Tony Birch, Blood (University of Queensland Press, 2011)

Blood, the debut novel of accomplished short story writer Tony Birch, is a story told from the perspective of a thirteen-year-old boy, Jesse, who sets out on a journey to protect his half-sister Rachel from the atrocities of one of her mother’s many boyfriends, Ray Crow, who has a perverted interest in Rachel. The book is set on the back roads of Victoria and Melbourne. The despairing predicament makes the protagonist, Jesse and his sister, Rachel move through caravan parks, shabby cigarette-choked motel rooms, bouncing between country towns, cities and states. There is no one to look after Rachel except Jesse, as their mother, Gwen, an immoral, drunken, unstable and self-indulgent woman, is always busy hopping from one failed relationship to another. The men brought home by their dissolute mother are real troubles for both Jesse and Rachel.

The novel is deeply immersed in the fundamental bonds of family. There is the theme of blood, too, from which the book takes its title: the shared blood of promise, the blood of family ties, and the blood of violence. In its first appearance, the blood oozes from the fingertips of the teenage narrator, Jesse, and his younger sister, Rachel. Jesse slices their thumbs and holds them together to fasten their lives and make them ‘whole’ after their mother – full of malice over breaking up with her latest boyfriend – tells an agitated Rachel that she and Jesse were conceived by different fathers. There is a great loss of trust between Jesse and Gwen, as he tells it:

I didn’t trust anything Gwen said. Once, when she was having an argument with my pop he’d called her a ‘born liar’. It sounded strange because I didn’t see how a person could be born a liar. But as I got older I thought that if anyone could have, it would be Gwen. (11)

From the moment Jesse saw Rachel wrapped in a blanket at the hospital, he was certain that he would be the one to look after his little sister. Jesse has assumed most of the parental responsibility for his eight year old sister Rachel ever since she was born. Their careless mother Gwen, who does not like to be addressed as ‘mum’ as it makes her feel old and who has a ‘habit for latching onto men who were good with their fists’ (19) is apparently too indifferent to provide a stable childhood and the sort of care they need. Jesse, fatigued by Gwen’s false promises, is aggressively protective of his little sister, and with the ritualised mixing of blood from their fingertips, he vows to always safeguard her from harm. Though Jesse sometimes entertains the idea of running away from his unbearable circumstances, he soon realises his commitment to protect his sister from any harm and drops the idea.

These siblings have a troubled childhood. They lived hand to mouth, as their mother would get casual petty jobs in bars. They had a very unstable life. The siblings’ longest stretch in a stable home is their time living in a dilapidated farmhouse near Melbourne airport with tattooed ex-con Jon. At first they fear he will be ‘good with his fists’, like other boyfriends of Gwen, but instead he turns out to be a rare stabilising influence and the only father figure in their lives, baking cakes and sharing life-advice such as: ‘Any fella inside for the time I did, they carry their history with them. Your body is a map. Or a book’ (34). Their stay with Jon does not last long, as Gwen finds his domestic ways unexciting and kicks him out. The only other pause from their continuous ordeal comes when they stay with Gwen’s father, a reformed alcoholic, who comes as a spark of hope and stability in their life. They get
to see a glimpse of a different way of living, though ultimately it turned out be just an ephemeral interlude.

Jesse’s circumstances made him generally behave like someone older. His insight is learnt from the inescapable struggles for survival from the awfully violent and traumatic incidents in his life. Birch echoes Jesse’s voice with substantial genuineness, coupling the naiveté of youth with a peculiar kind of maturity born of a tough upbringing and the responsibility of looking after his younger sister since he was five. He has intelligence beyond his years, but he is still very much a kid. The bond between Jesse and Rachel offers the narrative a compelling emotional centre, and some scenes – like the Christmas spent with Pop, when the children receive their first real Christmas presents – are almost heartbreaking.

Birch uses the film *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a motif. Jesse and Rachel see this movie at an outmoded theatre one afternoon. There is an obvious indication that the two children identify themselves with Jem and Scout and draw comfort from their characters.

The tale is straightforward and simple, with few flashbacks and a single narrative voice. I found myself wanting to know what happens to the siblings next, but this was thwarted by the abrupt end of the story. Otherwise, it is an engrossing and heartrending story about the bond between siblings and the strength of children. The book carries the complexity necessary for making it a compelling read. The unpretentious language and simple structure of the novel are enriched by Birch’s vivid and complex characters.

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