# A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary For Lovers

Xiaolu Guo

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Sam Haddow

posted 25 April 2007

When Amos Tutuola wrote his debut novel *The Palm Wine Drinkard*, he unwittingly instigated a revolutionary dialectical approach to that seam of literature which inevitably falls under the suppressive category of postcolonialism. Rejected by every British publisher until it found a champion in Dylan Thomas, *The Palm Wine Drinkard* is a preposterously bizarre account of a one dimensional narrator navigating his way in a violent and magical odyssey, in the search for more alcohol.

The revolutionary aspect of this novel, however, was its perspective. A semi-literate and under educated postal worker, Tutuola simply wrote what he knew, so the novel placed Yoruba demons and mythologies amongst football pitches, stiletto heels and petrol drums without any self conscious irony. Without realising quite what he'd done, Tutuola ushered in a cultural homogeneity that (in my opinion) sidestepped one of the most pressing problems of postcolonialism: the impossible position of the subaltern trying to articulate an independent voice in the discourse of its former oppressors.

Xiaolu Guo's debut novel, *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary For Lovers* is unlikely be categorised as postcolonial, yet with its fusion of Eastern and Western culture shown through the eyes of a beguilingly credulous narrator, she is tracking a similar course.

To begin with, one of the most intriguing aspects of this sparsely written but elegantly complex novel is its approach to language. Guo, the blurb informs us, drew the genesis of *A Concise...* from her own diaries, when first arriving in Britain. Whether her English was better or worse than the narrator Z's (so named because the British can't pronounce her real name) is a matter for probably meaningless speculation, but the blurb informs us the novel is written in 'deliberately bad English'. Consequently, the opening chapters stumble over their grammatical shortcomings with all of the failed grace and eagerness of a punchdrunk spaniel. However, the most beguiling strength of Guo's style is its unflinching honesty. This sometimes spills over into grammar itself – in a chapter entitled 'progressive tenses', we are treated to Z musing, "People say 'I'm going to go to the cinema...'Why there two go for one sentence? Why not enough to say one go to go?".

The connection that Z perceives between language and sentiment feeds into the central construct of the novel, and she quickly begins to construct one of her most deliciously abstruse theories – that the application of 'tenses' (an alien construct to her, since they don't exist in Mandarin) is somehow connected to the Western condition of impermanence and flux. Discussing her criteria for judging attractiveness in others with her English partner (written in the second person – another wonderfully elusive mechanism to draw the reader in) she speculates on whether or not the object of attraction would make a good husband, and be able to provide for a family. 'You', the object of her affections, offer simply that you would like to see them naked. In most writer's hands, this exchange would fall flat into leaden cliché, or worse, sanctimonious finger pointing, but Z is so idiosyncratic, so hopelessly lost and yet seemingly more grounded than everyone else she meets, that you can't but help admire her.

Because the conflict at the heart of this story isn't a diachronic critique of East versus West, nor is it a coming-of-age, or even a loss-of-innocence. Z, as she develops within the chosen medium of expression – the English language, is able to criticise both her own, and western heritage. She finds herself clinging to certain aspects of permanence – she cannot understand why her lover – You – wants her to travel Europe alone, but she goes anyway, and in doing so begins to isolate all modes of living as adjacent discourses. She is frightened, certainly, and her experiences are not always pleasant – falling prey to her newly developed but inexperienced sexuality, she leads on a stranger in Faro, and when she eventually pleads, 'No plugging in... Just using sucking me', he forces her into sex. Afterwards, she leaves him stranded on a railway platform, and washes herself in the little sink in the toilets. Whilst she doesn't comprehend the freshly unveiled and insatiable appetites of her body, she

doesn't dismiss them as she would have done previously, and begins to learn more about her power over others, and herself. In any book that deals with the culture of its intended demographic through the eyes of an 'other,' there is always bound to be an element of Freud's Uncanny, (to say nothing of poststructuralist paradigm shifts), and *A Concise...* doesn't escape. Indeed, Guo is entirely open about this, as she directs the novel entirely to 'you.' Which could trip her up slightly, and sometimes verges a little on the trite, but to be honest, I'd already found way too much sympathy for Z by that point to hold it against her. This is, however, where the novel's weakest point lies. It is difficult to separate Guo and Z – and though I've never had much sympathy for the liberal humanists, I do prefer a degree of distinction, as writer/character fusion tends to clutter a narrative. So, while I can forgive Z her sometime regressions to cliché or just-too-convenient picturesque naivety, I can't do the same for Guo. However, the answer to this seemed to come readily enough in the fact that, after everything, Z doesn't take herself too seriously. At one point, she claims that the Chinese don't understand humour, but you eventually realise that she is playing with her own sensibilities as well as the reader's. Whilst the humour (of which there is a great deal) in *A Concise...* springs more from misinterpretation than actual character intentions, it quickly becomes apparent that if Z's finger is pointing, then her tongue's sticking out at the same time.

The novel concludes with an inevitable conjunction – between permanence and impermanence. The relationship between 'You' (who, for good measure, is a formerly gay sculptor who earns his living as a glorified courier) collapses, as was always going to happen. The syntactical structure of the narrative (signposted by chapter headings that pertain to be dictionary entries – see what she did there?) leaves Z as she returns to China, though not to her home town, as a woman poised between two cultures that she cannot feel absolutely a part of. This is not, however, a tragedy. Somewhere in all the artifice, Z has managed an emancipation which has enabled her to see all human interaction as belonging to discourse – merely a matter of choice. This choice has led her (and the reader) through an odyssey which feels a good deal more intimate than its pan-continental scope suggests, and the eventual feeling at the book's end is a sort of delight in impermanence. The refusal to commit may turn some readers against this novel, which could, under didactic scrutiny, be viewed as incidental, or worse, whimsical. But I believe it to be one of this book's greatest strengths. That and the pleasure of being allowed to view a familiar landscape as unfamiliar, through the perspective of one of the most charismatic and beguiling narrators I have read in a very long time.

# The Observations

Jane Harris

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James Topham  
posted 19 April 2007

Undoubtedly the Orange Prize is a good thing (albeit it is has now been renamed the Orange Broadband Prize and may well, in a sponsorship coup, soon become the Orange Broadband Only 14.99 For Unlimited Downloads Restrictions Apply Prize). One can barely quibble with a multinational organisation bequeathing some of its obscene wealth to the worthy cause of celebrating literary merit, and as such we should not begrudge Orange the free sponsorship call-out they receive every time the prize is mentioned.

That the laurels can only be won by a woman writer, however, is perhaps a little more open to gentle scepticism, especially since the male hegemony over literature's top prize was finally ended last year by a Booker shortlist that favoured women two to one and which saw Kiran Desai finally triumph. Women novelists – Zadie Smith, Sarah Waters, Ali Smith, Kate Grenville, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie - are the bright young things of the literary world; they are not marginalised voices clawing at the edges of the mainstream. There is a tipping point at which attempts to help redress the gender balance can outlast their usefulness and end up appearing hollow. What's worse, they may do some considerable harm by implying that women need to be protected from male competition. That tipping point seems to be fast approaching. Women are competing on the bookshelves, in the salons and should certainly be allowed to do so in the tough arena of the multinational sponsored book award.

The Observations, a first-time novel by Jane Harris, is particularly in danger of being tarred with the label 'women's fiction'. It is a danger that one feels could have been better avoided if it had done a little more to avoid the stereotypes of the Victoriana literature that is very much the vogue since Sarah Waters and Michel Faber burst upon the scene. It is a tale of a young woman who has moved from Ireland to Scotland to start a new life. Bessy, the narrator of our tale, suddenly falls into a job as a maid to a beautiful upper middle class lady called Arabella. Her new mistress acts strangely, asking her to keep a record of her thoughts in a diary, and often drilling her in trivial and unrewarding tasks. However, despite this strange behaviour, Bessy becomes extremely attached to the lady of the house because of a kindness and understanding that she didn't have in her native Ireland, where her villainous mother forced her into prostitution. Going through her mistress' things one day, she finds a book that her mistress is secretly writing about the best way to train and discipline servants, called The Observations. In it she reads that her mistress considers her a poor servant and has found out about her dark past. She also learns more about her mistress's relationship with another Irish maid who died whilst she was working at the house. Pricked by feelings of jealousy and betrayal, Bessy determines to trick her mistress into believing that the old maid is haunting the house, a decision which leads to terrible consequences.

