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Butterfly. Sonya Hartnett (Hamish Hamilton/Penguin, 2009)

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded 11 April 2009.

Sonya Hartnett's new novel *Butterfly* is magnificent and troubling. She excavates the world of the early adolescent and finds a vein of pain and shame and powerlessness that one suspects runs unacknowledged through everyone's psyche.

It is the early 1970s, and Ariella – known to everyone as Plum – is thirteen. She lives in an unnamed Australian suburb, she has two older brothers – much older, in their early twenties – and is on the fringe of a group of schoolgirls whose friendship is judgemental, merciless, prescriptive and conditional. Deeply self-conscious about her looks (of course – what thirteen-year-old is not?) Plum is flattered by her stylish neighbour's throw-away remark that she could be a fashion model, and rashly repeats it to her friends, 'realising too late that she's peeled herself of skin. Under the navy shade of the oak tree her friends stare in post-nuclear silence.'

Hartnett's control of point of view in this novel is superb. She stays with Plum except for the occasional foray elsewhere when needed to show how much Plum is failing to see; because there is a lot that she does not know about her family and her neighbour Maureen: finding out some of these things drives the plot of the novel, while other things she begins to realise she will probably never know: halfway through the novel she has somewhat of an epiphany: 'It occurs to her that she lives in a house with people she knows only from the outside. That everything she thinks she knows about them has been a guess.' Even when she finds out the facts about her brother and her neighbour, there is still much she fails to understand.

Hartnett fits so much into a paragraph: 'The suburb in which she lives is muted and leafy, tall-treed and tile-roofed. Many of its residents have survived well beyond their necessity.' This last sentence is presumably Plum's hard teenage judgement. But it goes on, 'Although the neighbourhood is her home just as her bones are her own, Plum has never learned the street names, nor the names of the gardeners she sees in flowerbeds, nor the names of the flowers. ... Nothing happens, there is nothing to do, but Plum has hardly realised that yet. So far, it has been enough.' The teenage mentality, to perfection. Another acute and subtle observation is the irrelevance of Plum's parents: they barely figure in her emotional life, which centres on her brothers, her friends, and, for a time, her fascinating new role model next door.

Hartnett's perspicuity can sometimes be almost ferocious, her tone almost bitter. The friends laugh when one of their number says something artlessly revealing: They laugh because they're sure they know everything able to be known and life holds no further mystery for them, not even about things they haven't yet known and will not know for years. ... Plum laughs because she can, it is so extremely funny; and because when they're laughing at Caroline they are not laughing at her.

Plum's family is odd, her parents older than those of her friends, her home furnished with shaming antiques and humiliating piles of books. Perhaps partly because of this, she feels herself to be special, and different, but in many small ways Hartnett demonstrates that she is just as bad as her friends, and that each of them might have been the subject of their own equally disturbing novel.

I'm not sure whether teenagers will enjoy this novel: perhaps some will see in it a refreshing honesty about their world, but others might resent the harshness with which they are viewed, although Plum is a sympathetic enough protagonist despite her manifest faults. Older readers might also find the book disconcerting, especially since its setting, some thirty-five or forty years ago, will evoke for many a distant and blessedly remote past – too distant, by the way, to belong to Hartnett herself, who's in her early forties. But its rewards are many. Hartnett's constantly arresting but precise use of language is one, and the mordant humour of many of her observations is another. *Butterfly* is the kind of book that makes you enjoy having your comfortable assumptions overturned.