
Recorded at Radio Adelaide on 18 February 2006

Peter Goldsworthy’s collection of short stories, *The List of All Answers,* was first published in 2004 and has just come out in a new edition. Stories from more than two decades are included, in reverse chronological order. This is an interesting decision. He says in his Author’s Note that this has been done ‘less as an attempt to travel back in time and reclaim lost innocence than to give the previously uncollected pieces front of stage.’

The first two stories, both previously uncollected though they have been published in periodicals, certainly pull no punches, and in some ways they are a hard act to follow. Though Goldsworthy’s writing is never less than effective, some of the earlier stories at the end of the book seem callow by comparison, their denouements a little pat and even smug.

But this is an incredibly rich collection, and satisfying in the completeness of its range. Short stories are a perfect medium for the kinds of themes Goldsworthy excels at: life and death crises, families and friends *in extremis,* viewed from just about all possible angles. He can set a scene, establish characters and deal a blow which leaves his reader gasping for breath all within six or eight pages.

The first story in the book, ‘The Kiss’, is a little longer, but after a languid prelude, the tension of the days before the end of the Dry mirrored in the sixteen-year-old friends’ yearning for the adult world, he once again floors us with an ending so bold that it almost defies comprehension, because it’s so unexpected.

Goldsworthy spends half his working life as a GP. This gives him more than just the expertise to write authoritatively about illness. It gives him a slightly different view of death from the rest of us. In an essay published along with his breathtaking novella *Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam* he reveals that he finds his ‘greatest satisfaction’ in helping the dying. Death is not taboo for him, and most of his later stories hinge on death or at least some kind of threat to life, and what it can mean to the living. This of course was the theme of his latest novel *Three Dog Night,* in which three doctors grapple with the impending death of one of their number with a conspicuous lack of composure.
Goldsworthy’s characters are often doctors. Jane Austen was criticised by some of her contemporary female readers for giving away too much, and I wonder if there are some members of the medical profession who feel the same way about Peter Goldsworthy. He does nothing for the mystique of the profession with stories like ‘The Duty to Die Cheaply’ and ‘The Nice Chinese Doctor’. It comes as an uncomfortable shock that these inscrutable beings whose professional skills we so depend upon are prone to jealousy, pettiness, racism and all the other human failings we would prefer to think them immune from. Another subject close to Goldsworthy’s heart is childhood, and title story, ‘The List of All Answers’, is one of several stories where the pleasures of family life are viewed with some equivocation.

In the story, the list is just a piece of paper stuck on a suburban fridge. When it grows to the status of the title of a 335 page book, it takes on more ponderous overtones. But Goldsworthy is not interested in providing answers. Chekhov said that of ‘the solution of a question and the correct setting of a question, the latter alone is obligatory for the artist.’ The List of All Answers demonstrates that Goldsworthy has developed over twenty years an exemplary skill at the correct setting of many of the most important questions human beings have to confront.