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Opalised storytelling

review by Alex Henderson



Kathleen Mary Fallon

A fixed place: the long and short of story

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Kathleen Mary Fallon is a multi-talented writer who has been playing with language and storytelling in poetry, stage plays, feature films, and prose since the 1980s. *A fixed place: the long and short of story* is a collection of short stories from across her career (and some never before published works), taking the reader on a journey through the deeply personal and messy lives of a variety of characters from contemporary Australia. The book nearly defies genre definition; it feels reductive to call it 'a short story collection', given that the tales swing and swoop so readily between prose, poetry, prose-poetry, scripts, song lyrics, and the occasional dreamlike dive into stream of consciousness, demonstrating Fallon's ability to

leap between genres and forms. The overall effect is a dreamlike adventure through the Australian landscape and through the many playful possibilities of language.

The stories are filled with evocative imagery: headstones made of cracked china saucers in a back-garden graveyard for chickens; the thudding heartbeat of a tree frog in the hands of the child who has just rescued it from a dance floor; sheets of rain-damaged taffeta hung up to dry, their colours running so they become ‘aquarelle taffeta opalised taffeta rainbow-stained-across-the-sky taffeta’ (23); ‘starscraps’ (92) falling to earth like cosmic metal shavings as the night sky rearranges itself over the heads of characters while they have an existential moment.

The backdrop of the stories is uniquely Australian and full of sensory details, some grubby and grimy and some glowing and lovely, never shying away from awkward truths. Some stories are deliciously funny: ‘That’s the way the game’s played’ introduces us to a snobbish housewife who ‘often imagined herself having high tea with men in cream linen suits wearing white topees and ladies, elegant in wispy floral frocks, under the whirr of the fans on the verandah of Singapore Raffles, circa 1930’ (34). Her attempts to perform a very colonial, old-world vision of good housekeeping – something that shall surely elevate her above the rabble, establish her as part of the new elite culture of Australia – are impeccable, and she lives in hope that her neighbours are peeping enviously over the fence. However, irony strikes when her husband fertilises the lawn (that symbol of tamed nature and suburban bliss!) with chicken manure, and the garden becomes a noxious stink-site for passers-by to avoid rather than a domestic sanctuary to marvel at. Her efforts at performing the perfect housewife and garnering envy are brought down by the simple facts of nature (and, it should be noted, a very wry and very Aussie sense of humour from her aforementioned husband).

Indeed, many of the stories seem populated by older ladies making their best attempts to ascend to the rank of classy, domestic goddess, even if it means turning up their nose at their own (and their country’s own) rougher beginnings. Fallon presents these characters with a tongue-in-cheek sense of humour, and her knack for slipping into a gossipy stream of consciousness (stream of gossip?) in the narration itself is delightful, creating the impression that you, the reader, have been trapped at the tea table by a Very Cultured Lady who will not stop telling you about the expensive furniture she got when she was in London, and how it’s such a shame that so many posh hotels are ‘owned by Arabs now’, even in ‘glorious England’ (32). You long for escape, and yet the prose makes these caricatures so strangely compelling. Perhaps it’s the authenticity in the voice, delivered with that knack for dark comedy, and the dreadful knowledge that this is only a slightly exaggerated creative rendition of a thousand real conversations.

While there is plenty of satire in the tales, there is also plenty of down-to-earth melancholy. ‘Michael – a potter, not a ceramicist’ expertly blends black comedy with crushing dread, telling the story of a complicated friendship brought to its end by the AIDS epidemic. The image of two friends who never properly said goodbye to each other, as it would have been

too sappy for the biting and banter-filled dynamic they had developed, is haunting and feels painfully resonant. ‘not unlike the peeling of many bells’ also tells, through looping and languid prose poetry, the story of a disastrous relationship and the complexities of sexual identity.

The detail in all these stories, and in all these characters’ lives and loves, is rich, and Fallon paints a multi-layered picture of these flawed, messy, toeing-the-line-between-sympathetic-and-unsympathetic characters in a short amount of time. While some stories, such as ‘Michael’, are clearly autobiographical, there is a ringing of truth to all the writing in the collection. Even if they may feel ethereal, there is always a strange certainty that the events and emotions described really happened – yes, even shavings of the stars falling down as the constellations remake themselves.

Sometimes these stories are melancholic, sometimes chaotic, sometimes both at once. Like the taffeta with the ‘opalised’ dye, the writing is colourful and effervescent and shimmers a little differently depending on the angle from which you look at it. Those familiar with Fallon’s work will no doubt delight in having so many of these tales and poems gathered together in one book, and for new readers *A fixed place* provides an intriguing tasting platter of Fallon’s range as a writer.

Alex Henderson is a PhD candidate at the University of Canberra. Her creative thesis explores the ways writers can play with familiar tropes and archetypes for the purpose of social commentary and diverse narratives, with particular focus on depictions of gender roles and the representation of LGBTQIA+ characters.