

## Charlotte Wood, *The Natural Way of Things* (Allen & Unwin, 2015)

Welcome to hell. Imagine that you wake up, alone, in an unfamiliar room. You are dressed in someone else's clothes. The door of the room is locked. You have no idea where you are, or why you are here. If you are a man, you will now have to imagine that you are a young woman. You are being punished for a crime that only a woman can commit.

Charlotte Wood's fifth novel opens with this scenario, a scene from the nightmare world of dystopian fiction. This could be 1984, the landscape of George Orwell's Oceania or the remote island of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. Margaret Atwood's futuristic Republic of Gilead, home of Offred and the other female victims of *The Handmaid's Tale*, also comes clearly to mind. Instead, Wood's novel is set in an unmistakably Australian and contemporary society.

The ten prisoners in *The Natural Way of Things* are all young Australian women. They have attractive names – Yolanda, Verla, Leantha, Isobel, Joy – but they are also called 'the minister's-little-travel-tramp and that-Skype-slut and the yuck-ugly-dog from the cruise ship; they are pig-on-a-spit and big-red-box, moll-number-twelve and bogan-gold-digger-gangbang-slut' (47).

These women are 'what happens when you don't keep your fucking fat slag's mouth shut' (47). Victims of sexual abuse who have refused to stay silent about their experiences, they have been 'handed over' (56) to a security firm (Hardings International: 'Dignity & Respect in a Safe & Secure Environment') and imprisoned on an isolated rural property.

Charlotte Wood's powerful novel examines what happens to the young women as they come to terms with their terrible captivity. Essentially, they are dehumanized and treated like animals: put on leashes, herded around the compound, forced to sleep in dogboxes. 'Exactly like sheep' (17) – or female wartime collaborators – they are 'shorn', their hair shaved off by one of the male jailers. Animalistic references abound in the text: the women are compared to goats, dogs, horses, pigs, hens, rabbits and sheep. Locked in their 'kennels', they 'breathe through their mouths like animals' and 'lunge at their dishes like dogs' (46).

Hardings International has hired three people to guard the women: the ex-army man Boncer, an unemployed backpacker called Teddy and a 'nurse', Nancy. Like their prisoners, they seem to be unremarkable, ordinary young Australians. Boncer is the most vicious and abusive of the guards, but he is also a pitiable 'mummy's boy' with pimples and an internet dating profile. Placed in a position of unchecked power, though, he is more than willing to physically abuse the 'slags' and 'whores' in his captivity. Teddy despises the women as 'sloppy seconds' (58) and complains bitterly about his ex-girl-friend Hannah, with her hairy legs and 'unceasing bitching ... like some harpy kindergarten teacher' (129). Nancy treats the girls with 'amused, disgusted pity' and blames them for their plight: 'So what have you done to yourself, you silly bitch?' (81)

It is this everyday sexism, so carelessly expressed in this extreme environment, that makes Wood's novel such a chilling and confronting text to read. Early in the book, Verla wonders at the extent of her companions' compliance in their terrible and hopeless incarceration:

What would happen if they refused? [Boncer] could beat one of them, but together they could overpower him. Why have they been so stupid as to follow him? Why this trailing, limping obedience? (34)

Perhaps, Wood's female characters are so obedient because they have absorbed the inherent sexism of modern Australian culture, the belief that male dominance and female subservience are just 'the natural way of things'.

This 'natural' way unfolds in the three seasons that structure the nine-month timeframe of the novel: summer, autumn and winter. In Part II, Autumn, the corporation ruthlessly abandons its staff as well as its 'clients'. The jailers become as helpless as the jailed when the power is cut off, and food supplies start to run out. The eleven women and two men are left in a state of complete isolation, trapped on the derelict sheep station, surrounded by the 'unknowable bush'.

This natural bushland, the vast outback is a distinctive trope in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Australian literature and history. From Lawson's drover's wife to Baynton's chosen vessel, from the terrified school-teacher in *Wake in Fright* to the protagonists of Michael Meehan's *The Salt of Broken Tears*, the dead heart of the country has claimed its victims. This is the dark, gothic territory that Wood's characters inhabit as they move from the desolation of Autumn to the grim end of Winter.

In her interview with Kerryn Goldsworthy during Adelaide Writers' Week,<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Wood confirmed that authors Margaret Atwood and William Golding were the 'god-parents' of her novel. Certainly the terrors of Atwood's feminist dystopia segue into Golding's primitive survival of the 'fittest' as Wood continues her examination of male-female power relations under extreme, life-threatening conditions. Initially, the established hierarchies of control and abuse remain in place; gradually, however, subtle shifts and changes alter the dynamics of the isolated 'community'. While some of the women seek advantage by conforming to traditional stereotypes – the mother, the cook, the sexual slave – others create different roles for themselves as hunters, gatherers and protectors. An uneasy equilibrium is sustained for a time, but the end, when it comes, is sudden, violent and unexpected.

*The Natural Way of Things* has been shortlisted for several literary awards, and it won the 2016 Stella Prize. Judging by the warmth of its critical reception, it will be a strong contender for the Miles Franklin Literary Award – certainly it is a book 'of the highest literary merit ... presenting Australian life in any of its phases'.<sup>2</sup> It also encompasses universal themes: our human versus our animal nature, the effects of nature and nurture, the performance of gender and sexuality, and the trauma of incarceration at the hands of political and economic power.

Charlotte Wood's fifth novel is a memorable and remarkable text. Read it for the startling prose, the realistic characters and the compelling themes. Then ask yourself if you will ever feel the same about being a woman – or a man – again.

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<sup>1</sup> Adelaide Writers' Week 2016. Web. 21 Mar. 2016 [http://www.adelaidefestival.com.au/blog/collected\\_stories\\_podcasts\\_from\\_2016](http://www.adelaidefestival.com.au/blog/collected_stories_podcasts_from_2016).

<sup>2</sup> Miles Franklin Literary Award. Web. 21 Mar. 2016 <http://www.milesfranklin.com.au/>.