**THE QUALITY OF MERCY**

BY LYN MCCREDDEN

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*Eyrie* by Tim Winton
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*Eyrie*’s central character, Tom Keely, is defeated and ineffectual, a pill-popping and lonely one-time idealist who has fallen out of his own life. He is also arguably a haunted version of Tim Winton. This is not to suggest that *Eyrie* can be mined for details about its author, but as Winton ages and the body of his work grows, the ghosts that haunt his oeuvre are beginning to stare out at us more persistently. *Eyrie* is a dark – and often darkly funny – rewriting of the central preoccupations of Winton’s earlier novels: the volatile workings of family, the nature of mercy, the possibility of redemption.

This repetition or haunting across Winton’s works is evident in *Eyrie*’s relation to *That Eye, the Sky* (1986) – the two novels’ titles echo each other – to *Cloudstreet* (1991), and to the many novels which explore the traumas and the hope sought in family. These novels also mirror Winton’s early family history as he has publicly described it. In *The Riders* (1994), *Dirt Music* (2001), *The Turning* (2005) and *Breath* (2008), he is
preoccupied with a set of recurring questions: What kind of cradle is family? How many ways can families go wrong? In Winton’s fiction, we do not find a ‘John Howard’ version of family, all picket fence and stability. His families are often scouring, even violent.

_Eyrie_ is set in Fremantle – ‘good old Freo’ – Winton’s home territory (or one of them) and the gateway to the booming state of Western Australia. Which was, you could say, like Texas. Only it was big ... The nation’s quarry, China’s swaggering enabler. A philistine giant ...

In this world, the fallen person, the outsider, the little person, the questioner, is nobody. And Tom Keely, Gemma Buck and Kai are nobodies. They huddle in their sparse flats on the tenth storey of the seedy Mirador – a kind of clapped-out, anti-Cloudstreet – barely keeping at bay the world of drugs, crime, abusive sex, greed and political violence. Tom’s life is in ruins; Gemma, hunched and defensive, scrabbles to keep herself and her grandson physically and emotionally together. Six-year-old Kai, a strange, lost child, haunted and afraid, is drawn to Keely.

Gemma, who leaves her young grandson asleep alone in the flat each night when she goes to her job packing shelves in a nearby supermarket, seeks out Keely as carer. Slowly, and a little reluctantly, he responds. Around this narrative pivot, care for the child, and some intermittent lust for Gemma, we see Keely begin to recover his lost manhood. But it is a slow, sometimes farcical journey. Masculinity is being deconstructed and partially put together again as the novel proceeds. As a protector, lover, father, son, brother, professional, Keely is abject. The novel opens with him as victim of yet another giant hangover. Seeking solace from his torturing headache, his morning-after hunger, his waves of nausea, Keely passes out on the cool floor of the supermarket, thinking:

Maybe this was what it was like to die a little, to feel shriven, rescued, redeemed. Having your collar pulled, your fucking beard tugged by the roots until there you were, upright and guiltless, watching your irritated savior scuff away in Third World footwear, pushing a loaded trolley.

Told as farce, from floor level, this is the first of many falls in the novel. As a hopeless drunk, a reluctant or impotent former saviour, a self-pitying middle-class boy sunk to living in the shabby quarters of town, Keely is alarming and unlikable. But in him there are sparks of desire and compassion. His former idealism continues to prickle, to break the crust of his present self-loathing.
The many readers who loved the pied beauty and hard-won promises of Winton’s family saga *Cloudstreet* will find less loveliness in the world of *Eyrie*. The writing is equally astute – colloquial, pithy, unashamedly Australian – but the world evoked is far more pocked and raddled, the tone mordant. It is as if Winton has nose-dived straight into the darkness of his earlier novels; but here the darkness coalesces into a vision of Fremantle as a capitalist dystopia, a cesspit of no-hopers, victims and cringers:

| dazed and forsaken at the rivermouth, the addled wharfside slapper whose good bones showed through despite the ravages of age and bad living ... spared only by a century of political neglect. Hunkered in the desert wind, cowering beneath the austral sun. |

As with all Winton’s novels, location is crucial. The characters inhabit a familiar landscape that has turned toxic. In this modern day Western Australia, environmentalism is regarded as a joke. The state rushes headlong

| to drill, strip, fill or blast ... Oil, gas, iron, gold, lead, bauxite and nickel – it was the boom of all booms ... There was Pentecostal ecstasy in the air, and to resist it was heresy. |

And Tom Keely is the heretic: ‘just another flannel-tongued Jeremiah with neither mission nor prophecy, no tribe to claim him but family.’

