

From website of The Wheeler Centre: Books, Writing, Ideas  
Melbourne, April 2012

# A Sentimental Yoke

by Maria Tumarkin

Most Australian books I have loved of late have been publicly admired for their radical unsentimentality: Helen Garner's *The Spare Room* (2008) is 'utterly unsentimental' and Gillian Mears's *Foal's Bread* (2011) an 'unsentimental chronicle', while 'no hint of sentimentality' lurks in *Forecast: Turbulence* (2011) by Janette Turner Hospital, and M.J. Hyland, in *This is How* (2009), displays an 'entirely unsentimental command of her craft'.

And I agree, in principle. I agree with the praise itself and with the idea that a steadfast refusal of what James Joyce called 'unearned emotion' should be worthy of praise. But as I took in the reviews of these books and of other books I hadn't read – Paddy O'Reilly's 'unsentimental celebration of simply getting by' in *The Fine Colour of Rust* (2012); Carrie Tiffany's 'decidedly unsentimental' portrait of rural living in *Mateship with Birds* (2012) – a feeling would come to me, stronger each time, that a review could be going along swimmingly, all verve, let's say, and fireworks, and then we'd get to that bit and instantly the whole thing would feel more wooden than a politburo meeting. I understood what was being said. I found it completely reasonable. I didn't buy it, though.

It's not the contrarian in me, it's simply the noticer of things, who wonders why we are condemning sentimentality in this unified voice, one that seems a touch zealous. If you like a book, and if the book you like deals with a high-stakes subject such as death, life, love or loss, and if you want to tell the world about that book, and particularly, I suspect, if the book happens to be written by a woman, then you reach for 'unsentimental' and its many variations – *This book never feels mawkish* – the way you reach for a pair of old slippers. It's a habitual gesture replete with a curious, disengaged automatism. The more we say it, the more this denunciation of the sentimental seems old, unconvincing.

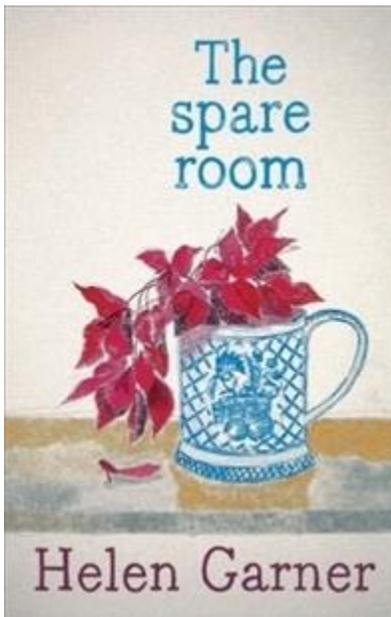
I wonder what the archetypal image of sentimentality in our culture might look like. Let's leave books to one side: might it be us weeping over ten-year anniversary specials on Princess Diana's death? Images of dying children set to Bach? The very pointed use of the colour red in Steven Spielberg's black-and-white *Schindler's List*?

I know how 'sentimental' feels, when we talk about sentimental writing: wet, a bit slimy, a bit purple and baroque, unrestrained. *Cheap*. It feels as if we are shouting words that should be said quietly; slurring words that demand to be said crisply. It feels like stories – readers' emotions too – are being milked, wrangled, squeezed dry, forced into something. It feels like cheating.

Over the past few centuries ‘sentimental’ has become an unambiguous term of literary disparagement, with only a handful of big-league authors, Dickens foremost among them, managing to hang on to their literary reputations despite charges of sentimentality. It’s the automatism that preoccupies me, this going-through-the-motions sense of us tossing ‘sentimental’ around without stopping to think what it means and why we do not care for it. Instead of figuring out what we are aching to say, and then saying it, we say what everyone else has already said. ‘Sentimental.’ ‘Unsentimental.’ Our meaning is bleedingly obvious, is it not? – only it’s the bleeding obviousness, the spectacle of everyone saying it and no one questioning it, that’s the problem.

