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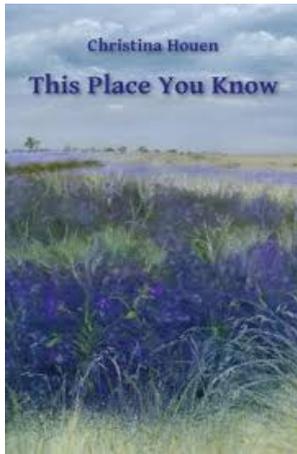
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## TEXT Review

### The exhausting earth

*review by Zinia Mitra*



Christina Houen  
*This Place You Know*  
Ginninderra Press, Port Adelaide SA 2019  
ISBN 978-1-76041-743-7  
pb 242pp AUD32.50

*A man does not mean anything.  
But the place.  
Sitting on the riverbank throwing pebbles  
into the muddy current,  
a man becomes the place.*

(Mahapata 1976: np)

Christina Houen's *This Place You Know* is a memoir. The book is in three parts, 'Martha's Story', 'Anna's Story' and 'The Last Song'. It begins with a Prologue and ends with an

Epilogue. The memoir of Christina's mother, Martha, and Christina's own childhood experiences are, by the author's own admittance, drawn from archival records, her mother's handwritten memoirs and her own memoirs. Much of Martha's story is imaginative reconstruction of her thoughts and actions.

The first part of the book occupies 'Martha's Story'. Martha is a classic scholar from the coast. She takes up a teaching job and goes to a man's town in the outback. Martha's first days are filled with letters to her parents. She soon falls in love with Henry, a local man. They decide to marry and find their dream place beside river Murrumbidgee. 'The Place' (in a chapter with the same title) is a harsh unforgiving location with recurring droughts and hurricanes. Martha begins her life with her love for Henry, with a dream and scanty furniture. During Martha's first pregnancy, Henry helps her and runs the place. He makes a front lawn and plants privet hedge. He plants a cedar tree which grows to cover the house like an umbrella. He takes care of the livestock. Martha begins to "feel" the place but has her fits of discontent. She eventually gives birth to five children: David, Vera, Malcolm, Simon, and Anna. The pages of Martha's story reflect the lived experience of many women, filled with everydayness of cleaning, housekeeping, running the house, excitement and love for children, worries and cares of children. The early days of Martha's and Henry's marriage, establishment of their sheep flock and beginning their family with five children coincide with the Great Depression. Australia, especially rural Australia, is hit hard. World War 2 follows soon after. Unreliable rainfall and drought make farming even more unwarrantable. It is difficult to domesticate the demanding landscape. Poverty and the oppressive heat of the lake district summers of Australia combined with solitude make life even more difficult. The overwhelming fear of another pregnancy takes its toll on the pair. A final pregnancy occurs when Martha is forty-five.

'Anna's Story' begins in July 1946. Anna is a sensitive imaginative child. She grows up in the native house in the harsh landscape. One-by-one, the older children leave home to attend boarding school. The fun-loving Henry finally begins dating another woman, loses interest in Martha and the family and abandons them for her. Martha decides to continue to work on the property on her own. It is challenging but she is persistent. The seven-year-old is her only help. She also receives occasional help of her sons who return during school holidays. A few years later, Henry returns to reclaim the prospering farm. When families broke down, in the days prior to the 1975 Family Law Act, women could demand little from their husbands. There was no provision for alimony and women were bereft of all social security. Martha has to leave the farm. She returns to her teaching career again to support Anna and pay for her boarding school. Anna's story speaks of her difficult childhood in the same place, her adolescence, the cleaning and washing of mother that fills up lives of women. A sensitive girl she notes her parents quarrel. Fairy tale imagination fills up her imaginative mind. Finally, when her father abandons them, she and her mother are a team. Later in the book an older Anna meets her father who is in the hospital and an amputee. Henry intimates her his side of the story but Anna knows how her mother had to settle for a paltry sum. She visits Hay after her parent's death and finds the place changed. She lets go all the memories she had been

holding on to. We learn in the end that she herself is divorced and her children are taken by her husband.

Another presence is strongly felt in the book, that of nature. An almost Hardian nature is alive and active throughout the book. When the courting Martha and Henry kiss in 'Courting', in a characteristic Hardian way there is a sudden loud crack and a splash that startles Martha and she pulls back. A branch of a tree breaks and falls from an 'overhanging tree into the river' (34). When Martha feels trapped with five small children and much housework to do, nature 'is dark with brooding storm clouds massing in March skies every afternoon, promising rain but remaining closed' (73). In spite of the presence of the river, it is an arid landscape. Sometimes there is no relief from heat. There are repetitive concerns of 'drying up' (44). The house dries up 'cracking and shrivelling to a carapace like the discarded cicada shells on tree trunks and fence posts' (44). Martha is anxious that she herself will dry up.