The central selling point of the novel is its narrator, Bessy, a first person voice that is full of bawdy humour, commonsense adages, and colloquialisms galore. She is the kind of character who, on every page, demands to be recognised as a 'character', a 'voice'. Hmm, one is supposed to say, a real, vital, human voice has been found here, what a wonderful, picaresque creation. In actuality, despite Harris's careful examination of maids' diaries from the period, and a good vocabulary of its colloquialisms, Bessy's sense of speech comes across as no more realistic than that of Mrs Potts from Disney's Beauty and the Beast. Mannerisms, ticks of speech and thought, are a shortcut when it comes to characterisation; over the period of an entire novel something more concrete and more solid must emerge. I spent much of the novel desperate for Harris to subvert the initial blustering, easy-talking, unrestrained Bessy, to deconstruct the stereotype that she exploits with so much panache that I could not help that I was but think a postmodern volte-face was on its way. Very rarely these days does one find the opportunity to criticise a contemporary novel for failing to deliver enough postmodernism, but The Observations certainly merits the charge. Without an intellectual twist that shows an acknowledgement of Bessy the maid's deeply caricatured nature, I felt as though Harris was offering me yesterday's reheated left-overs and expecting me to eat as though it were nouvelle cuisine.

This sense of desperation stayed with me throughout the book, a desire for Harris to make something out of her extremely promising premises. It was a feeling that stoked by Harris's seemingly natural ability to create tension – and not just of the gothic ghost story kind – although she can crank up the supernatural excitement with the best of them. Rather, Harris has a gift of finding enormously interesting avenues to be explored and then forgetting to explore them. Of creating intellectual tension she is a grand master. A reader wonders what she is going to do with the spectres she raises, how she is going to explore, for example, the nature of servitude, the power of obsession, the ethics of nineteenth century prostitution, (we are even given a sniff of repressed Victorian lesbianism a la Sarah Waters). It is as though she is rushing through an old, cold house, tinderbox in hand, setting fires in every hearth. Unfortunately, she also seems to expend a similar amount of energy rushing around putting the fires out before they can catch light and threaten to consume her novel with any intellectual flame. At times, her fire-fighting seems almost perverse, she seems to take delight in stopping her narrative taking the reader anywhere remotely unsafe or out of the ordinary.

An excellent case in point is the supernatural element of the novel. For a few chapters the reader is given a feeling of deep ambiguity about the nature of the ghosts that haunt the old house and its mistress' mind. Are they real, corporeal; can the phantoms of the mind be more destructive than the phantoms that walk an old house at night? However, this extremely effectively created atmosphere is very soon dissipated, and the remainder of the book has the same tone of dreary realism with which the novel began. The ghost story peters out, as does so much else in the novel, and one is left wondering whether an extremely promising lead as just been thrown away.

The book deals with sex in a similar way. Many of the recent contemporary novels that have drawn on this period in time have done so in order to play with the ambiguities of its sexual politics, to place our own supposed liberated era against the repression that was endemic in Victorian England. Sex is an important aspect of *The Observations* and yet the novel never really approaches it, never really questions it. Bessy is a bawdy, open character; a woman who because of her class and personal history can act outside of the social propriety as represented by the husband and wife whom she serves. And yet, whenever she is recounting sex – whether it be a scrambled fuck with a stable boy in order to express her feelings of self-loathing, or her attempts to recount her history as a child prostitute in Ireland, the narrative falls back on a 'reader look away' device; the uninhibited Bessy is too shy or too understanding of social propriety to enter into any real discussion of it. As such, you get the feeling that the novel wants to use Bessy's history of prostitution as another short-cut to characterisation, rather than to explore it in a deep or complicated way, or to expose its horrors.

All in all *The Observations* is all about potentialities rather than fulfilment. It does have potential, as does Harris, who is a first-time novelist and perhaps needs more books under her belt before she successfully bridges the gap between the different techniques of short story and film and the longer novelistic form. The book is too episodic, one feels, and too lacking in an overall artistic or philosophical structure. Harris has a feel for the representation of longing, and perhaps she should have risked her pristine character by allowing Bessy to be less likeable, and examining more precisely the impulses behind her love for the woman who employs her. Her writing shows a good eye for comedy, and the plot flows along nicely, taking its reader's interest with it, though I felt the book was a little on the long side. I'd like to see a novel from Harris that was a shorter, tighter work, and one that draws its characters from a sense of life and the world rather than aiming for the larger-than-life narratorial persona that is this book's central flaw.

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James Topham is creator and editor of the online arts journal, [the roundtable review](#), which seeks to cross disciplinary boundaries and showcase the best young talent from the arts world. He spends his time writing, editing, reviewing fiction and theatre, and generally affecting an air of studied bohemianism.

# Alligator

Lisa Moore

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John Dennen  
posted 16 May 2007

I am entirely indifferent to Lisa Moore's Alligator. Which is, I fear, the worst insult one can level at a writer. There are worse books. There are better books. Her book doesn't irritate me, she's not an incompetent writer. But nor does it excite me. I can happily describe the thing in one word. Meh.

Which is a problem in what is essentially an exercise in characterisation. We have four major characters who knock about in a town in Canada. Each chapter is written from the point of view of one of these characters and each chapter helpfully comes with their name as its title. So there's Frank who has a hotdog stand. Valentin is a rotter, not just because he's Russian but because he thinks things like: 'Thug was an English word with which he identified. He liked its truncated sound, its gangster-movie anonymity, its gritty truthfulness'. I don't want to be too picky but I would like words to be used to refer to something that made sense. If Moore is going to indulge in constant sensory descriptions, I would like her other descriptions to be attached to something vaguely tangible. What does gritty truthfulness look like? How does it refer to the word 'thug'?

I wouldn't mind so much, but Moore does this too often. You begin to worry that she's not thinking too much about what she's writing. There are strong passages but they're then let down by this whittering. There are only so many times you can read about the 'loud, erotic gushing' of pouring sugar without wondering what the hell that sounds like (no laughing at the back please). The style Moore is writing in is meant to replicate the way her characters think, so the narrative interrupts itself, its attention wanders. There's nothing necessarily wrong with doing this. I imagine it's useful for developing a character's voice. But I read on with a mounting dread that, rather than showing anything meaningful, Moore was just writing what she saw. Which is what I would call whimsy.

Then Colleen, so the backcover dutifully informs me, is a hard-edged female Holden Caulfield. Good Lord, whoever wrote the backcover was really writing the book's death warrant. You've just told me to compare your book to Catcher in the Rye and, guess what, the comparison is not flattering. I salute the ambition and in principle there's nothing wrong with having a female Holden Caulfield. But you've set yourself up for an ugly fall. To survive it, all the book needs would be good writing. But then if you had good writing you'd have, you know, an actual character all of your own.

So Colleen goes to pour sugar into the engines of bulldozers, vaguely because of the environment but mainly because she's rebellious. This is a cause of concern for her mother, who worries whilst pottering about in the kitchen. Her aunt isn't that fussed because she's trying to make a film before she dies. She has a bad heart. Sadly, I was entirely indifferent to the fate of this film and indeed the fate of Aunt Madeleine. We gather this film is meant to a good 'un because Madeleine wants it to be better than Bergman. It is a neat concept to describe a film that you're never going to see but it left me cold. It's a device that's been done better elsewhere. To make an unfair comparison, I was thinking of the book of poems that Orhan Pamuk can't find in Snow. He's been told what some of the poems were about but we never get to read the poems themselves. Here I felt no sense of loss at not getting to see this film.

Maybe it's me. But I think the weaknesses of Moore's writing are to blame. She spends too much time telling me what her characters are feeling with these woolly phrases. If she had indulged in something as old-fashioned as a plot then I might have been able to see what was at stake for her characters and maybe given a damn. But she just lays it out. For instance, she could have set up the fact that Frank really wanted his hotdog stand but was \$300 short. Created something known as dramatic tension. But instead we get: 'Frank felt, that if he went home without the hotdog stand it would break his will'. Which is all well and good but, if you bluntly tell me like that, I'm not going to feel a thing.

There's no rule that says Lisa Moore has to do anything she doesn't want to do. The beauty of a novel is that you can go anywhere, you can do anything. You can jump into people's thoughts or jump around in time, as Moore does. But the danger is that without structure the work sprawls. If anything can happen, then it's hard to be surprised or care when something does. The weak passages erode your confidence that the writer knows what she's doing with this. It's an effective technique, for example, when Moore drops you into a burning building and you have to rewind to find out how you ended up there. But, when the sentences fall into themselves and the narrative slips inexplicably from third-person to first-person, the reader can't get a handle on what, if anything, is going on. The style here fragments and undermines the work.

