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Justine Ettler, *Bohemia Beach*

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A moment's silence, the audience holds its breath, and soon it's time to begin. At first it's business as usual as I sail away riding the sea of sounds in my quiet ship, but once the initial excitement of the opening is over I find myself curiously detached and my mind starts to wander. I watch helpless as my mind drifts off into the audience, scanning seats, and then starts churning fiercely with thoughts of Reed, the Deutsche Grammophon deal, the phone call from my mother, and the next thing I know I'm in difficult waters. It's almost as if the piano is playing itself and I've become something of a spectator. (45)

Justine Ettler's *Bohemia Beach* negotiates the mind of Catherine Bell, an acclaimed concert pianist, as she comes to terms with her alcoholism, trauma and obsessive nature. Written entirely in first person, we shift time and place as the narrative reveals not only post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but inherited trauma and self-inflicted trauma within the character. Along the way Ettler taps into her previously established reputation for gritty, urgent and impulsive writing, leaving the reader writhing in discomfort as Catherine falls again and again.

If considered in chronological order, the novel maps the demise of Catherine as she fails to complete a concert in Prague, goes on several benders, loses her husband but meets several other men, is raped, is assaulted and injured in the Hundred Years Water flood, realises she's an alcoholic, and finally considers the possibility that she might need some help from one of the many people who offer it to her along the way.

At the outset it seems that the premise of *Bohemia Beach* has the potential for an interesting exploration of the cliché that is the artist as addict. It holds the possibility of challenging the Romantic representation of the creative type as obsessive to the point of

self-destruction, existing outside of acceptable society, and drawn to mind-altering substances to help them cope with their extraordinary vision of the world. However, while Ettler frames the narrator as an artist, she primarily focuses on Catherine's alcoholism, and the novel becomes little more than a brutal portrayal of that condition. Coupled with Catherine's obsession with men, particularly 'bad' men who treat her poorly, she merely plays her part in maintaining the cliché of the damaged artist.

It is interesting to note that Ettler is an accomplished musician herself, and yet the music in the novel does not really define Catherine. Yes, she's conscious of a performance she needs to do in New York, she notices pianos or incidental music that surrounds any scene, but overall there's a lack of believability in the representation of her profession. For instance, due to her primarily inebriated state, Catherine never practises, and seems to think that she can arrive in New York and perform without having rehearsed with the orchestra or conductor. This is not simple music that she's performing—Ettler has selected the most (famously) difficult piano music as her character's repertoire, and there seems to be no real significance in that except to remind us that Catherine is brilliant despite her flaws. Later, as Catherine tries to recover from her time in Prague, she's baffled when her doctor/lover tells her that her piano technique could be hurting her back, "this pain, a series of injuries compounded by *playing the piano*? That seems far-fetched" (246). Yet, it would be safe to argue that all professional musicians—even the poor ones—are aware of the impact playing an instrument can have on your body.

Much has been made of Ettler's debut novel *The River Ophelia* and its representation of violence towards women and of gender inequality, particularly with its re-release last year. Meanwhile, with *Bohemia Beach*, similar themes arise around Catherine, whose ability to seduce and sleep with nearly every man she meets leaves her in a permanently smitten state, and leaves the reader wondering who she really is. While the fact that she sleeps with her own mother's former lover, Tomas, is somewhat unsettling, it can be forgiven because she didn't know (initially, at least) and she was, of course, drunk at the time. Yet when she follows Tomas to his castle for a party, she is violently raped by Franz, a burly man with an obsession with mice. What is perhaps most disturbing about this is not the fact that no one seems to notice, but simply that she just carries on. She leaves the castle and returns to Prague and within the next 48 hours has had sex with two different men,

with little reference to the fact that her last contact was so brutal, except some dubious dialogue with the first of these lovers, after they've already had sex:

“Hey gorgeous – what’s with all the bruises?”

“Oh,” I say, and look away.

