TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Emma Chapman, *How To Be a Good Wife* (Picador, 2013)

This chilling contemporary novel has the same title as an advice manual reputedly given to brides in the 1950s: *How To Be a Good Wife*. ‘Make your home a place of peace and order’. ‘Your husband belongs in the outside world. The house is your domain, and your responsibility’. Phrases like this are scattered throughout the text of the novel, to be read as the story unfolds.

Marta Bjornstad is struggling to be a ‘good wife’. She lives on the outskirts of a remote Scandinavian village with her ageing husband, Hector. Her adored son, Kylan, has long since grown up and left home. Marta spends her days locked into an obsessive routine of cleaning and cooking. When the novel opens, she is waiting for her watch to read exactly one o’clock. Then – and only then – can she leave the house and go to the market to buy food.

Marta is the creation of first-time novelist Emma Chapman. The text was written for the Masters in Creative Writing at the Royal Holloway in England, selected and edited by Picador and published early this year. If I were asked to provide an example of exceptionally talented work that has emerged from a university’s Creative Writing program, this is one of a handful of titles that I wouldn’t hesitate to select. Chapman’s novel is remarkably insightful and a genuine pleasure to read; she has written a clever and subtle psychological thriller. She has also made a thought-provoking contribution to the fictional representation of women and marriage in the twentieth century.

Doris Lessing’s Mary Turner (*The Grass is Singing*) succumbs to the ‘impalpable but steel-strong pressure to get married’[1] and bitterly regrets her decision. Richard Yates’ April Wheeler (*Revolutionary Road*) aborts her third child and ends her own life rather than continue to pretend to be a ‘good wife’ and mother. Michael Cunningham’s Laura Brown (*The Hours*) leaves her conventional 1940s suburban home before her unhappiness drives her to suicide. And as Marta Bjornstad comes to despise her life with her husband Hector, she retreats into a frightening world of her own making.

Hector tells his mother and his friends at the pub that Marta is suffering from ‘Empty Nest’ syndrome now that their son has left home. But Marta’s malaise is far deeper and more complex than this. She has stopped taking the ‘little pink pills’ that her husband’s doctor prescribed for her many years ago. Without her medication, she is starting to remember incidents from her forgotten past, from the time that led to her becoming Hector’s wife: ‘For all these years, I have thought of that day in the city as one full of light and joy. Hector and I, beginning our lives together. Now it’s as if I can see shadows for the first time’ (83).

Marta has always accepted Hector’s version of their shared past: they met when she was very young and seriously ill, overwhelmed with grief after her parents’ sudden death in a car crash. Hector took care of her, nursed her back to health and kept her ‘safe’; they moved to the isolated house in the valley, married and had a child. Marta’s memories of her early life are disturbingly vague and hazy. But she does recall, with joy and clarity, the first years of her son’s life:

> I watch as the front door opens and a woman walks out onto the stone doorstep. She carries a child on her hip, a boy with blond hair, and she is wearing my red apron, splattered with what looks like cake batter. She smiles as she puts the little boy on the

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[1] Doris Lessing, The Grass is Singing (Harper Perennial, 2007) 40.

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> ground and begins to sweep the leaves. I hear her humming to herself. The little boy watches her with wide eyes. He reaches his arms out to her, and when she is finished, she scoops him up and runs back into the house with him. I can hear their laughter intertwining. (31)

There is no question that Marta loves her young son, and draws purpose and happiness from her life during his childhood. However, it is also clear that she resents Hector's efforts to be a loving father, and her relationship with her son, now that he is an adult and independent, is fraught with tension. The chapters that cover Kylan's arrival at the house with his girlfriend, Katya, and the announcement of their engagement, are painful to read. While Hector opens celebratory champagne, his wife hides in the kitchen, drinking too much wine and spoiling the dinner. Made shrewish and spiteful by jealousy, she treats Katya as a rival for her son's affections and deeply resents the girl's presence in their home.

Deprived of the fulfilment of motherhood, no longer in love with her husband, Marta is unable to continue to be 'a good wife'. She becomes obsessed with memories of her past and begins having strange sightings of a young girl, 'a flash of white-blonde hair, a shriek of laughter, her muscular limbs pushing forward. The ballet shoes she wore on her feet' (58). These recollections form part of a story that Marta begins to tell herself about her marriage, a story that becomes increasingly horrifying and bizarre. Is she uncovering repressed memories, tormenting herself with nightmares or experiencing hallucinations? Chapman's skill as a writer prevents easy answers or simple conclusions: every incident in the novel can be interpreted in different, conflicting ways. Marta is drawn as an unreliable narrator and, like the governess in Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*, she exists on the brink of reality and madness.

Emma Chapman has cited Sylvia Plath's harrowing novel *The Bell Jar* as an influence on her work,[2] and other examples of female insanity in literature come to mind. The anguished female narrator in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, driven to madness by the 'rest cure' that imprisons her in her room, is an obvious antecedent. Doris Lessing's Mary Turner, condemned to live on her husband's isolated farm, and Susan Rawlings, the married woman who commits suicide in Room 19, feel as if they are losing their minds.[3] A careful reading of Chapman's novel reveals the same concerns: women, defined as wives and mothers, restricted to conventional lives, can suffer intensely in roles that stifle and entrap them. Chapman's protagonist can find no reason to go on living her joyless life after her son leaves home and marries another woman. On his wedding day, she chooses her own way out of her terrible dilemma. It is left to the reader to determine whether this choice is the result of female madness, or the consequence of Marta's recovered memories and the appalling truth about her marriage. Neither conclusion is reassuring.

Jennifer Osborn

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[2] Nicolle Flint, 'Life Lost in a Domestic Fog', *The Australian* (Review), 19 January 2013, 5.

[3] Doris Lessing, 'To Room Nineteen', *Stories* (Knopf, 1978), 396-428.

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