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LESLEY HAWKES

Amanda Curtin, *Elemental*

UWA Publishing, 2013, 448 pp, pb

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Amanda Curtin's debut novel *The Sinkings* (2008) and her short story collection *Inherited* (2011) achieved critical and reader acclaim and I have no doubt that her second novel *Elemental* will do the same. *Elemental* is a story spread across four generations and shifting in location from Roanhaven in North East Scotland to the Shetland Isles and on to Fremantle and Perth. The story is told in the reflective voice of a now elderly Meggie Tulloch (nee Duthie born in Roanhaven 1891). The novel's narrative structure is divided into four notebooks or more specifically four elements: water, air, earth and fire. Each reflective notebook threads together to create a heart wrenching story that Meggie intends to leave her granddaughter Laura (Lambsie). The notebooks and the corresponding element each have their own landscape. Notebook one is set in Roanhaven between 1891 and 1905. Roanhaven is a small fishing village and the corresponding element is water. This small village is consumed with superstitions, myths and legends all in place in an attempt to explain hardships and cruelty. In this village the ocean is both feared and respected. Notebook two is set in a fish gutting factory in the Shetland Isles between 1905 and 1909 and its element is Air. While the dominant element is air there is also the strong winds and mist which forces the inhabitants to breathe in the landscape. Notebook three is set in a biscuit factory in Fremantle WA between 1910 and 1932 and the element is Earth. The final story is in the form of a Coda and takes place in Perth in 2011 and the element is Fire. The combination of the elements, notebooks and locations is a powerful reminder of the interconnectedness of all things.

Meggie is a strong complex female character who is forced to endure hardships and a level of poverty that seems almost surreal when viewed through a contemporary western sensibility. There is nothing sentimental about Meggie's reflections. There are moments of visual beauty but there is no masking of the terrible living and working conditions of her family and her workmates. Meggie is marked out as different from the beginning of the story because her superstitious small village believes redheads are a bad omen. She must hide from any fishermen in case she causes misfortune to them or to their boats: "All of them stopped cold by this *reid-heidit* child who has put herself between them and the sea. And then Granda Jeemsie rips the lines from his shoulders. *Get from my sight!* Is what he says, but the words are mangled up in rage" (11). Curtin is able to highlight gender inequality and the demarcation of jobs based on gender through the narrative thread rather than as didactic historical facts. It is at times hard to fathom that these marked separations were occurring in the not too distant past. One of the most enduring images from the novel is the young females

carrying fishermen out to the boats so the men do not wet their boots: “*The men must be kept fit for work, quinies. They must keep their seaboots dry for their spell at sea*’ (20).

The research behind this story is vast and the result is an extremely detailed novel filled with eye-opening facts and remnants of oral stories passed down through families. However, the novel does not get bogged down in these factual details as many historical novels do. The details come out organically through the structure and the telling of the story. These past events are alive rather than dull lines in an official history book. One of the ways in which Curtin manages to allow the story to flow in a seamless manner is through the female act of knitting. The women knit for practical reasons and to keep their minds and fingers active. Just as the men throw their fishing nets the women spread their knitted garments linking them across places and generations: “We knitted from the time we could master the simplest stitches—knit, purl, stockinette. Everywhere we went, no mind what else we might be doing, there’d be a ball of thick blue yarn and a pair of needles stuffed into our leather knitting belts “ (18).

The number four appears to have a dominant place throughout the novel. There are four elements, four notebooks, four locations, four generations and there are also four reoccurring colours throughout the novel: grey, purple, red and blue. There is the relentless grey of oceans mixing with the heavy grey clouds and mist in Scotland which creates an oppressive and suffocating world for the young girls. The striking purple of the exotic scarf, gifted to Meggie by her sister Kitta, becomes a symbol of rebellion and determination. Red is another dominant colour through this novel. The red of Meggie’s hair mixes with the blood of the gutted herrings and with the soaked blood of lost babies and wounds. There is also the colour of blue which stands for hope and promise. Meggie is attracted to the hope in Magnus Tulloch’s blue eyes and the hopeful blue of the open Australian sky. These colours are repeated throughout the novel and become symbolic of the women’s lived experiences:

Purple silk, Laura says softly.

And the girl is laughing, her eyes following a swathe of purple shooting into the air, up through the plasterboard ceiling, up through the four floors, through the sheet-iron roof of the hospital, up, up into a cold, clear West Australian sky the colour of the North Sea. (430)

The women in this novel live abject lives filled with realities of feet plunging into freezing waters, knives gutting fish, blood and guts smothering diseased hands and all mixing with their own flesh and deep wounds. This is a strong story told in a realistic yet lyrical manner. There are no sentimental tricks as these women have no time to ponder romantic notions. The women live, work, love and struggle to make sense of their situation and their environment. They do not passively accept their “lot” in life but struggle and fight for better conditions. The novel ends with the tragic event of Meggie’s great grandson being badly burnt. Laura is forced to face a reality she did not cause and it is Meggie’s story that gives her an understanding of how she may endure but never accept the pain. Sometimes historical fiction can become dry and overfilled with facts and description but not in this instance.

