

David Callahan: *Rainforest Narratives: The Work of Janette Turner Hospital*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2009. 370 pp. A\$ 39.95. 978-0-7022-3727-0 **Reviewed by Marion Spies**

David Callahan does not only call his book *Rainforest Narratives* because the rainforest is one of Janette Turner Hospital's favoured metaphors (cf. Callahan 180), but also because Hospital does not believe in straightforward story telling. Instead, the Canadian-Australian writer uses fictional strategies which are as profuse and as entangled as the rainforest. And Callahan offers to be our guide through this forest. If this makes the reader think of Dante and his guide Virgil, it will fit, since Hospital is fond of making allusions to the *Divine Comedy*.

Callahan's introductory chapter could be published as an essay in its own right, in which he summarily - and convincingly - discusses some bones of contention critics pick with Hospital: identities, displacement, representation, language, and responsibility among them. These issues will be taken up again later.

The rest of Callahan's book is arranged chronologically; he studies all eight novels and three volumes of short stories Hospital has published so far. (He only briefly mentions the novel *A Very Proper Death*, which Hospital published as "Alex Juniper", and Hospital's *Collected Stories 1970-1995*, though.) He is of the opinion that Hospital deliberately only supplies fragmented information and out-of-sequence time schemes, leaving it to the reader to make sense of plots. In addition, she often structures her fiction as thriller narratives, and the reader has to figure out who has done what to whom. Therefore, the reader certainly needs a guide. And our guide plants signposts in each chapter,

which (1) summarize the issues involved in Hospital's books, (2) indicate the principal critical contexts, and (3) suggest possible interpretations.

Hospital's *The Ivory Swing* (1982) probably is the most dated of her novels, since it takes up issues that were highly topical in Canada in the 1980s, such as the difficulties of dealing with cultural difference, the limitations placed on women and how people resort to violence when they are faced with transgressive behavior. So, although the book is set in India, we mainly gain some insight into the ways Canadian women are restricted. To this effect, Hospital here and in later works makes use of twinned pairs. In one of those twinned pairs, the Indian woman Yashoda is killed because she violated Indian social norms, and her Canadian 'twin' Juliet 'kills' her marriage and her provincial Canadian life by stepping outside the patterns laid down for her by her family. This pair of twins already points to a major concern of Hospital's: she often sympathetically portrays tough women who are downtrodden but do not give up (cf. Callahan 164 and elsewhere).

Presumably because Hospital felt that she was "pigeonholed as a writer of the drama of intercultural dislocation" (Callahan 43), in her next novel, *The Tiger in the Tiger Pit* (1983), the story of a family reunion in Massachusetts, she focuses exclusively on white New Englanders and a white Australian. Callahan shows that in contrast to *Ivory Swing*, *Tiger* displays a much greater attention to structure and a sophistication of point-of-view and the use of time shifts. Callahan analyzes this novel in detail, because for him it is the first one to exhibit what will later become a core feature of her art - an intricate plot. Additionally, he points out that the patriarch Edward Carpenter is the first of the series of autocratic fathers in Hospital's work, and also the first of the series of absent fathers. Intricate in this novel are the various

interpretations of past events by different family members. They constantly challenge Edward's claim to reconstruct the past objectively (cf. Callahan 48); readers will have to cope with multiple versions of history in many of Hospital's works.

Borderline (1985) is philosophically and politically highly ambitious, as it takes up the issue of ethical responsibility (in this case for a refugee from El Salvador), which was already discussed in *Tiger*. On the surface, this book might be constructed like a woman-hunt, but - as Margaret Schramm suggests - it makes a lot of sense as well to interpret it as a postmodern work on absent subjects, including missing people, missing identities, errant fathers and subjectivities that are told by two different layers of narrator (cf. Callahan 75). Slithering memory and self-delusion are topics again, as is violence; the political background makes Hospital's point clear that violence is not restricted to third-world countries but can occur in Canadian middle-class society as well. Here again, Hospital takes the side of the suffering girl or woman who is punished for resisting male power.

In 1986, Hospital's first volume of short stories, *Dislocations*, was published. In his three chapters on Hospital's short stories, Callahan always singles out a handful of tales which exemplify the theme(s) he considers preeminent in the respective volume. In the case of *Dislocations* this is the experience of disjunction that arises from being located outside the familiar. The reader already knows this topic from *Ivory Swing*, and in *Dislocations* Indian and Canadian cultures clash once more. A new topic, chaos and fate, comes up as well; it will become prevalent later in *Charades*. The short stories in *Isobars* (1990), exclusively set in Australia, focus on violence and pain, how to deal with them and how to represent them. Similar to *Borderline*, the ethical imperative to be a moral witness is voiced as well. Callahan points out that in Hospital's work it is always women who demonstrate solidarity

towards fellow human beings. Traces of such a stance could already be seen in *Ivory Swing*. In *North of Nowhere, South of Loss* (2003) it becomes obvious that in the new millennium Hospital made her home in South Carolina, since the "nowhere" of the title frequently stands for a place in the American south, and the volume as a whole is concerned with both absent homes and adopted homes. As a new citizen of the American South, Hospital also gradually comes to realize that the trauma of the lost Civil War still is important there; we will see this in her later novels as well. Heritage and belonging are topics which are tentatively voiced here for the first time.