Which is a shame because, taking a step back, there's some good stuff in *Alligator*. The idea is that these characters are absorbed in themselves and despite knocking against one another, any emotional contact between them is only fleeting. Moore does surprise you. For example, you've been set up to expect Frank and Colleen to get together. He picks her up after a wet T-shirt shirt competition (yes, exactly what a female Holden Caulfield would do). They have sex, make eye contact but rather than anything emotional happening she steals his money and makes off to where the alligators roam.

So there you have it. The acts done on random impulse lose their impact because there is no plot to contain them, no real plot to be offset or surprised. Stuff happens and yes, I concede that stuff does just happen in real life. But I would like a novelist to try to hack some meaning out of that stuff. To do what Moore is trying to do you've got to be good. And whilst Moore isn't bad, she's not good enough.

# The Housekeeper

Melanie Wallace

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Sarah Boyes  
posted 25 April 2007

'As Margaret had once said to her, the amazing thing about human beings is that whenever they become conscious they're oh so liable to create their own existence. Although most humans resist that consciousness.' (p242)

Most, but not all: The Housekeeper tells the story of waif-like 17-year-old Jamie. Abandoned by her father and orphaned by the death of her mother she runs away into the desolate hinterland of America to become part of a loosely-knit crazed cohort of characters, each secreted away to battle off any awareness of their bleak existence. Jamie's first action in this bubble-like environment is an essentially moral one: she unties a mad mute boy from a tree he's been lashed to for days. What follows is her coming to terms with the inevitable consequences of this decision, and her attempt to 'create her own existence'.

The book's title refers to Jamie's job working for outcast artiste and mother figure Margaret. Margaret is the mouthpiece for the theory underlying the book: a hard-nosed humanism that endorses human beings' need for, and dependence on, each other, that has a thorough-going commitment to the idea that what makes us human is that we make moral (and therefore conscious) decisions and commitments, that we are all and ultimately free. Margaret takes Jamie into her home, teaches her and tells her she could one day be a great equestrian, symbolically a word that Jamie doesn't understand, and more symbolically still the first word spoken between Jamie and lover-to-be, Galen.

Margaret's explicitness can work well to tease out what the other characters are only intuitively aware of, it draws out the implications of what's tacitly going on. She uses a rich and nuanced language that contrasts sharply with the monosyllabic utterances of Galen (a lonesome trapper) and Harlan (an unhinged and embittered poacher) and the self-contained silence of Jamie. As the only person who travels beyond the countryside that frames the tale, she provides a necessary link for the reader to its closed, inward-looking world. But sometimes her theorising is too academic and ham-fisted, "the truth about America is that individualism is barely tolerated..one for all and all for one, but every man for himself" (p159).

Wallace's free-flowing prose works much better when it intimates, very much like the writing of Annie Proulx. And like Proulx, Wallace seems to relish the brutality of nature and peoples' easy violence with one another. Beatings, searing open flesh with sizzling bacon fat, yanking semi-sensate babies around in the snow and then kicking them to death are nonchalantly humdrum events. A description of a deer slashing a man from jowl to belly beautifully counterpoints his intention of shooting it between the eyeballs; rape is to be expected and a fat sow squashes a small child. The narrative voice effortlessly twists and turns about, constantly pulsing forward as if pain is dull and obvious, it points to a broader understanding of a wholeness of things.

And just as the narration blurs over the division between life and death, so the distinction between inner and outer worlds gets rehearsed. It's crass to say the barren landscape is simply representative of the characters' mental lives, but the pathetic fallacy is a dominant and well-executed device. Jamie's fever breaks with the spring, for instance, the snow-thaw parallels her opening up emotionally to Galen. Whilst this isn't as bad as the embarrassing Narnia (snow = depression = impossibility of good Christian values), and is so eloquent it cheapens criticism, it nevertheless creates a stifling tightness of plot.

The characters are more a living part of the landscape, both aware of and part of its changes. Galen knows the terrain intimately to the point of navigating in the dark, the scarred poacher convinced God is punishing his serial womanising tirelessly records 'meteorological minutiae' in a diary but omits his own emotions. The relationship between each person and the landscape is both intimate and complex. The way a tree stands or a crest breaks, the lie of land or depth of snow is both an imposition on and

an amplification of the characters, it quite literally prevents them from ever doing anything different whilst providing a familiarity and comfort they crave, even if it is, like them, vicious and unforgiving.

Another dichotomy Wallace cuts across is that between animal and human being. People are described with animal terms in a way that works, the boy with no name is 'feral', mute, and doesn't measure distance or understand the passing of time. A girl returns 'like a dog' to where she is fed and beaten, and obediently performs demeaning sexual tricks for her masters. These are characters without character; they have no morality, no will, no responsibility. How soon you realise their inability to speak and absence of name signifies lack of participation impacts heavily on how effectively they work. They are minimal people who haven't graduated to being human in Margaret's 'full' sense. The world they live in isn't immoral, it's amoral, which is all the more terrifying. How do you understand and judge their actions? – should you even judge them? The absence of a narrative position is disconcerting, and the characters' unflinching acceptance of each other makes them strangely convincing. People respond to each other more as animals than as people and are moved by something less intellectual than an ethic, "when Bobby heard about that he bludgeoned her father almost to death, not only in full view of his hapless daughter but as Harlan lay her belly down over a table and made her mewl" (p107).

And what pulls these violent scattered events and people together is symbolised by the merry-go-round standing dormant near Galen's cabin, which is the dominant symbol of the book. It represents a dynamism all the characters try to avoid but are inexorably drawn to. When the nameless boy gutturally realises he is about to die his last act is to open his arms wide and spin at the sky. And Harlan, the most destructive character of the book, shoots at the merry-go-round and all it represents in blind rage. Margaret has already told Jamie she must be an equestrian.

But, just as the boy spins on a single spot, the merry-go-round remains in a fixed location. It is this straight-jacket sense of immobility, of ultimately never going anywhere but raging nonetheless that provides both the bleakness and fullness of the story. But again, this works better when it isn't hammered home as it is in the final pages. For instance, Galen remembers his former cellmate saying, "we just keep going in circles that just get tighter and tighter. Our lives senselessly repeating themselves within themselves over and over" (p222). Likewise, the sense of necessity that gives events force and coherence treads a fine line between being endearing and being utterly icky when described outright. As Jamie first kisses Galen she thinks, "I will let this much happen, because it should happen, was bound to happen, must happen now before it is too late for it to happen at all" (p223).

And like in every novel by Hardy, life's little ironies play a major role, but thankfully coincidences are resolutely ironic rather than annoyingly post-ironic. The ending is wild and predictable (hinging on the zigzag path of a frightened deer), but by then we need what happens to happen. I like this narrative completeness and daring to turn full circle. As in *Ethan Frome* by Edith Wharton, the end situation is like the raw beginning. The younger generation ends up in the same position as the one before, and the characters in much the same place as where they began, but with a hard-won and weighty consciousness of their position. The question the book prompts is, was it worth it? – and the answer, yes. But there is another question: will we ever stop writing about it, will we ever escape (do we want to)? – the plot structure of *The Housekeeper* strongly parallels that of previous books, *Ethan Frome* and *Jude the Obscure* to name but two. How does Wallace measure up?

The point that life can turn in circles doesn't mean less the more it's made, and this sort of story doesn't diminish in the telling but often grows in momentum. *The Housekeeper* nevertheless leaves me unsatisfied. It seems wrongly anti-progressive: Jamie does become 'fully conscious' and morally autonomous, but doesn't manage ultimately to 'escape' her situation. That she ends bereft, but at least knowing she's bereft, doesn't quite cut it. Despite its final bleak humour, the book lacks a certain innovation: I feel like I've heard it all before and this isn't enough. There's nothing wrong, then, with giving away the ending, "Jamie sat near the reservoir's edge, with the dog beside her, where she railed and wept, keened and grieved, and did so inconsolably. In the manner of her grandmother, to whom she bore a great resemblance".

The rhythm gives me goosepimples, but I for one would rather have left Jamie sobbing and leaden than have been forced to consider, again, the ironic repetitiveness of existence. That way, the book

would have been a devastating love story and not so overtly a formal exercise in plot structure. That way, I would have felt able to sob inconsolably too, rather than being shocked into an unwanted and abstracted appreciation of the repeating nature of things.

# What Was Lost

Catherine O'Flynn

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Beth James

posted 16 May 2007

What Was Lost is clearly a first novel. It is a bit shaky in parts and the various narrative strands do not always fit together as neatly as they could. Once you add in some memorable characters, a bit of deus ex machina and an almost too neat ending, what you're left with is a nearly satisfying piece of fiction.

