



Out of Auckland

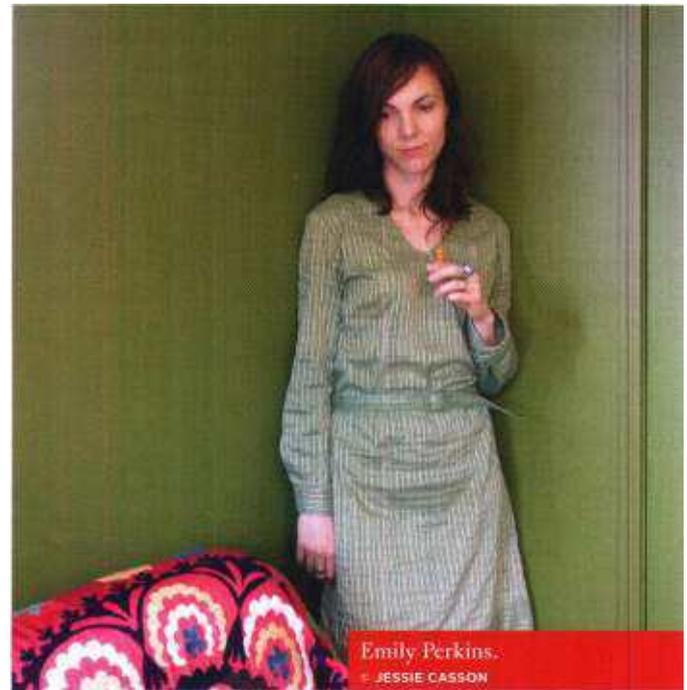
Michelle de Kretser on Emily Perkins' *The Forrests*

Hurrying towards the Museum of Contemporary Art's screening of *The Clock*, I didn't notice Emily Perkins, but she noticed me. We had met a few years earlier, but thinking only of Christian Marclay's video installation, I had failed to see the familiar figure standing outside the auditorium. Afterwards, reflecting on the elements of that little scene – art, noticing, the passage of time – I realised how fundamental they are to *The Forrests* (Bloomsbury; \$29.99), Perkins' remarkable fourth novel.

There was a buzz about *The Forrests* even before it was published in May, and it's not hard to see why. The novel opens in the early '70s with a father filming his family, and it shares the jerky, fragmentary structure of a home movie; there is something, too, of the camera's flicker coupled with its grainy intimacy in the novel's marvellously idiosyncratic feel. Shortish chapters present scenes from the lives of the Forrests, who have migrated from New York City to Auckland, where the sky comes "with its colours all the way down to the deserted streets". Very quickly, the narrative focuses on Dorothy; Evelyn, her older sister, is prominent for a while, and other Forrests move in and out of sight, but the novel belongs to Dorothy, whose consciousness we inhabit for long stretches.

Plot is minimal (but crucially present – more on that later). Dorothy grows up, marries, has children, suffers losses, works, grows old, dies; even her teenage rebelliousness is a convention of a kind. What dazzles isn't the story Perkins tells but the manner of her telling. Consider the episodic structure of the novel. Chapters typically jump, without explanation, between different phases in the characters' lives. Daniel, a young man who has grown up with the Forrest children, is Dorothy's boyfriend in one chapter; in the next, she's getting engaged to his housemate Andrew; and in the chapter after that, Evelyn and Daniel are an item. The disorientation this brings is only fleeting because the narrative gaps are easily bridged by the reader: everyone's been there when it comes to falling in and out of love, and there have already been hints of rivalry between the sisters. A novelist pledged to orthodox realism would nevertheless have felt compelled to chart the shifts of allegiance; Perkins avoids potentially banal exposition as well as delivering a pleasurable jolt.

Her bold and canny way with form is matched by an imaginative approach to narration. An omniscient narrator hovers and directs us at times, but large swathes of the third-person narrative unroll from this or that character's



point of view. Certain chapters recount turning points – deaths, celebrations, decisive meetings – while others focus on characters or events that lead nowhere much. The sense of caught-on-the-wing reality is strong: as in life, what does and doesn't matter isn't immediately clear and only emerges over time. This striking even-handedness of treatment could be regarded as a postmodern reluctance to exercise authorial authority over the reader. Alternatively, we might glimpse the influence of the internet in Perkins' presentation of the vital and the trivial on the same plane. Just as cinema and the novel once learned from each other, *The Forrests* might point to a future in which Google affects narrative technique.

