

**RAINFOREST NARRATIVES:
THE WORK OF JANETTE TURNER HOSPITAL**

David Callahan

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David Callahan's contribution to Janette Turner Hospital studies is a major one, since, apart from the fifty-odd page compilation of essays edited by Selina Samuels in 1998, in which Callahan's chapter on *Isobars* also figures prominently (along with Hospital's own essay on the work of Christina Stead), this is the first, and so far the only monographic book-length study of Hospital's work published so far. Given that Hospital embarked on her career as a writer of fiction nearly thirty years ago, and that her work has come to occupy a more and more prominent place in the panorama of contemporary literature in English, a work like this is not only most welcome, but also absolutely necessary. A look at Callahan's previous publications indicates how well-placed he is to tackle the task, since he is the author of abundant previous articles and book chapters both on Turner Hospital herself and on different aspects of Australian literature and culture. He is also the editor of *Australia —Who Cares?* (2007) and of *Contemporary Issues in Australian Literature* (2002).

His new book constitutes a thoughtful and sensitive study of all the books published by Hospital so far, from *The Ivory Swing* (1982) to *Orpheus Lost* (2007), with the exception of the pseudonymous crime novel *A Very Proper Death*. It consists of twelve chapters, the first of which is introductory, while each of the remaining chapters is a detailed analysis of each of Hospital's books, including her eight novels and her three collections of short stories. This overall clearly-ordered

structure seems to suit better the tidy, classical simplicity of the subtitle, *The Works of Janette Turner Hospital*, than the title proper. Callahan, however, shows in Chapter 1 how both parts of the title work by clarifying the underlying meanings of “rainforest narratives”. He explains how Hospital’s texts resemble “the profusion and entanglements of the rainforest” in that they offer an “oversupply of information” but, at the same time, by means of their convoluted plots, they “occlude connections and links until we have made our way into them”. If, as the author suggests, “Hospital’s work [seeks] to explore things in their connections and the ways in which they implicate each other” (2-3), Callahan’s own work mirrors hers in that he is able to trace doggedly each of the connections between her different books, between her books and the different sources they draw on, and, especially, that last connection of all: the one between literature and life. For, even though Hospital’s works make it clear that fiction is indeed, “a created artefact”, and not “a mirror that reflects reality or life” (1), yet they also remind us that it may (it must, as a matter of fact) passionately engage with real life.

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These links are established, not merely by pointing out autobiographical aspects in the texts, but, especially, by means of the concept of responsibility, a crucial one in Hospital’s works, and one that Callahan, as an ethically-concerned critic, pursues throughout his book. In his analysis, responsibility turns out to be many-sided. To begin with, there is the writer’s responsibility, closely related to what he sees as the “main theme of her fiction”: “how to read reality” and “how to record one’s reading”. Reading responsibly involves, among other things, bearing witness to the injustices committed by power, asking moral questions without any of the pusillanimity that often goes with political correctness, or preventing readers from being self-complacent by “interrupting their tendency to follow passively what they are being told” (48), which she achieves by, for example, making us distrust the version of the story we have, perhaps too confidently, been listening to. In this connection, the proverbial difficulty in reading Hospital is shown to be no mere idle technical display, but rather an instrument intended to keep her readers fully awake, that is to say, fully responsible. Faced with multiple versions of reality, the responsible reader is sometimes at pains to decide what to make of “Hospital’s troubling mixture of intellectual playfulness and ethical seriousness” (50). This leads to nothing less than an examination of “the practical consequences of the contemporary idea that reality has no objective basis and is merely a collection of different stories told about it” (156). The result of this examination, Callahan argues, is that “there are contexts in which it is crucial that one meaning prevail over others”, because a version of reality that allows those in power to commit rape and go unpunished, remaining untarnished in the eyes of the society, should not be allowed to triumph. Being a responsible reader is, therefore, no easy question,

and Callahan concludes that it is “a matter of reading the signs in such a way as to affirm the possibility of human solidarity” (156-157). Hospital’s fiction also introduces the issue of responsibility by presenting us constantly with characters who care for others along with those who, by failing to establish meaningful connections with others, are led to self-destruction. Moreover, for an Australia-born author, responsibility is unavoidably connected to the question of the Indigenous population of the country. Presenting this issue responsibly has to do, Callahan says, with the need to “reference Indigenous stories without appropriating their voices” (215), which Hospital absolutely refrains from doing. Finally, writer and reader alike have the responsibility of sustaining continuing hope. Hope, in fact, “however banal it sounds, is a fierce imperative in Hospital’s world” (204). It is therefore the writer’s moral duty to transmit this hope; it is the reader’s duty to understand that “we need to act *now* to oppose the forces of violence and unfeeling”, because, in the final analysis, the “last magician” in the homonymous novel is “the one who acts last”, that is to say, the reader (205).