The book unfolds in alternating sections set in 1984 and 2004. The 1984 sections feature Kate Meaney, a self-styled girl detective. In the best tradition of children's literature (eg. The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe; Harry Potter; Nancy Drew), Kate is a semi-orphan whose minimally supervised life gives her plenty of scope to be a detective. But make no mistake: this is not children's literature. Kate's essential naïveté is conveyed by the narrative directly, which is written from her point of view. However, the reader sees things that Kate cannot. Striking the balance between a faux innocence and the 'truth' sensed by the reader is a delicate business and one which shows O'Flynn's writing ability to its greatest effect.

O'Flynn presents us with a mystery, but the cause of the disappearance of ten-year-old Kate is ultimately less important than how the event affects the other people in the novel. Unusually for a book that can be considered as part of the crime genre, What Was Lost features characters who are far more important, and indeed interesting, than the plot around them. If the reader wants to know what happens next, it's because knowing takes you deeper into the world of the characters, not because you're carried there by any conventional use of suspense.

In the 2004 sections we meet a cast of characters united by their connection to the shopping mall Kate had under surveillance twenty years earlier. The main characters in these sections work in the mall in various capacities. And generally unrelated to the main plot and these main characters, are passages told from the perspectives of various shoppers and others hanging about in the mall for legal, as well as illegal, purposes. These passages are some of the weaker aspects of the novel. While O'Flynn clearly intends many of them to be humorous, they miss the mark as often as they hit it and are often merely extended clichés about modern consumerist life.

Judging from the author's biography on the fly cover, it is clear that O'Flynn shares at least some superficial characteristics with Lisa, an assistant manager in a Virgin Megastore by another name. How much of the story is autobiographical is unclear, but Lisa, stuck in a dead-end, socially negligible service sector job and equally dead-end relationship, constitutes one half of the book's moral centre.

The other half of that moral centre is security guard Kurt. While Lisa's function in the book's social message is to show the soul-destroying nature of service sector work, Kurt's family background provides us with a sugar-coated vision of 'how things used to be' for the working classes in the West Midlands. The degradation of work in and around a shopping mall is contrasted with the dignity of industrial labour. However, the contrast is presented in such a way that it tells us very little new about modern society.

In the end, the book succeeds where it concentrates on building characters and luring the reader into their world. The observation of the eccentricities of colleagues and the lengths to which people will go to justify their working lives are funny and poignant and above all realistic. The political anti-consumerist message however, adds little and could easily be given less prominence.

Andrew Wheelhouse  
posted 13 July 2007

'Ooohh' I thought when I first looked at the cover, imagining a subtle yet punchy writing style that would combine the trauma of the, as yet anonymous, dissident's personal life in some oppressive tin-pot dictatorship, with the broad drama of international espionage and realpolitik. I more or less imagined the author of the book to be Tom Clancey with ovaries.

But I was wrong and glad of it, because *The Dissident* is something much more interesting and complex than first glance would have you believe. The plot centres on a Chinese experimental artist who has purportedly won critical acclaim on the international art circuit for his work in the 'East Village' of Beijing in the aftermath of the events in Tiananmen Square. He is invited to take an honorary professorship for a year at a private girl's school in the moneyed snake-pit that is the habitat of the well to do in Los Angeles. Whilst there he is billeted with the Travers family, who outwardly seem to embody the elusive American Dream.

It soon becomes apparent that neither the artist, Yuan Zhao, nor the Travers, are what they seem to be. Instead of using the professorship as a springboard for carrying on with his own work, and getting it publicised as his hosts expect, Zhao instead prefers teaching the teenage girls at his host school. He also appears suspiciously modest for a great artist, insisting that he is only 'a brilliant copyist', and constantly deferring to his cousin, a fellow East Village artist. Meanwhile the home life of his hosts, the Travers, while seeming outwardly happy, actually turns out to be as fragile as a stricken U-Boat. It is as though the vastness of the Beverley Hills mansion they inhabit actually swallows each of the family members up, somehow accounting for the complete lack of meaningful communication between them.

What makes Freudenberger's almost-debut novel (she has previously had a selection of short stories published) impressive is her use of a complex narrative structure to encompass the perspectives of four different characters. Zhao's narrative jumps in the first person between his time in LA and his formative years as a student artist in the East Village. Cece Travers' narrative meanwhile, depicts her struggles to maintain her family's cohesion, in the face of her husband Gordon's aloof disposition, her daughter's imminent departure for college and her teenage son's slightly tiresome angst and depression.

The danger inherent in this format is that it is possible the author could end up sketching out the characters without endowing them with the depth they might have had, especially if the author had stuck to a single narrator and point of view. But this does not end up being a problem here. Well actually it sort of does...but it counts in the book's favour as it means Zhao's character and past can be revealed piece by piece. In a sense, Freudenberger has characterisation and exposition running side by side, rather than having them run in that order, which creates a genuine sense of surprise at the end of the novel, when we learn about the dissident's true nature at the same time his hosts do.

The obvious problem with this technique is pacing. With Zhao taking up a good half of the narration space, and his character being explored in tandem with lurches between the present and the past, the plot of *The Dissident* veritably trundles along, like a donkey ride on Blackpool Beach, as though the constant Californian sunshine has somehow bled through onto the pages of the book, slowing everything down. However, this is countered by the subplots featuring Gordon's younger siblings, Joan and Phil, as they unconsciously compete against one another in an attempt to find meaning and success in their lives. Phil is the feckless, wandering younger brother who shows up at the Travers' house having sold his screenplay, cheekily based on his affair with Cece, for a million dollars, and he comes bearing a pet 'bush baby' as a gift. Joan is a writer, serious

and embittered by Phil's unexpected success as 'someone who (only) dabbled in literature, the way he dabbled in theatre, in women, and in life in general'.

The [Observer](#) reviewer complained that Zhao's character had failed to shine through. I disagree. Although his character appears suspiciously wishy-washy and bland at the start, it serves to highlight the artist's discomfort at his own deception. It is also one of the interesting ideas of the novel that 'culture clash' can extend beyond traditional, superficial concerns; idiosyncrasies of language, customs etc, into more fundamental areas, such as identity. In the beginning of the novel it is a supreme irony that Cece Travers, in her eagerness to be understanding and welcoming to the artist, imprisons Zhao in the role of The Dissident by her own expectations. Expectations that are entirely incongruent with Zhao's view of himself.

What surprised me was the fact that, given the amount of time Freudenberger has obviously spent researching this period of upheaval in Chinese art, she doesn't harp on about the obvious questions. What is art? What's it like being oppressed? Instead, she quite cleverly uses the narrative of the dissident as a mirror through which to evaluate and analyse the contemporary weirdness of the American Dream. It is something she probably feels more qualified to write about than Tiananmen era China. This benefits the tone of the novel, as Freudenberger writes with a kind of relaxed intelligence and precision, without trying to make herself sound like Wittgenstein or David Starkey or something. It makes her writing unpretentious and gives the sense that she is comfortable handling the China-based parts of her novel as she will be relating them back to Zhao's present in LA.

Some who agrees with Muriel Grey's recent comments about unambitious women authors only writing about 'domestic stuff' will probably argue that this book is limited by the author's seemingly constrained imagination and will probably hold up [The Tenderness of Wolves](#) by Stef Penney as a work of true imaginative genius. To an extent this is true, but I feel that in looking at her own culture Freudenberger is raising an important point. Zhao theorises that in his own work copying requires both the skill of a copyist, and the collusion of those who accept the copy as real. In the same way Cece's accommodating acceptance of both the dissident's identity and the imperfections of her own family makes the point that as modern society places so much emphasis on the primacy of the individual, it can lead to our dissociation from one another in order to 'leave others be'. The example of the Travers shows this can lead to the collapse of group structures like the family unit.

# Careless

Deborah Robertson

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Kiranjeet Kaur Gill  
posted 13 July 2007

With the publication of the Orange Prize longlist, Muriel Gray criticised female authors for failing to write imaginatively enough and instead allowing themselves to be pigeonholed into focusing on 'small-scale domestic themes' – ordinary stories about ordinary people. And Deborah Robertson's first novel, *Careless* may well fall into the same trap that haunts many, or if Muriel Gray is right in what she says, most of her contemporaries.

Set in the author's native Australia, *Careless* follows three intersecting life stories, that of a young girl whose brother has been killed, a woman who has recently lost her husband, and a rather selfish artist who fails to find inspiration after the one controversial piece that threw him into the limelight.

