Review: Jolley, Elizabeth, My Father's Moon

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Abstract
In My Father's Moon Elizabeth Jolley presents a discontinuous narrative where readers must piece together, through a series of short stories, the life of the narrator, Vera Wright, as schoolgirl, student nurse and young mother. We shift back and forward in time not only between stories but within many of the individual stories as well. Most of the action is set in a period before, during and just after the Second World War, but the second story, 'My Father's Moon', with its allusions to television, break dance and esoteric religious sects who go in for communal living and vegetarian diets, indicates that Vera is setting down these events in the present, reflecting on them from a considerable distance in time. Sudden shifts in chronology are, therefore, accompanied by equally rapid shifts of mood as intense absorption in the turmoil of adolescence and youth is interspersed with moments of detached observation and analysis.

Keywords
review, elizabeth, father, moon, my, jolley

Disciplines
Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details

This journal article is available at Research Online: http://ro.uow.edu.au/lhpapers/603
In those days the position of the married woman was one of dependence. However, many of the women in the Anthology refused to knock down. Alexandra Hay, the heroine of Ada Cambridge’s story, ‘The Perversity of Human Nature’, was a very unhappy woman. She says: 'A married woman has no possessions of her own... We have no longer any individuality whatever' (p. 181). She tries to explain her feelings to her husband. He advises her to take up embroidery.

You've no idea how charming a woman looks in a man's eyes when she's doing those feminine kind o' things—sitting by the fireside and stitching away. (p. 180)

She bitterly regrets her hasty marriage and leaves her husband. And yet as she lies in solitary state in a second-class cabin she wishes:

with all her heart that she was either dead, at the bottom of the sea, or back at The Nest with Robert (p. 187).

Catherine Martin was the first writer to present an Aborigine as the heroine of a book. The Incredible Journey concerns Lliapa whose child has been lured away by a white man on the pretext of helping him find his missing father. The story parallels the lives of many black women whose children were forcibly removed by the government and educated on mission stations or put out to service in white people's homes. This is a remarkable tale with its insight into Aboriginal ways. It also recognizes that Aborigines feel just as deeply about their children as white people. In the closing paragraph Lliapa's friend Polde thinks she can hear footsteps. Lliapa replies:

It is my heart—it beats so hard as if it were up in my ears—I cannot make it be still, for I am thinking all the time that Alibaka is so near to me tonight. (p. 201)

One wonders how many times an Aboriginal mother would have liked to have said those words after her child had been taken but there was no one to hear.

There is so much to commend in these two volumes. The editing has been well done and the writing is fresh and lively. As a record of Australian women's endeavour they are unsurpassed.

Hilarie Lindsay


In My Father's Moon Elizabeth Jolley presents a discontinuous narrative where readers must piece together, through a series of short stories, the life of the narrator, Vera Wright, as schoolgirl, student nurse and young mother. We shift back and forward in time not only between stories but within many of the individual stories as well. Most of the action is set in a period before, during and just after the Second World War, but the second story, 'My Father's Moon', with its allusions to television, break dance and esoteric religious sects who go in for communal living and vegetarian diets, indicates that Vera is setting down these events in the present, reflecting on them from a considerable distance in time. Sudden shifts in chronology are, therefore, accompanied by equally rapid shifts of mood as intense absorption in the turmoil of adolescence and youth is interspersed with moments of detached observation and analysis.

Like all Jolley's fiction, My Father's Moon turns a piercing moral gaze upon the absurdities and vicissitudes of human existence. On her progress through life, Vera meets with a variety of moral challenges, failing most of them. Much of her inadequacy stems from a consciousness of her precarious social position. Daughter of an eccentric father and a German-speaking mother, and brought up in an industrial town, she perchers uneasily on the outermost edges of gentility, striving to assert both her conventionality and her Englishness through minor but repeated rejections of her parents. Vera's social insecurity is further reinforced as she tries to insert herself into the life of various hierarchical, class-ridden institutions, first as a girl at boarding-school, then as a trainee nurse at St Cuthbert's, a large London hospital, and finally as a lowly staff member at yet another boarding school:

Almost at once I begin my game of comparisons, placing myself above someone if more favourable and below others if less favourable in appearance. (p.31)

Because she is so intent on retaining her toehold on the ladder, Vera usually fails in charity towards those whose status appears even lower than her own with the result that she is increasingly trapped in a loveless existence.

