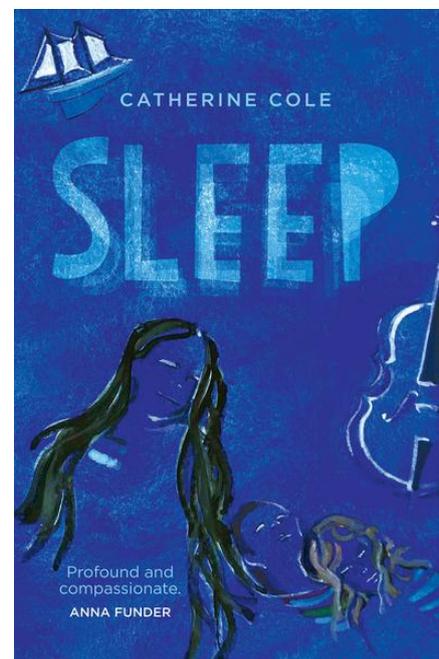


Be Careful What You Remember

Catherine Cole. *Sleep*.
Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 2019.
Reviewed by Anne Brewster

For full journal see https://hecate.communications-arts.uq.edu.au/files/4890/AWBR%2019_1.pdf

Catherine Cole's new novel *Sleep* revolves around an extended family of women and the ways in which they manage intergenerational trauma. The protagonist, Ruth, struggles with issues of abandonment. She has to deal with the trauma of her mother, Monica, which had been passed down to Monica through her father, a survivor of the Second World War. He returned from the war a troubled and restless man, estranged from his family and the Yorkshire landscape of his childhood. He relocated the family from Yorkshire, where Monica had grown up, to London where they continued to move from house to house, with Monica and her sister always homesick for Yorkshire. Although they had never lived there, Monica's daughter, Ruth, and her sister, Antoinette, remained deeply attached to the Yorkshire landscape of their mother's childhood, and to the people who inhabited it, especially their Aunt Elsie.



Sleep presents us with a loving portrait of the Yorkshire Dales – the pale twilights, the wind slinking through the grasses, the bracken, the hills and crags, the dry stone walls and rambling tracks, and the domestic interior of Aunt Elsie's homely Langthwaite cottage, infused as it is with the warmth of its fire in the hearth, the hissing of Elsie's ironing and the aroma of her wonderful cooking. Whether she is making tea, cooking, knitting, shopping or preparing the fire, Elsie is constantly engaged in the "interminable little chores" (11) that sustain a household and occupy so many women's lives. This novel is in many ways an essay on, and a homily of the rituals of women's domestic practices – the comforts and connections they sustain – as different generations visit and care for each other. These connections are loosely maintained when a couple of the women – Monica's mother and sister – migrate to Australia. The novel doesn't show us anything of their lives there except for the occasional postcard, but their histories continue to bind them together. This novel is organically cosmopolitan, exploring the effects of both international and intra-national migration. Although it problematises notions of belonging – Monica tells her daughter Ruth, "you can never go home" (28) – the novel demonstrates the durability of familial and historical memory.

This is a novel primarily about memory. As Ruth says, "memory allows you to keep things close" (10). But some of the memories in this family are horrifying; this is the reason Ruth's female relatives migrated to Australia. While the novel shows us how loving memories continue to sustain a family separated by migration – within and beyond the UK – it also shows the challenge a range of characters face in living with painful memory. Ruth has been deeply scarred by the intergenerational trauma that her mother Monica had inherited in living with her father's "remembered horror" (79) as a war veteran. Monica struggles with despair and depression and her brutalisation at the hands of the medical profession and its latest "cures" impact deeply on Ruth especially as she enters adolescence.

