

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

John Hughes, *The Remnants* (UWA Publishing, 2012)

The Remnants is John Hughes' debut novel, but it is by no means his first work. Hughes' first book of autobiographical essays *The Idea of Home* was published in 2004 and won the New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards for non-fiction in 2005 and the National Biography Award in 2006. Since Hughes' talent obviously lies with essay writing perhaps it is not surprising that *The Remnants* is written in a similar form. While it is a fictional novel, it is presented to the reader mainly as an edited manuscript and comes complete with footnotes and a comprehensive, and somewhat daunting, reading list at the beginning. Readers of traditional fiction may need to keep an open mind, as each chapter is a different recollection of a moment of time or an event from the perspective of a different character. There is hardly a linear plotline to follow, and even the main character, R. H. (Robert Hughes) states in the introduction 'I hesitate to call it a novel' (6).

The Remnants consists of journal entries and stories recounted after the fact. It is 'a book made out of books' (8), as the narrator describes it. The timeframe jumps back and forth, with the stories recounted being far more significant in themselves than the details of when they happened and the order they happened in. This is best described by the author himself, through Robert, who meditates on memory:

The memory I'm on about is not like a geological layering of rock strata, it doesn't just lie there in a kind of sedimented torpor, earliest experiences at the bottom, most recent at the top, but is in reality a cement-mixer jumble of time, the earliest still perhaps the most vivid and all surface, but always in a state of flux and small chaos, moving in and out of loss, of the metamorphosis that comes from such heavy liquefying pressures ... a hubbling bubbling lava of the past, where whatever is hottest at any moment boils up and bursts out through the surface. (58)

The Remnants could be described as a 'cement-mixer jumble of time' where the timeline of events is almost insignificant, and 'whatever is hottest ... boils up and bursts out through the surface'.

Contributors include Robert, who has translated his late father's manuscript (originally written in Russian) and provides his own commentary on his father's work as he travels to Italy to re-trace his father's footsteps. While we read chapters in the perspective of Piero, an artist, and Eugenio, a boy who one day wandered out of the mountains and into Piero's life, perhaps the most interesting of all the characters is Anna. It is Anna's relationship with Robert's late father that is the most engaging part of the story, but Robert is the first character we are introduced to. As the novel begins, he is in a cafe in Arezzo, Italy. He has his father's translated manuscript with him and plans to travel to Piero's home, and other places his father visited, and provide his commentary on them and how they have changed over time. He is accompanied by a beautiful Polynesian woman named Angel who attempts to teach him Italian and with whom he has an affair.

Much of the story revolves around Robert's late father's relationship with Anna Ivanovna Kuznechikaya, who approaches him after he has given a lecture on St Francis of Assisi and asks him to translate a poem for her written by the late Osip Mandelstam, known in the text mostly as M. Anna is perhaps the most intriguing and memorable character in the text. We see her in present day as an elderly Russian woman with a secret and a tragic past,

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but we also read about her when she was a young and beautiful mother who nursed the dying poet M. in his final days. The text flips back and forth between these two Annas, allowing the reader to learn a little bit more about the mysterious aged Anna after each chapter written from the perspective of her younger self.

However, *The Remnants* does risk excluding readers with its didactic style and frequent passages in Italian and Russian. These foreign passages are untranslated, and there is little motivation for readers to go to the effort of translating them themselves. This is a book very obviously written by an academic, and its erudition and pretention is at times extremely off-putting. It is very easy to get lost in the lengthy musings about time and language and have to start the whole page again (if you care enough to do so) if you're to understand it by the time you reach the end. Hughes is obviously a very clever writer, and some of his passages must take a very clever reader to get to the end of them without feeling befuddled. Take, for instance, this passage on pages 55-6:

I'm Australian, New World born, from the lands of Pharaonic cartography, born of Ptolemaic rapture, conjecture-rush at emptiness's fear, like oceans rushing craters newly formed in some vacating mountains' wake, that must be landed and peopled with all manner of freaks and chimeras of hybrid-graft, miscegenated queering and gargantuan mongoloid hobgoblined mutations befitting an antipode of such fantastic terror ...

I'll admit that I struggled with such overwritten passages. *The Remnants* demands a lot from its readers, but it is not without reward if you're able to persevere. Perhaps the most thought-provoking theme revolves around Piero and his penchant for painting frescoes that were designed to only reveal their true meaning after a hundred years of deterioration. It makes one wonder how much of oneself is revealed over time by one's own age and deterioration. As we are worn down by the effects of life, perhaps we begin to display aspects of our personalities that we thought were private and forever hidden.

However, despite being privy to their private journals and musings, it is difficult to understand and relate to Hughes' characters., and therefore it is difficult to care about them. Some readers may find that the challenges of this text combined with the sometimes dull characters make reading this novel an exercise in futility. Robert, the only living narrator, is not a particularly likable character. He begins the novel by cheating on his girlfriend with Angel, who he routinely objectifies. There are also occasional bursts of misogyny and sexism that may put some readers on edge.

Anna, while being the most interesting character, is hardly more engaging. She is defined by her sufferings and by the relationships she has had with the men in her life. We know her only as Kolya's mother, Evgeny's lover, Sura's wife, M.'s nurse and Robert's father's curious companion. As she does not develop a strong identity and connect with the reader, her tragic ending fails to move.

None of the remaining characters are particularly memorable either, and if there is a long enough gap between their contributions it is possible to forget they are even a part of the story. While Hughes has obviously had success in the past, *The Remnants* is an ambitious novel and it is possible that Hughes bit off more than he could chew by beginning his career as a fiction writer with such a challenging concept.

Lauren Dougherty

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