BOOKS

Hilarious outrage

Airini Beautrais serves up poetic justice to men behaving badly.

by AMY McDAID

“A"t a certain age, I began to think less about sex and more about tableware.” So Airini Beautrais opens her sharp and confronting, though often funny, short-story collection with a Strait-laced science educator refurbishing her husband’s cupboard if well-meaning attempts at spontaneity. Who would want a trip to Bungan? Far better to have matching dinner plates and perfectly stacked spoons. Enter Don, the entomologist, with his brittle books, microscopes and a dogmatic refusal to sleep in anything but Belgian linen.

“This is not what you want, told myself. You like neatness. You like distance. I pressed him against a wall. “Let’s not do this in here,” he breathed, close to my ear. “There are one hundred and ninety years of our lives being collected in this little room and I don’t want to damage anything.”

The educator wants order, but her love affair with Don will bring disruption – and violence. It’s a fitting opening to the title story in Bug Week. Beautrais uses her background in poetry and ecological science to tell sinewy stories that simmer with female outrage and a mullet, yet powerful defiance. In Bug Week, a woman’s regime resident destroys a gift from her abusive husband. She is suprisingly honest about the petal pulp. The weight of her, grinding them into the pimpled slab of concrete. The leaves take longer, but they do shred. She is also surprised by how angry she feels, but no sound comes out. It’s a tre- mendous, powerful, silent anger.

Beautrais deploys images of rot and decay to underline society’s sickness, particularly in regard to male entitlement. In a pair of hands, body parts wash up by a river, interrupting a romantic picnic. In A summer of scents, we follow the humdrum lives of elderly residents in a German apartment block – until a putrid smell is taken over. In the novel’s most unusual story, involving a young wife dodges sex with her husband. Instead, she forwards a brown stain appears on Frau Dickmann’s ceiling, and where has Martin disappeared? Perhaps one of Beatraus’ most impressive skills is mingling the hilarity in the thoughts and deeds of deplorable men. I alternately laughed and ached.

Here Rabie looked at his wife and decided it was her fault. No one could gaze at her nakedness and maintain an erection. However, after the divorce, subsequent experiments eventually convinced him that the problem had a mechanical basis. The baddest Tonto in town is painted in the collection’s most unusual story, involving an allbarack, bespoke jacket in a potato-lined room. Somehow it works. Another life less well lived, a woman’s torture spying on her lost, newly married, ex-boyfriend. There is no cheap closure in Beautrais’ stories – all ask questions and unsettle, and no more so than the final story, A quiet death, in which a terminally ill woman’s desire for a peaceful end is cruelly wrested away. Although she is silenced, we roar with rage.

BUG WEEK, by Airini Beautrais (VUP, $30)

It’s hell out there

Booker winner’s misjudged overdose of the horrors ahead.

by CHARLOTTE GRIMSHAW

When Francis is admitted to his Tasmanian hospital, his adult children, Anna, Tommy and Terza, refuse to let her die, instead subjecting her to the pain and distress of aggressive medical interventions. She spends the whole of her life less well lived.

The novel quickly becomes so grueling it’s like fighting your way through the apocalypse and running into a prophet who subjects you to a hell-fire harangue while brandishing his totemic, this tweet and eraser device, for example: as Francie deteriorates, bits of Anna start disappear ing. In the time of the novel’s aged, it is a struggle to comprehend the reaction is similarly low-key; oh, right, another bit of Anna’s fallen off.

Indeed, now meaning by the novel’s fallen off. In an age of meaning, Booth says, “we’re all dying. And nature’s about, unverified, but not reacting with the hysteric one would expect. At this stage the reader having got the symbolism, is so harried and agitated and depressed that the reaction is similarly low-key, oh, right, another bit of Anna’s fallen off. Indeed, now meaning by the novel’s fallen off. In an age of meaning, Booth says, “we’re all dying. And nature’s about, unverified, but not reacting with the hysteric one would expect. At this stage the reader having got the symbolism, is so harried and agitated and depressed that the reaction is similarly low-key, oh, right, another bit of Anna’s fallen off. Indeed, now meaning by the novel’s fallen off. In an age of meaning, Booth says, “we’re all dying. And nature’s about, unverified, but not reacting with the hysteric one would expect. At this stage the reader having got the symbolism, is so harried and agitated and depressed that the reaction is similarly low-key, oh, right, another bit of Anna’s fallen off. Indeed, now meaning by the novel’s fallen off. In an age of meaning, Booth says, “we’re all dying. And nature’s...