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***Brothers and Sisters* edited by Charlotte Wood. Allen & Unwin, 2009.**

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded 5 December 2009.

The art of the short story is on dazzling display in Charlotte Wood's anthology, *Brothers and Sisters*. She has collected twelve stories by some of Australia's best writers, each with their own perspective on that age-old phenomenon, sibling rivalry.

It's probably because of the drama inherent in the form, but there aren't many happy families described between these covers. Virginia Peters begins the collection with 'About the Others', a rather creepy first-person account of an almost demonic youngest child who can't make any connection with her older siblings, while monopolising their mother's attention. Robert Drewe's 'Paleface and the Panther' alternates an account of his narrator's much younger half-brother's 8th birthday party with a meeting between them later in life, when unwelcome family secrets are spitefully revealed. In 'Beads and Shells and Teeth', Cate Kennedy's two little girls live through a year of their father's absence in Vietnam, their bitter enmity ignored by adults who 'ignore reality and manufacture an instamatic cosiness that existed nowhere else'.

Michael Sala's 'Like My Father, My Brother', is narrated by a less attractive younger brother, trying to connect with his magnetic older brother, estranged from but nevertheless so like their father. There is violence in the past, and an unpleasant secret in this family too, but it's only hinted at. In 'The Cricket Palace,' Charlotte Wood's own story, the two sisters are getting on for old age, with a lifetime of differences to keep them apart but a final realisation that their bond is the only one left, at least for the childless widow Wendy. Roger McDonald's 'Family Radio' is probably the least successful of the whole collection. A radio shock-jock about to retire looks back on his childhood, shared with an adopted sister, both of them chosen to fill the gap left by the death of their guardians' son. As a narrative it lacks the clarity and focus of the other stories.

Tegan Bennett Daylight's 'Trouble' is set in London where the narrator is living with her more successful, beautiful and popular sister. The atmosphere of depression is beautifully

conveyed: 'In London it just rained, greyly, endlessly, like a weepy friend, always sorry for herself.' Ashley Hay's contribution, 'The Singular Animal: On Being and Having' – more essay than story – stands out because it is about *not* having a sibling, and her decision, deeply and stubbornly resisted by just about everyone she meets, to have only one child. Nam Le's story 'The Yarra' – one of the longest – is about a deeply disturbing, pathological relationship between two brothers, centred on violence and a vicious crime which both unites them and keeps them apart.

In Paddy O'Reilly's 'One Good Thing' the narrator is an only child, but her best friend has a brother. 'I wished Dieter was not her brother and that I had never met him,' she says, and we soon learn in this brief, taut story, that she has very good reason for these sentiments. The brother and sister in Tony Cole's 'Blood' are homeless waifs, dragged round by a feckless mother, the narrator trying his best to look after his younger half-sister while the mother sets off in her 'lucky' red dress to take her chances in a small town off the highway somewhere. Lastly, Christos Tsiolkas takes us to 'The Disco at the End of Communism', where the older, staid Saverio journeys to Queensland to attend the funeral of his counter-cultural brother Leo who has died at 52, unrepentant and still drinking and taking drugs. There are some unpleasant memories to be revived, and some unpalatable new facts to digest, but Tsiolkas leaves us with a kind of reconciliation between the living and the dead, further supporting my suspicion that despite his edginess, he is ultimately an optimist.

Brothers and Sisters is a testament to the richness and variety of Australian fiction writers. The idea of collecting together stories on this very basic bond is simple but brilliant: it has allowed the writers to reflect not only on the sibling bond but also on families more generally, and the harming and healing that occurs in the most intimate childhood relationships.