

# Long Paddock

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Toni Jordan, *Addition*

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Grace Vandenburg leads a measured existence. Literally. Since the age of eight, when she first noticed there were 10 front steps of her house – steps that had “borne my weight uncomplaining for all of my eight years” – Grace has been counting out her world – measuring her life not in coffee spoons, but in the poppy seeds on her daily piece of orange cake (number of seeds = number of bites), the number of salt shakes on her dinner (five), strokes of toothbrush on teeth (160), and so on. Her hero is Nikola Tesla – nineteenth-century engineer, inventor, physicist and fellow counter. When we meet Grace, she is living on a disability pension in her small flat in Glen Iris, organising her world into neat groups of 10 and its multiples, and engaging in various romantic fantasies featuring the Father of Physics.

In a previous life, Grace was a primary school teacher. One of her favourite pastimes was to teach the children the names of various phobias. Such playfulness was frowned upon by the parents, and her response to their lack of creativity provides an opportunity for Grace to outline her particular world view:

As usual, I received complaints from the parents. How will this improve Bilynda’s scores at high school? As usual, I couldn’t tell them the truth about their children’s lives, their own lives. That they are colour blind. They are tone deaf. They are ants racing across my balcony as the sun is rising only to race back as it sets. They will get jobs in offices and most will work well enough for their feed. They will meet another ant of the same or opposite sex and will borrow more money than their grandparents could imagine and use their freedom as collateral to buy a double-fronted weatherboard between a park and a train station. If they breed they will make more worker ants to guarantee economic growth and more taxpayers to pay for more politicians and poorer quality schools. When they retire they will receive not a gold watch but an indexed pension. Their children ants will move away to be spared their parents’ grasping, wallowing lack of productivity ... The parents ... will die painlessly due to the advances of modern drug therapy, as numb and vapid as they lived. Their belongings will scatter and they will cease.

I never told the parents this. (20)

Grace’s mother and sister are resigned to her obsession, phoning at allotted times each week for perfunctory 20-minute conversations. Grace’s mother has a fascination with mortality and morbidity; her sister Jill is a Stepford-esque wife to a banker with “flabby pink manicured hands”. It is Grace’s spunky, precociously cynical niece, Larry, who is her connection with a world outside numbers and the one person she really trusts.

One of the finest features of Jordan's writing is her ability to take us beyond the pathology of her protagonist and into Grace's pleasingly unique mind. We develop an empathy with and an understanding of her way of thinking. We even begin to see the sense in, and beauty of, a world governed by numbers. Grace travels through life like a hoarder through a council tip – poring over and treasuring the moments the rest of us toss away. She takes the reader into her confidence and encourages us to pause and consider the size and shape of our hours and days.

Every year we pass anniversaries. We often mark them; birthdays, the day we started a job, the day we met our significant other. Our parents' wedding anniversary, name days of nieces and nephews. Lucky dates or the day we arrived in a city. The anniversary of the day the family dog died. This year will be the 27th anniversary of the day our dog died.

And every year we all pass a day, an anniversary, but we don't know the date. This is the day that might be remembered for a little while at least, and if you are very special someone might cry on this day every year or buy roses or stay in bed or go to a bar and drink their way through the top shelf starting from the left-hand side. (40)

It would seem there is little space in Grace's life for a relationship more significant than the one she shares with her beside photograph of Tesla; however, the archetypal handsome stranger enters into her world and threatens to disrupt its painstakingly constructed equilibrium. Her relationship with Seamus is revelatory for Grace, but provides some difficult moments for this reader. Weighed against the substantial, sympathetic creation of Grace, Seamus feels a little too thin; his stoicism and patience in the face of Grace's pathological inflexibility is a touch too perfect.

At one point in her story, Grace goes on medication to control her desire to count. Grace describes the sensation of being medicated as like having "two brains". This could almost be an analogy for *Addition* itself, which feels like two books – one a philosophical and eloquent inquiry into the nature of being and the received notion of "wellness", the other a light and somewhat predictable romance. This visible and somewhat untidy seam lends a self-consciousness to the material that leaves the reader wondering if the author felt some pressure to lean towards a more marketable genre than that of literary fiction. This quibble, however, does not diminish *Addition* as clear evidence of an exciting new talent. It is a fine, funny and thought-provoking debut.