Closely related to the topics of responsibility and interconnectedness, the book also explores a number of related questions, such as those of difference, dislocation, trauma, loss, expatriation, memory, power, causality, consciousness, or time (especially the relationship between the past and the present). Such a rich array of topics is an indication that *Rainforest Narratives* may be found attractive by a much wider reading public than just those concerned with Hospital studies. It is also good reading for those working in the fields of ethics and trauma studies, as well as anybody with an interest in Australian culture and literature. It may be necessary to recall here that, in spite of her transnational identity (Australian/Canadian/American), “wherever she is, Hospital is touching Queensland” (243), that much of her writing is marked by both her love and her fierce criticism of the country, that “by far the most evocative places in her writing [...] are Australian” (55), that, even in a novel set in India (where she also spent a considerable period of her life), her writing is strongly influenced by “an Australian upbringing in which history shows a hard-won battle to strip social interaction of the subservience and hierarchical protocols brought from Europe” (19-20), and that, therefore, it is with very good reason that Callahan has chosen an Australian metaphor as a title for his book. Nonetheless, it should also be borne in mind that “Hospital’s career also challenges the tendency to nationalise culture” (5) in a way highly consistent with her “everpresent attention to margins, borders and liminal states” (6).

Callahan’s exploration of these (and many more) issues is carried out by means of the joint operation of textual analysis and post-modernist and post-colonial theory. Plain theory is introduced very sparingly, and then in very reader-friendly terms, even when what is at stake is, as happens in the discussions of *Charades*, as complex

as Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle. The reader also feels thankful towards the guiding, yet unobtrusive hand that, like one of those Dante figures Hospital is so fond of, guides her/him through the dense web of allusion and reference that spreads over Hospital's work, from medieval manuscripts to postmodern theorists, through the Bible and American literature, as well as the classics. Callahan's quick eye and knowledgeable response come in handy here.

The bibliography section also deserves a comment. Exhaustive and well-organised, it is divided into two parts which comprise, respectively, works by and works about Hospital. The former are divided into novels, short stories, selected uncollected fiction, manuscripts, articles and reviews. The latter consist of interviews and criticism, divided in turn into the categories of book (before the appearance of *Rainforest Narratives*, this category only had one item), booklets, special issues of journals, articles and reviews cited. Generous towards the reader, Callahan has even included websites where the reader can easily find further information. This generosity is also revealed in other aspects of the book, as when we are informed of ways in which we can expand our experience of the world of the novel. The notes at the end of the book direct us to find, for instance, "an excellent recording" of Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* (346, note 7) so that we can have a first-hand experience of what listening to this piece, so significant for Leela and Mishka in *Orpheus Lost*, is like. Another example: we are invited to revise material about the legal framework surrounding the trial of William Calley, a real-life event echoed by Slaughter's story in the novel (347, 15). Such an attitude is perfectly consistent with the book's ethical concern with connection: very much like the rainforest, the book establishes links for readers to go on exploring and to open up the field of their experience. In more than one way, then, ethics is not only a topic in the book, but an overall attitude on Callahan's part.

This ethical stance towards both his readers and his material is also apparent in other aspects. On numerous occasions, after discussing his own approach to an issue, Callahan introduces a note whose only purpose is to present a contrasting viewpoint (this happens, for example, with Mueller's views on *Dislocations*, 328, note 21). This is done without any sort of comment or interference, as if the author just intended to make room for difference, an attitude that he often praises in Hospital's works, and to allow the reader to draw her/his own conclusions. The lack of a final conclusion to *Rainforest Narratives* may indeed work in the same direction. In the middle of the rainforest of Hospital's narrative, Callahan provides enough light for readers to find their way but he does so respectfully enough to keep intact the experience of darkness we are indeed intended to go through, leaving all the responsibility to the reader after having fulfilled his own as a critic.

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