

Not the last word: point and counterpoint

A kiss is not just a kiss

The isolation of the adult victim of child abuse

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*Translating great novels to the small or large screen inevitably involves the loss of some of the insights gained from the written word and the creation of a new world. Some novels appear to be written with screen translations in mind. Others appear to be impossible to translate. In this article *The Kiss*, by Kathryn Harrison, is reviewed. The book provides beautifully written insights into the painful world of emotional and psychological child abuse, anorexia and bulimia. There are other important messages in the work, not the least being those that we can learn about the isolation that an abused child can suffer. Such abuse can prepare (or groom) children for later abuse as an adult.*

I love reading. I have often imagined being a castaway on a desert island with only one book or just a handful of books. Which to choose? Choice is important in such circumstances because to be left with an airport novel (or a series of airport novels) would be a nightmare. Endlessly reading John Grisham's novels, for example, would add to the torture of isolation.

Such novels have their place – and that place is in departure lounges and on aeroplanes. Prosaic and formulaic, they fit the scene perfectly. Travelling by plane involves getting a lot closer to God (if he or she exists) than most of us would wish. At 30,000 feet, with a few rivets and sheets of metal between the passengers and instant death, I find pondering the meaning of life and other related activities too disconcerting. Grisham is perfect for such an unnatural activity as flying.

These thoughts were prompted by reading reviews of Grisham's (1998) latest 'airport novel', *The Street Lawyer*. Some reviewers like his books. Charles Spencer (1998) 'looks forward with real pleasure' to Grisham's books, but even such favourable reviews are heavily qualified. According to Spencer it 'would take a Dickens to do justice' to the problems portrayed in Grisham's new book and 'Grisham is no Dickens'. Others review Grisham's work less favourably. David Horspool (1998) in a sister British newspaper, is less flattering: 'His flat styleless prose is not up to the task'.

Reading book reviews is, for me, the next best thing to reading books themselves. One of the most encouraging developments in Australia in recent years has been the introduction of *The Australian's Review of Books* published monthly in *The Australian* with a subsidy from the Australia Council for the Arts. There was much to enjoy in the April edition, in particular David McCooey's (1998) analysis of adapting classic novels for television.

McCooey reviews the BBC adaptation of Anthony Powell's *A Dance to the Music of Time*, shown recently on our ABC TV. According to McCooey, Powell's work comprises 12 novels published over 25 years, one million words, 300 characters and a time span of more than 50 years. I will accept McCooey's estimate of the number of words and characters because when I read the novels I wasn't counting. Powell's words are not written for

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counting though Grisham, one feels, has certainly counted his.

Reading *A Dance to the Music of Time* gave me great pleasure. I have often thought that those 12 novels should be waiting on my desert island. The writing is beautiful, almost sensual, and the characters entrancing. Kenneth Widmerpool must be one of the greatest creations in English literature.

I watched the BBC adaptation with some trepidation. While I don't expect films or television adaptations to be faithful to the books (McCooy's discussion of this point is interesting), sometimes, somehow, my memories of the books are damaged by the visual representation. *Catch 22*, *Heart of Darkness* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* are examples. Some films I avoid for this reason. I do not want to see the film version of *The Wings of the Dove*.

I approached the BBC adaptation of *A Dance to the Music of Time* with these thoughts in mind. Perhaps because I knew that 12 novels (and one million words) could not be reduced to seven hours of television, I took the risk. I am glad I did. The television series was a wonderful entertainment. Widmerpool was just as I imagined him. There was a great deal missing, and many metaphors were lost, but it was powerful nonetheless. Even if my desert island has electricity and a video machine, however, I will choose novels. The novel allows the reader to enter the story in a way that films and television do not.

It is hard to imagine how *The Kiss* by Kathryn Harrison will ever be translated to film or television. This is the apparently true story of a woman's abuse by her father. The blurb on the jacket of the book describes it as 'an obsessive love affair' between the woman and her father. I feel uncomfortable with the word 'affair' (see Goddard 1997; 1998) and think, on balance, that abuse is the correct word.

Kathryn Harrison is a respected author with three previous novels to her name. Two of them were acclaimed as *New York Times* Notable Books. *The Kiss* is something different. Her parents divorce when she is six months of age. She is in a house where her father's name is never spoken and where her maternal grandmother uses scissors to cut the father from family photographs.

Her mother remains fixated on her husband, Kathryn's father. The maternal grandmother screams when the mother goes out with someone else.

...She begins to scream from behind her closed bedroom door. My grandmother has a talent for screaming. Her screams are not human. They tear through the veil of ordinary life...and in rushes every black, bleak and barbarous thing: animals with legs caught in traps, surgery in the days that precede anaesthesia, the shriek of a scalded infant, the cry of a young woman raped in the woods...(Harrison, 1997:6-7).

When Kathryn's mother isn't dating someone else, she sleeps, hidden behind a satin face mask:

For as long as she lives with us, in her parents' house, she sleeps whenever she can. She sleeps very late every day, as much as six or seven hours past the time when I get up for breakfast. I stand beside her bed as she sleeps. *Wake up. Wake up...*(Harrison, 1997:7).