Winton – like Keely, an environmentalist in an über-capitalist domain – is arguably writing here from some dark places in his own experience. *Eyrie* depicts capitalist dreams of exorbitant wealth cheek-to-cheek with the seedy (and worse) effects of greed, pitting against this zeitgeist a pathetically impotent idealism. Winton’s realism powerfully ventriloquiases the jangle of different classes, genders and ages, but it is also inflected with farce and black humour. Against a backdrop of corrupt politicians, capitalism on a gross scale, and the druggies and wheeler-dealers who inhabit the underbelly of Fremantle, Tom Keely – a former environmentalist disgraced for reasons Winton does not elaborate – licks his wounds. He reels and stumbles, self-medicates with pills and alcohol, and looks back blearily at his childhood state of grace, when he stood secure beside his parents, Nev and Doris, and his sister Faith, knowing his place in the world.

One of the keys to *Eyrie* is to be found in that phrase ‘no tribe to claim him but family’. The novel is staking a claim about the centrality of family. But what kind of claim or gesture is this? What does family signify in Winton’s novels? Families can be sustaining, even redemptive. They work on intimate premises different to those of the political and social. They can be bulwarks against a hostile world and places of
repetitive, formative violence and loss. Families in Winton can be units of resistance against personal dissolution, even in the face of utter loss and falls from grace, but they also carry the seeds of tragedy and hostility, personified here in the figure of hard-bitten, sexually abused and degraded Gemma.

So what kind of gesture is Winton making in *Eyrie*, in placing family at the centre of our gaze? Is it a moral gesture, a measuring of the value of family and community against the tsunamis of state, media and capitalism? Or is family, as some critics have argued of Winton's fiction, a nostalgic, conservative, backward-looking, even apolitical trope?

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In the midst of Winton's national tour to promote *Eyrie*, Deborah Bogle reported for the *Adelaide Advertiser* under the headline 'Winton uses words as way to ponder change':

> ‘Novelists and art can’t effect change,’ says West Australian author Tim Winton. 
> But in his new book, *Eyrie*, he paints a powerful picture of what happens when a culture embraces the notion that we are an economy first and a community second.

This version of ‘Tim Winton’ is not entirely convincing, but critical readers might be thrown into deeper dismay by Winton's further claims in this article:

> ‘I don’t think I’d flatter myself to think I’d have any impact,’ said Winton. ‘Just because Keely gets to vent doesn’t mean there’s any use in me venting. I don’t think that would serve any purpose. Novels aren’t a means of persuasion. Fiction doesn’t have answers. It’s a means of wondering or imagining.’

What, we might wonder, is the purpose of wondering, or imagining, or of fiction, if it has no impact, no persuasiveness? Answers do not necessarily reside *in the fiction*, but they may be broached by readers, who respond to fiction in diverse and passionate ways. So we are led to ask: is *Eyrie* a protest novel and does it have any impact, as such, or is it merely an apolitical pondering – not even a ‘venting’ by its author?

This brings us back to the novel’s consideration of the power of family – both destructive and hopeful – and its nurturing of values different to those of unchecked capitalism. The novel offers something more than just a nostalgic pondering of a past world, of the bosom of the family as a place of personal, apolitical withdrawal. Tom Keely is a character who has indeed withdrawn, massively and self-pityingly. But the narrative is arguably one of re-emergence, even redemption, however tentative, in
which Keely turns back from the edge of self-annihilation. Winton is concerned with the often unlovely relationships that exist between self, family and state, and the novel focuses on the nature of the moral responses to this unloveliness: within the self, within the family, and beyond the family's tight borders.

