



Ballad for a Mad Girl

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Editorial Choice:

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Book

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A slip on the narrow pipe spanning the old quarry could be fatal. But Grace holds the record for the timed run along the pipe in the dark and she's done it a hundred times. As always, her challenger comes from Sacred Heart Private, while she's risking life and limb for Swampie Public (aka Swamptown to the locals, and Swanston on the map of Australia). The rivalry between the schools is no game. Money and class divide the two and a hostility which stretches beyond living memory. Grace is on her way when, suddenly, she's immersed in a blue-tinted mist and finds she's frozen part-way, straddling the pipe. Drawings she's never seen before and the single word 'Hannah' have appeared on the pipe; close by, someone is sobbing as if their heart could break. She feels taken over, possessed. None of the friends she'd thought were her comrades for life seems willing or able to help. On the contrary, those friends and the other watchers at the quarry see only Grace screaming, chickening out, humiliated. In a moment, she's no longer the school's champion prankster; she's a loser, a traitor.

For Grace, a turning point had been a couple of years ago when the family left the old farm where she'd been born, 20 kms from town. It had been Mum who had driven the move into Swanston, Mum who had always been erratic, charged with manic energy, who'd 'lived like there were no consequences'. She and Dad had grown up in town; he'd been a Swampie, she a Heart, though never buying into her school's elitist ethos. Grace hates the neat house on the neat estate 'you'd have thought that would be the last place Mum would want to live. But that was unpredictable Mum. Now she was gone: killed in a road accident, run over by a truck at an intersection.

Grace can't speak to anyone of the irrational events which intrude into her daily life 'or they can't hear. So she has no explanation when she sketches a face in life drawing class which shows skills and an individual style she's never had, as though the charcoal were moved by an alien hand. The face she has drawn is that of Hannah Holt. It all happened twenty years ago, but everyone in town knows the story of the missing Hannah and the disappearance of her suspected killer, William Dean. Grace knows that somehow she's being drawn into that story, and that some of its supporting characters are still alive in the town. Though she cannot always identify them, the spirits which invade her mind and body belong to that story, which is terrifying enough. There's worse. Her Mum, she learns, was mixed up in all of this, and so is the driver of the truck which ran her down. Was it an accident then? Maybe her Mum was murdered to silence a witness.

If my last paragraph suggests the intensity of the telling at the expense of a clear indication of the plot, that must suffice.

It's the urgency and loneliness of Grace's telling that are so powerful. Grace tells her own story, using throughout the storyteller's 'dramatic present', leaving the reader in anticipation of something 'probably disturbing' just about to happen on almost every page. The narrative is not simply crowded with startling incidents, it's also charged with potent threat.

Those immediately around Grace heighten tension too. Her Dad and her brother are also lonely and, like Grace, unable to 'move on' from Mum's death, so home offers Grace little comfort. Her friends do try to reach out to her, but they've got late teen issues of their own and are beginning to search earnestly for pathways into adulthood; they have no clue about what's going on inside her bruised mind and body. Her teachers and counsellors are unsubtle listeners. Then there is the continuing pressure of the mindless, sometimes malicious, rivalry between the schools.

Endings to such breathless narratives can dwindle into anti-climax. Not so here.

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