Throughout the book, the author shows a fascination with the commemoration of death, from an exhibition in remembrance of a furniture designer to a memorial for lost children, and it is, in fact, a meeting about the design of this memorial that brings the characters together in the first place. Eight-year-old Pearl, wise beyond her years, supports her often feckless mother, Lily, as they try to return to 'normality' following the brutal killing of Riley, Pearl's younger brother, by a car driver who is himself a grief-stricken father. The young artist, Adam Logan, longs to be commissioned for the memorial, but his own selfish nature makes it difficult for him to come up with any design that will suitably encompass both other people's sadness and also their hope for the future. Adam works in the old workshop of yet another character who has loved and lost, Sonia, who finds her life empty after the death of her husband Pieter, the aforementioned furniture designer.

Predictably, Lily falls for Adam, but she finds herself used and then tossed to one side, as it seems, does every other young woman unfortunate enough to come into contact with the self-absorbed artist. Nina, a young journalist, 'cannot calculate in exactly how many ways she has been insulted' after she loses her virginity to him. But his disregard for anyone other than himself is most evident when he persuades Lily, still grieving, to give him the ashes of her young son for his own potential, and of course selfish, gain. From here, the characters in the story become inextricably linked as they unite to reclaim Pearl's brother's ashes, and we are shown compassion that Robertson seems to suggest can only come from having suffered hardships or losses. Adam, always the one with only his own interests at heart, is incapable of feeling anything for anyone.

Muriel Gray says that books by female authors are far too often about 'motherhood, boyfriend troubles and tiny family dramas'. So far, so *Careless*. However, Deborah Robertson's book is far removed from most of the trashy chick-lit cluttering up bookshelves today. Whilst these 'tiny family dramas' existing as three separate stories would most likely be exactly what Gray laments over in women's literature, what Robertson has done, via the memorial, is turned them into a neat storyline that impacts more than those directly involved with the main plots. In the epilogue, when plans for the memorial have been finalised, one character says that 'It looks like one of those memorials you can take your own grief to', and this is, I think, what Robertson wants the reader to remember. Whilst an individual death rarely affects more than a handful of people, the feeling of grief is universal. This is what links not only the characters in the story, but anybody who at some point in their life has experienced the same emptiness the characters feel after losing their loved ones.

One particular talent that Robertson seems to have is being able to portray feelings – I often found myself startled by how well she puts into words emotions that many of us will have felt, and the way in which the story slips between the past and the present shows just how raw and how real these emotions, and the characters' grief, still are. Robertson also achieves a great deal in terms of characterisation. She makes it impossible for the reader not to feel moved by Pearl, for example, who is written about in very simplistic, child-like terms, but whose thoughts and feelings are probably more complex than those of most people twice her age. And it's natural to feel it shouldn't be like this, that so much shouldn't happen to someone who is so young and innocent, that she should be such a sharp contrast to her childish mother, who Robertson suggests we shouldn't really blame, and even more of a contrast to the narcissistic Adam, who even the most cold-hearted of readers would take an instant disliking to.

The book has been criticised as being too heavy on dialogue and really leading nowhere, and there is perhaps an element of truth in both of these claims. There certainly is a lot of dialogue at times, and at the end it is hard to see what has changed since the initial events of the story. There is no doubt a purpose to this however. Firstly, the dialogue can really help the readers to understand and empathise with the characters better, from the simplicity and beauty in Sonia and her husband's short exchanges, to the tension and awkwardness often present in conversations between Pearl and her mother Lily. Secondly, in terms of where the story leads, the reader may well be left wondering whether there really has been any kind of redemption; this is, after all, what is being sought throughout the book. What Robertson seems to be pushing at is that sometimes there is no justification, no reason for what happens, or maybe this is just what we've come to expect with our postmodern and cynical view of the world.

Nevertheless, the most positive part of the story is found towards the end, with some of the characters beginning to accept and come to terms with their grief. But at the same time, Robertson reminds us, never forgetting what they have lost.

# The Tenderness of Wolves

Stef Penney

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Helen Birtwistle  
posted 20 April 2007

Stef Penney's debut novel was greeted with quiet but enthusiastic reviews from the literary press when it was released last September. When it was announced in February that she had scooped the Costa book of the year, a flurry of attention greeted the novel, not, as one would expect, because of its new found status as a literary tour de force, but because its author reportedly once suffered from agoraphobia. Following a plethora of in-depth interviews detailing which therapy the author favoured and the inevitable strain of air and train travel, another controversy arose. Penney had never visited the backdrop to her novel, the desolate interior of northern Canada. Does lack of direct experience, the reviewers seemed to argue, make for a less credible novel?

Penney's later inclusion on the Orange longlist also raised a few eyebrows from award purists and reportedly sponsors, bemused that the judging panel should overturn a tradition that different awards rarely, if ever, share the same titles. Considered in light of the chair of judges Muriel Gray's plea however; that female writers 'dream bigger dreams', 'take risks' and use their imagination, *The Tenderness of Wolves* stands tall as a work of considerable ambition. In defending their choices, this year's Orange prize judges answered their critics by energetically stating that their one and only criterion was excellence. But as Gray went on to criticise contemporary female fiction writers' tendency to focus on the domestic confines of everyday life, it is noteworthy that almost all writing on Penney's work seems to illustrate a concurrent trend amongst the literary editors of the mainstream press, who have salaciously leapt on any hint of 'real-life' detail that might proffer some insight in to the recesses of Penney's imagination.

Penney's novel is set in 1867, and opens in Caulfield, a small and recent settlement in the depths of northern Canada. Mrs Ross, the novel's main protagonist, has found the murdered body of a local tracker, the mysterious 'frenchie', Laurent Jammet. Having informed the local magistrate, a band of lieutenants from the Hudson Bay Company (the sole trading entity and authority of much of the region prior to 1860) are called upon to investigate, and arrive at the settlement to untangle what is the first murder ever to blight the community. As the company men visit and interview Caulfield's inhabitants, Mrs Ross becomes concerned that her young son, the aloof loner Francis, is nowhere to be found. A confidante of the murdered tracker, Francis becomes a sought after witness, and suspicions arise when he fails to return. Concerned that her son is implicated in the investigation, Mrs Ross embarks upon an arduous journey to find him, her companion an American Indian called Parker, who is also a murder suspect.

*The Tenderness of Wolves* is first then the story of a mother's quest to find her errant son and second, an unravelling of the mystery surrounding the murdered Jammet. But against the stark backdrop of the Canadian outback, plot and sub-plot forestall an epic adventure that sees Penney marry murder mystery with western, with studied, historical novel on the whole very successfully. Moving chapter by chapter, from first to third person narrative, the weight of the novel lies with the character of Mrs Ross, who, 'is not popular in the town, for she gives the impression of looking down her nose at people, although by all accounts...she has nothing to be conceited about'. Although it is in Mrs Ross that we find most in the way of emotional and moral development as, it is through the supporting characters, told in the third person, that Penney's research endeavours finds fruition.

Having reportedly spent over two years researching the social, political and cultural history of North America, Penney is adept at communicating historical and social interest via her secondary characters. She is clearly fascinated by the impact of European settlement on American Indians, and it is the learned maverick Sturrock, for example, who allows Penney to explore the possibility of finding a Native American written tradition, and satisfy what is clearly a fleeting interest in philology. Similarly, the intertwined nature of the murder plot enables the writer to scrutinise and lay bare the underbelly

of power within the Hudson Bay Company, guardians of order and stability in 19th century Canada and beyond.

While in many cases Penney's obvious fascination with her material bolsters the narrative, however, there are other occasions when fancy obstructs her story. When a trail leads a group of characters to a Norwegian religious settlement and focus shifts to a dissatisfied and yearning widower for example, we are left with little sense of the episode's purpose within the overall structure of the book. The under-developed relationships between the Ross family, and a revelation regarding Francis' relation to the murdered trailer Jammet is also a little cumbersome and clumsily done, heightening the sense that Penney has at times sacrificed the more complex emotional and social aspects of her novel to the conventions of the forms she is so eager to flit between. At times the shift from murder mystery to western action to unrealised love story can appear just too onerous and self-conscious a task.

