The Scurrying World

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Sue Woolfe
THE SECRET CURE
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In some ways, Sue Woolfe’s new novel, The Secret Cure, deals with similar themes to her last novel, the award-winning Leaning Towards Infinity (1996). The central character of the novel is a young laboratory technician, Eva, unqualified but desperate to be a scientist. She nurses an obsessive love for a professor of immunology who has a professionally disadvantageous but compelling desire to find a cure for autism. Like the mother and daughter amateur mathematicians in Leaning Towards Infinity, the passion for research is transmitted unwittingly by the parent figure (in this case the professor and lover) to the younger. Eva takes up the professor’s genetic research into autism long after he has given up, defeated by academic and professional enmities. Each has a deeply personal reason for wishing to find a cure: the professor has the disease himself, and so does the daughter Eva has from their affair.

However, The Secret Cure is a better novel than Leaning Towards Infinity. Subject matter aside — the despised amateur in a professional field, world-shattering discoveries, the painful, inarticulate love between mismatched parents and children — the invention of the character of Owen is a masterstroke, both of technique and imagination. The narrator in the first part of the novel, he is thoroughly beguiling. Woolfe has turned an interesting technical problem into a narrative device with great possibilities.

Owen has been secluded in his apartment for most of his adolescence, kept there at first by over-protective parents and then by timidity and force of habit. He decides, at the age of twenty, to leave his apartment and ‘visit the world’, as he puts it. Venturing out into the streets of his native city, Sudlow, he falls by chance into a maintenance job in the local hospital — Eva’s hospital.

By degrees he is drawn into life, in spite of his mother’s warning that ‘the entire scurrying world is a tiny, pitiable thing’. Owen learns rapidly about love, pain, and the world of work. Throughout most of his memoir, which forms the first two-thirds of the book, he is mute, which is the reason for his seclusion. His muteness, however, far from being the disadvantage in the world his parents had assumed, gives him certain advantages. Unable to explain himself, Owen is unable to lie. Also, his very inability to speak makes him, as he himself suspects, more sensitive to the speech of others. He is extremely perceptive and open to experience. Woolfe has used his naïveté to great effect. He is the perfect narrator for this section of the book, in which a great deal happens unspoken and unobserved by others.

Nevertheless, this part of the novel is not as successful as the first part, mainly because Eva seems an odder and more interesting person when viewed through the eccentric but loving eyes — of Owen than in her own narrative. It is disappointing, too, that Eva finally discovers her cure off-stage in the hospital for some years without being on the payroll, just turning up and wearing the uniform he has been given. But someone who seems to know what they are doing can get away with a lot in that kind of workplace, where the personnel department has little to do with the maintenance staff.

What Owen actually gets away with, having glimpsed Eva and fallen in love with her, is building a closed-circuit television system in a disused shed to spy on her in her laboratory. He knows this is not honourable, but, as he reasons, ‘the honourable life was invented by people whom nature has smiled on, and made whole. Then there are the rest of us.’ He needs to spy on her, he believes, to find out about her and to learn how to make her love him. What he does witness, of course, is her harrowing and difficult love affair with the professor. In the process he manages to record, without understanding it, some of the scientific research taking place in the lab, together with the shady deals, the vanities and flirtations, and the petty machinations indulged in by the laboratory staff.

The second part of the book takes the form of a letter written by Eva to her autistic daughter, Tina. Eva has never become aware of Owen’s existence. The letter, written years after Owen’s memoir finishes, describes Eva’s surreptitious research into the genetics of autism. Cleverly, with the use of computer hacking and the knowledge she picked up from working for years as a lab technician, she manages to trick the head of the laboratory into running a research project under her direction, while working in disguise as a cleaner.

It is intriguing to see how she manages this. Nevertheless, this part of the novel is not as successful as the first part, mainly because Eva seems an odder and more interesting person when viewed through the eccentric but loving eyes — or cameras — of Owen than in her own narrative. It is disappointing, too, that Eva finally discovers her cure off-stage in America and that we are not privy to the details. This is no doubt because Woolfe is not a scientist and has not discovered a cure for autism; presenting one in the book would be somewhat ridiculous. The ending of the book, however, is too neat, with all the characters happily disposed of and loose ends fastened.

Nevertheless, this is an outstanding work of imagination, wit and intellect. I await with fascination the future development of this highly talented writer.