The grim depiction of realities in the United States once again makes Hospital speak for (in this case black) marginalized people. The problem Callahan has in those three chapters is that although he only analyzes a couple of stories, out of necessity he has to give a lot of plot summaries. It is not always possible to establish common themes in stories which might have been written over a long period of time.

Hospital's novel *Charades* (1988) has a Queenslander MIT physicist as its main character. In general, it is a book about "... how to act responsibly, how to represent the universe in ways that do justice to its complexity, and how to profit from the operations of personal and cultural memory despite their inherent instability" (Callahan 122). For these purposes, Hospital makes recourse to Werner Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle and his search for a Grand Unified Theory. The scientist Koenig and his friends, among them Charade (Scheherazade), are telling stories which are anything but unified. According to Callahan, Hospital thus aims to show " the inability of the scientist to transfer the consequences of his speculations from the abstruse realms of theoretical work to the concrete practice of the narratives out of which we build our realities..." (124). Hospital wants to tell her

readers that although people make connections that create new patterns, realities remain that do not fit together. Nevertheless, we have to try to bring them together. Hospital drives this point home with the help of the example of the Holocaust and its deniers. So she stresses our responsibility to discriminate between different realities and not to accept all of them as equally real. *The Last Magician* (1992) is all about Australian society. Here, the reader has to solve two kinds of mystery: "... what happened to Cat, who has not been seen for a long time, and what to make of the turbulent collage of reflection, intertextual allusion and teasing, double meanings, realist narrative, time shifts and moral outrage that the novel displays" (Callahan 176). The main setting is a 'rainforest' of a special kind, it is the Sydney underworld. This novel is a bitter comment on Australian myths such as 'the fair go' or 'the carefree childhood in a sheltered school'. Instead, there is "violence, inequality and difference" (Callahan 194) and a type of reality whose order is mysterious (cf. Callahan 200).

The spiritually barren outback community in *Oyster* (1996) with its pseudo-savior called Oyster ends with an apocalypse. Almost the only ones who survive unscathed are Aborigines. Here, Callahan seems at a loss when he tries to figure out the meaning of the book; he merely underlines Oyster's "manipulative destructiveness" (228), presumably because destruction will become a major concern in Hospital's next two books. Since Callahan is fond of stressing Hospital's debt to European and American cultural traditions (for example Dante, Boccaccio, Camus, Gluck, Bartok, Hawthorne), it probably has not occurred to him to look at Australian pretexts. But perhaps Randolph Stow's *Tourmaline* (1963) might be of service?

Due Preparations for the Plague (2003) was written before 9/11, when Hospital was already a resident of the United States. It was

considerably altered after the event, since it deals with the hijacking of an aeroplane by terrorists. Callahan works out that the plague is a metaphor for a type of death (through terrorism) one feels indiscriminately threatened by and which has the power to infect our imagination. This fear poisons our relation with the world (cf. Callahan 280).

One of the Orpheus figures in Hospital's latest novel, *Orpheus Lost* (2007, reviewed in ZfA 23), also has a poisoned relation with the world: The musician Mishka Bartok cannot relate to people in Boston but through family ties is connected to an Islamist fundamentalist network in Lebanon. Like in *North of Nowhere*, heritage becomes important; there are several people who believe "... that 'heritage' justifies murdering those whose 'heritage' is opposed to yours" (Callahan 300). This is true for American characters as well, who are described as fighting and killing in Vietnam and Iraq. But surprisingly, 'Orpheus'/Mishka comes back from the underworld of killing, which makes it possible for Callahan to somewhat abruptly end his book and his discussion of Hospital on a positive note: "... the book suggests, we need some version of the myth of renewal..." (Callahan 315).

There is no further summary or conclusion in Callahan's book. But he strove to sum up important themes in passing when he discussed *Orpheus*. And throughout the book, Callahan also made it clear what is important for him in Hospital's art. In short: She is very much influenced by European traditions, she does not favour linear plots, she loves thrillerlike plots, there is a deliberate oversupply of information in. She suggests that there is no perceivable order in the world, and although she is wary of assuming the voice of the Other, she is of the opinion that one has to take ethical responsibility. Callahan's interpretation is not the only feasible one, but it is conclusive and will certainly help many readers. Thank you, David; you are a true Virgil.