

## The Details, by Tegan Bennett Daylight

“Even Knausgaard,” Daylight observes, “can’t record every piss or shit, every phone call, every exchange with a friend.” For this reason, all writers leave out stuff and often that includes our bodily functions, the “narrative of the foot, the ear or the arse”.

Or the vagina, which “literature generally pretends ... isn’t there, unless it’s juxtaposed with a penis”. Daylight overturns this and writes about her experiences giving birth to her two children, who are now in their teens, and the problems she had afterwards, down there. It is a brave, candid, funny essay. The passage on her “Squawking Vagina” is hilarious.

What I take out of it, though, more than anything else, is this: when it comes to pregnancy, childbirth and post-childbirth, men have absolutely no idea.

Daylight has written three novels and one book of short stories. She is a creative writing lecturer and also works on a NSW government initiative to help would-be teachers pass the literacy part of their course. The chapters on teaching people who want to teach today’s children are depressing. In short, she is teaching “literature to habituated non-readers”.

When she asks a class about their reading, the general answer is this: a small group has read Jane Austen (mainly women) and Isaac Asimov (mainly men), a far larger group has read Harry Potter and The Hunger Games, and a similarly sized group has read nothing but their social media feed. She recalls reading with a class the opening sentences of Monkey Grip and Randolph Stow’s *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*. The students didn’t relate to the first as it was set in prehistory, the 1970s, but at least they were able to read it. The Stow was too difficult. Yet, as Daylight writes, “The difficulty is Stow. The difficulty is the point”. When students tell her that Harry Potter’s frolics teaches them that they can overcome their problems, she feels like saying, “Tell that to Anne Frank”.

*The Details* (280pp, \$26.95) will be published on July 8 by Simon & Schuster Australia. Daylight’s publisher is the mercurial Ben Ball, who is making an impact at S&S after being shown the door at Penguin Random House. He is expanding the imprint of Scribner, publisher of Ernest Hemingway and Edith Wharton, in Australia. Another recent Scribner book I highly recommend is Jo Lennan’s short story collection, *In the Time of Foxes*.

Daylight is a huge reader. Her description of trying to climb Mount Proust is wonderful and a little reassuring. I made notes to read SJ Perelman, the Irish writer Brian Dillon and to listen to the Triffids’ 1986 album, *Born Sandy Devotional*. The cover of the book shows the author’s teen self reading during a family holiday on the NSW south coast. The opening chapter, *Detail I*, is about how her mother

turned her into a reader. If Tegan said she was bored, her mother would go to the bookshelves and return with 10 books. Some Tegan read, some she didn't but that book-based, words-based relationship has lasted forever. "When I read, I am still in conversation with her. All that detail in the air, living still." That double "still" is important. Daylight is a writer determined to find the right word and put it in the right place.

The subtitle of her book is *On Love, Death and Reading*. With that in mind I want to finish with chapter six, Detail II, on her mother's final days. She has pulmonary fibrosis, is at home under constant care, connected to an oxygen machine. This is a thoughtfully structured book. That the following chapter is about Saunders and his novel, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, is perfect.

"I suppose my mother's official dying," Daylight writes, "began a week before the actual death." She and her two siblings spent this time at their parents' house. In the early hours, the doctor is called. He pulls the tubes from his patient's nose and turns off the oxygen machine because "she doesn't need it any more".

What Daylight writes next is as good as anyone anywhere can write: "Silence. The silence of a landscape over which a goods train has passed, dragging a line of carriages that it seemed would never end. Silence that carried the imprint of a sound so long heard it was as though you were still hearing it. Silence, except for the sound of Mum taking her dying breaths." I have heard that goods train, too, but until now had no words to describe it. If you care about reading and writing, past, present and future, read this book.

## STEPHEN ROMEI



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