

Artful approach to mental health

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FULL TEXT

SLEEP By Catherine Cole UWA Publishing, 246pp, \$24.99

When I first had small children, I used to say that all I wanted for them in life was to find a good job, a caring partner and to be happy. Simple. Or maybe not so simple —because that's everything, isn't it? It's what we all hope for, and it's not easy to find.

Life deals up bad cards from time to time: grief, loss and sadness are part of the journey. But how do we tackle difficult times? And how do we heal? These are questions explored by Catherine Cole in her latest novel, Sleep. Sleep is the story of Ruth, a young woman who has lost her mother, Monica, to mental illness. For Ruth, as for most people who have faced traumatic loss, healing is difficult: there's a heavy personal burden to deal with, as well as the impact of her mother's illness on the family.

"What did I believe as a child?" Ruth says. "That my mother was a puzzle that would take a long time to solve." It's not until she meets aged French artist Harry in a London cafe that Ruth begins to find a pathway to healing. Across time, Ruth and Harry come to know each other through sharing -stories and art. Harry has grown up in Paris alongside the Canal Saint-Martin, and he transfers his love of this place to Ruth through recollections and memories. But not all his memories are happy ones. He, too, has experienced suffering and loss. Sadness and grief connect him to Ruth and, in turn, she is able to tell him about her mother and family.

This is a layered novel in which memory and flashback are key tools used by Cole to convey character and identity. Ruth's -stories are interspersed with Harry's to merge the present with the past. Fourteen years on from her mother's death, Ruth is about to travel to France with Harry to see his beloved city and canals. She is staying with Aunt Elsie, her mother's sister, who also shares memories of growing up with Monica.

Art as a form of expression and healing is a strong theme in this book. "Anything can be tolerated if you make art of it," Harry says, and this reflects the journeys of both characters as, together, they work through their respective stories of trauma.

Art has helped Harry traverse difficult times. But art isn't easy: "There was a painful yearning for artistic realisation in all that he saw ...He'd paint well, very well ...but the core of it would never quite sing." It is the distraction of creating art, however, and this strong yearning for expression that helps Harry to live. Through sharing his love of art, he offers Ruth a different way of seeing the world.

What appealed to me most about this novel was Cole's bold tackling of issues around mental illness. "When I was a child," Ruth says, "I believed that the human heart could break with a crack because that happened to the Happy Prince and to my mother." Despite increased community resources and greater support for mental health in recent decades, this is still an area surrounded by silence. In Sleep, Cole brings mental health to the fore by showing the manifestations of depression and its impact on families. My hope is that Cole's work will promote awareness and discussion of mental illness. The right intervention and treatment can help —not always, but often. And if loss occurs, recovery is possible, in time, through friendship and support.

Although Sleep delves into challenging and confronting -issues, it is a story of healing and hope. Gently written and carefully constructed, this novel will carry you through the highs and lows of the protagonists' life journeys and leave you with a sense of acceptance and optimism. Karen Viggers's latest novel is The Orchardist's Daughter.

CREDIT: Karen Viggers

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