

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Brenda Walker, *Reading by Moonlight: How Books Saved a Life* (Hamish Hamilton, 2010)

Near the beginning of this moving and gracefully written personal memoir, the author figure (to whom I'll refer as BW) stands at a street corner in suburban Perth holding an armful of pink peonies, which seem to her 'like small breasts floating on stems' (7). The flowers are not, as a comment by a passer-by assumes, a lover's gift to her; no, she is taking them to her breast surgeon. This little passage draws together succinctly several threads that will form part of the subtly textured pattern of *Reading by Moonlight*. Central to it is the gift motif, which has been anticipated in the preface: there, as she packs her bag for hospital, she considers taking with her Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* and calls to mind the moment when one of its characters, at a bookshop window, thinks about choosing a present for a sick acquaintance and reflects: 'You want to give him the book of his own life, the book that will locate him, parent him, arm him for the changes.' This, remarks BW, is 'close to what we might hope for from the right book' (3). She depicts herself as 'standing at a bookshop window in [her] mind' (4), wanting to share with her own readers some of the stories – especially in the form of literary fiction – that have sustained her during a long illness and contributed to a gradual recovery.

Storytelling is the particular kind of giving that figures most importantly in *Reading by Moonlight*. Narrators draw readers into acts of exchange, offering story-shaped experiences in return for (at least) attentiveness and imaginative investment. And this reciprocally donative process, the telling and reading of tales, stimulates other exchanges whereby 'the stories converse with one other, and with ourselves' (8).

That opening scene on the footpath initiates other thematic threads as well. The flowers that BW is taking to her surgeon are peonies, and their name derives (though she does not say so, for much in this book is discreetly implicit) from Greek mythology: Paeon was physician to the gods, healer of their wounds. *Reading by Moonlight* is in part a book about wounding and assuagement, about the terrors and marvels of medicine, about physical frailty and strength – a book about the body, and about a bodily engagement with the healing power of books. It comprises five main sections, from 'Surgery' to 'Survival', and the title of each braces us for an unblinking confrontation with the grim stages of cancer treatment. It is not a story that evades pain. Yet it is also a story about pleasure, the pleasure of reading.

Cixous and others made much of the idea that women's writing ought to express the female body. Reading, too, is profoundly somatic, often gendered, and always situated. Permeating the pages of *Reading by Moonlight* are the physical qualities of various lived-in spaces and objects that accommodate our bodies and surround our readings: beds and hospital gurneys, offices and hotel rooms, beaches and gardens. BW keeps us conscious, too, of the materiality of printed objects, whether stacked into 'fat chimneys of books rising in the centre of the room' (1), or held in the hand of one of Samuel Beckett's characters, who 'scooped his fingers under the book and shovelled it back till it lay wholly on his palms' (48), or palpable in the tendrils that texts send out into the reader's environment: 'A good book laces invisible fingers into the shape of a winter armchair or a hammock in the sun. I'm not talking about

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comfort, necessarily, but support.... We don't leave our bodies behind when we pick up a book' (8).

As the book unfolds, that early tableau in which the narrator stands in the street with a bouquet in her arms accumulates fuller meanings. The peonies signify not only her response to the gift of prospective survival but also the cluster of literary blossoms that she has gathered for her readers. In one of its aspects, *Reading by Moonlight* is a generous anthology – which is to say, literally, a garland of textual flowers. Some are in the form of brief snippets and summaries from this or that text, incorporated into her own elegant prose. In the space of a few pages we can slide unexpectedly but pleasurably from Hollinghurst to Poe to Tolstoy to Amis, and then on to a true story of disaster and deliverance told to BW by someone who was sharing her hospital room. There are also extended readings, reflective commentaries on books that have special resonance for her, and some of these reappear in various parts of her memoir. Gothic tales by Poe and Tarrt come and go, each time seen from a different angle. Beckett's *Malone Dies* is first mentioned early in the piece as a story that shows how waiting, even waiting for a difficult terminus, can transcend despair; then further on there is a fuller discussion, focusing on its strange engagement with Dante's *Divine Comedy* and showing how each text illuminates the other.

BW's own undulant emotions at different stages of her ordeal are delicately conveyed through meditation on the imaginary people encountered in what she reads, whether she is contemplating Nabokov's character Cincinnatus, who awaits execution with an acutely elegiac sense of how cold he will feel leaving his warm body that has been 'fashioned so painstakingly' (21), or White's Voss, whom BW sees as exploring 'the unseen interior of the land and the self' (209), or the eponymous protagonist of *The Tale of Genji*, whose flawed and fallible character is so compellingly presented that we cannot dismiss it as merely deplorable.

So the book is suffused with literary associations, but not in any derivative way. Every reference to other writing arises from BW's own perceptions and feelings, and often the images engendered by these connections are drawn into the narrative current, recurring evocatively. For example there is a powerful account of her father's protectiveness when she was a child and their farm was flooded: as she tells this tensile story she enriches it with allusions to Isaiah, to E.M. Forster, to Tsurayuki – all apt, all unforced – and then she seems to leave that anecdote behind, only to surprise us a few pages later when the black floodwater of her childhood seeps back obliquely into a different context, with the sheen of moonlight on it.

Darkness and moonlight are among the predominant images that drift through this remarkable book, creating a refrain of lyrical melancholy that is often tinged with sadness and grief but always moderated by grace and occasionally lightened by glimpses of joy.

One of the things BW values in Patrick White's fiction is his skill in suggesting 'the tiny slippages of connection' between people (210). One of the most valuable things in her own book is the way its figurative language slips associatively from one thing to another. A fine sketch of winter in New York – 'The whole city was white and silver and watercolour-brown. Lean squirrels rushed and paused, rushed and paused, over crusts of old snow...' (55) – can segue into remarks on the bitter chill of chemotherapy and then into a memorable image of pallid faces in an oncologist's waiting room seeming 'to carry a Flemish light within us, something foreign,

northern, bare and bright and cold', as in a portrait by Jan van Eyck (56).

This is an exceptional book, highly individual yet free of self-importance, shaped in language of sustained beauty. Already a novelist of recognised stature, Brenda Walker has produced here something beyond the usual generic categories: a narrative meditation on wounding and healing that opens into a demonstration of how deep and intricate the relationship between writing and reading can be.

Ian Reid