

Tony Birch. *Women & Children*. University of Queensland Press, 2023. 328 pages. AU\$34.99 ISBN 9780702266270 Paperback

Women & Children (2023) is set in a fictionalised working-class suburb of Melbourne, with a “reputation for hard men and their crimes, from robbery and violence on the street to family violence behind closed doors” (4) in the mid-1960s. This statement introduces the main premise of the novel which is how women and children survive in a family, more expressly, how they survive the men in their families. *Women & Children* was published in the year before Australians took to the streets to decry our almost 30% national increase in domestic violence, most of which is carried out by men,¹ and significantly shifts the conversation about gender-based violence being a “women’s problem” to a whole-of-society problem.

From the outset, Birch’s novel delineates “sectarian boundaries,” between Protestants who dominate local government and business, and Catholics who were more likely to be police and therefore have “mutually beneficial relationships between local crime bosses and constabulary” (4). We see this play out with Joe and Ruby’s absent father Stan, whose only fatherly instinct is to splash tiny bits of cash his family’s way. Their stoic and proud single mother Marion refuses his money, until forced to seek him out for a loan to help her sister, Oona, escape the clutches of her abusive partner, Ray Lomax. Marion at first tries to enlist Stan to get one of his sidekicks to warn Lomax off. When he is reluctant to do so, she observes a line of new transistors on a shelf in his office, and realises he is in business with Lomax. Stan claims he “can’t do anything about it . . . This is a domestic.” To which Marion replies “It’s not a domestic, Stan. It’s violence. And Oona is my sister. My blood. Your own children’s blood” (286). We have already gleaned by this stage that most men, including the police, are loath to interfere in other men’s business, and that wives are considered property.

Rather than being told from the perspective of an abused woman, *Women & Children* is told through the limited and often anxious viewpoint of Joe Cluny, a gentle “wide-eyed eleven-year-old boy in year six” (7). This use of the child’s limited (and naïve but not for long) perspective is reminiscent of Debra Robertson’s eight-year-old Pearl in *Careless* (2006) and Sophia Laguna’s 10-year-old Justine in *The Choke* (2017). In Birch’s novel this perspective not only highlights the hypocrisy of the nuns’ warped morality as Joe tries to make sense of them, but also shows their complicity in perpetuating racism, prejudice, and misinformation. To unravel the racist outer world and the violence that encroaches on his home life, Joe seeks solace in the wisdom and kindness of his grandfather Charlie, and his friend, Ranji. These two older “decent” men contrast sharply with Stan, Joe and Ruby’s absent and selfish father, and Lomax, who, according to Marion, “talked too much” and “preened himself in the mirror above the fireplace . . . as if to reassure himself that he was a peacock” (102). This positioning of good and bad men signals the life stage (early to middle adulthood) in which male violence is typically perpetrated. This is especially pertinent when considering that the (real) perpetrators in Australia’s current wave of domestic violence reflect the demographic of Birch’s fictionalised perpetrator Lomax in *Women & Children*.²

The nuns entrusted to teach children are the only female perpetrators of violence in the novel but mostly serve as a reflection of social values of the time. They all share the first name, Sister Mary, and have varying middle names including Josephine, Agnes, and Bernadette. These women in black habits, with large crucifixes dangling from their necks, are as patriarchal as the male villains, though the violence and fearmongering they inflict is on children and in the name of God. As well as regularly inflicting corporal punishment (the strap), the nuns also make moral judgements on their parishioners’ family status. Joe is an anxious child who is embarrassed by the birthmark on the side of his face and feels an affinity with a “*Black Sambo* money box” that is passed around at school to collect money for the “poor coloured children

on the missions” (24). When he paints his face black one afternoon (both as a tribute to the money box boy and to disguise his birthmark), Sister Mary Josephine forces his head into a bucket of ice-cold water and tells him to “wipe that dark filth” (28) from his face. She then laments to Father Edmund that as “he has no father of his own” he might need a firmer hand, to which Edmund replies: “A home without a father’s presence is nothing but an empty house” (30).

