

Charlotte Grimshaw’s *Opportunity* is one of the most gripping books of short stories I’ve ever read. Short stories are usually a more leisurely read: no matter how good the individual stories are, you’re usually content to put the book down between stories, but not with *Opportunity*.

Grimshaw is a New Zealand writer, and these stories are based in and around Auckland. Each story stands alone, but there is a thread. In every story a character from one of the other stories makes an appearance, even if it’s just an oblique reference. After a while it becomes a kind of game for the reader to pick up the thread and work out the web of relationships. The man who takes an unnatural interest in a woman’s son in ‘Him’ later appears as the quiet, clever teenage cousin of the main character in ‘The Prodigal Son’. The unlikable socialite friend of the same woman is also the beloved wife of the gynaecologist whose father is a shameful homeless alcoholic, and the irritating sister of a sick man in ‘Animals’. One story, ‘The Mountain’, relates an episode in the life of a young man who is on trial for murder in another story ‘Parallel Universe’. A transportable home being driven through the streets at night appears in several stories. It is partly the fascination of this network that keeps you reading, trying to fathom the hidden story, though ultimately it is not a master narrative that binds the book together.

There are nineteen stories with seventeen first-person narrators. Grimshaw gets inside the mind of each of these people, male or female, criminal or law-abiding, conventional or eccentric, young, old or middle-aged. Some stories are set in the past,
in the narrator’s childhood, so a character we meet as an adult might feature somewhere else as a child. What we learn from these stories is not about events but about points of view, subjective and revealing. The openings often seem to promise a dramatic story, like the opening of ‘Him’: ‘There are some unsolved murders in this city, and I think three of them are connected. I think they were done by the same man.’ We expect that this narrator is going to investigate these murders and get herself into trouble, or make a dramatic breakthrough, but what actually happens is far more interesting: her suspicious nature allows her to prevent another crime closer to home, while at the same time destroying her marriage.

The texture and complexity of these characters’ lives unrolls for us as we read. Grimshaw’s imagination and vision is astonishing. Her prose is spare and amazingly expressive. *Opportunity* is a book to read compulsively and re-read for its subtlety, penetration and sheer brilliance.