THE AUSTRALIAN

Hearts break and mend as a widow comes to terms with loss

GEORDIE WILLIAMSON THE AUSTRALIAN MARCH 30, 2013 12:00AM

GRIEF is a strange affliction. Those who suffer its effects do not always wish to be cured. To lose a loved one is only the first injury; the second comes from the awareness that a return to health requires a betrayal of the memory of those who are gone.

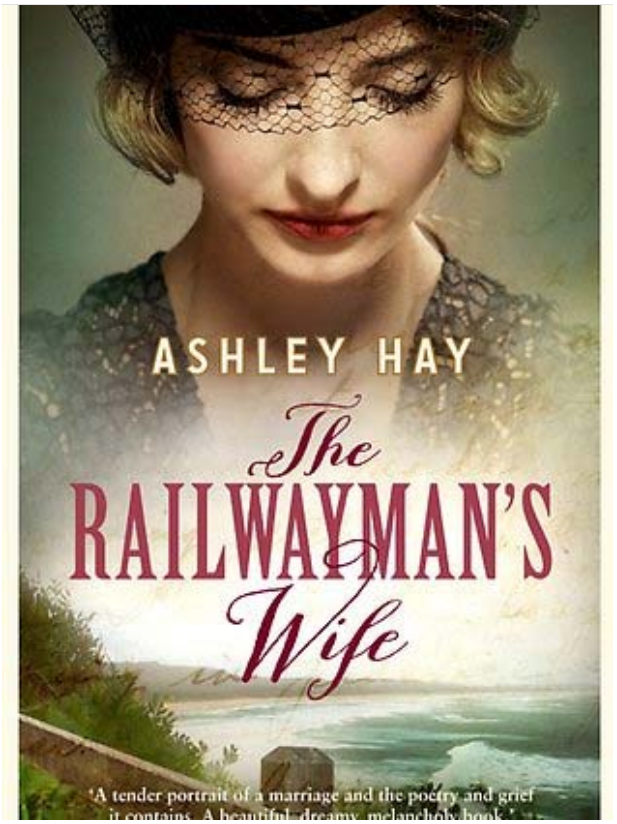
For some, reopening the old wound is a way of maintaining connection with the dead.

Ashley Hay's new novel makes drama from this painful paradox.

In its pages we meet Anikka Lachlan, a young woman whose husband, the railwayman of the title, dies in a work accident, leaving her with a young daughter, a modest cottage in the lovely seaside village of Thirroul to Sydney's south and a tremendous hole in her life.

What makes this sudden loss worse is its timing: Mac Lachlan, a Scottish migrant, is killed in 1948, in the long shadow of World War II. Anikka has spent the preceding years sharing in the massed sadness of wives and mothers made bereft by war; and now her husband, spared the conflict, has died nonetheless. It feels ignoble to luxuriate in a loss so drearily commonplace.

The Railwayman's Wife is nonetheless given over to a beautifully rendered and psychologically acute picture of Ani Lachlan's widowhood. The time of course is one of strictly observed social proprieties. Though the priest visits regularly and women of the town leave plates of food on the Lachlan family's doorstep in rotation, the necessity of maintaining a stiff upper lip means that all her pain is turned inward.



The Railwayman's Wife, by Ashley Hay Source: Supplied

Outwardly, there is no exorbitance to Ani's grieving. Only the reader is privy to the chaos of her emotions, the perverse and magical thinking she privately indulges.

Ani is offered a job by the Railways in meagre recompense for her loss, and she accepts, even though it is at Central Station in one of a network of lending libraries, hard by those machines that took the life of her spouse. There she reconnects with the novels and poems - from Jane Eyre, a work whose moralism and focus on the interior development of a young woman echoes this antecedent work, to the war poetry of Siegfried Sassoon - that first drew her to the railwayman.

Her work also reintroduces her to two men who have long been Thirroul locals but who have only belatedly returned from the war: Frank Draper, a doctor hardened by his experience of liberating the Nazi death camps in Europe; and Roy McKinnon, a gentle poet, talented but lately rendered silent by the experience of conflict.

Gradually the pair, childhood friends, draw Ani out of the burrow of her sadness. Each opens a window for her on the hard truths of events from the wider world; and each, in recollecting aspects of Mac Lachlan's character, teaches Ani that her husband had not yet revealed all of himself to her.

The country girl of Scandinavian parentage who had never seen the sea until Mac Lachlan brought her to Thirroul comes to appreciate that there is still much to experience and learn.

Hay handles the delicate progress of Ani's return to the world with sympathy and toughness; she is an author in whom intellectual scope and empathetic imagination are not separate activities but two sides of the same coin. If her first novel, The Body in the Clouds (2010), was a book in which ideas were predominant, this work is unashamedly concerned with the movements of the heart.

Both the ostensible subject matter and the cover design of The Railwayman's Wife are complicit in this: they suggest the novel is chick-lit, albeit a finer-grained example of the genre. But this understandable exercise in

marketing does a disservice to the quality of Hay's prose and to the quality of her insights: into the opaque mystery of a loving marriage; and into the chasm that opens in the psyche of even the most stolid soul when such a union is wrenched apart.

Finally, though, Thirroul itself emerges as a central presence in the novel: the geological anomaly where Sydney's sandstone escarpment makes some small allowance to the sea and retreats inland, allowing a village to squeeze in between land and water, is beautifully portrayed here. We know DH Lawrence got in first. His Kangaroo - infuriatingly, still the most exquisite account of place in our literature - emerged from the months that Lawrence spent in Thirroul in the early 1920s.

Yet it is fair to say Hay, who spent her childhood in the same town, brings her own poetry to bear. She makes of it a coastal sublime, meticulously described. But she also makes that liminal strip into a metaphor - at once vaporously melancholy yet profoundly ordinary - in a manner that recalls the sour-sweet best of Michael Ondaatje's fiction. Another author, Ford Madox Ford, began his The Good Soldier by claiming, "This is the saddest story." It isn't. That title rightly belongs to The Railwayman's Wife.

The Railwayman's Wife
By Ashley Hay
Allen & Unwin, 320pp, $29.95

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