Ruth is drawn into an odd kind of friendship with an elderly French-Hungarian artist, Harry, who is exiled from his beloved Paris. The story of Ruth and Harry's conversations about love, grief, memory, philosophy and art, comprises a central narrative thread which is interwoven – in alternate chapters – with the story of Ruth's family. Harry has migrated to London from Paris after the Second World War. As I have suggested, *Sleep* produces a loving portrait of the Yorkshire Dales, but it also centres on a beautifully crafted historical portrait of Paris in the 1920s and 1930s, specifically the 10th Arrondissement with its famous Canal Saint Martin which Harry adored as a boy. Paris with all its visceral street life, its homely interiors and, perhaps most importantly, its lavish cuisine, is rendered in all its enchantment and richness through the perspective of a precocious young boy on the edge of puberty. This evocative portrait of the

famous city that encompasses Paris's occupation by the Nazis and the flight of its Jewish population, is evidently founded on substantial research, the result of Cole's residency at the Keesing Studio in Paris. This research is knitted seamlessly into the texture of the lives of the many characters that populate Sleep's Paris. The effervescence of the young Harry and his talented extended family are shot through with whimsical and comic moments, such as the memorable section depicting the draining and cleaning of the Canal Saint Martin, and the wartime tragedy and heroism that have characterised the history of this iconic city.

Carrying all these memories which jostle up against each other, Harry, we gradually come to understand, is beset with his own inner demons. In his long conversations with Ruth, he relives his idyllic childhood in Paris with his gifted and affectionate extended family. The war has impacted upon both their families in calamitous ways and as an exile in Paris it is clear that Harry nurses secrets that have transformed him into a strange and somewhat creepy person. Both Harry and Ruth are tormented individuals who struggle to keep the "evil" (32) that beset their childhoods at bay. They both wrestle with a grief that is at times almost insurmountable. Harry's solution to the wreckage wrought by memory is art. He tells Ruth:

"I prefer not to remember the dark things ... let historians and curators deal with them. I want to move through what's left of my life slowly, watching how leaves change colour or how a spider spins its web." (232)

Harry has found a measure of peace in his life as a portrait artist although he is an ambiguous, voyeuristic figure. Ruth, as a young woman, has not found the peace that Harry cultivates; her troubled childhood has left her with an ingrained drive for revenge. Both her grief and her anger bubble up at times, threatening to overwhelm her, but she gradually learns from the wisdom that her aunt and Harry impart. Ruth's aunt Elsie tells her, "Be careful what you remember ... some things are best forgotten" (33), and Ruth's journey in the novel is that of learning to manage her memories. The novel suggests that, where it is not possible to forget, we must find a way of co-habiting with memories in a manner that does not destroy us. Harry counsels Ruth: "you can't kill memories. You have to find a way of living with them" (209). Of the painful events that haunt her and for which she seeks reparation, he advises: "It is too late. It is done ... you have a life to live ... what was done cannot be undone" (226). This radical form of acceptance resonates with some of the spiritual practices of Buddhism or Christianity. But Harry has discovered that it is his art that enables him to live with pain and trauma, and Ruth herself starts to write about her mother as a means of living with the painful memories of her childhood.

However, as I have suggested, our relationship with Harry and his art is ambivalent. While initially it may appear admirable, his dictum that "art allows us to make something lovely of self-delusion and pathos and longing and fear" (105) is rendered ambiguous in the course of the novel. We come to see that Harry's art has unexpected consequences that threaten to destroy the friendships he holds most dear. The novel appears to question art and its voyeuristic relationship with suffering and despair. Harry seems at times a predatory creature who "collects" people in order to paint them (105). The novel suggests that his relationship with some of the people he paints is possessive and appropriative; we are told that, in one instance, he "watched [the woman he wanted to paint] as a fox watches its prey" (172). Harry and Ruth are both stalkers who disturb and unsettle their quarry.

