

The Natural Way Of Things by Charlotte Wood

Ten young women awake from a drug induced sleep to find they are being held captive in a derelict rural farmhouse on a disused sheep property in Australia, by two men who work for a company known as Hastings. A high electric fence surrounds the property offering little chance of escape. The women suffer abuse, physical violence and many deprivations at the hands of their jailers who control most aspects of their lives and force them to labour building a road through the property. Soon we find out what they have in common: they have all suffered sexual abuse at the hands of men...for example, a football team pack-raped Yolanda one of the key narrative voices and Verla, the other, was a politician's mistress, deceived, exploited and cast aside. Towards the middle of the novel there is a change in power relations: the company truck/bus fails to arrive with more food resources and salaries for the jailors; all persons then are equally pushed to survive as food supplies run out. While the jailors still have their weapons to use against the women, their rules are no longer enforced. In this 'law of the jungle' women work out how to survive, some more successfully than others. Finally, the Hardies corporation sends a bus to pick up the women to take them, not home as they seem to expect, but to probably an even more horrific, undisclosed destination.

I chose this book in search of a Charlotte Wood novel I could enjoy. Friends had been talking favourably about her last novel, *The Weekend*, which I didn't like at all. *The Natural Way of Things* was apparently inspired by the historical transportation of girls from Parramatta Girls Home to an institution in Hay where they were sexually abused. The story line is reminiscent to me of the *Handmaids' Tale* and later of *Lord of the Flies*. In a radio interview I listened to, Charlotte Wood revealed that living in a deserted farmhouse in rural Australia helped her write.

I loved the vivid descriptions of nature, the women, and their horrifying interactions with their jailors. I liked the gradual disclosure of fragments of the past abuse of each woman in well-timed flashbacks. I enjoyed following the transformations of Yolanda and Verla and how they were able to come to terms with their traumatic past, their horrifying and hopeless present, and a future that did not bode well.

Symbolism abounds in this book of corporate control and misogyny. The two jailors offer two vastly different though stereotyped masculinities in their domination of the 10 women: Bonsa openly misogynist and masterful, vengeful and cruel, and physically and verbally abusive; and Teddy the casual hippy type, a seed eater with dreadlocks, a yoga mat and...a spear gun. The book reaches a climax with Yolanda's realisation: 'We are here (in this farmhouse) because we are hated; it's the Natural Way of Things'. Later when the corporate rules in the farmhouse relax a bit, however, there is no 'feminist revolution'. All are still captive on the property with no escape. The misogyny displayed by the men is embodied too by the women: some appear shallow and infantile while others seek male approval. Patriarchal culture stunts and cripples the women too. The social relations in the farmhouse and beyond I considered a microcosm of patriarchal societies everywhere.

What I didn't like: this book was too horrific at times to read, the happenings too awful to contemplate. It was a confronting and uncomfortable read; all the more because I know all

of us women have been disrespected, dismissed or abused in small and large ways just because we are women. I didn't like what could be called the overall didactic or cliched tone of the novel, represented in the stereotypes and some of the symbolism; also the ugliness of women's bodies is stressed in the writing and I wondered why.

Annie Hilsdon