---

Writers themselves are often excellent on the subject. Here is Helen Garner: ‘There are plenty of points ... when I could have slackened off and it was painful to me to make myself keep pushing hard against that sort of stuff. Sentimentality is a terrible temptation in writing because it gets you off all the hooks and it makes people go *aargh*.’



No one is spared in Garner’s *The Spare Room*. Not Nicola, the dying friend who comes to stay – she is naked in front of us, on mottled feet, veins all over her ankles, no knickers ever, with a ‘frightful, agonised, social smile’ and the ‘possessions of a refugee’, random bits of clothes, dirty, neglected, packed in an Indian cloth bag, her lush voice now ‘a thread’. Not Helen, the main character, with her exhausting bouts of rage gushing up ‘like nausea’; her impatience and her intolerance of falsehoods and her pitiless absolutes. No one and nothing is off the hook. Even the dying is naked: ‘Death will not be denied. To try is grandiose. It drives madness into the soul. It leaches out virtue. It injects poison into friendship, and makes a mockery of love.’

To describe Garner’s voice in this book as merely ‘unsentimental’ is to lose something crucial. Of course, the whole book is unsentimental in its non-beautification of the dying, and in its honesty: an honesty beyond good taste, beyond propriety, at times almost beyond measure. Not a

single wet patch in the book. Hardly one operatic note. The author's hands are off the reader's heartstrings. Fits the 'unsentimental' bill to a tee.

But if 'unsentimental' is primarily about not tugging at easy, empty emotions that distort and falsify the emotional reality of whatever we're talking about by removing ugliness, contradictions and depth, then the term cannot quite account for how it is that Garner's insistence on telling the truth does not create ugliness. It does not diminish anyone. Nor does it pretend to speak matter-of-factly about something overwhelming and terrifying: a friend dragging towards death, kicking and screaming, and the sight of ourselves up-close as they go. *The Spare Room* is not so much unsentimental as unpretending – unpretending in the deepest, most morally engaged of ways.

That is why Nicola, whose bed linen – all piss and sweat – Helen changes three times a night, on a good night, and who gives herself over to charlatans and who resolutely puts on 'a tremendous performance of being alive' that grates on Helen's nerves something shocking, is nonetheless beautiful. 'She was the least self-important person I knew, the kindest, the least bitchy. I couldn't imagine the world without her.' Nicola made her friends laugh, a special gift. She was a great looker, too – we can see that, the nobility of her face and frame, despite the cancer that's eating her up and despite Garner more than once painting her as a 'crone'. And Helen, with her desperate, raging love for her dying friend, is also beautiful. Real and beautiful. 'I learned to wash her arse as gently as I had washed my sister's and my mother's, and as some day someone will have to wash mine.' (I am yet to read this line without tearing up.)

---

When it comes to mortality, we admire our writers for holding back, for not playing death and dying for all they're worth. The late Donald Horne and his wife Myfanwy's 2007 memoir, *Dying* – comparable, in its gloriously lucid tone, to Tony Judt's *The Memory Chalet* (2010) – is an exemplary work of this kind. *The Spare Room* gives us not a peep of violins. But to me this is not what sets Garner's book apart.

Perhaps by 'sentimental' what we are actually talking about is 'crassly manipulative' – in other words, a reliance on overwrought, inflated, spelt-out and inauthentic emotions to get to the reader. The thing is, the use of the unsentimental voice when it is a writer's starting point rather than their destination, an aesthetic rather than a moral choice, can be just as manipulative. Sentimentality is cheap. So is faux unsentimentality. Writers are taught in today's creative writing classes to avoid sentimentality, to pull back when tackling the big stuff, to give us 'sparse', 'spare', 'quietly affecting' prose. They can do 'self-restraint' by the truckload. They can nail 'economy of expression'.

