

KATE LIVETT

Three re-issued novels of Elizabeth Harrower

Down in the City

Text Classics

RRP \$12.95, pb, 290

ISBN 9781922147042

The excruciating pleasure and pain of Harrower's psychological astuteness articulated through exquisite poetics is not recommended reading if you're feeling fragile. For those who have not read any Harrower, imagine the entangled emotional terrain of Henry James crossed with the twentieth-century multi-person identity wranglings of Patrick White and his slightly rougher Australian context, and a dash of the cartwheeling inevitability of the dynamics between people of Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood*. Harrower has neither White's darkly ironic humour nor Barnes' sudden absurdist comic phraseology, however, meaning there is little respite from the relentless emotional rollercoaster.

The central, repeated preoccupation of Harrower's oeuvre is the intricate triangular relations between a small group of people. There are different permutations in each book. *Down in the City*, Harrower's first (1957) is the heterosexual couple 'plus one', where the 'one' is filled by several other characters in turn. In this case the couple is Stan Peterson and Esther. The couple are two individuals both original: Stan charismatically forceful and Esther enigmatically rare, together they make a glamorous couple. They are watched from without by two other women, the more ordinary Laura Maitland, and the teenage Rachel Dempster, who idolizes Esther and has the experience of seeing the abusive violence that is part of what the couple's dynamic has produced. As the third term, neither of these characters are actually able to stop the inevitable playing out of this relationship. After them comes another woman who firmly enters the dynamic between Stan and Esther, and the scene between the two women, with no Stan present, is an amazing one.

The Long Prospect

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Age difference, not in its generational difference, but in its primary adolescent-to-adult, or nascent-subject to full-subject is the ostensible agitation in Harrower's second novel, *The Long Prospect* (1958), but it is familial cruelty that is the real motivator of the events of the book. The Australian rural-coastal suburban femme-fatale grandmother, Lilian is a bundle of thwarted energy left without occupation or education. She is still young enough to spend all her time going to dinner parties with her boorish lover, after which all the couples drive

very drunkenly to the local hotel for more prawn cocktails. Whenever the excitement of such suburban social rounds palls, Lilian's energy is perverted into a sadism that finds outlet in punishment of her granddaughter's attempts at agency. This granddaughter, Emily, has been left to live with her grandmother by her biological mother, Paula, who is living "in the city" and absorbed in a semi-reconciled long-distance relationship with Harry. Paula is defined by her failure to live up to the expectations of her own mother, Lilian. A person without energy, Paula's character is in opposition to that of her mother, but even now that she, too, is a mother to Emily, she plays out the longing for maternal love and approval in ongoing power plays with her own mother, and in the handing down of the same denial of love or approval to her own daughter. The cruel power-wrangling of the adults at the expense of this benighted child is painful to read. It is so horribly unequal and so unnecessary. Neither Paula nor Lilian allow the child's existence to disrupt their own routines in any way. Emily is emotionally neglected to the point of trauma – left alone to tremble in the dark as a twelve-year-old in an empty house during the long 'prawn cocktail' nights, and finally denied her only source of human comfort in the excruciating denouement. Again, an amazing psychological and cultural narrative portrait, but a grueling read.

The Catherine Wheel

Text Classics

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This 1960 novel is a departure from Harrower's first two -- set in London this time, rather than Australia, and written in the first-person, rather than the third. There's still the exotic couple plus one, but there are no helpless children in sight....unless you count Christian Roland, the adult male whose psyche has been fused by trauma in childhood, when his father committed suicide, his mother left and his older sister whom he adored became both his surrogate mother and a prostitute to get the money they needed to survive (97-8). Is Christian really a fully accountable man, responsible for his actions to his friends and society? Or should he be treated like the damaged child that a few special people, like twenty five year-old Australian Clemency James, can see that he is? For those who did not feel loved at important moments, no amount of love and approval later on can fill the void, Harrower shows us.

'He isn't easy to help. He never has been. For some people, you know, Clemency, it's too late.'

Too late, he said.

My heart emptied at the finality of his tone.

Too late?

Like an oracle, with a weird impassive authority, he had said it.

Almost beyond bitterness, incredulity or sorrow, but as if I'd heard him sentence Christian to death, I stared at his face, waiting for a denial. (297-8)

And then there's the problem of self-knowledge, deliberate perversion of the love offered, and resentment and even hatred of the one offering the love. A veritable Catherine Wheel of emotion and self-sacrifice. Clemency James becomes first Christian's friend and then his lover, another version of Christian's wife Olive, who has until Clem been the mother-substitute. Harrower's characters are stuck on a torturous wheel:

Now kneeling, face upraised, grasping my hands, he cried wildly. 'Oh, Clem! Are you the one? Are you the one who's going to save me?'

His eyes held mine in frantic enquiry.

'I don't know.' I looked at the shiny walls, numbed by the extent of the demands I had glimpsed in his eyes.

'I don't know.' (156-7)