Perkins has always written vivid, assured prose that is at once highly polished and disarmingly casual: supple, alive. Light "badoings" off a window pane, a child's face "prunes" into discontent. Figurative language is deployed with ease, worked into the texture of the novel, ramped up in the early and late chapters to convey the particular quirkiness with which very young minds and fading ones apprehend the world – the "carpety black" seed heads of sunflowers perceived by the child Dorothy are heartbreakingly echoed in the "pored seedhead" of a microphone in the morphine visions that attend the end of her life.



What is conspicuous, however, is Perkins' use of sensory detail. All novelists turn to detail to create place and character – which is another way of saying that descriptive detail plays a fundamental yet subordinate role in the construction of fictional reality. By contrast, *The Forrests* moves detail to the forefront of narrative. The space Perkins saves on exposition is lavished on a precise rendering of what it is like to live in a material world:

A fierce orange light from the three-bar heater blazed by the pantry door; the soles of Evelyn's sneakers smelled melty where her legs were stretched towards it. Frank came into the kitchen and washed white paint out of a thick wide brush into the sink, water running opaque beneath the spiky black bristles. ...

The telephone receiver was thick and green in Dorothy's hand. The booth smelled of cigarette smoke and so did she. ... The cord coming off the receiver was covered in a flexi kind of metal coil. The square buttons were silver.

We have all seen those square silver payphone buttons, inhaled that melty rubber smell, handled that thick green receiver, but the novel, with its emphasis on the twin abstractions of psychology and society, is not known for rendering the thinginess of things. That generally falls to poetry (think Francis Ponge). In *The Forrests*, objects loom as if studied under a microscope or through the magnifying lens of zoned-out drugginess. It contains hundreds upon hundreds of sentences whose purpose is merely to recount a string of concrete details. Perkins writes about flowers, light, water, the fall of a child's hair – all impeccably evoked, but also subjects that routinely lend themselves to descriptive prose. But what of the “ribbed pink handles” of a child's bike, a wad of green, tooth-ridged chewing gum, a domed-lid barbecue with its faintly greasy grill? Their ordinariness counters lyricism and confirms the sharpness of Perkins' eye. She is a kind of recording angel, testifying to the worth of the world.

Roland Barthes characterised realism as an effect produced by the selection and placement of descriptive detail. Typically, then, detail creates ‘depth’ in fiction: we speak of ‘rounded’ characters, the ‘layering’ of plot. But a curious thing happens when detail is heaped upon detail and placed centre stage. Just as an intensely patterned surface works against pictorial perspective, the sheer accumulation of detail in *The Forrests* flattens its narrative plane. Novels that chart the arc of a long life usually create the illusion of accrued time – we call it a sense of history. Here, time is a succession of disconnections: of discrete events and fleeting impressions. We've moved from the continuities of history

to “moments of being”; Virginia Woolf's famous phrase for brief yet intensely felt experiences. Sure enough, “Moments are what we have,” said Perkins in the course of her conversation with Anton Enus at the Sydney Writers' Festival. In her novel's sensibility to moments, we might locate its central quality: the lively *nowness* that dances through its pages. I've mentioned Woolf and the cinema, but the looming and receding of imagistic detail in *The Forrests* might owe no more to modernist stream of consciousness and filmic close-up than to the streaming data of RSS or Twitter feeds.

Born in New Zealand in 1970, Perkins was a literary wunderkind whose first book, *Not Her Real Name*, a collection of sharp, funny stories from the grungy side of life, was published when she was just 26. It brought Perkins international acclaim, and her reputation has grown steadily. Her previous book, the prize-winning *Novel About My Wife*, is as compelling as *The Forrests* yet quite different. For one thing, it features a slippery male narrator; for another, its London setting is strongly present. Auckland and its suburbs are mentioned here and there in *The Forrests*, but the setting could be pretty much any modern Western city, just as Dorothy is an everywoman and the Forrests are a generic family. That's what enables Perkins to skip plot connections and the reader to supply them; all unhappy families are alike in this First World cocoon.