But even whilst this hotch potch of trajectories can make for a jumbled tale, there is no doubt that in Mrs Ross, Penney has created a character of great subtlety and imagination, whose presence, whether relayed by herself or others, is enough to make the story a compelling and satisfying work. Penney weaves together a fractured and kaleidoscopic past that the reader is never quite able to piece together; we are given mnemonic flashes of significant past events that provide an unusual knowingness and insight in to the main character. Penney's flitting between past and present, like her use of first and third person also often adds significant depth to the book. Mrs Ross in particular is revealed layer by layer, as pieces of her personal history are divulged throughout the narrative. We see the young Mrs Ross lose her mother, who was committed to an asylum, and then make the journey with her husband across her home country Scotland and then to Canada, adopting a young child to ease the pain of an earlier infant death, and finally in the search for her missing son. As Mrs Ross journeys through forest, snow storms, across mountains and river, two of Penney's most notable accomplishments, the developing character of Mrs Ross and the conjuring of so unforgiving a landscape, meet, mirroring the other more and more. As she travels further and further in to the depths of northern Canada, alongside Parker, we the readers are given a palpable sense of Mrs Ross' swelling personal freedom, a freedom that had somehow been lost along the way.

It is also of course this achievement, the conjuring of so robust and developed a character that seems to have inspired the search for a real-life 'Mrs Ross' in the shape of Penney herself. Judging by the reviews offered by some journalists and critics, it is incomprehensible that an author create a strong character without it being a direct reflection of herself, and an illness or vulnerability through which to identify her. But to focus on either illness or novelist is to miss completely what makes Penney's book an able and deserving contender in both the Costa and Orange prizes. Whilst flawed, Penney's book is the ambitious and imaginative undertaking that Muriel Gray suggests is so important a task for female writers.

# Afterwards

Rachel Seiffert

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David Bowden  
posted 19 April 2007

God, isn't post traumatic stress disorder really screwed up? Isn't it funny how people in relationships never really tell each other the truth, even though it'd be easier all round? Aren't old people really, really wise? And isn't it weird how an oppressive military regime isn't just dehumanising to its subjects but, like, totally dehumanising to the oppressors as well?

It's easy to be glib (and Lord knows it's served my journalistic career well) but *Afterwards* is a fairly simple story, told in a fairly simple style. It covers the brief relationship between two thirtysomethings who meet down the pub: Alice, a physiotherapist mourning the loss of the grandmother who part-raised her, and Joseph, who's rebuilding his life after a traumatic period spent in the British Army in Northern Ireland. We learn much about Alice's life, her relationship with her teenage single mother and absent father, her worries about her widowed, emotionally stunted grandfather, David. Until late on we learn very little about Joseph despite his increasingly erratic behaviour, which finally tears them apart.

Haunting both lives is the spectre of deeds done in the course of war: Joseph in Ireland, David fighting insurgents in 1950s Kenya. Both incidents are relatively mundane as war goes (David dropped bombs which may have killed people, Joseph shot a terrorist who was about to shoot his friend) but given the morally-ambiguous nature of the conflicts they occurred in, both found it difficult to reconcile with their consciences. The parallels to the future for soldiers fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq are obvious though implicit, and Seiffert paints a rather bleak future for them. While David could rely on his marriage and sense of duty to help control his trauma, Joseph is only able to sustain a series of short-lived affairs, normally book-ended with a nervous breakdown and violent outbursts.

Given that Seiffert generally steers clear of the politics (treatment and support of veterans is simply dismissed as ineffective in Joseph's case, while she goes no further in denouncing the occupation of Northern Ireland than suggesting the soldiers were a rum lot), *Afterwards* is an observation of the simple tragedies that ruin lives. The problem is that the prose is so sparse and stilted, and the background of the characters so limited, that it is difficult to forge any emotional attachment to them. Of course, in a book about how poor communication can ruin relationships this is probably deliberate, but it is a dubious and ultimately unsuccessful tactic.

There's an interesting point made about the changing nature of warfare in modern times: it is the elderly David in a propeller plane who was able to potentially kill scores of faceless individuals, while Joseph was face-to-face with his non-uniformed enemy in a counter-insurgency war. Seiffert is also pleasantly understated in detailing Joseph's breakdowns, relying on suggestion rather than histrionics, and never lapses into cheap sentimentality. But the overall effect is a slight and unsatisfying read: much like watching *9 Songs* with the sound off and the sex scenes edited out. In *Afterwards* the hero is Alice, who is able to brush off the traumas of life and carry on, having learnt a little but nothing significant. Much the same could be said of the reader having finished the novel but, like in life, such an approach shouldn't win you many awards.

# Ten Days in the Hills

Jane Smiley

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David Bowden

posted 19 April 2007

There's a lot of sex in Jane Smiley's new novel. No, let's be precise – there are a lot of penises in it. One pops up acting all 'nonchalant' on the very first page, and over the next 448 pages various ones manage to pop up (or not) at inopportune moments. Hell, one even gets to act and dance in a film. In fact, if Charlize Theron or Hilary Swank were looking for another Oscar for playing an unusual figure with a varied emotional range, they could do worse than playing one of these little fellas.

This needs saying, because reviews have so far emphasised the amount of sex in the book, yet have deigned not to mention the disproportionate focus on the male member. Saying so is more than flippancy, for *Ten Days in the Hills* is an update of Boccaccio's very bawdy and sexually explicit *Decameron*, set in contemporary Hollywood – an industry where the appearance of even one limp todger qualifies a film for extreme art-house status, while a pair of exposed breasts make a blockbuster. The American film industry's schizophrenic attitude towards sex inspires one of the characters, Max (an Oscar-winning director on the slide), to make his next film a warts-and-all depiction of a middle-aged unmarried couple making love for two hours. His agent is horrified, telling him his idea has 'everything an American audience despise – fornication, old people, current events and conversation'. He avoids mentioning the unmentionables, but you get the drift.

The self-knowing joke is that the same charge could easily be levelled at the book. Although Hollywood loves to satirise itself, it is difficult to see how *Ten Days* could ever be filmed, even discounting the troublesome erections. One imagines this will not upset Smiley, as the *Decameron* has so far only been attempted on screen by Pasolini – and, well, suffice it to say a bit of fornication never bothered him. It doesn't bother Max's stepson either, who graciously lends his (dancing) organ to a student film that is trying to make a statement about the sexual politics of Hollywood cinema. Only it never becomes clear what that statement is.

In fact, the book is filled with people trying to make some statement or other, but never really saying anything. The action starts the morning after the 2003 Oscars, and four days after the invasion of Iraq, when ten characters hide themselves away, telling stories to each other to pass the time. Smiley's chief conceit is that while Boccaccio's characters were drawn together to escape the Black Death sweeping Europe, these pampered, spoilt Hollywood-types are only trying to hide from the blanket media coverage of the war, which makes all of them uncomfortable in ways they can't put their finger on. Max's liberal, Gore-supporting girlfriend Elena even worries that his continuing impotence is a result of anxiety or guilt over the war, while his daughter frets that her movie star mother is going off the rails.

The plot has all the elements of a fairly straightforward satire of LA vacuity and insularity: a kooky New Age guru, a bratty vegan daughter, a cranky ageing conservative, a shady Russian billionaire and a gossiping old woman. Of course invoking a masterpiece of Renaissance literature, rich in allusion and allegory, is a fairly heavy-handed step to take to tell us that Hollywood-types are shallow, self-absorbed and sex-obsessed. Yet it is here that *Ten Days* starts to come alive. Smiley treats all her characters with the appropriate amount of tenderness and compassion, having fun with their absurdities but never making it possible truly to dislike them. Even Paul, who suggests that the tension between a mother and daughter is the result of a feud going back to their previous incarnations centuries earlier, is allowed some of the most piercing insights into those around him.

The book has been criticised for its meandering structure: it is filled with pretentious philosophising, idle gossip about Hollywood's golden greats and current stars (such as in my opening paragraph), analysis of familiar movies such as *Sunset Boulevard* or *The Seventh Seal* and, of course, the sex scenes. Yet all of these things serve to mirror the hot, lazy atmosphere of the characters' lifestyle (making it an excellent holiday read), and the political ennui to which they are all subject. In any case

Smiley's prose is crisp and clear, vaguely reminiscent of the pared-down simplicity of Anne Tyler, making sure that the luxury on display never becomes suffocating. Some of the characters may be crashing bores, but that doesn't mean they're not interesting to read about.

What is more troubling about *Ten Days* is that one suspects Smiley's sympathy for her characters goes too far, so that she implicates herself in their self-obsession. The daughter of Zoe, the pampered movie star, wails to her that 'It always has to be about you, doesn't it?' But with her awkward insertion of anti-war polemic, the constant spectre of global warming in Bush's America, and the elevation of the suffering experienced by Delphine (the poor Jamaican mother of Zoe) to that of a humbling example to them all, Smiley achieves the feat of making these events all about you, the reader. It is also difficult to tell whether Elena's substitution of her antipathy towards the war (and her sense of powerlessness) with an increasing acceptance of her obsessive-compulsive personality traits is satirical or not, although she is guided to this conclusion by Paul.