In this novel, Birch suggests that survival in the outer world (racist, corrupt, and violent) and the inner world of the family (also violent) depends on character, personality, and luck. However, even those with strength and independence can be crushed, as is the case with Oona, who has the bad luck to fall for Ray Lomax. Ruby is likened to her aunt Oona, who is described as “her father’s favourite,” “beautiful, independent, and fearless,” the daughter that Charlie liked to boast would “never be stood over” (100). But when Oona arrives at Marion’s house halfway through dinner one evening, these qualities have been stripped from her: “Heavily made up with foundation, rouge and eyeliner,” she is “unable to mask the shadow of a deep bruise under her cheek” (102). Ruby, who is beautiful and fearless too, is very interested in the aunt she resembles. She interrogates Joe about what happened with Oona in her absence (when Oona came to stay seeking refuge the first time, Ruby was on the farm holiday she won for being dux of the school). Birch alludes to slavery here, with Joe joking that they will probably make Ruby work on the farm, “like the slaves used to” (42), again pointing to a harsh outer world.

Marion is careful with Lomax, the perpetrator of domestic violence in the present of the narrative. She loathes him but knows that “when dealing with troubled women in the family, at work or on the streets, silence [i]s a necessity, and accusations, even anger directed against a man responsible for a broken face, could be fatal” (102). Here, Birch addresses the inherent unfairness of violence; the fact that with certain perpetrators, addressing it can make it worse. This is Oona’s problem: she knows what Ray is capable of and must protect Marion and Ruby, whom Lomax has his eye on, even though she herself has been rendered helpless. We see the woman who her father has lauded as independent and fearless, diminished, lamenting that “she might shrink away until there was nothing left of her” (109).

What is evident though not stated in *Women & Children* is that it is during their middle years that men’s violence is mostly enacted. Joe is gentle and inquisitive and Charlie and Ranji both have philosophical dispositions that question, and to varying degrees, embrace spirituality. The contemplation of religion is interesting in the novel, too, with Charlie fluctuating between abhorring its repressive influence and, when desperate to help his daughter, seeking its solace. After visiting a church and telling the priest he is past praying, the priest agrees to say a prayer for Oona. Charlie then goes to the playground he used to take her to as a child and recalls how brave she was when she’d hurt herself. He goes to the spot where Oona fell from the monkey bars and whispers, “you are so brave.” He then hears her reply “I am very brave” (241). Charlie also reflects on the Stolen Generations when he talks about his deceased wife Ada’s childhood and why she didn’t know when her birthday was. He explains to Joe that she was “taken away” and was an orphan. When Joe asks why, Charlie explains: “Your parents don’t have to be dead to make you an orphan. Even today. Your parents might be poor. Or they were the wrong colour. Like your moneybox friend in the classroom” (237).

The ending of *Women & Children* is chilling but quietly affirming. It shows that the violence that occurs in the family must often be dealt with by the family; that some perpetrators will not stop until they have killed their victims. The novel also shows how much children and women are beholden to a few good men, and if these men are not able to protect them, then they must do whatever it takes to endure. Birch’s signature accessible writing style and depth of understanding of working-class masculinity means this novel is sure to appeal to a wide audience of readers of any gender and from a variety of education levels and backgrounds. If

there is hope offered by this novel, it is this: this topic is not only a women's problem, and reading, writing, and talking about these issues are significant acts of redress from which every Australian stands to benefit.

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NOTES

¹ Currently between 75% and 90% of domestic violence is reported as being perpetrated by men.

“Almost 30% spike in rate of Australian women killed by intimate partner last year, data shows” (Kate Lyons, *The Guardian*, 29/04/2024 accessed 13/04/24.). <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2024/apr/29/30-spike-in-rate-of-australian-women-killed-by-intimate-partner-last-year-data-shows>

² “Horror and fury in Australia as epidemic of violence against women sweeps across the country” (Kate Lyons, *The Guardian*. This article describes the uptick in violence against women (most of which is perpetrated by young men) and the public outcry that has resulted. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/article/2024/may/05/horror-and-fury-in-australia-as-epidemic-of-violence-against-women-sweeps-across-the-country>