

Michelle de Kretser, *Springtime* (Allen & Unwin, 2014)

How can the modern-day ghost story adapt to the new trends in literature in the twenty-first century? Which characteristics should an author discard from those traditionally ascribed to the genre, and which should be retained or transformed? These are questions readers will have to decide for themselves

Michelle de Kretser's novella brings to mind the extent to which Edgar Allan Poe's Gothic tales of horror and imagination showed the highest degree of innovation for the nineteenth century. *Springtime*, however, has no Gothic feeling to it; quite the contrary. The sun dazzles and ripples on Sydney's Cooks River as the protagonist, Frances, walks her panicky dog Rod around her inner-west suburb whenever she's not writing her PhD on the objects portrayed in eighteenth-century French paintings.

Frances has just moved from Melbourne to live with Charlie. The move (naturally) prompts the sort of conversations only Melbourne or Sydney people would consider worth having:

One of the things that had been said in Melbourne when she announced that she was moving to Sydney was, 'You'll miss the parks. Other things included: There are no good bookshops there. And, What will you do for food?' (1)

Charlie has been previously married and has a son, Luke, who seems to enjoy tormenting Rod when he comes from Melbourne to visit his dad. De Kretser won the Miles Franklin Award in 2013 for her marvellous *Questions of Travel*, and here she mixes visual details and veiled hints in order to gently guide readers towards drawing their own conclusions: 'The child would stamp his feet or click his tongue to attract Rod, all the while watching Frances from the corner of his eye – slyly, she thought. In the end, it was easier to put Rod outside' (38).

It is during one of her long walks with Rod on the capriciously designed Sydney streets that Frances is first startled by what she believes to be an old lady wearing a pink dress and a wide-brimmed hat, accompanied by a bull terrier only she can see:

[The] partial visions, half-encounters, were repeated at intervals over weeks. One day, striding past the woman and her dog, Frances realised that whenever she saw those two she was alone on the path (11).

As in *Questions of Travel*, De Kretser's prose is economical and progresses at a relaxed pace; she grasps the essentials in few words and serves them as if they were bite-sized canapés. This is how a secondary character is introduced at a dinner party:

Tim – muscles, aftershave – dealt out cards: *Tim Prescott, Creator*. He organised product launches, he explained, 'all the way from concept to creative communication outcomes'. (26)

A different dinner party attended by Frances and Charlie sets the stage for Frances's ghost story to be revealed. She will later try to minimise the effect it has, but de Kretser implies that their resulting disagreement might be about to cause more trouble to their relationship, already somewhat strained by Charlie's ex-wife's erratic behaviour on the telephone.

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It probably makes little sense to write the more traditional ghost stories in our IT age. *Springtime* successfully yet lightly negotiates the boundaries that characterise the genre. While a significant episode in the narrative, the sighting of the ghost feels nowhere near to being the most significant factor in Frances's transformation. When challenged by Charlie to explain why she had kept mum about her supernatural vision, she quickly dismisses the possibility that it was a ghost:

Ghosts called for calm and the application of logic. Don't tell me what you feel, tell me what you think. ... Research conducted under scientific conditions had proved that ghosts were only a smell which triggered fear in the brain. (59)

What previously is sarcastically (and self-referentially) called 'a creative communication outcome' now becomes a more pressing issue. Frances contrives a sneaky visit to the house where she believes she has seen the ghost, in order to validate her initial impressions. What she sees there should put an end to their argument. But will it?

Springtime is a charming novella, full of irony and subtlety, about a young woman moving between cities, with a rather surprising ending. It is marginally about the impermanence of humans in this world, but mostly it deals with how, imperceptibly, feelings and emotions change with the years. Even though people we had strong feelings for are, or feel, no longer close to us, they have nevertheless left their mark.

Springtime has been published in an exquisite hardcover by Allen & Unwin, and includes some fetching colour plates by photographer Torkil Gudnason.

Jorge Salavert