Even so, these criticisms are only valid if one approaches the book primarily as a satire, which I don't believe it is. It is a well-crafted novel by an experienced and gifted author, constantly leading you down false paths and teasing you to make quick and misleading judgements. Classicists will have fun with the allegories (John Updike has suggested a Trojan war metaphor, while global warming stands in for the Inferno allusions in Boccaccio) and there is a plethora of beautiful phrasing, witty observation, compassion for the failings of mortal minds and unexpected film trivia to engage the mind even of a reader with only a passing interest in the lives of the beautiful people.

# Digging to America

Anne Tyler

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Timandra Harkness  
posted 19 April 2007

This is a novel about intercultural adoption and what it reveals about cultures and relationships. But to sum it up thus is to collapse the many dimensions and insights of the book into a glib sales pitch. Two families meet at the delivery of their new babies. Because these babies are Korean adoptees, the moment in Baltimore Airport is public and shared, and begins a bond between the Yazdans and the Donaldson-Dickinsons that is the core of the book.

Like most of Anne Tyler's books, this one is well-observed, the characters are inconsistent in the way that real people are, which makes them believable, and the details that tell the story are small, convincing ones. Food is a recurrent theme, not just the dishes that both families prepare for the annual 'Arrival Day' party, but even the words people use for simple dishes, and how they are pronounced: 'polo' or 'rice'? The word chosen, of course, reveals as much about the listener as the speaker.

The Yazdans are Iranian immigrants, though both Sami and Ziba were raised in America and Sami's mother Maryam has not been back to Iran for years. To Sami and Ziba's eyes, the Donaldsons are the all-American family which they aspire to be, and Maryam observes their subtle (and not-so-subtle) emulation of Brad and Bitsy with wry scepticism.

But with gentle humour, Tyler draws out the ironies and complexities of the characters' relationships with their own, as well as each others' cultures. Sami loves to deride Americans at Iranian gatherings, relying on their shared experience as immigrants. He makes jokes about Americans' willingness to sue each other, their unwillingness to discuss money, and the unwritten rules that underlie their supposed tolerance. But he does so in English as, born and raised in Baltimore, he always refused to speak Farsi.

The Donaldsons themselves, far from being boorish cultural imperialists, are most typically American in their desperation to apologise for cultural insensitivity. Their Korean daughter keeps the name Jin-Ho, while Sami and Ziba call their child Susan. Bitsy Donaldson goes to great efforts to prepare Iranian dishes, while Ziba turns to sushi for more sophisticated entertaining.

There's much more here than a comedy of manners. The outside world makes its bigger conflicts felt in small but immediate ways. After 11 September 2001, an Iranian cousin is held up by security on a journey from his home in Canada. Maryam knows that the Iran she remembers from her teenage years no longer exists.

And on more intimate levels, Tyler can use small details to big emotional effect, as the book deals with loss as well as the arrival of new children. 'Why, this is just unbearable,' thinks a character mourning a dead partner, 'I should have been allowed to practice on somebody less important first. I don't know how to do this.'

Perhaps that is what makes Tyler's characters so real. Though they often sense that something is expected of them, they seldom know what it is or how to deliver it. Bitsy tries to direct the important moments of her life, organising parties to mark the occasion, or to control in some way the emotional impact on her family and herself. Of course, she can't control things, and like everyone she has to cope with the terrible as well as the joyful sides of life.

At first, we too laugh at Bitsy and her desperation to make everything right. We empathise with Maryam, who resists joining in on Bitsy's terms, and refuses to play the exotic Persian. But like any reader, don't we also want a happy ending? When the characters rebel against our own hopes, it's hard to accept that real people sometimes don't want to fit into their allotted roles.

And, in the end, the book asks the question – who allots the roles we feel expected to play? How much can we blame culture, our own or other people's, for what we do or refuse to do? There's a revealing scene between Maryam and her Turkish friend Kari, discussing how to deflect unwanted male interest. 'I tell them my culture forbids it,' says Kari, relying on her suitors' ignorance of Turkish customs. She even jokes that Maryam could always take up wearing a veil.

At times, Tyler seems to slide towards Bitsy's weakness for setting up grand set-piece occasions, almost as if she has one eye on the film of the book. The epic structure, returning to the annual Arrival Day parties to mark the two families' progress, sometimes lacks drive when the characters' own reluctance to engage can make them less engaging to the reader. But these are minor complaints.

Digging to America does just what a novel should. It uses the writer's imagination to take us inside the lives of people unlike ourselves, and teaches us more about our own. It has the rare gift of letting us laugh at characters while feeling empathy for them, with sharp flashes of pain at unexpected moments. But don't expect any easy guide to multicultural life. This book, like life, has more questions than answers.

# Peripheral Vision

Patricia Ferguson

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John L Rosewarne

posted 29 May 2007

The eye is the mirror of the soul and, it is said, the only feature of the human frame which remains unchanged, regardless of age. As befits its title, *Peripheral Vision* tells us a good deal about eyes, particularly that they have components, can be taken apart and put back together. Patricia Ferguson provides a fascinating introduction to the mysteries of 'reconstructive orbital surgery' whilst exploring the trials of worrying mothers, confused lovers and eclipsed or absent fathers separated by the passage of fifty years.

Be prepared for an education in the cringe inducing arts of post-enucleation socket syndrome, conjunctival incisions and the revelation that if a kitten's eyelid is sewn shut the eye will go blind. Actually, all this is absorbing and compelling in its own right but how does it connect with Ferguson's assortment of emotionally Astigmatic characters and how are they linked to each other across time? That is the puzzle of this multi-stranded, resonant, well paced and thoroughly engaging tale. Ferguson questions how we see ourselves, how we see others and how we think others see us. This is a tale of love, loss and finding. There is first love, lost love, love conditional and love withheld. There is also blindness in the face of true love, with all of the participants linked more profoundly than they will ever know.

In 1953 a little boy has an accident. This is common enough as every parent knows, but this mishap leaves him blind in one eye and shapes the destinies of many lives, not least his own. Ahead lies a lifetime of disfigurement and pain made all the more difficult by the reaction of his mother, Ruby. George has spoiled himself as surely as if he has scratched a cherished table or spilt paint on a rug. This evident but unspoken blame aside, George's accident is her failure. She is that worst of things, a bad mother. Ruby is convinced that the neighbours are whispering, pointing fingers and condemning her: a perception reinforced by a series of chillingly literal poison pen letters. After a lifelong struggle for inconspicuous respectability, ashamed and guilt-ridden she embarks on a path of obsessive perfectionism with debilitating and near fatal consequences.

Nurse Iris De Silva is an expert at deflecting the painful and unpleasant. She has had to be. As nurses do, she tries to make things 'better'. She alone provides help and real comfort for the injured, frightened George. Through the stories she tells, Iris really does seem to be able to make those around her and, in the process make herself, feel 'better'. For medical student Rob Wilding, Iris is his first love. Falling foul of his mother and Rob's lack of common sense, she is destined to be his great lost love. Iris will leave a void in the lives of both George and Rob; a void which each in his way will spend a lifetime attempting to fill.

Status conscious and formidable, May Wilding wants the best for her son. For this would-be member of the County Set, 'best' means what is seemly. Determined to be more than the wife of an unassuming Scottish doctor, she has the airs and graces of a grand lady and enforces rigid propriety with a steely hand, despite Dr Wilding's minor periodic attempts at boyish rebellion. She regards Iris with horror: this girl who has been to holiday camps and who must have terrifyingly plebian relatives is simply not good enough.

Meadows the parlour maid is devoted to Mrs Wilding. Whether or not it is actual affection that she feels is doubtful because such feelings are alien to her experience. But that she is bound to her mistress is all too apparent. What is also clear is that she is a powerful force in the sinister co-dependent dance with the lady of the house. She is indispensable. She is the acme of parlour maids who knows 'how correctly to address the widow of a baronet in person and in writing'. She also knows how much the grand Mrs Wilding did not know. The result of this strange, abusive relationship will be an implicit pact which proves to be Iris' undoing.

In 1995 Sylvia Henshaw is an habitual success. Despite the tendency of some to treat her as a sweet little thing, she is an admired ophthalmic surgeon of great skill: highly competent and professional, adept at dealing with her patients and wise to the world, but pregnancy comes as a shock. Labour and birth can be and are difficult and this is happening to her, not a patient from whom she can maintain a studied if caring distance. Rationally she should know that these things happen. However, attuned to success and, armoured against a world that comes too close, she is confronted by something difficult and alarmingly real. She cannot love her child as she feels she should.