_Eyrie’s_ openness to the abject and unlovable has a lot to do with the lessons Keely has learned from the powerful figures of his mother and father. It also relates to how families are constructed, how they are sometimes tentatively made up, from outside the strict bounds of biology, class and religious background. The odd, disjointed, mismatched, surrogate family of Tom, Gemma and Kai is a reconstructed vision of family – one that is necessary for their survival. It is made up of scraps of memory. It is based on vulnerability, lust, tenderness, the desire to care for a broken and endangered child, the need to care for someone outside one’s own tight little circle, someone other than oneself. Family intimacy and the outside world of strangers are thus tumbled together, as Winton envisions the ethics of family impinging on the state, and vice versa.

The ethical questions of fathering and mothering are central to _Eyrie_. Keely’s father, Nev, died young but left his son with a model of humane and potent compassion for others. Many nights in Keely’s childhood, Nev would have to restrain his violent neighbor, to knock him down if necessary, in order to prevent him from monstering his own wife and children. Protectiveness as a strong male trait is ambivalently depicted here, tipping over into violence as it does in _The Riders, Breath_, and many Winton short stories.

Then there is Keely’s mother Doris, who lives on after Nev’s early death, copes, gets things done. She loves, not unconditionally but with effect:

Keely thought of the hundred nights the Buck girls came knocking: summer evenings out there on the porch sobbing in their nylon nighties, the sound of glass breaking up the hill behind them. There was always screaming; their place was bedlam after dark ... The girls would just be at the Keely door, whimpering on the porch until a light went on and Doris took them in. Then the old man would go looking for his boots, gathering his wits a moment, muttering some prayer or imprecation, before trudging up the hill to deal with it best he could.

In those days the Keelys didn’t have trouble, they fixed it. By faith, with thanksgiving. And now and then, when the shit hit the fan, with a judicious bit of biffo.

Class, religion, gender and family are all rolled out together here in Winton’s
idiosyncratically Australian lingo – the girls from a battler household in their nylon nighties, shit hitting the fan, the ‘bit of biff’. But this may well be Winton’s least ideologically straightforward novel. Class failures erupt in all sectors. Religion can lead equally to ‘prayer or imprecation’. It is treated in this passage with ironic fondness, almost as an in-joke. ‘By faith, with thanksgiving’ – a well-known Protestant mantra – is introduced as the shorthand or formulaic expression of the parents’ Christian modus operandi. And gender representations, for which Winton’s fiction is so often criticised, have a different inflection in Eyrie. Here we are given the wonderful creation, Doris, who welcomed the frightened girls, ‘took them in’, and who does so again for the adult Gemma. In addition, Doris genuinely and pragmatically cares for her fallen son.

But everyone falls in Eyrie: women, men and children; drug-addled con artists; failed idealists like Keely; working class battlers like Gemma; politicians and institutions of law and order. The metaphor of falling – from some kind of grace or human goodness, from the law, from one’s ideals, from childhood possibilities – flows through the novel like the ever-present, murky waters of the city’s river. Keely’s recurring nightmare of falling from the tenth storey of the Mirador – or worse, his visions of Kai’s tender young body falling over the flimsy railings of the balcony – ripple through the narrative as evocations of human powerlessness. Kai is the centre of an overwhelming river of dread, a victim, with his strange, quiet questions, his imagining of himself sprawled on the concrete ten floors below like the police outline of a murder victim, and his reiterated claim that he won’t grow old. The figure of Kai, in his Christ-like innocence, is a prophetic child adrift in a violent, devouring world, foreseeing his own death.

The fallen Tom Keely resembles many of Winton’s male characters. Henry Warburton, Fred Scully, Quick Lamb, Sam Pickle, Luther Fox, Bruce Pike, Vic Lang: in different ways they are all injured men, haplessly trying to perform their manhood. Critics have pointed out – and often decried – the plethora of broken and abused women in Winton’s fiction; but the male characters are arguably just as misshapen. While it is often men in Winton’s fiction who are the perpetrators of women’s abjection – along with fate, accident, class limits, self-harm – in Eyrie the focus is equally on male loss and impotence.