“You been up to a bit of rough? Who’s the guy with the heavy hands?”

My mind blanking, stopping short, heart pounding. I just shrug and look away. (203)

Then, within the next hour, within the next four pages of the book, she sees Thomas and “I let him fuck me, hard and fast” (207). The rape is only ever passed over again, in reference to telling her counsellors with little to no significance. This underemphasising the rape means it takes on less significance than a repressed childhood memory of being hurt and locked in a car, takes on less significance than her husband having an affair with her manager, takes on less significance even, than the fact that she thinks she’s in love with Tomas—the man who is twice her age and was once her mother’s lover. It’s hard to say whether this is Ettler’s comment on the ability of women to underplay violent relations to men, or whether she is in fact herself glossing over the trauma of the event. I would like to assume the former, but it does not necessarily read that way. Regardless, in light of Ettler’s debut novel, and the current social and political climate, it seems an odd choice to underplay the impact of rape on a person—even if it is initially suppressed, it is never really addressed.

The final third of the novel focuses on Catherine’s attempts at recovery and her denial of her alcoholism. She meets Edgar, a thoughtful and attentive doctor who she quickly falls for, though not passionately enough to forget Tomas. Thus we land with a thud into the romance-novel territory of a heroine who needs to choose between Tomas, the bad-boy who maybe cannot love her enough, and Edgar, the good-guy who loves her despite her flaws. The final pages leave us firmly in the hands of “all is right in the world” as her career and love life settle within the final three pages.

It is difficult not to compare *Bohemia Beach* with Zoe Morrison’s *Music and Freedom*, published in 2016. Both books navigate the intriguing artistic representation of brilliant

female pianists, both battling Rachmaninov (as did David Helfgott in *Shine*), and both have narratives of violence and trauma shaping the work. However, where *Bohemia Beach* fails to acknowledge the physicality of performance, the necessity of perfection and rehearsal, *Music and Freedom* uses these qualities to lay a foundation of rigour that draws the reader in. Both women in the stories have periods of not playing—of responding to their trauma by leaving the music behind—yet where Morrison’s Alice Murray comes back to the music slowly, not playing for herself, but to connect with another pianist, Catherine just happens to get a recording deal and thinks “I guess this means I’ll have to start practicing again...” (323). Neat and tidy, and awfully convenient.

It seems that few of the side characters ever get frustrated or angry at Catherine, despite her many many flaws. Catherine’s husband, Reed, leaves messages on her phone that she ignores in a manner that seems unfair and cavalier, given that they were married. It isn’t until later that she realises he was having an affair, and even then he seems pleasant enough. Meanwhile her “life guru” Nelly persists in supporting Catherine despite being ignored, stood up, and lied to repeatedly. Nelly remains “very supportive” until the end. Edgar too puts up with Catherine’s return to drinking, her sleeping with Tomas and her moving out. And yet we never really get a sense of why anyone would like Catherine at all. She’s arrogant and judgemental, clearly an alcoholic, and therefore her only positive qualities are that she can play the piano and is beautiful. If we don’t like Catherine, why does everyone else?

This book sits uncomfortably on the shelf. It is repetitive, inconsistent, laden with heavy exposition about the Czech Republic, a tacky Australian character with a shark story, dreams that are taken as fact, and the counsellors in Catherine’s life are extraordinarily inept. When she finally leaves rehab, Catherine is given somewhat simplistic advice to “find a therapist you like and work through everything that’s happened to you” (322). Ironically, it feels like this is what the book requires of the reader—we become some kind of strange therapist, witnessing Catherine’s downfall until we are left wondering why we were listening in the first place.

About the author

Dr Hannah Ianniello is an academic, novelist, songwriter and award-winning screenwriter from Sydney. She has published in online journals, co-written and produced a short film, and has a PhD in Creative Writing from Western Sydney University. She currently works in Research and Postgraduate Education at the University of Notre Dame, Australia.