

Rachel Hennessy, *The Heaven I Swallowed* (Wakefield Press, 2013)

Why does Grace, the protagonist and narrator of *The Heaven I Swallowed*, Rachel Hennessy's second novel, choose to adopt Mary, a young Indigenous girl, forcibly removed from her family by the New South Wales government? Is it loneliness? Grace is a middle-aged widow, her husband, Fred, having gone missing in action during the recently concluded Second World War, and her suburban-Sydney life is a tedium enlivened only by a dissipating Christian faith and the gossipy, insincere society of a widows' group. Is it regret? Mary was to be the name of Grace's miscarried child, and her swooning first encounter with the adopted Mary suggests the girl is a daughter-surrogate: 'I had dreamt of those kinds of eyes, looking up at me from my arms' (6). Or is it patriotism, a sense of duty, which motivates her? Upon first reading about the assimilated children, Grace finds her 'heart swelled with pride' for her compatriots 'helping those less fortunate to find their place in the new utopia' (8), and she later imagines Mary to be 'the epitome of my goodness, the difference I was making to the bustling boulevard' (13).

In truth, Grace's motivations feel irrelevant, for they are only surface excuses for a deeper, darker undercurrent: the delusion of white superiority that gripped Australia in the mid-twentieth century, resulting in the tragedy of the Stolen Generation. Through Grace we experience the nauseating, ingrained racism of this delusion first-hand. Disgusted by the swarthinness of her charge – 'how black Mary's hand was next to my skin. It implied a certain kind of dirtiness' (12) – Grace absurdly vows to 'keep her out of the sun, try to get her to fade a little' (12). Later, signs of Mary's despair are brushed aside as the wild emotions of a beast: 'after all, she was a baser creature, closer to primal than me, more connected to passion and hunger' (67). Even the emergence of Mary's birthmother, who is desperate for reunion, fails to puncture Grace's fantasy that she is the girl's saviour:

This is what I had to keep in my mind: she could not be as good for Mary as I was. The clothes I could give her, the way of speaking, a chance to read and write, domestic knowledge, the reining in of her baser instincts. (77)

As a socio-historical symbol, Grace is effectively repellent, her every thought and action causing the contemporary Australian reader to cringe. Hennessy, however, has more ambitious plans for Grace, seeking to depict her as a complex, perhaps even sympathetic, figure. Central to this strategy is Hennessy's casting of Grace in the role of orphan. Her parents having been dealt 'the swift hand of death' (75) when she was only a toddler, Grace was brought up in a convent by a group of savage nuns with 'a love of suffering' (49). This tragic back-story is only briefly sketched out, but its influence on Grace's later life is emphasised by her continuing obsession with the orphan stories of classic literature: *Jane Eyre*, *Great Expectations*, and *Tom Jones*.

Although sympathy for Grace may elude the reader, her orphanhood does create some intriguing parallels between her life story and the narratives of the stolen children. Mary is terrified by the prospect of returning to the girls home she had been removed to, a reaction that astonishes Grace, but would not surprise any reader familiar with the *Bringing Them Home* report, which documents countless institutional abuses at least equal to the nuns who, Grace laments, 'tore the skin of our hands and buttocks to shreds in emulation of the lashes laid on Jesus' back' (49). When Mary longs for her mother, it is a cause for Grace to recall the desperate yearnings of her own childhood: 'how often had I created a fantasy family as a child – the perfect mother and steady father, the gaggle

of brothers and sisters who would laugh with me' (70). Grace's rootlessness has left her emotionally anaesthetised, living 'as if I was outside of myself, detached and only half there, noticing foolish details' (113), a state the *Bringing Them Home* report (1997) believes is common amongst members of the Stolen Generation: 'many separated children would be likely to have difficulties in relationships because their feelings would be numbed'.¹

Once raised, however, these connections are never satisfactorily explored. In fact, the relationship between Grace and Mary, ostensibly the novel's crux, remains largely undeveloped, barely budging an inch from its starting point. It is, instead, crowded out by a menagerie of subplots – such as the truth behind Fred's absence, and the possible paedophilia of a neighbour – that feel irrelevant in comparison. Any reader hoping for Grace's transformation from a symbol of white prejudice to a beacon of white reconciliation will be left disappointed – the best insight that she can eventually muster is that Mary, like herself, has secrets: 'there were thoughts and angers and hopes and hurts I knew nothing of, little balls of pain she hid as well as I did' (102). When Mary disappears in the novel's second half, Grace simply absolves herself of the girl's burden – 'I no longer wanted her black face to belong to me' (123), and the novel continues on without her, until a late, partial reunion is contrived.

The novel's cover declares that '*The Heaven I Swallowed* is a compelling and confronting tale of the Stolen Generation', but this is misleading. Mary, and the tragic generation she represents, are never more than secondary concerns in a plot focused on a white woman, Grace, attempting to make peace with a tragic past. Grace is an admirably nuanced character, and the revelations of her myriad secrets are well plotted-out, but it is difficult to concentrate on her journey when the reader knows there is a far more important story occurring off-stage, the barest hints of Mary's inner turmoil casting everything else into shadow. Mary is a blank character, yet the spaces in her personal narrative are easily filled by any reader familiar with the *Bringing Them Home* report, or powerful Indigenous narratives such as Sally Morgan's *My Place* and Doris Pilkington's *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*. There is a compelling story here, but unfortunately it remains untold.

It is no coincidence that Mary's disappearance corresponds with the novel's most effective section. Free of distraction, the reader is able to focus on Grace, and the quiet denouement to her story is satisfying. Yet while Mary remains in Grace's custody, the two do share some affecting moments. In one scene, Grace is bemused by a seemingly aimless pile of gum nuts and leaves on Mary's bedside table, and instructs the girl to 'put them in piles or rows or something. They look like rubbish' (80). It is a clever metaphor for all the white meddling the Indigenous of this country have endured since the invasion. Despite a white protagonist, this novel cannot help but be about them: victims of a delusion beyond both one's comprehension, and sympathy.

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¹ Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1997, *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*, HREOC, Accessed Online 21 September 2013, <http://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/bringing-them-home-report-1997>