
Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers’ Radio, Radio Adelaide

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In Maree Giles’ novel *Invisible Thread* the reader is subjected to a year in the life of fourteen-year-old Ellen, a year in which she suffers enough cruelty and hardship for a lifetime, all for her own good.

I use the word ‘subjected’ intentionally, because this is a sustained piece of first-person narrative which is at times almost unbearably vivid. From the beginning of the book, Ellen’s physical perceptions are extraordinarily acute, and she is assaulted on all fronts by excruciating sensations – disgusting smells, gross ugliness, and pain. On top of this, there is the burden of being treated with appalling callousness and injustice by practically everyone she meets.

What is the crime this so-called delinquent has committed to bring all this agony upon herself? She has not assaulted or robbed anyone. She has run away from a home where she felt unloved, or at least misunderstood – and looked for love in the arms of a young surfie, whose casual lust and opportunism she mistakes for the real thing. And for seeking warmth and affection in such an inappropriate place, and for trying to stay out of the way of a stepfather she disliked and feared might abuse her as others had, she is, with the collusion of her mother and other less well-meaning adults, sentenced to six months at a Girls’ training school, for being uncontrollable.

This book claims to be based on a true story, though no further details are offered. It is set in Sydney in 1970, but it almost beggars belief that such brutality was being inflicted on such young children so recently in our free and enlightened society – well, at least on white Australian children. Ellen turns out
to be pregnant, but the regime of hard labour, spartan living arrangements, appalling diet, sleep deprivation, and violent suppression of any spark of self-expression, is nevertheless imposed on her as well as her fellow inmates. Conversation is only permitted for twenty minutes a day, for example, and the girls are not even allowed to turn over in bed.

Relief of a kind comes when her pregnancy becomes advanced, and she is moved to a more comfortable room by herself for several weeks. But she is locked in and sees no-one but the nurse until she is taken to hospital to give birth.

After the agony of birth comes the worse pain of being separated from her baby and gradually becoming aware that she is never going to be allowed to see her again. This is a make or break process. Some of the other girls don’t survive. Ellen seems to be unusual in many ways. She has a quickness, an intelligence, an ability to escape into her imagination, and a love of language and music, which makes the reader suspect that she will manage, although the point is not stressed. It also, incidentally, is the only hint that this story might be autobiographical: if it is, the material has been admirably transmuted. Somehow, at any rate, Ellen manages to come out alive, well, and in a reasonable mental and emotional state. The extreme subjectivity of the writing changes subtly as Ellen matures. By the end of the novel she is beginning to develop an adult capacity to look beyond herself and to see other points of view. She begins suppresses the irritation she still feels with her mother, for instance, and tries not to hurt her feelings. It is impressive the way Giles does not overdo her transformation. The maturity is only beginning: first steps are being taken, enough to see that she will make it, but she is still a believable fifteen-year-old
at the end of the novel. And as Ellen’s perceptions open out and take in the world, the narrative style becomes more relaxed and inclusive.

The success of this novel, as will be obvious, lies in the way it sustains Ellen’s subjective view. The reader feels with her, almost unbearably at times. For this reason, the only real weakness is a short digression to the viewpoint of the nurse at the training school. This might have worked if we had been as convinced by her as we are by Ellen, but unfortunately it is a superficial sketch of a stereotyped character, self-righteous and stupid, and we don’t gain a genuine alternative view. Giles would have been better to leave this section out: the empathy she manages to generate for her main character is too valuable to be diluted by a half-hearted attempt at even-handedness.