There's a very real sense in which *The Forrests* is written against *War and Peace*. Social history shows up fleetingly: for instance, in the form of the wimmin's commune where the children and their mother take refuge in the 1970s. When Dorothy and her brother revisit the commune around the turn of the century, it has morphed into an organic-farming, self-sustaining community. For the most part, however, the passage of historical time is marked by changing technology: Sega Light Phasers, iPods, tablet computers. We might infer that in a lucky country, history isn't war or revolution or dictatorship but a series of electronic toys – the novel is hardly in thrall to realism's socio-historical charter, however. And if we think of EM Forster as an emblematic figure for the realist novel in English, we can understand the disconnection that operates as an organising principle in *The Forrests* as one kind of response to his “only connect”.

But are realism's connections to time and place and character – let's say to the world – so easily set aside? ‘Moments’ are indeed writ large in *The Forrests*, but Dorothy doesn't live only in the present – who does? Unable to forget Daniel, she dreams of finding him again; whether or not her wish will come true supplies the narrative tension that draws us through the novel and constitutes its plot. In *The Forrests*, time is flatness (moments) as well as depth (memory, desire). It's linear, strung out over the course of a life, as well as cyclical: characters who have dropped out of sight return, a daughter has a sister's voice, parents leave and children arrive.



We are creatures of time, hostage to memory and yearning; that's another way of saying that we're hardwired for story. The French *nouveau roman*, which set out to discard character and plot in favour of a focus on surfaces, learned - or didn't learn - that lesson to its cost. The Anglophone novel has always been far more resistant to formal change, which has saved it from the more arid reaches of the Alain Robbe-Grillet experiment but also encouraged stagnation. Recently, however, Britain has seen the rise of the avant-garde artist and novelist Tom McCarthy, whose most recent novel, *C*, was such a hit with the literary establishment that it was shortlisted for the 2010 Man Booker Prize. McCarthy's manifesto for an experimental aesthetic includes the materialist exhortation to "let the orange orange and the flower flower". We might glimpse McCarthy's orange *oranging* in the "fierce orange light" of Perkins' heater - and, more generally, in *The Forrests*' commitment to conjuring the physical world.

But material detail isn't the whole story here. Just as Perkins preserves the rudiments of plot, she remains invested in psychological realism. Dorothy and Evelyn's thoughts and feelings are depicted at length, and in the early part of the novel that know-all narrator is on hand to tell us that Frank Forrest will show up in his daughters' dreams for decades, and that his rage is "love that had nowhere to go". As Dorothy moves into adulthood, she supplies the character

analysis: we learn that the Forrest girls marry "providers" in reaction to their improvident father; we are told that Daniel laughs at things he secretly loves. The novel leans towards showing but doesn't shun telling; it shimmers and kinks between material surface and psychological depth. We could read this kind of thing as a hedging of aesthetic bets - experimentalism lite - or, more fruitfully, as Perkins' intelligent negotiation with the avant-garde novel.

Even the deliberate vagueness of setting in *The Forrests* isn't quite what it first seems. After 11 years in London, Perkins returned to New Zealand not long before starting this novel. She has spoken of her delight at rediscovering Auckland's space and light and vegetation, a pleasure that shows in *The Forrests*' joyful apprehension of these things. New Zealand is a coded presence in this novel but a pervasive one, linking Perkins to writers like Katherine Mansfield and Janet Frame whose work is similarly infused with feeling for the natural world.

On re-reading Perkins' wonderfully literary novel, it struck me that its aesthetic engagement was less with avant-garde fiction or cinema or the internet than with a different watershed. Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* came to mind: its tricky organisation of perspective, its flaunting of surface, its anarchic exultation in the sheer artiness of art. From New Zealand, *The Forrests* looks back at it: waves. ■