

# THE SMALL SHINY DETAILS

**Justin Somper** talks to award-winning “newcomer” **Sonya Hartnett**

Many UK readers may be under the impression that Sonya Hartnett’s first book was *Thursday’s Child*, winner of the Guardian Fiction Prize. It’s a reasonable assumption. Melbourne born and bred Hartnett is a fresh-faced 34 year-old, and *Thursday’s Child*, was the first of her novels to be published in the UK. In fact, it’s her twelfth book. She was first published in Australia at fifteen and is under no delusions as to why. “I was very aware that they were publishing *Trouble All The Way* because I was fifteen. It wasn’t a good book and if I was older, they wouldn’t have published it. I thought, well, publishing is a notoriously difficult thing to do. It’s fair that I should be treated as a novelty act and, in exchange, get a foot in the door.”

Yes, Sonya Hartnett is every bit as tough, incisive and engaging in person as in her writing. She has much to say about childhood, and whilst *Thursday’s Child*, and Sonya’s latest book, *What The Birds See* are strikingly different kinds of novels, the same perception of childhood permeates both works. “Childhood is like arriving in a new city. You don’t know where the hell you are and it takes time to place yourself.” In *Thursday’s Child*, narrator Harper’s childhood is torn apart by the failures of her parents. In *What The Birds See*, the central character Adrian is awash with anxiety – worrying that his tough hair “is a symptom of some inescapable failing” and that his strange classmate Horsegirl could be “contagious, but only to him”.

Adrian’s anxieties are palpable and it’s not a surprise to hear that they are close to the author’s own. “Harper took a lot longer for me to construct because she was the sort of child that I wasn’t. Adrian came without any problem because he was just a matter of me looking back.” In many ways, Hartnett’s own anxieties have not gone away as an adult, but settled more deeply inside her. “At fifteen, my greatest horror was to be invited to a slumber party. Now it’s to be



invited out to a nightclub.” Hartnett sees the essential difference between kids and adults in the different levels of information you have about the world. She equates innocence with ignorance and remembers her own epiphany. “When I was nine, I suddenly realised that I was a child and that the world wasn’t the place that I thought it was. I had no power and didn’t understand how things worked”.

*What The Birds See*, with its eerily relevant storyline of child abduction, raises questions about the safety of childhood and the ways adults attempt to make kids safe. In the wake of real-life events in the UK in summer 2002, some parents are considering inserting microchips into their kids to keep them from harm. Hartnett dismisses this as “a sign of the world going mad, you can microchip them all, that’s not gonna stop somebody from grabbing them off the street”.

Hartnett’s child characters are at risk both from their own peers (“the animal lives inside us and particularly in children”) and even more so from the adults around them. In *What The Birds See*, Adrian is actually far more damaged by the adults within his life than by the “bogeyman” lurking at the novel’s edge.

It’s no great surprise that one newspaper crowned Hartnett a “grim fictioner”. Like Hartnett, I’d prefer the term “Australian gothic”. There is an intensity to every aspect of her novels. She readily admits, “I’m not

interested in those huge stories that span generations. It’s the small shiny details of life that jump out at me”. And how! Hartnett has a rare ability to pin down

scenes, feelings and characters in a spare line or two. Take Adrian’s Aunt Marta, “a woman who unfailingly knows better – she has a job in advertising which involves long lunches, harmless flirting, and a sound knowledge of wines”.

There is a deep vein of dark humour in Hartnett’s work, such as the moment when Horsegirl is given a rein and bridle and the narrator opines, “If she must be a horse, let her be a joyous and fulfilled horse”. Hartnett sees such humour as belonging to the gothic tradition but also as part of her job as author. “I can write this terribly sad story about a little boy, but I laugh because he’s not real and I know that the reader will forget that and will feel his troubles deeply. I laugh to remind the reader that they can laugh as well.”

A self-taught writer, Hartnett articulates the craft of her writing with characteristic clarity. Emerging from the emotional punch of *Thursday’s Child*, it initially comes as a surprise to hear her say “characters, settings – they’re nothing more than plot devices to get the book to work”. That’s why that book was set in the Depression – “because (Tin) might have been able to exist during that time – not going to school and stuff like that”. But knowing the craft behind her work does not detract from its effect; it only makes you admire her more.

Hartnett does much to break through the gauze that sometimes surrounds our views of writing. “It’s been a lot of hard work for me to learn how to write. There’s never been anything romantic about it, I can tell you that. I’d like to look back and think not so much that I wrote a good book but maybe that I encouraged my readers to see the world through different eyes, to look a little bit closer at the things that are around them.”

Having started early and produced more work than many authors do in their entire career, Hartnett isn’t even sure how many more books she has inside her. “To write the serious books that I do, you have to mine a lot of yourself and there’s not much left that I haven’t used. One day, I will crash and burn through sheer exhaustion.” I, for one, hope that day is a long, long way away and that Hartnett continues to open our eyes and minds to the small, shiny details she captures like no other writer can.

**Thursday’s Child**

Walker Books £4.99 ISBN: 0-7445-5996-0

**What the birds see**

Walker Books £7.99 ISBN: 0-7445-9093-0

