

News from the war zone

NOW I know why so many Catholic women in Australia have fought their way to the top: those bleak Irish/Catholic primary schools they attend define the war zones of life, identify enemies and allies, and point the way to victory, while in Protestant schools girls are learning to blame themselves and distrust each other.

In *Promise of Rain* little Lucy Stapleton tells the pesty boy who is always trying for a glimpse of her knickers, "I play with girls because they're the same sex. And being the same sex is almost the same blood, like parents."

Later, directed by her father and the boy to fetch a petrol cap from the gutter where the boy has thrown it in spite, Lucy, having rejected his advances, reflects: "The two of them were sitting in co-operative superiority. Same sex, same blood, a pair of Toby jugs, in different sizes, balanced on the car seat."

This early awareness by Catholic girls in daily contact with nuns and priests, that men and women have quite objective and class conflicts, provides them with a useful rationale for action, while the very existence of nuns legitimises the female spiritual quest.

So Lucy Stapleton, schooled in a Five Dock convent and resident in Haberfield, two little worlds rife with bigotry and prejudice, obtains her mother's blessing to head for the desert, that age-old venue of those with the thirst of righteousness and a belief in the promise of rain.

As a teacher in Alice Springs Lucy finds her grown-up pupils to be no more enlightened than the kids in the Five Dock playground, but encounters with the relatives of an Aboriginal medical student, a friend of hers from university, seem to expand the possibilities for her union with others, across the division of sex and race.

Promise of Rain is an ambitious, wide ranging and intense novel, satirical and comic much in the manner of *White*. Parts of the Alice Springs section are hilarious, though Morgan will never again be welcome in that region if the local whites ever get beyond spelling lessons in their English courses. They

PROMISE OF RAIN by Gail Morgan; *Virago*, \$8.95
THE VOICE BEYOND THE TREES by Nancy Phelan; *J.M. Dent*, \$14.95

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will fuss that Morgan's whites talk like peasants and her Aboriginals like princes. Both groups seem, strangely enough, amazingly authentic.

Morgan is an accomplished writer. No question of that. Pity her novel ends badly, almost melodramatically. An abortive mob lynching in contemporary Alice Springs needs more preparation than is given it to seem inevitable.

Still, *Virago's* judgment in making *Promise of Rain* the first contemporary Australian novel on their list should meet with wide approval.

Nancy Phelan, in her third novel, *The Voice Beyond The Trees*, explores the psyche of a spinster who thinks (wrongly) that she has been rejected by her family and others on account of a facial disfigurement, and who in turn rejects them, turning to books and music. The voice beyond the trees is the lure of isolation, the desire for extinction, for absorption into the universe. This voice blocks out human voices, making Emma, the spinster, deaf to others' pleas for love.

Phelan sets her novel in a Sydney bayside suburb, home for a once wealthy and vital but now decaying family, whose fading gentility she describes with considerable sympathy.

As an established travel writer the author is at ease with description, sometimes lyrical, often critical. "Inside the house, with lamps alight, with windows shut and mucus melodies swooning on the air, the women of the suburbs sat frowning at their cards."

A travel writer's perspective. But Phelan does more than peek through curtains while passing down the street. Her book is a novel, not a travelogue. Though one may find Emma somewhat repellent, her resentments irksome, her apathy tedious, and her cold-

ness towards her grief-stricken mother inhumane, her behaviour seems psychologically true, and her inner development, while she gropes towards some understanding of love, is likewise convincing.

Some of Phelan's personal interests are reflected in *The Voice Beyond The Trees* with varying degrees of success. The narrator's obsession with Beethoven and Mozart seems laboured in treatment and not especially enlightening.

"But I was still thinking of Mozart. Who else has expressed at once such joy, poignancy, perfection of beauty? Who else calls out so piti-

fully, so unconsciously for affection?"

More successful are the discussions of reincarnation, Karma and euthanasia and strange concepts like "fighting to die" as opposed to giving in to death, which, given the slow dying of the heroine's mother and the daughter's penchant for communing with the universe, fit naturally into the story.

If you're in a contemplative mood, receptive to elegy, your thoughts turning on death and immortality, *The Voice Beyond The Trees* will meet your needs.

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