There is not only drought, there are also dust storms. Martha writes:

We still get dust storms sometimes. At least they've brought some good: seeds of perennial saltbush from South Australia. It is small creeping tough plant that survives the harshest summer, and the sheep love it. (75)

This landscape is woven into the lives of Martha, Henry and Anna. Murrumbidgee river is an unfailing part of the landscape. Murrumbidgee is like no river Martha has seen before. When Henry talks of his dream place on the river, Martha feels 'strangely happy and hopeful' (31). Martha absorbs the landscape: 'The landscape is so different from the coast. The plains are flat and stretch out in a huge area to meet the horizon. The only thing breaking the circle is the belt of trees that winds along the rivers course' (37). The river is Anna's nightmare. She dreams of the rising river, wall of waters gushing and roaring down the riverbed overflowing the edges and pushing down trees. When Anna revisits the river after her parents' deaths, she is left disoriented. The sandy beaches are gone, the banks are bare and muddy. She bids farewell to her parents' memories and to the memories of her childhood. She finds the place changed with 'more certainty, greed rules and dictates the way land is managed' (229).

In the Prologue we are introduced to a wrinkled skinny woman tending vegetables at night. She walks leaning on her stick to another bare patch. The old woman, like the Sybil in the epigraph of Eliot's *The Wasteland*, symbolises Hay. She reappears in the Epilogue. In the end there is hope of rain in the land threatened by drought. She moves to take shelter.

Although the book abounds in descriptions of nature that often become almost poetry, there is an unmistakable feminine voice that is not drowned in the lyrical images of natural surroundings. 'I would have loved to study law', writes Martha early in the book, 'but Father said it was not a suitable profession for a lady. Indeed although the first female law student graduated from Sydney University in 1902 it wasn't until 1918 that women were entitled to practise in New South Wales' (22). The voice is dominant especially in chapters like 'No Place for Girls' and in 'Boys are Different'. The latter describes the terrible abuse little Anna

is exposed to. The book also shows the modifications in the outlook of the three generation of women. Martha mother was a figure the children took for granted. She was a figure in the background, sewing, cooking, cleaning and polishing who ‘saw home as a sanctuary from the outside world, and her main focus was to shelter her husband from the stresses and pressures of his work when he was at home, and to bring the children up to respect him, the home, and the family’ (22). Martha’s own experience of marriage falls short of this model her mother had set. Martha’s husband abandons her and she fights to keep the land and works to look after Anna. Later Anna is the one who breaks the family.

The memoir is also a chronicle of social history of life on the land and the silent role played by women in farming.

*This Place You Know*, Christina Houen’s first book, speaks of heartache, deception and forgiveness. It explores love and love’s outcomes in a realistic approach. The book is meant for quiet reading. There is lyricism in the prose and sometimes the lines take flight to becoming poetry. Women will find their tales told in the realistic portrayals of Martha and Anna, and the courage with which they face the hard facts of life. Much of their suffering is because of the structure of the society conjoined with the unforeseen events like the Great Depression, the Stock Market Crash and the Second World War.

Eliot in ‘Tradition and Individual Talent’ makes a point that ‘the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past’ (Eliot 1919: 55). In the end, *This Place You Know* says that one’s place is not a simple equation of a country one lives in, it is one’s blood and bones, one’s nerves, that never leaves its natives wherever she/he lives, whatever she/he does. When one dies, it is always going to be this place one knew (237). Eliot spoke of ‘tradition’ as not just the immediate past but the distant past, the cognizance of the entire pastness of human history and literature ‘that compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order’ (55). Houen is acutely conscious of her place and time, of her own contemporaneity as much as her past which directs and shapes her present. She concludes her memoir with an awareness that the best way to end a broken story is to close the circle.

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*Zinia Mitra teaches English in North Bengal University, India. Her travelogues and articles have been published in The Statesman, her reviews, articles, translations in books and journals. Her books include: The Concept of Motherhood in India: Myths, Theories and Realities (2020), Twentieth Century British Literature: Reconstructing Literary Sensibility (2013), Indian Poetry in English: Critical Essays (2012), and Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra: Imagery and Experiential Identity (2010). Her areas of interest include Indian Literature, Poetry, Feminism and Gender Studies. Her poems have appeared in Muse India, Ruminations, Contemporary Literary Review, Kavya Bharati, East Lit. Indian Literature, Asian Signature, and Setu. She is on the editorial board of Teesta Review, an international journal of poetry.*