Rosemary Henshaw lost her husband long ago. She brought up Sylvia alone and made a success of her business through her own efforts. She runs kennels; she talks to the dogs, often in preference to people. That this is so is, at times, a worry to her. However, this thoughtful woman has learned not to think too much. She prefers to 'cure introspection with a nice fat tree trunk and a chain saw'. Perfectly at home ripping up concrete paths with sledgehammers or tangling with cement mixers, she is a figure of naturalness and unstudied ordinariness. Like Mrs Wilding she wants the best for her child. Full grown though she may be, Sylvia's tendency to pursue unfeasibly older father substitutes is vexing. She still hopes that her daughter will find someone who will draw her out of her protective shell, won't waste her time and who will make her happy. Once there was a nice young boy of whom she had hopes but just as in the play, 'what a mess Romeo made of things'.

Fifteen years ago Will was a success. As TV cult hero Toby French he did battle week after week with the likes of Zentor the space amoeboid and was the focus of innumerable teenage crushes. Now this one-time hero of imaginary other worlds is something of a has been; a Mister Bingley standing awkwardly on the sidelines of life. In the real world of here and now he has returned to bungalow suburbia to care for his dying mother. He is self-consciously, almost guiltily dutiful. He is 'doing the right thing'. Everybody tells him so, as 'if he was doing the right thing not only for this mother and himself but for everyone else'. His mother, gently slipping out of life, has almost stopped worrying about him, feeling the delighted love of parents for their grown children. He, on the other hand, career apparently failing and increasingly alone in the world, contends with the fear that there 'will be no greater aloneness I will feel than when my mother's rapt attention is entirely withdrawn'.

In Patricia Ferguson's own words, *Peripheral Vision* is a treasure trail littered with clues, some more apparent than others. Ferguson suggests that the greatest clues of all lie with Iris. Iris lies and does so repeatedly. As children play 'let's pretend' so Iris embroiders her life with harmless happy memories. Her motives are simple. 'She liked things to be nicer than they were'. It is the shared desire in some way shape or form of every character in the book. Returning to the imagery of the eye; in 1983 Rob gives a lecture. 'I think it's clear what artificial eyes are for. They're not for the wearer; they're for the rest of us. They make us feel better and that makes the poor sods who have to wear them feel better'.

Ferguson has skillfully inter-twined the strands of the tale, setting scenes, planting clues and ideas in a rapid switch back to and fro across time and between stories. These are interspersed with longer, more languid passages of almost lyrical warmth such as Iris' rediscovery of the sand dog, Will recalling the teenaged Sylvia or the ageing Rob hang-gliding and his night time evocation of the long lost Iris.

The cast of characters is drawn with skillful clarity, affection and genuine empathy for both male and female, something which eludes many writers. Ferguson succeeds in being simultaneously witty, genuinely funny, profoundly sad and thoroughly perplexing. Her book has many of the merits of a well constructed whodunit and draws the reader into the excitement of unraveling a mystery. It is important to say that the subject matter is all too believable and will strike many chords with her audience. There will be few readers who cannot relate to at least some of these timeless hopes, fears, joys and tragedies. Ferguson brings her remarkable insight to the difficult business of living and loving. It is then reassuring that, ultimately this is a hopeful piece which ends with a nice twist and far more sweetness than bitterness - perhaps there is hope for us all? Truly a treasure trail indeed.

# Over

Margaret Forster

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Dean Nicholas

posted 24 September 2007

Girl drowns. Family mourns. And mourns. And mourns. The end. That's how a more time- and column inch-pressed reviewer might summarise Margaret Forster's Orange Prize-nominated *Over*. Still, that's hardly the kind of purple prose that will find its way onto the paperback reprint, is it?

Set three years after a boating accident in which 18-year old Miranda died, the novel sets out to examine in forensic detail what happens to a middle-class family when tragedy struck. Like Ian McEwan's *The Child In Time*, Forster's novel is all about the aftermath: how the family unit spins out of control amidst the chilling of previous emotional bonds and the quickening resentment at the way others respond.

The early chapters, by far the most interesting, depict how the family has splintered as a result of the accident. Miranda's mother Louise, the novel's narrator and only clearly defined character, has sold the family home and moved into a spartan flat; her estranged husband Don, meanwhile, remains convinced that the death was no random accident, and has dedicated his life to his daughter's memory, spending his waking hours hunting for a culprit in the form of a technical flaw in the boat's design. Molly, Miranda's twin sister, has fled abroad to do charity work.

The early chapters are strung along at a leisurely pace, as the narration flits between Louise's work as a schoolteacher, the routines of her prescribed life, and her recollections of the pivotal event itself. Forster slowly works around to having Louise reveal the specific details of her daughter's accident, drawing out the tension through specious, measured references to Don's 'investigations', and delaying her protagonist's ability actually to lay down the precise words that describe her daughter's fate. These early stages unfold as elliptical, diary-like entries, thought bubbles that slide out of Louise's pen: her calm mundanity and matter-of-fact description of her quotidian days is neatly jolted into relief by the unbearable memories that leap from nowhere.

As the novel progresses, though, Forster gently and gradually undercuts her character's plausibility. Louise's analysis of her family's differing reactions is uncompromising, and her moral superiority shines through in comparison: she resents her estranged husband for his refusal to accept that what happened was an accident, while she appreciates what she interprets as the maturity of her son and his ability to move on. Her thoughts towards the surviving twin, Molly, are less explicit: there is a mixture of pride, and hurt, at her African charity work. It is Molly's return that spins the quixotic, solipsistic Louise into a re-examination of just how her own reaction is, in its own way, as damaging and self-deluding as her husband's.

Unfortunately, Forster is unable to sustain interest in this nuclear family fallout through the whole novel. With regards to the plot, she plays her cards early, and once the details of Miranda's death are revealed, the momentum evaporates. Forster's writing throughout is clean and crisp, resisting melodramatic perorations, but the lack of narrative strand does lead to dry, often lifeless text. The second half of the novel is hooked around Louise's gradual realisation that – despite her loathing of her husband, for his extroverted and extravagant search for the 'truth' – her introversion, her stripping bare of the life she had before, is equally as damaging to what remains of the family unit. This occurs over such a span of pages, with such slight increments, that it's difficult to care one way or another what happens to the characters. Meanwhile, the word count is clocked up with episodes in which Louise visits her friends, barely-delineated ciphers who Forster uses prosaically (the tough sporty type who never married; the wife never able to have children).

The bare bones writing in these moments is at times indigestible, although the occasional phrase – watching the TV coverage of Dunblane and the mothers, ‘fear tightening their faces’, for example - suggests Forster’s restrained aesthetic is a conscious choice.

The novel also tends, for a sense of drama, to rely too heavily on spurious coincidences and chance encounters. Returning from holiday, Louise sits next to a newly-wed young couple, the wife the namesake of her lost daughter; Miranda’s name, and her aquatic demise, hint at a deeper resonance with Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, which is never really explained. Moments like these come across as spurious and lacking in the stark verisimilitude that the author strives for in the rest of the novel.

Ultimately, Forster’s biggest problem is a failure of imagination. Not enough work has been done by the author in creating a plausible situation or sympathetic characters that can affect the reader; and when the plot is this slight, the lack of an interesting protagonist is dramatic. Perhaps it suffers due to contemporaneous events in the real world; when the news is dominated by a story as gripping as the Madeleine McCann disappearance, a not-dissimilar work of fiction is bound to come off second-best.

**Culture Wars** is the reviews website of the [Institute of Ideas](#) (IoI) in London. In keeping with the IoI's aim of shaping the future through debate, we review books, films, theatre, art and talk events, with a view to understanding how political and other ideas filter through the culture, and how the arts in turn influence politics and culture more generally. We also publish essays, interviews and other articles on the arts, culture and society.

'Culture' is often presented as a vast accumulation of commodities to be browsed and consumed by passive audiences. In this view, the role of the critic is banal. Critics trawl through the marketplace and advise us, as the annoying phrase has it, 'what's hot and what's not'. **Culture Wars** is different. We want to engage with cultural life, to discuss it, and argue over it. And we want to encourage others to join in.

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We believe that cultural output tells us a great deal about the society we live in. As well as assessing books, plays, films and so on for themselves, we are keen to draw out the way they express contemporary ideas. Ideas like multiculturalism, environmentalism, evolutionary psychology, and social exclusion, to name just a few, appear in the most unlikely places. By engaging with contemporary culture we can come to a better understanding of society more generally.

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