

LIKE A HOUSE ON FIRE

'In these stories, hope and despair are perfectly balanced.' Do you agree?

The characters in Cate Kennedy's collection of short stories, Like A House On Fire, while hopeful at times, struggle with their despair to a much greater extent. So much so as the internal difficulties Kennedy's characters face and their response to them are at the forefront of her writing. The narration of the stories allow the audience a deeper insight into the minds of her characters, and as they face their emotional qualms, Kennedy documents their pessimism and fleeting moments of hopefulness. Relationships are also explored to expose the value of honesty and the idea of disillusionment in the lives of the characters.

The narration of each story allows the audience to peer into the anxiety, dissatisfaction and fear that go unvoiced by many of Kennedy's characters. As the only story written from the perspective of a child, *Seventy-Two Derwents* allows Kennedy to showcase Tyler's dissatisfaction in life through her deeply personal diary entries. As home life becomes increasingly difficult for the young girl, she turns to writing to express her inner anxieties and fears about her mother's boyfriend Shane, who makes her feel like she has "stones inside [her] stomach." Similarly, the narration style in *Cross Country* allows the audience a deeper insight into the way the protagonist feels about her situation. Through the use of the second person, the protagonist's isolation and desperation is emphasised as she addresses the audience with lines such as "I don't know about you..." and "It's amazing, isn't it, the level to which we'll invent what we need." *Ashes* also demonstrates the unvoiced anxieties of Chris, the perspective of which is favoured in the third-person narration style of the story. His pent up emotions primarily concern the fact that he had never felt understood or accepted by his parents for the way that he was. He recalls standing by his dying father, begging that he wouldn't "address [the fact that Chris is gay] now, when it's all too late." The focus on Chris' perspective allows the audience to see how he grew up withholding his true self, fearing further rejection and disapproval from his parents. These anxieties have also pervaded into adulthood, and has meant that the despair he held around accepting himself has prevailed.

As the characters combat their emotional qualms, they experience moments of hope, but are, on the whole, pessimistic and disappointed with life. *Five Dollar Family* presents the saddening story of a new mother, who hopes that her boyfriend Des will be there for her and her baby. She comes to realise that Des will "never [grow out of]" his immaturity and must accept that she will be raising her son, Jason, alone, and give up on her initial dreams of a 'traditional' family. *Little Plastic Shipwreck* also presents a similar moment of disappointment and hopeless acceptance. After Roley finds Samson's dead body, the true state of 'Oceanworld' comes to light. The park is "teetering on the edge of bankruptcy", its animals are dying, and its workers are heartless people, who order Roley to "cut [Samson] up" and who tap carelessly "on the glass of [the fish] tanks." Though Roley may at one stage have been hopeful about the recovery of his wife, he now realises that she has become as broken and hopeless as 'Oceanworld'. His disappointment in life festers into what appears to be a depression caused by him feeling like his life is falling apart and losing all hope of a happy ending.

Relationships are also a key theme in Kennedy's writing, and she uses them to explore the value of honesty and the idea of disillusionment within her complex characters. In the short story *Sleepers*, Ray reminisces on his relationship with his ex-girlfriend, Sharon, and feels himself lapsing more often into a "lethargic kind of trance". The removal of the old redgum railway sleepers in his town are, to Ray, a symbol of hope, and yet, instead, they make him spiral into disillusionment. He thinks about doing some landscaping for Sharon, and seeing her "surprised and gratified smile, lost for words for once", despite the fact that she has moved on. His hope and delusion begins to dissipate when he continues to "drive past her

house” and sees another car in her driveway, which worsens his lack of motivation and his “sapped, exhausted feeling”. Similarly, Frank’s wife in *Flexion* experiences brief moments of disillusionment when she begins to hope that Frank dies in the hospital; that she will get a call and be asked to “pull the plug”. Faced with “almost twenty years of invisibility” and frustrations at the way Frank treated her, there’s no doubt why she felt that her opportunity for freedom had come, and “she feels cheated” when he begins to recover. The value of honesty is explored in the short story *Waiting*, as the protagonist stops telling her husband, Pete, about her visits to the hospital. She lies and tells him she’s going shopping because she wants to protect him from the despair that she feels by not being able to reach full term. After having experienced loss so many times, the protagonist begins to lose hope, and no longer gets excited at the prospect of being pregnant, because she expects that she will lose it again.

Cate Kennedy’s [Like A House On Fire](#) depicts characters experiencing fleeting moments of hopefulness as they struggle through the despair in their lives, facing hardships that many face in the real world. Kennedy’s writing is categorised by the pain her characters endure, and this far outweighs their hope, though it is still present. The nature of the relationships between characters and the narration style offer a unique perspective to each story, however, they are ultimately unified by their disappointment and despair in life, while hope rests in the background.