At the same time, Vera is keenly conscious of how unjust and worthless are the petty social distinctions that timidly prevent her from defying
outright, and much of the novel’s humour arises from her sardonic observations. In the story 'Night Runner' she tries to manoeuvre her way safely through the Gothic labyrinth into which war has transformed St Cuthbert’s:

When I go out into the darkness I can smell rotting arms and legs, thrown out of the operating theatre and not put properly into the bins. I gather my apron close so that I will not get caught by a protruding or malodorous hand. (p.63)

Similarly, she must negotiate a complex array of social interactions as she tries to protect and reward herself through covert acts of subversion like forging notes from the Home Sister—"Your room is disgusting. Take some hot water and disinfectant and wash down. Sister"—to avenge herself for snubs inflicted by her fellow nurses. She also steals food from a supply of luxuries intended solely for doctors to brighten up the meals she must cook for nurses on night duty. In the further attempt to filch some happiness for herself, Vera has a brief affair with one of the doctors, only to discover she is the victim of cruel manipulation more devious than anything she herself could have contrived.

Forced to leave the hospital pregnant and in disgrace Vera, like Jacob in Milk and Honey, must now acknowledge that her own moral limitations have condemned her to an economically and emotionally meagre existence. She does, however, retain a source of spiritual strength and consolation through remembering the love she once received from her father, her neighbour Gertrude, and staff nurse Ramsden, although these recollections are tempered by an awareness of her own youthful ingratitude. She is also comforted by the joy of listening to music in which she has been schooled by Ramsden. Even though Vera must continue life at a lower level of expectation, she has been able to find some inner resources with which to face it:

From where I sit it seems as if the moon is shining with some secret wisdom. I read somewhere that it was said of Chekhov that he shows us life’s depths at the very moment when he seems to reflect its shimmering surface.

My father’s moon is like this. (p. 32)

Jolley has named her heroine with care. Vera Wright’s behaviour is often morally wrong and sometimes deceitful. But she is also an aspiring writer, and her manipulation of those around her is comparable to the way a novelist precipitates characters into dramatic and painful situations, just as her emotional withdrawal from other people reflects a novelist’s detachment from the characters and situations she has created. How far does Vera, so untruthful in her dealings with others, write the truth about herself for those who read her story? Is it ever possible to write the truth? As in her earlier novels, Miss Peabody’s Inheritance and Foxybaby, Jolley explores once again the paradox of writing truth and fiction simultaneously.

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Some short time ago, David Foster warned that he was abandoning the comic genre for ‘more serious writing’. Hitting the Wall appears to be a first outcome of this new direction—although the second novella was written in 1973 and published in 1977 as part of Escape to Reality.

After novels such as Plumbum and Moonlite, with their almost manic licence of plot, style and characterization, these two novellas surprise by their tight control over those three elements of story-telling. As a result of this control, the mood is claustrophobic—an effect which Foster surely intends as a precise reflection of the lives and attitudes of the main characters in each story.

The protagonists of both stories are men trapped and driven. Wilson in ‘Eye of the Bull’ and the first-person narrator Billy in ‘The Job’ are caught in the circularity and meaninglessness of their lives. Wilson is ‘not prepared to assume responsibility for what he had become, because the process had seemed so arbitrary’ (p. 8). Billy believes ‘the same decisions keep offering themselves and you keep making the same choices’ (p. 70). Both men are obsessed with escape, Wilson through running and Billy through safe-breaking, but their obsessions become further entrapments.

Wilson runs to dull the pain of existence. As he runs he philosophizes on the state of man and of modern society and of his own life, and on the influence of running on these issues. There is little angst or resentment, rather a wry acceptance and bewilderment. The story opens in an unnamed Indian city, probably Calcutta; Wilson is running in the heat of early morning and seems threatened by four Indians running around him. He suffers a breakdown which leaves him impotent; back in Australia he runs again, abandoning career, home and family to do so. Sophie, another runner, restores him sexually, but the final twist in the story has him