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This is the author's radio script of this article.

***Bluegrass Symphony* by Lisa L. Hannett (Ticonderoga Publications, 2011)**

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded 3 November 2011

Nothing odd will do long, Samuel Johnson pronounced, loftily dismissing *Tristram Shandy*, in 1776. He was wrong. Lisa L. Hannett's first story collection, *Bluegrass Symphony*, is very odd indeed, but I fancy it might be another instance which demonstrates the fallibility of the great Doctor's pronouncement.

Let me hasten to add that I am not a connoisseur of the fantasy/horror genre, which is I believe where these stories would need to be put if it were necessary to find them a pigeonhole. So it's possible they are derivative and unoriginal. Somehow I doubt it. The evidence of a lively, quirky mind with a supple command of language and an extraordinary imagination is there on every page.

The stories inhabit a parallel universe which usually bears some resemblance to the southern states of the USA. The fantasy element in each story is always crucial to its design, but fits in with a more recognisable reality, so that each story makes a powerful statement. You could say that some of the stories are didactic, I suppose. The last story, 'Forever, Miss Tapekwa County', for instance, is a devastating critique of beauty pageants and the obsession with beauty at any cost. But it's so engagingly told, with such a subtle building of narrative tension, that the breathtaking conclusion offers considerable aesthetic gratification to sweeten the didactic purpose.

Self-sacrifice is a frequent theme. In 'Down the Hollow' there is a new and bizarre take on the virgin sacrifice, instigated by one of the sinister 'Reverends' who figure in several stories. Slightly less harrowing is 'Commonplace Sacrifices', narrated by a strange little creature who in his (or perhaps her) devotion cheerfully dismembers himself – a finger here, an ear there – to provide practical support for a wife who is suffering the loss of her husband's love. You'll have to read the story to understand how this works, but it is a good example of how the stories are grounded in deeply perceptive emotional intelligence. The fantastic elements are not gimmicks: they serve the emotional logic of the stories, in every case.

Add to this a turn of phrase which can cause chuckles of delight: 'the yellow upholstery decades beyond cheery' in a cheap motel room, for example, or the precise placement of a word to change the dynamic of a statement:

Goldfish whirlpooled in her stomach whenever she thought about being crowned Miss Tapekwa County. ... Goldfish churned when she thought of how pretty she'd be then.
Officially.

'Officially' is devastating: that one word indicating all the pathos of the girl's desperate need to be perfect according to an external standard, to be validated by judges who care nothing about who

she is, only how she appears. The force of the word is redoubled when we realise what she sacrifices to attain this perfection. Short as some of them are, every one of these twelve stories has the capacity to move, and haunt, because each one is a self-contained world with its own weird logic but with characters whose humanity we share, even though they might possess strange superpowers or bizarre afflictions.

In an Afterword, Hannett gives a short but fascinating account of the genesis of each of the stories. The soundtrack (literally) of her creative inspiration is provided, but for me the particular attraction was learning the germ of each story: the idea or image from which it grew. Often these are hardly evident in the finished story, but it is always enlightening to see how these tales, with their biting whimsy, emerged from the subterranean depths of a very original creative mind.