
Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers’ Radio, Radio Adelaide

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Janette Turner Hospital’s new novel *Due Preparations for the Plague* is gripping and compulsive reading, while at the same time being intelligent and erudite. She has used a formidable range of sources and references, both as epigraphs throughout the book and as parallels to illustrate the action. The plague has inspired works by Boccaccio and Daniel Defoe – the novel’s title comes from one of his works – and Albert Camus, all of which Hospital has drawn upon, and other epigraphs come from Shakespeare, Lewis Carroll and Jorge Luis Borges.

Hospital has found out a lot about chemical weapons both as physical and psychological agents. Because her plague is not literally a disease spread by rodents but international terrorism. She includes several excerpts from lecture notes for a course in espionage and chemical warfare for elite American recruits to the secret service, chilling in their clinical exactness and disturbing in the way that instruction is given not only for protection against the effects, but also for effective deployment, of chemical weapons.

So this is a book which hits hard. It begins with a vividly realised panic attack suffered by the adult son of a woman killed 13 years before in a hijacking, as he is painting a roof. We are increasingly gripped by Lowell’s predicament, as his momentary terror broadens out into the general mess his life has become; his difficulties facing up to his mother’s death, his troubled memories of his recently-dead father, his doomed attempts to cultivate a happy relationship with his children and his estranged wife.

Lowell is contacted by Samantha, a survivor of the hijacking whose parents and brother were killed, and together they begin to work out what happened. International espionage, agents with code names, Islamic fundamentalism, and mysterious deaths all enter the equation. Needless to say, Sam and Lowell are in mortal danger, pursued by those who don’t want the truth known. But with the posthumous help of Lowell’s father, they learn that the
hijacking was a CIA anti-terrorism operation which went wrong, and their relatives’ deaths were actually collateral damage, rather than the result of a genuine terror attack. The book ends in late summer 2001 in New York City, implicitly emphasising what we know will happen there in the early autumn of the same year.

Dramatic, compelling, thought-provoking, topical: Due Preparations for the Plague seems to have it all. But about three-quarters of the way through I found scepticism creeping in. I began to feel that it was laid on a bit thick. The terror and the pity began to seem more like melodrama and bathos. This might seem harsh, when we are after all dealing with extreme situations, with violence, horror and death in the most cruel circumstances. But once the seeds were sown it was difficult to prevent their germination, and as the ending approached I felt more and more strongly that sentimentality had taken over from true imagination. In spite of the foreboding we are surely meant to feel at the end, with the spectre of 9/11 looming, I felt cheated of genuine catharsis.

And then, looking back on the rest of the novel, I began to see that in spite of its intellectual and literary veneer it in fact contains many elements common to the most formulaic thriller. There is the evil charmer – middle eastern of course; there is the good man seduced into evil with the purest of intentions; there are the threatened innocents – not a naughty child among them; there are even a couple of long-hidden family secrets which emerge at the end. So Due Preparations for the Plague is exciting and entertaining but ultimately disappointing. Its equation of terrorism, whether resulting from CIA conspiracies or fanaticism, with the black death, ignores the conditions which give rise to terrorism, treating it as a force of nature rather than a reaction to acts of aggression, deprivation and imperialism. And although there might be little difference in the horror of its effects, some glimmer of recognition that Muslim fundamentalists are not monsters but human beings would have added immeasurably to the stature of this novel.