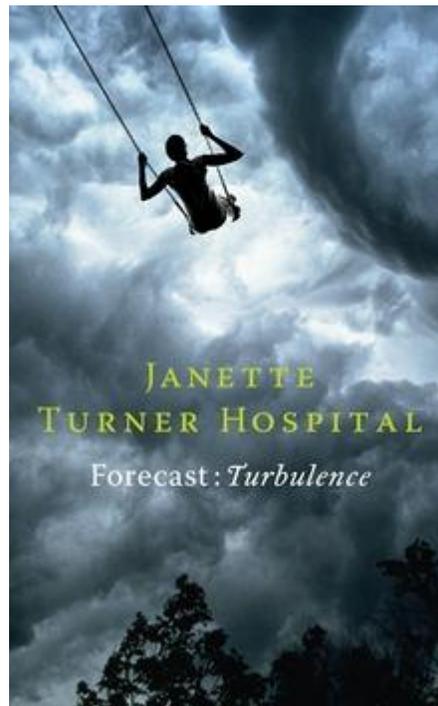
What I am saying is that unsentimentality can be faked. It's not that hard. Writers have their tricks.

Which is why what Helen Garner thinks about sentimentality is much more interesting than her own by-now-legendary lack of sentimentality – and for Garner, sentimentality is in essence a loss of nerve, a recoiling from something central about being human, from some kind of

indispensable truth. It is the inability to think a difficult, shameful, vital thought through to the end; to dispense with what Christopher Hitchens, as he was dying, called ‘facile maxims’ about suffering and mortality. (Hitchens singled out one in particular as egregiously facile: ‘Whatever doesn’t kill me makes me stronger.’ I am sure Garner would agree.)

The philosopher William James left us with a useful example of a sentimentalist at the theatre. Inside the theatre, a woman cries at the heroine’s on-stage suffering; outside, the woman’s coachman is freezing to death. The complex, confronting, demanding emotions of caring for a real-life human – in this case your subordinate, someone ‘at your disposal’ – are traded for a banal, narcissistic gushing forth of tears and mucus. Oscar Wilde had a phrase for this. Wanting, he called it, ‘the luxury of an emotion without paying for it’. For James, the sentimentalist is a close relative of the cynic. Both go to great lengths to avoid empathy: an empathy that is genuine, and therefore hard work, often thankless, just as often invisible. One may weep, the other may smirk, but their two cardiograms will remain uncannily in sync.

---



Empathy in literature is notoriously tricky. I could have picked any story from *Forecast: Turbulence*, Janette Turner Hospital’s new collection. In ‘Weather Maps’, two girls – one black, one white – meet in the visiting room of a local prison. They are there every Sunday with their mothers, visiting their stepfathers. Both stepfathers are violent: one’s obsessed with setting fires, the other breeds berserk dogs. On the outside, they abuse their stepdaughters. On the inside, they demand loyalty. ‘Hi, Dad, I miss you too,’ the girls say into a telephone connecting the two sides of a visiting room cut in half by a glass wall.

Each Sunday, and for two days beforehand, and on other days too, the girls cut themselves. They make patterns. Elizabeth makes weather maps, on the insides of her thighs and upper arms; she can hide those from everyone. Elizabeth and Tiyah have worked out how to cut better, deeper, cleaner. Gradually, they reveal to each other this most sacred, secret part of themselves: ‘We were hardly breathing, we weren’t even blinking, just keeping watch, but I could hear my heart and hers, loud as kitchen timers, loud as the band teacher’s metronome, far louder than our voices which were barely above a whisper.’

We can feel, here in this moment, the electricity between Elizabeth and Tiyah, the heart-stopping beauty of their emerging sisterhood. They say to each other, ‘We’re bionic women,’ and we believe them. We believe, too, that there can be safety, strength and release in cutting. Hospital doesn’t let us feel sorry for these girls, to see them as deluded and brutalised vestiges of white and black trash. She doesn’t let us feel that their relationship, based as it is on a shared pathology, is inherently doomed. No such comfortable and instantly available crumbs of anguish are tossed our way – instead, we are led into far more complex emotions.

