

Lynette Washington, *Plane Tree Drive* (Midnight Sun Publishing, 2017)

Lynette Washington's *Plane Tree Drive* is a suburban street in the city of Adelaide. It's a long road, lined with cream brick houses and bluestone cottages, flats and housing trust homes, vegetable patches and run-down, old sheds. And of course there are the plane trees, 'their elaborate forked leaves ... phosphorescently green in summer, camp orange in autumn and then absent in winter' (13). In spring, South Australia's hay-fever season, the street is littered with pollen 'like yellow puffs of fairy floss' (111).

Washington's cast of characters is as varied as her landscape and as changeable as the weather: people of all ages, in all walks and stages of life. There are teenagers and brides-to-be; young mothers and divorced, middle-aged men; married couples and grandparents. We meet Mary, 'the woman who talks to animals' as well as Poppy, the 'teenager with a nosy brother' and Jennifer, married to Dan but desperately in love with Alexander. A cast of 50 or so of 'the most important people' (9) is named at the front of the book, a quick and useful guide to the characters whose stories are woven throughout the text of *Plane Tree Drive*.

The short stories in Lynette Washington's captivating book form a collection of interlinked stories, joined by common themes, characters and setting. As such, they fit the genre of the short story cycle, sometimes known as a 'novel in stories'¹ or a discontinuous narrative.² Some of the stories have already been published independently (243); they stand alone and can be read as single stories, complete in themselves. In *Plane Tree Drive*, the outcome of Washington's work for her PhD in Creative Writing, the stories are enriched by a connected reading.

There are still 'single story' protagonists (such as Poppy, the teenager whose funny and delightful diary entries appear early in the text, or Hunni, 'Department store worker, friend of hermit crabs'). But there are also characters we come to know well through a *series* of glimpses into their lives. Maurice, first-person narrator of 'Secrets and Plane Trees', reveals:

Jacqui hated the house on Plane Tree Drive. She moved in with me because she was pregnant with Amily ... She said the trees made her feel like she was in prison. She was convinced the street was shadowy, secretive. Something about the gnarled fingers of the branches especially made her skin crawl. Of course, it was nothing to do with the trees at all. (13)

By the end of the collection, Amily is a teenager, living with her mother and visiting her father at the house in Plane Tree Drive; Maurice is rebuilding his life by sharing his music with the local community, enjoying regular gigs with his Shed Dogs band.

¹ Benjamin Sapadin, 'Celebrating Short Story Cycles', *New York Public Library blog* (3 May 2016), <https://www.nypl.org/blog/2016/05/03/short-story-cycles>

² Kerryn Goldsworthy, 'Plane Tree Drive by Lynette Washington', *Sydney Morning Herald* (22 December 2017) <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/plane-tree-drive-review-lynette-washingtons-stories-of-neighbourhood-life-20171222-h09275.html>

The protagonist whom we come to know most completely is Jennifer, who appears in a dozen or so of the stories, sometimes as the narrator. She is introduced in 'Smoke and Broccoli' as a woman in her thirties, struggling to come to terms with stay-at-home motherhood (with baby Ava and her husband Dan, a man who eats his dinner in front of the television and is in his pyjamas by 8 pm.) Her plans and dreams, her 'idea of a different life' have become 'smoke. Gone, in the face of immediate demand' (24). Over the course of *Plane Tree Drive*, it becomes clear that Jennifer's marriage is compromised by her unrequited love for her teenage friend, Alexander: 'security and love are not the same' (40). Dan's gradual awareness of the breakdown of their relationship is evident in two of the strongest stories in the collection: the subtle 'After', where the couple struggle to communicate at a birthday dinner in a Chinese restaurant, and 'Compartments and Venn Diagrams', a novel way of drawing Dan's view of 'the space between Ava and me' (196).

The strengths of the collection are enhanced by this variety in narrative point of view, structure and style. There are first, second and third person narratives; past and present tense; dialogue and monologue; realistic and surrealistic stories. The structural forms are as varied as diary entries, blog posts, housing needs assessments, letters and flowcharts. One of my favourite stories, 'Milk Cup', is less than a page long – yet it perfectly captures a moment in the Jennifer 'cycle', a revealing glimpse into her relationship with her small daughter.

As the frontispiece quotation from *The Great Gatsby* emphasises, this is fiction about 'the inexhaustible variety of life'. *Plane Tree Drive* is a fine cycle of short stories, written by a new Australian author very much in command of her creativity and craft.

Jennifer Osborn