Kathryn's father was forced to leave the family by her mother's parents:

The bargain was simple. If my father would leave without causing the family further trouble, then he could consider himself free: the divorce settlement would require nothing of him...(Harrison, 1997:22).

My grandparents thought they could end it, erase my mother's unfortunate mistake. There was the baby, of course, the life that sprang from my mother's rebellion, her attempt to thwart her parents and especially her mother's desire to control her – there was me to consider, but I was a cost they'd accept. He, however, had to go...(Harrison, 1997:22).

With her father gone, Kathryn Harrison learns how to survive as a child in a family of overwhelmingly powerful adults. Her mother leaves the home as well, leaving her at the mercy of her grandparents. This is a story of emotional abuse, of learning to keep secret feelings that don't fit the scheme of things. Kathryn's mother:

...may sleep with a mask, but by the time I am a teenager I have made one within myself. I have hidden my heart...(Harrison, 1997:36).

Rebuked by my grandmother, sitting in silence beside her, I began to teach myself to define what I really feel toward my mother – a desperate, fearful anger over her having abandoned me, an anger that has left me stricken with asthma and rashes – as *love*...(Harrison, 1997:36).

There are occasional accounts of physical abuse but it is this constriction of the emotions, a translation of powerful feelings into more palatable language, that grooms the author for what is to come.

Anorexia and bulimia are the only languages left to her:

An uneasy relationship with food is the standard example in cases such as my mother's and mine. At fifteen, when I stop eating, is it because I want to secure her grudging admiration? Do I want to make myself smaller and smaller until I disappear, truly becoming my mother's daughter: the one she doesn't see? (Harrison, 1997:39).

Anorexia can be satisfied, my mother cannot: so I replace her with this disease, with a system of penances and renunciation that offers its own reward. That makes mothers obsolete. (Harrison, 1997:39-40).

Rescue from such situations isn't easily found. 'The dizzy rapture of starving' leads to a gynaecologist's office and abuse that is somehow more appalling because it is in a clinical setting and uses medical language.

The kiss that begins the grooming by her father occurs when Kathryn is 20 years old:

In years to come, I'll think of the kiss of transforming sting, like that of a scorpion: a narcotic that spreads from my mouth to my brain. The kiss is the point at which I began, slowly, inexorably, to fall asleep, to surrender violation, to become paralyzed. It's

the drug my father administers in order that he might consume me. That I might desire to be consumed. (Harrison, 1997:70).

This is the kiss everything that occurs in the memoir has prepared her for but it is a kiss that nothing can prepare anyone for:

One kiss. An instant, seemingly discrete and isolated in time, yet paradoxically so, for the kiss has grown. It is like a vast, glittering wall between me and everything else, a surface offering no purchase, nor any sign by which to understand it. I can see past and through it to the life I used to have, but, mysteriously, the kiss separates me from that life. (Harrison, 1997:71).

The kiss leads to her gradual enslavement to her father, a father whose demands cannot be satisfied. This kiss leads to a life where 'manageable pain' (Harrison, 1997:153) is the best that can be achieved. She becomes obsessed with and addicted to her father and what he calls 'love'.

The reviews on the dust jacket of *The Kiss* provide powerful testimony to the awful attraction of this work: 'only a writer of extraordinary gifts could bring so much light to bear on so dark a matter'; 'a darkly beautiful book, fearless and frightening, ironic and compassionate'. This, for me, is the heart of the issue. As in so many great novels, it is possible to read this book at a number of levels. If this is the story of Kathryn Harrison's abuse by her father, on this level alone it stands as a beautifully crafted but terrible story. The insights that she shares with her readers are exquisitely and excruciatingly described. This is the story of a woman whose emotional isolation as a child set her up for the pain of an exploitative relationship as a young adult. This is not a formulaic novel (unlike Grisham's) written with the screen in mind.

At another level, this memoir serves other purposes. She brilliantly describes the devouring, humiliating abuse of power by her father in a way that only an intelligent adult, with finely developed communication skills, could provide. As I read this, I thought of the women about whom Lu Pease and I wrote (Pease & Goddard, 1996), women still searching for therapeutic healing for the brutalizing scars inflicted upon them.

Kathryn Harrison was an adult when her father had sex with her. She is now a respected writer living in New York City. To write this is not in any way to diminish

what happened to her, what she experienced, or is experiencing. She was, after all, still his child and remains so. Child abuse is still possible when the child has grown into an adult, although it is not generally so named. A young child, however, has even fewer choices, even fewer opportunities to articulate the pain, even less chance to escape abusive relationships.

It is in the descriptions of life as an isolated child that the truth of this abuse of power lies. As a child she was as isolated as I would be on my imaginary desert island. As the sub-title of the novel suggests, her life was until now a secret. If I had a choice of books to take to my island (and, in reality, any choice is as unlikely as Harrison's) I don't think I would choose *The Kiss*. It is a beautifully crafted work, an extraordinary book, but too painful to read in total isolation. □

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