In Eyrie, while the memory of Nev stands tall, it is Doris who perseveres, still upright, strong and wise:
His mother was a brick, a saint. Which of course made everything much worse, especially since she’d had ample time to form a view of his situation. Two years since the break-up. A whole year since his catastrophic brain-snap and all its rewards. Doris was a shrewd old bird. She didn’t miss much. He did not want to suffer her thoughtful analysis a single moment but he was pretty certain he already understood it in all its loving, pitiless permutations.

Here is Winton at his best, capturing both Keely’s mammoth self-pity and his enduring love and respect for his mother. While he has to ironise and distance her – ‘a brick, a saint’ – their history together has been intimate and is acknowledged by Keely. Doris is shrewd. She knows her son in all his fallenness and still loves him, prompting him to do better, even as she knows she cannot fabricate his redemption. She lives in a world of brokenness – her son, the people she encounters in her social work, her own single life in old age – but she is independent, radiating a kindness and practicality that Keely admires, depends on, finds suffocating, and would emulate if he could.

At the novel’s end, new possibilities for Keely have been sketched. But only sketched. This is not an unequivocally redemptive tale. It is more a narrative roadmap for what still needs to be done. Keely’s attempts to ‘save’ Gemma, Kai and himself are piecemeal and, at times, farcically depicted. What can someone with nothing inside do for others? Some things, it seems. So Keely in his impotence decides to send postcards, inscribed with warning images – a gun and a cross – to those who threaten Gemma and Kai. Faced with the grubby ordinariness of violence, Keely registers its mundanity, but he also has to confront its reality in the shape of Clappy, a small, boy-like thug:

Fuck us about, he hissed. Try that shit on. You don’t know what I can do, you dumb fuck. Finish with you I’m in there, mate, with those two, and then the fun really gets goin.

Short, clichéd little Clappy is also literally ‘dancing on tiptoe’ to maintain his reach of Keely: ‘Keely felt the little bloke lose his footing and release a hand to steady himself.’ Assailants come in all sizes, it seems, as do victims. This farcical encounter between Clappy the thug and the abject Keely brings the novel towards its conclusion, but not until one final fall. Down the stairs of the Mirador in mad pursuit of Clappy, Keely runs out into the world below:
The veiled faces retracted uncertainly and Keely understood. He’d fallen. He saw the tower beyond and the tiny figure of the boy safe on the balcony ... The boy’s face a flash – or was that a gull?

Readers must judge whether this is a scene of redemption or a farcical defeat. No one is superman or -woman in Eyrie: not Nev of blessed memory; not the institutions of the law; not the do-good social workers; certainly not the ineffectual Keely. But what we witness in Keely is the persistence of his desire to retrieve that which is eminently un-savable: a childhood of goodness personified in his father; the endangered land and its creatures; Gemma, himself, and, most urgently, Kai, the monstered child deprived of happiness.

The figure of Tom Keely can be read merely as a pitiful, ineffectual and self-deluded idealist caught in a web of nostalgia, a middle class mummy’s boy gone wrong. And he is all of these things. But the novel also offers a vision of stumbling, persistent human longing: the desire to live up to ideals, no matter how unrealisable.

Sir, there is bleeding. Are you well?
Yes, he said with all the clarity left in him. Thank you. I am well.

For this moment, Keely in all his gracelessness – fallen, hurt and pitiful – is ‘well’. For readers seeking a resolution to the narrative’s many tangled traces of self-pity, violent self-interest, and possible redemption, the ending will perplex. This is not a novel offering answers; it is too dark and twisting for that. But Eyrie does have impact. It asks us, through the figure of Tom Keely, how we might respond to the fallen world – in ourselves, in our families, and in those beyond the tight circle of our own tribe. The novel counters the dystopias of greed and self-congratulation, being on the side of the unlovable and of mercy.

REFERENCES

Deborah Bogle, ‘Winton uses words as way to ponder change,’ Adelaide Advertiser (21 October 2013).

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