
Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded 2 April 2011.

Three cheers for Affirm Press. They have made a commitment to publish quality Australian short fiction in their ‘Long Story Shorts’ series. Leah Swann’s fine collection, *Bearings*, is the fifth in this stylish and distinctively designed series.

*Bearings* contains seven short stories and a novella. Though hardly ground-breaking in their subject matter or even narrative technique, they are powerfully written and emotionally resonant.

The first story, ‘Street Sweeper’, is a second-person account of one remarkable day in the life of a teenage boy, related by someone from his future, perhaps a lover. The raw potency of the narrative masks the implausibility of this device, where the story is being retold to the original teller: ‘When you tell me of the evening walks your voice is tender. … years later, … now a grown man …’ the narrator writes. It’s not something I noticed until I revisited the story to write this review.

‘The Singles Club’ is one of two stories in the book including multiple points of view. In this case they are two inhabitants of the town of Dubbo, who reconnect at an over-forties singles club. While it’s wry and eventually up-beat, I feel it doesn’t quite come off. ‘All Your Mothers’ is the grimly affecting story of a foster child making sense of his life. The first-person immediacy of the present tense accompanies him from childhood to manhood in a few deft vignettes.

In ‘Lovest Thou Me’, a woman mourns her recently-dead father-in-law. It’s a warm and affectionate portrait of an unconventional patriarch, framed through a twilight walk in which the daughter-in-law becomes disoriented and can’t find her way home. ‘Slow to Learn’ is the first-person reflections of a woman in her nineties, pondering a life filled with rage and disappointment: ‘I once heard an intellectual say that when you look back over your life it flows like the plot of a novel … Well, I take issue with him over that … It might look like a plot when you’re seventy. But when you get to my age, all the wool’s undone and even as you knit it up, it still unrolls by colour, by pattern, strand by strand.’

‘The Easter Hare’ concerns the lives of two families briefly connected by the horrific sight of body hanging in the bush, but Easter brings new life to one family and an intimation of protection against harm for the other. Once again this story contains multiple viewpoints, but it keeps its focus better than ‘The Singles Club’. The final story, ‘The Ringwood Madonna’, is about a new mother who tries to counteract the ugliness of her neighbourhood by painting an icon by the train line, attracting the attention, alarmingly, of a young graffiti artist, while groping her way into motherhood.

The novella ‘Silver Hands’ also features an artist, a sculptor who develops debilitating pains in her arms when her husband leaves. The lessons she learns are hard but fruitful. This is a magnificent story, with a fresh and urgent angle on an age-old situation.

Female, male, young, old - everyone in *Bearings* eventually orients themselves after a period of transition: they get their bearings. But what remains with the reader are not so much the affirmative conclusions to these stories, but the sheer physicality of emotions - usually grief - borne by the characters as they feel their way through life. In ‘Silver Hands’, the protagonist describes her father: ‘He’s always been a furnace as I am a furnace; we’ve funnelled our passion into odd, mostly manageable shapes because you can’t be with others when you’re a live ribbon of passion.’ Leah Swann has shaped her ribbon of passion and woven it through these stories with a great deal of skill, and I look forward to reading more of her illuminating fables of modern life.