Loading the Dice

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Janette Turner Hospital

DUE PREPARATIONS FOR THE PLAGUE
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A NOVEL BY Janette Turner Hospital is an event. Although her new book comes with a disclaimer, suggesting that it should be read as a thriller, there will be high expectations. Even with its cumbersome title, for which the fact that it’s a quotation from Daniel Defoe doesn’t compensate, Due Preparations for the Plague claims attention. Thrillers suggest plot-driven entertainments. Some are relatively undemanding: the sort of thing sold in airport bookshops. This one is too unsettling to be entertainment, and, because its central event is the fate of passengers on a hijacked plane, it won’t be a big favourite as an airport novel.

‘It sometimes seems that our whole planet has swung into the fog belt of melodrama.’ The words are Graham Greene’s, but they could equally well come from Turner Hospital. She has always been drawn to that dangerous edge where the safety fence of civilisation fails. She writes exceptionally well about fear. Like Alfred Hitchcock, she sometimes uses such moments for reversals of expectation: sometimes the terror is self-created. In Due Preparations, such a moment comes when the central character, a young American woman who has survived all kinds of threats and physical ordeals, has a panic attack in a Manhattan cab when she sees the driver’s face in the rear vision mirror and reads his name: Ibram Siddiqi.

Turner Hospital’s work — six novels and three collections of short stories — is distinguished by its imaginative power, intelligence and verbal inventiveness. Endlessly allusive in her range of reference, she seems effortlessly to carry the heavy baggage of her reading, dipping in and scattering liberally from medieval to modern classic texts, sixteenth-century poems and last year’s thinking on chemical warfare. Chretien de Troyes is as much a presence in Due Preparations as Osama bin Laden. Doomed lovers Tristan and Genevieve embrace in a gas-filled bunker somewhere in Iraq, hostages after a 1987 hijacking. The author doesn’t stint the epigraphs: thirteen in all, with two or three for some sections, ranging from the Book of Job to Graham Swift.

Few writers are as well placed as Turner Hospital to write an international thriller. Born in Melbourne, she grew up in Queensland, and has lived in Canada, England, France and the US. In Boston some years ago, she was the victim of a mugging, and that experience may have sharpened her sense of the fragility of order in modern society.

Her new book brings together a group of young Americans, all of them child survivors of a plane hijacked en route from Paris to New York, thirteen years before this story begins. Their rescue was part of a bargain with terrorists: a ‘let the children go’ concession exacted by the American Intelligence officer whose plan gets out of hand. Samantha, six years old when her parents were killed, grows up obsessed with the disaster of Air France Flight 64. Using a website, she gets in touch with some of the other children, pieces together their stories, tries to discover the design behind the disaster.

Samantha, who comes from Charleston, has the Old South surname of Raleigh; and the echo of Sir Walter is no doubt intended. Her counterpart from Boston, Lowell Hawthorne, son of Mather Hawthorne, evokes the Puritan past. Other survivors include Jewish children Jacob and Cassandra. The latter, in the few lucid moments of her deranged life, takes the Cassandra role of prophesy, while Jacob succumbs to drugs. A sub-plot reveals the true parentage of two black American children, and one of the hostages is a descendant of slaves. Altogether, it’s a round-up of representatives of modern America, carrying the legacies of their forebears.

There is also Turner Hospital’s trademark Australian, the whimsically named world-wanderer Genevieve Teague, known as Genie, who appears to her lover Tristan as magically as the spirit of the lamp in the Arabian Nights entertainment. We’ve met her before, notably as Charade (Scheherazade) Ryan in Turner Hospital’s novel Charades (1988).

In thus assembling her cast of victims, Turner Hospital signals her theme. She might have taken The Sins of the Fathers as her title, so clearly does the evidence point to the older generation, whose exercise of power is shown to be corrupt. It’s an American story, and although the motive for the hijacking stems from Middle Eastern power politics, there’s almost no attempt to fill in the background. The deaths of most of the passengers when the plane is blown up, and the later deaths of the ten hostages, are caused by American Intelligence, in association with a thuggish Arab, Mohammed. The representative American feels guilt; his Arab counterpart enjoys killing. It would be a better story if the author had given the same measure of complexity to the men on both sides. By casting Mohammed, code-named Sirocco, as the mercenary and the American, code-named Salamander, as a tormented idealist, Turner Hospital loads the dice. For all its literary ponderings on good and evil, this is too shallow to take seriously as a political story for our times.

Compared with such classics of the thriller mode as the works of Eric Ambler or Graham Greene, with their range of ambiguities, and their political awareness, Due Preparations for the Plague looks at best a perfunctory exercise. In fact, Sirocco and Salamander make the moral opposites in a John Buchan novel seem subtle. There’s very little sense of what Salamander actually does: we don’t enter his everyday world as we would in a Le Carré novel. Turner Hospital has published a thriller under the pseudonym of Alex Juniper, and perhaps Due Preparations would have been better placed as a Juniper novel. And yet it seems to fail somewhere in between the two modes. Too flimsy to illuminate our times and too literary for a mere entertainment, it doesn’t measure up to the dazzling novels that have made this author’s reputation.