Who Invented This Rule Anyway?

Anna Goldsworthy

Catherine Padmore
SIBYL'S CAVE
Allen & Unwin, $21.95pb, 304pp, 1 86508 952 4

Charlotte Wood
THE SUBMERGED CATHEDRAL
Vintage, $22.95pb, 302pp, 1 74051 264 2

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I was privy to a breakfast conversation with one of our venerable literary critics, in which he lamented the proliferation of novels in Australia by young women. Of particular concern, he announced, was the tendency of said young women to construct 'itsy-bitsy sentences from itsy-bitsy words'. And he smiled around the table warmly, secure in venerable male polysyllabic verbosity. As a young woman myself of vague literary urges, I felt thoroughly rebuffed. The only words I could think to form were both too itsy-bitsy and obscene to constitute effective rebuttal, and they remained unsaid

The above quotation speaks to a number of things, and scarcely needs to be addressed, but is of passing anthropological interest. Young woman and venerable elder alike, the human being is a pattern-seeking creature, and, upon receiving two books by two young women novelists, my inclination was to do just this. *Sibyl's Cave* is Catherine Padmore's first novel, and was shortlisted for *The Australian*/Vogel Award (2001); Charlotte Wood's *The Submerged Cathedral* follows her acclaimed *Pieces of a Girl* (2000).

I generated a cursory list of similarities between the two works, which I may expand upon in a forthcoming paper: 'Itsy-bitsy Words/Sentences: Towards a Paradigm of the Young Woman Novelist.' Contrary to expectation, however, both books were composed of sentences of varying length. More interestingly, both novels featured resourceful, solitary women, and tracked their lives over a number of decades, in country Australia and around Europe. Both novels also contained scenes of morphine addiction, familial swimming lessons and women enjoying baths. These findings will be subjected to further analysis. However — as such a list must end — such similarities only highlighted the books' essential differences.

Sibyl's Cave is the story of a woman's life, imagined in detail, but its concern is not poetry or beautiful sentences. In *The Submerged Cathedral*, Wood aims higher, and often reaches it. She tells a story, too: an archetypal narrative, of love lost and regained. But she also enjoys getting there. *The Submerged Cathedral* begins with Martin holding a fish, and Jocelyn, appropriately, submerged. Already Jocelyn's perspective tends towards the botanical:

> This afternoon her half-closed eye has spiked the bathroom light globe into a yellow grevilleal star, and she is all watery conductor of the senses. So when the flyscreen judders and his knuckles strike the frosted glass, the sound of it moves through the fibres of glass and wood and plaster and iron bath claw and water, and it enters her body like a note struck on a bell.

It is sensuous prose, felt so intensely that it seems almost slow-motion:

> He holds out to her the newspaper and this shining platinum flower from the sea. And all he knows is *please take this fish from my hands.* His heart in spasm: please keep standing there, hand on doorframe and dripping hair and green dress casting its light on your skin, please open out your hands for this simple offered thing.

The novel takes one of its epigraphs from Helen Garner, and at first Wood's writing reminded me of Garner's, with its rapidly changing viewpoints, and appreciation of the ordinary — a bath, a fish. But *The Submerged Cathedral* is far-removed from Garner's exuberant, character-driven, urban narratives. It is a quiet book, and sparsely populated. Although she writes a love story, Wood seems more interested in elements — earth, water — than in characters, and this lends the book its strangeness, its silences.

The story begins idyllically. Jocelyn accepts the fish from Martin, and they begin a peaceful existence in Pittwater. Their Eden is disrupted by the arrival of Jocelyn's sister Ellen, from London, and her daughter Cassandra. The psycho-pathology of the sibling relationship is perhaps overplayed, but Ellen serves her destructive purpose, and a death scatters the main characters across the globe.

The second half of the book charts the parallel lives of Martin and Jocelyn, as they seek absolution and forgetfulness. Martin enters a Benedictine monastery; Jocelyn marries in Europe, before returning to Australia to establish a garden. These developments serve as interference patterns, and do indeed present sizeable obstacles to the path of true love. They also present sizeable obstacles to a compelling narrative — neither a Benedictine monastery nor solitary garden construction contains much potential for dialogue — but Wood does not shy away from her subjects. She celebrates the industry and stoicism of the

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monks, and charts their ambivalences and currents of desire. When Martin and his friend Anthony emerge from the monastery, it is a moving, surreal experience: 'At first they were foreigners, counting out the coins, feeling a mixture of stupidity and excess at this new weight in their hands.' Anthony is a marginal character who is treated with special tenderness, and his death scene is one of the most affecting in the book.

Jocelyn's attempt to reclaim a 'private Eden' is shot through with stark, lyrical descriptions of the Australian outback, and interspersed with snaps of her life in Europe. Occasionally, this section of the book feels like down-time, and I became increasingly nervous as the remaining pages of the book dwindled. Would there be time for a reconciliation? But, finally, these long tracts of solitude only highlight the cinematic experience of the book's ending: I felt the hairs stand up on the back of my neck. Physiologically, the novel works.

I began *Sibyl's Cave* expecting its sentences to thrum, too, or at least try to. But Padmore has a more pragmatic approach to sentences: they are there to convey story, and convey story they do. The novel begins with an introduction to our protagonist, Billie (formally Cibelle/Sybille/Queenie), and to a recurring leitmotif: her lock of red hair. In true Creative Writing fashion, we are not introduced to this lock of red hair outright; instead, Billie 'leans forward until her reflection wobbles in the river, framed by chunky grey locks escaped from her bun and with a streak of orange at her temple'. Must everything be shown and not told? Who invented this rule anyway? Here it reads as a contrivance within a contrivance. Billie's lock of red hair never quite works for me, although it is a useful device, identifying her with her illegitimate father, and providing continuity as she moves between countries and changes names. It also connects her to her objects of desire: her red-haired female relations. Indeed, *Sibyl's Cave* operates partly as erotic paean to the natural redhead.

The book's main strategy is the slow-tease: the gradual divulgence of secrets from Billie's past. Its first retrospective section describes Billie's childhood in Italy. Although this is imagined in great detail, it has an ersatz quality, as if Italian dialogue has been dubbed over with a clumsy English: '"I married you, even though I knew it wasn't mine. One day I thought you'd forget, I thought you'd come to look at me the way you looked at him." … "How could I forget, with that red curl reminding me of him every day?"'

Sibyl's Cave becomes more compelling when Billie/Queenie arrives in war-torn London. She promptly dispatches her virginity for money, a transaction that leaves her feeling empowered, and sets up a thriving home industry as a prostitute. I liked the way Padmore kept surprising me, introducing new deviancies in the same matter-of-fact manner: morphine addiction, incestuous longings. Sometimes it was a struggle to connect young Queenie to present-day Billie, save for that lock of red hair and a mild Sapphic disposition, but perhaps this is the book's point: the number of lives that can be contained within one.

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