If memory is a central theme of the novel, the title announces the book's focus on sleep – and on nightmares and dreams. The theme is introduced through the figure of Ruth's grandfather, a disturbed man who is haunted by images of war and afflicted with a "smouldering rage" (131). We are told that he had "given his sleeping life over to nightmares of begging wraiths, of bodies on which the most awful scientific experiments had been carried out" (97). Monica's experience with "sleep torture" (76) as a young woman impacts on the rest of her life. The terrible, gendered medical treatment that Monica received is overtly juxtaposed with the war experience of men when Ruth visits the Imperial War Museum in London and sees evidence of scientific experiments with mustard gas (97). If sleep is a precious and essential item in our repertoire of life skills, its calibration is all-important; too little or too much can have terrible consequences. The novel reminds us of the proximity of sleep and death.

The experience of trauma and exile raises many issues in the novel, some of which, as I have suggested, derive from macro global issues. Both families in this novel – Harry's and Ruth's – are inflicted with a kind of philosophical malaise. They nurse within them, as a result of war, "big,

imponderable questions, for which there never was an answer” (115). These questions revolve around people’s inhumanity to other people, around cruelty and brutality. They encompass sciences in particular, medical practices discredited in the passage of time as horrifically wrong and barbaric. How do we live in the shadow of these truths and their traumatic histories? The novel poses this question and also an answer: we learn how to survive through simple, mundane acts of care and self-care, through attentiveness to the small acts of regeneration in our daily worlds, which is also the stuff of art. As a child Harry had read Schopenhauer: “Each day is a little life: every waking and rising a little birth, every fresh morning a little youth, every going to rest and sleep a little death” (38). More than once Schopenhauer and other philosophers are called upon to contribute to the novel’s rich philosophical life. This is indeed a deeply philosophical novel that investigates the manner in which we might fashion ethical lives that sustain both ourselves and others. In one of Harry’s meditations on the compulsions and addictions of his extended family, he tells Ruth “once I’d grown older I understood how blinded we become by our own inadequacies, yearning for what we can never be while overlooking our best qualities” (100).

The novel incorporates snippets of philosophy such as this effortlessly into the narrative in its interest in the daily-ness of everyday life, and in particular the everyday life of families. Because of the searching nature of the journeys into and out of their families on which the two main characters, Ruth and Harry embark, these quoted excerpts of philosophical discourse slot apparently effortlessly into the fictional narrative, enriching and enhancing it. I say “apparently effortlessly” as this seemingly effortless textual hybridity belies the writer’s skilful craft and, in this case, the considerable research which has gone into the re-creation of the various historical periods in Paris and the UK history in which the novel is set. Both Paris and London are cities haunted by the memories of war in complex and subtle ways. Inevitably, on one level, life continues in spite of war. When, after the war, Paris’s beauty was unchanged this was a “terrible psychic shock for Harry” (230). He couldn’t understand how the place could have stayed itself (230) after the barbarity of the war. However, in the final view we have of Paris – on the last page of the novel – there is an image of “a veritable city of tents ... lined up along the other side of the canal: refugees, homeless people, the dispossessed. Nous sommes sans-papiers, says a sign” (243). In this single image at the novel’s conclusion Cole hints at history repeating itself. She gestures to war, migration, trauma and dispossession as ongoing conditions of the contemporary world.

The two narrative threads of the novel – Harry’s story and Ruth’s – become increasingly tightly bound and their narratives intertwine with and inform each other. Although the novel opens at a leisurely pace it imperceptibly gathers momentum through a number of powerful revelations and confrontations and by the last quarter of it I couldn’t turn the pages fast enough. The ending is a tour de force with enormous affective power and indeed confirms Anna Funder’s assessment of it on the front cover as “profound and compassionate.”

Associate Professor Anne Brewster is based at the University of New South Wales. Her research interests include Australian Indigenous literatures, minoritised women’s literatures, and critical race and whiteness studies. Books include *Giving This Country a Memory: Contemporary Aboriginal Voices of Australia* (2015), *Reading Aboriginal Women's Autobiography* (1995, 2015), and (with Sue Kossew) *Rethinking the Victim. Gender, Violence and Contemporary Australian Women's Writing* (2019). She is series editor for *Australian Studies: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Peter Lang).

For full journal see https://hecate.communications-arts.uq.edu.au/files/4890/AWBR%2019_1.pdf