Unsentimental? Unquestionably. Turner Hospital’s writing is clearly that – but not, primarily, in its avoidance of big notes and overwrought emotions. Rather, it is unsentimental in its rebuttal of cynicism and ready-made kinds of readerly consolation. ‘Unsentimental’, actually, does not quite capture it, and ‘unsentimental’ doesn’t come close to capturing something else about the stories in this book – Hospital’s insistence on the hard hope drenched in sadness, doubt and pain.

---

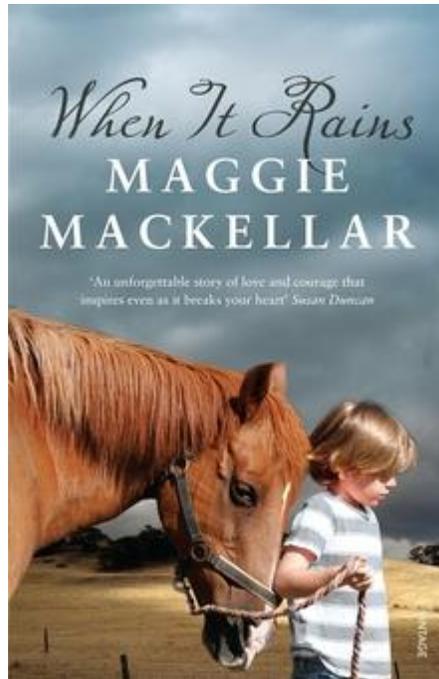
The fact that I have been talking here mostly about women writers is not lost on me. When V.S. Naipaul spoke recently about women’s writing being both instantly recognisable and recognisably inferior, and he threw the word ‘sentimental’ in there as a hand grenade, people retorted with righteous indignation: ‘You pompous, self-regarding, limited man, look at the forensic intellect of our Joan Didions and our Zadie Smiths, look at how our Garners, our Hospitals, our M.J. Hylands write about living, killing and dying. Get an eyeful of that.’

Or: ‘You pompous, self-regarding, limited man, you are part of the history of policing serious literature, you cannot handle messy, human, emotionally charged, intimate, non-phallic kinds of writing.’

Both righteous retorts are demonstrably true. There are *many* women writers of such unstoppable, fierce intellect that they could, if so inclined, eat V.S. Naipaul for breakfast; and there is *nothing* inferior about works of literature that ask to be read in a state of heightened emotional arousal ... or even emotional identification.

I have to ask again, though: why is ‘sentimental’ a useful word here? What is it useful for? What are we actually talking about?

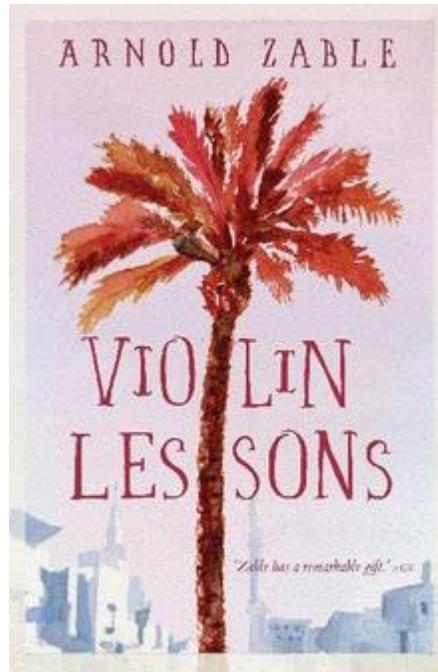
---



In her 2010 memoir, *When It Rains*, Maggie MacKellar writes about a double grief of hers: grief for her mother, who died of cancer, and for her husband, who killed himself while she, MacKellar, was pregnant with their second child. ‘I think of the women,’ writes MacKellar, ‘who slice their breasts with sharpened stones when they lose their husbands. They mark their bodies with a scar so people can see they’re different – separate from other women, other wives, other mothers.’ MacKellar can grieve for her mother. But how to grieve for him – him who abandoned her, them? For four years tears refuse to come, and when finally they do come, they do not wash the anger or the viciousness of her pain out. Instead, with tears, comes a desire – savage, human, true – to cut herself from breast to breast with a sharp stone. ‘I want everyone to see the scars and to know that however they imagine loss to be, it’s bigger, harder, higher and deeper.’

