

BYRON SHIRE ECHO BOOK REVIEW No 1

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Book Title: Sorry

Author: Gail Jones

Reviewer: Jeni Caffin

There are many joys to being appointed Director of the Byron Bay Writers Festival. Apart from being immersed in talking about, working with, exploring and discovering books and writing, there is the enormous creative privilege of assembling a program full of the most original and compelling voices and presenting them to readers. *The Echo* annually features a series of twelve book reviews focused on writers attending the Festival, and in this, the first of the series for 2007, it is my great pleasure to share with you Gail Jones' *Sorry*, released this month.

Western Australia's Gail Jones is one of the shining stars in Australia's contemporary literary firmament. *Sorry* is her fourth novel, with the third, *Dreams of Speaking*, currently short-listed for the 2007 Miles Franklin award. When her second, *Sixty Lights*, was short listed in 2006, I fell head over heels in love with the crystal clarity of her prose and upon reluctantly closing its pages, immediately reopened them again to swoon in the intelligence and intensity of her language.

Gail Jones is, quite simply, an exquisite writer. If you read no other literary fiction this year, lose yourself in this story. In the remote outback of Western Australia during World War II, English anthropologist Nicholas Keene and his wife, Stella, raise a lonely child, Perdita. Her upbringing is far from ordinary: in a shack in the wilderness, with a distant father burying himself in books and an unstable mother whose knowledge of Shakespeare forms the backbone of the girl's limited education. Emotionally adrift, Perdita becomes friends with a deaf and mute boy, Billy, and an Aboriginal girl, Mary. Perdita and Mary come to call one another sister and to share a very special bond. They submit to existence in this remote corner of the globe, until a terrible death lays waste to their lives. Through this poignant story of Perdita's troubled childhood, Gail Jones explores friendship, loyalty and sacrifice with a brilliance that is truly her own.

From the very first line of *Sorry* I felt assured that I was in the hands of a mature and masterly writer. At times lyrical, at times startling, the language delivers utterly complete image and sensation. "My throat is misshapen with all it now carries. My heart is a sour, indolent fruit." Nothing in this book is superfluous: for all its beauty and elegance, the prose is spare, with the perfect word always in the perfect place.

Shakespeare permeates every aspect of this novel. From the violent death that unknits the fabric of the characters' lives, to Stella's spiralling retreat from reality into Shakespearean monologue, to Perdita's very name, tragedy stalks the pages. Christmas provides a perfect setting against which family life unravels, and in *Sorry* this unravelling is both vivid and spectacular. In 1940, the family, Nicholas and Stella and the neglected ten-year old Perdita, share their home with Mary, the Aboriginal girl who Perdita has come to love and Nicholas has come to abuse. Christmas Day brings a feast of roast chicken, but the reader knows from the outset that a day of peaceful festivity will not unfold. The detail of the identical rose print dresses worn by the females, Nicholas' bitter pipe smoke thinly dispersing, Stella's black Spanish shawl against the summer heat, the glistening oily pyramid of food combines to create an atmosphere fetid with portent and nascent doom. The sherry-fuelled Stella launches into an increasingly shrill and impassioned performance of the last act of *Othello*, to Nicholas' derision and his inevitable violence against Stella and Mary in front of the mute Perdita. The accelerating pace of the scene as the mood moves from geniality to hysteria to terror and

subsides finally into grief is breathtaking. I found myself compelled to read and re read these pages, to luxuriate in the imagery and the bravura flight of a writer in full command of her art.

The narrative voice travels between first and third person, which sounds awkward but never is so. I felt that it enabled me to get a 360 degree perspective on Perdita, as though she was being turned round about and opened inside out. And as for the title, *Sorry*: read the book. It could never have been called anything else.

I finished the book last night and yes, am already reaching for it to begin again. Meet Gail Jones at the Byron Bay Writers Festival, the last weekend of July.