

Review Essay: Elizabeth Harrower, *The Watch Tower* (Text, 2012)

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Adelaide Writers' Week 2017 was dedicated to Elizabeth Harrower. The address in praise of her work stated, 'Admired by her contemporaries, including Patrick White and Christina Stead, Harrower is being read again. All of her books are back in print, and she is enjoying success here in Australia as well as internationally. She is being lauded by a new generation of writers and critics and being read by ever increasing audiences.'¹

Like Shirley Hazzard, the acclaimed Australian post-war novelist who died last year, Harrower's reputation rests on a slender handful of texts. She published three novels late in the 1950s – *Down in the City* (1957), *The Long Prospect* (1958) and *The Catherine Wheel* (1960) – before writing the book that is celebrated as her masterpiece, *The Watch Tower*, in 1966. Her work largely disappeared from public view later in the twentieth century;² its return was heralded by Text Publishing's reissuing of her novels in their Australian classics series. Harrower's fifth book, *In Certain Circles*, was published in 2014, followed by a collection of short stories in 2015.

I count myself amongst her second generation of readers. I was in primary school, still wearing plaits and reading Ladybird books when her novels were first published. But by the late 1970s and early 1980s, I was studying at university, discovering feminism and reading Australian literature. Along with Christina Stead's *For Love Alone* (1945) and Shirley Hazzard's *Transit of Venus* (1980), *The Watch Tower* became for me a mind-shifting, inspiring text. I shared the experience described by Joan London, in her introduction to the 2012 edition: 'The novel gripped me like a nightmare ... I didn't know. I remember thinking that. I meant: I didn't know there was writing like this, in Australia, now, by a woman' (viii).

What is it about *The Watch Tower* that provokes such strong reactions? The story is a deceptively simple one. Two sisters, Laura and Clare Vaizey, are growing up in Sydney in the 1930s. They are bright girls with promising futures: Laura 'had thought that she might study medicine as her father had done' (5) and Clare, at nine years old, loves reading and is doing well at school. Laura has a beautiful mezzo-soprano voice and 'an aptitude for languages' (6); Clare is a lively and energetic child ('Clare liked to slide down the banisters to the ground floor. She liked to run, read, swim and sing' [15]).

These ordinary, happy lives are broken by two people: the girls' widowed mother and, later, Laura's abusive husband. This is the brutal shock of *The Watch Tower* – that in a modern city, in twentieth-century Australia, these young women's lives can be so easily undone by the very people who should care for them most. The novel has the archetypal feeling of a fairy tale, with Clare standing like a princess on the look-out in the watch tower, Laura turning into a drudge like Cinderella and direct references to the story of Bluebeard and his wives. But Stella Vaizey, the girl's mother, is not an evil witch (or even a wicked step-mother, as London points out [viii]). She is merely a selfish, indolent woman, as lethargic and indifferent as Austen's Lady Bertram, the mother in *Mansfield Park* who allows the unpleasant Mrs Norris to control her

¹ Adelaide Writers' Week Advisory Committee, *Adelaide Writers' Week Program* (Adelaide, 2017) 5.

² Geordie Williamson, *The Burning Library: Our Great Novelists Lost and Found* (Melbourne: Text, 2012).

household. And although Laura's husband Felix is compared with a figurine of Bluebeard, he is really nothing more than a petty suburban despot, an abusive and domineering middle-aged man.

Stella Vaizey leaves Sydney early in the war, abandoning her young daughters to the care of the man she has met only a few times. Laura ('a born homemaker, a born housewife' [20], according to her mother) is to marry Felix Shaw, the enigmatic older man who employs her in his factory; Clare, still of school-age, is to become his ward. They are handed over to Felix's care as if they are packages rather than people, with no agency in the transaction: 'Laura felt herself falter. None of this ... was of her planning. Who had constrained her? She felt like an object' (67).

Laura's degradation at the hands of her husband forms the substance of the novel. Gentle and well-intentioned, she is no match for Felix's malevolence; once she has been installed in his luxurious house in Neutral Bay, she is as handicapped as 'a novice tackling a master of jujitsu' (74). Felix Shaw keeps his household 'mesmerised with uncertainty and alarm' (89), in constant fear of his sudden inexplicable rages and violent outbursts. His hatred of his wife – reinforced by his callous business partners, men like the well-named Peter Trotter – is 'intense ... at once sexual and sadistic' (99). Within a year of marriage, Laura has become Felix's victim, 'Hostage No. 1' (117). Her mother had promised her conventional feminine happiness, 'a new life as a young married woman', 'mistress of a beautiful home' – her parting words, 'You're a very lucky girl' (67).

Clare is initially in as vulnerable a position as her sister; she is also Felix's dependent, living in his house, subject to his will. He breaks his promise to support her during her education, and she is forced to leave school at fifteen. While Laura keeps the house immaculate and works steadfastly in the business – as his wife, 'she naturally received no wage' (96) – Clare is expected to work in Shaw's factory and to do as she is told at home. Unlike the passive Laura, though, she is active and articulate in her rebellion:

Why is my life so much less important than Felix's? ... I want to be free! That's not unnatural. I do not want to make artificial flowers in a factory all my life. Why should I? You want me to abase myself before him the way you do. I won't do it! (149)

Clare does finally escape from the domestic prison of the watch tower, but she frees herself *without* her sister's help. One of the most chilling aspects of the novel is the older woman's willingness to subjugate the younger, Laura's repeated attempts to 'recruit' (76) Clare to pander to Felix's incalculable moods, his drunkenness and emotional abuse. Many feminist texts develop this theme of the lack of women's solidarity, their collusion in their own and one another's 'meek and helpless subjection' (100). I discovered this again and again when I read nineteenth-century fiction: Mrs Reed bullying Jane Eyre, Fanny Dashwood depriving her sisters-in-law of their inheritance, Lily Bart betrayed by her female 'friends'.

Reading *The Watch Tower*, many years ago, was an unforgettable experience for me; re-reading it was affecting and disturbing in equal parts.³ As Joan London's introduction to the Text edition reminds us, 'it's always instructive to return to a book you admired a long time ago. It carries the ghost of the first reading...decades later, [*The Watch Tower*] is still excruciating to read' (xi). Harrower's stark examination of two young women's vulnerability and helplessness

³ At the time of writing this review, I also read a distressing newspaper article in the *Sydney Morning Herald*: 'How the Court System Allows Domestic Violence Perpetrators To Continue Abuse' – describing how a man with an Apprehended Violence Order, arriving at court without a lawyer, was allowed to aggressively cross-examine his wife and eldest daughter. (20 February 2017).

in the face of a domineering man's savagery *is* painful to read. I have read it twice now and each time I have been moved by the clarity of Harrower's vision, the terrible plausibility of her characters and the sheer power of the restrained emotion in her writing. It is a novel that deserves the closest and most attentive reading – whether you are coming to it for the first time, or the last.