MacKellar is not holding back here. She is certainly not being restrained. She wants the reader to see, and know, how much pain she is in. But I dare anyone to call this sentimental writing. To tell the truth about the uncontainable nature of grief, and its hold on you, the timelessness of it, you simply cannot be afraid of big notes, lest you sound like a field mouse squeaking.

---



A story called ‘Ancient Mariner’ in Arnold Zable’s latest non-fiction collection, *Violin Lessons* (2011), tells of an Iraqi woman, Amal, who was on board Siev X when it sank on its way to Christmas Island. Amal survived the sinking by clinging to the body of a dead woman for 20 hours. She managed, a miracle, to save one of her son’s lives (the other son wasn’t with them). Between that day and her death from cancer, years later, Amal told the story of Siev X’s sinking again and again, publicly, privately. This is how Zable met her. They became friends; she, knowing she was going to die, entrusted him with her story. Zable could see she was totally drained by the telling and the retelling, but she wouldn’t – couldn’t – stop.

Her compulsion to speak made sense to him. It fitted within the bounds of a tradition he knew well, that of bearing witness. Less familiar was the way Amal spoke:

*And when I came up to the surface, the doors of hell opened.*

*The children look fresh. They look like angels. They look like birds, like they are going to fly on the water.*

Later, alone in the water, only sky above and ocean around her – *I looked to the sky. I wanted to see the angel of death.*

If you never heard her speak, it would be easy to think of Amal’s way of telling this story as sentimental. Zable heard her speak many times. He knew ‘sentimental’ had nothing to do with it. After Amal’s death, he agonised over which way, the right way, to capture her voice, to honour the truths it contained about the end of a world she was witness to. He found a way, by listening to the legendary Arabic singer Umm Kulthum: ‘People loved her for her unrestrained emotion and the epic stories she told in her songs.’ Each performance would build to a cathartic union

between singer and audience. ‘I hear Amal,’ writes Zable, ‘willing her tales to their limits, inducing in her listeners a state of enchantment.’

To imagine Amal’s voice as essentially sentimental is to forget that this kind of incantatory storytelling is about speaking to, and with, both the living and the dead, and about bringing the dead back to life. A collective fear of sentimentality leaves little room for stories as large as these. When the English novelist Julian Barnes embarked on re-reading a French novel he’d once loved, Alain-Fournier’s *Le Grand Meaulnes*, a story of lost youth, a strange house, a beautiful girl – ‘one who had been the fairy, the princess, the mysterious love-dream of our adolescence’ – he worried he might find it soppy, or soggy, or worse ... Then he remembered: hadn’t Fournier himself had something to say about this? ‘Sentimentality,’ said Fournier, ‘is when it doesn’t come off – when it does, you get a true expression of life’s sorrows.’

There are places, as Alain-Fournier knew, that utter unsentimentality cannot take us.

### **About Maria Tumarkin**



Maria Tumarkin is an author and cultural historian. Her books are *Traumascapes* (2005), *Courage* (2007) and *Otherland* (2010), which was shortlisted for the non-fiction prize in both the Victorian Premier’s Literary Awards and the NSW Premier’s Literary Awards.

Her reviews and essays have been published in various publications, including the *Australian*, the *Age*, *Best Australian Essays*, *Meanjin*, *Griffith Review*, the *Monthly* and *Kill Your Darlings*.

Maria lives in Melbourne with her two children.