

A Dark Quilt

Joy Hooton

Jan McNess

THE THIRTEENTH NIGHT: A MOTHER'S STORY
OF THE LIFE AND DEATH OF HER SON
FACP, \$24.95pb, 320pp, 1 86368 397 6

Sonia Orchard

SOMETHING MORE WONDERFUL:
A TRUE STORY BY SONIA ORCHARD
Hodder, \$22.95pb, 253pp, 0 7336 1593 7

ON THE NIGHT OF 13 September 1993, flight lieutenants Jeremy McNess and Mark Cairns-Cowan were killed when their F-111 crashed at Guyra, in northern NSW. Written by Jeremy's mother, *The Thirteenth Night* dwells on the complex fatality of that night, which permanently changed several life stories in an instant. For his mother, who had coped with his exceptionally difficult childhood, winning through in his early teens to a remarkably close relationship, Jeremy's death was and remains a dark frontier. Beyond lay a strange and cold country. Totally disoriented at first by devastating grief, she found the courage and stamina to pursue the true story of the accident's cause for five years in the face of institutional defensiveness and media ignorance. This book began as a story for the family but it is an important book for other readers on several counts.

The first section, dealing with Jeremy's birth and troubled childhood, will speak to many first-time parents who have discovered that parenting poses challenges that baby-care manuals never mention. It is possible that Jeremy's difficult birth, hastened by the doctor's use of vacuum extraction, was the cause of his early misery, although McNess wastes little time on speculation. For her, the reality was how to survive feelings of despair. She details the frustration and depression induced by the unrelenting demands of her son's first five years, and by the shattering of her dreams of motherhood. Perpetually unhappy, Jeremy drove her to distraction with his constant crying, while his unresponsiveness and slow development sapped her confidence. The unpretentious prose graphically evokes the daily grinding despair of this period, but meanwhile a picture implicitly emerges of the mother's own strength and determination. Jeremy's eventual growth into a confident, brilliant, warm young man clearly owed a great deal to her perseverance. During the even more terrible first five years succeeding his death, this aspect of her personality was to serve her well, as the RAAF discovered.

Some judicious editing would have tightened the section dealing with Jeremy's middle and adult years. Fortunately lightened by touches of irony and humour, which serve to colour Jeremy's personality and relationships, the story of his and the family's activities nevertheless has pedestrian

stretches of diaristic triviality. In the latter part of the book, however, McNess dives fearlessly into critical experience.

Revisiting the physical and emotional impact of sudden grief, she dwells on the inadequate responses of Western culture and the lived effects of coming to terms with personal disaster. Many readers who have lost close relations will empathise with her contention that time does not in fact heal, and that grief is not an illness with a cure. Instead, in the nearest expression of a personal philosophy, she suggests that 'it is the accidents over which we have no control and the way we survive them that enhances or destroys lives'.

But the most original aspect of the book's final section is the account of her struggle with the defensive bureaucracies of the RAAF, bent on categorising the accident's cause as 'pilot error'. On the report of the Accident Investigation Team, which became her 'bible', McNess comments that 'a great many man hours had gone into trying to prove that the aircraft was in perfect condition, that procedures played no part in what happened, that weather conditions counted for nothing — leaving only the crew, particularly the pilot, to shoulder responsibility'. Pursuing every official and unofficial piece of information she can discover, and daunted but not defeated by technical officialese, courteous obfuscation, tactical silences, truncated interviews and refusals, she uncovers several systemic inadequacies contributing to the accident. She also suggests other possible direct causes.

It is an indication of her perseverance that the Chief of Air Staff eventually wrote to the family admitting 'chinks in the systemic procedures' and in the post-accident procedures. An 'Addendum' in *The Thirteenth Night* of comments by the RAAF includes details of changes made in both areas as a result of the Guyra accident. Notwithstanding this litany of official inadequacies, the RAAF as a whole emerges as far from inhumane; several individual officers proved sensitive enough to overcome institutional barriers. At one point, McNess suggests that cuts in the defence budget could have contributed to the accident, but she fails to mention that Australia is the only nation in the world that is still flying the F-111. By no means a political book, *The Thirteenth Night* nevertheless illustrates the complex, long-term and far-reaching impact of political decisions on individual lives.

IF JAN McNESS found little real support or consolation in a culture that attempts to repress death and grief, lamenting that she was unable to paint her face black to show her deep sorrow, Sonia Orchard has surmounted these cultural barriers. *Something More Wonderful* is the story of her experience as witness to the suffering and death of her greatest friend, Emma Burdekin. As Sonia's story opens, Emma, aged only thirty-one and the mother of a four-year-old boy, is diagnosed with advanced secondary liver cancer and given only months to live. The diagnosis marks a radical change, not only in Emma's life but in Sonia's, and in the lives of the numerous people who are close to them. Tracing the steps in Emma's physical and emotional journey, in detail that is often searing and that will disturb those who have

confidence in palliative care, *Something More Wonderful* is in effect a literary painting black of the face.

It would be inappropriate to apply aesthetic standards to either of these books, but it is Orchard's achievement that she has managed to make something wonderful out of the grimmest of experiences. This is partly due to the dramatised images of a vibrant Emma before her illness and to the vivid descriptions of the rich pleasures the two friends found in each other's company. They shared a passion for unusual garments, spending whole evenings dressing up and then ambling through the streets of Prahran, making elaborate plans for the future. Sewn briefly into the daily record of present suffering, these past rituals are bright squares in a dark quilt, sharpening the sorrowful blackness of other stretches. Emma's courageous attempts to recover the energy of her previous self, most poignantly at Sonia's thirtieth birthday party, enhance even more the impression of brilliance threatened with rapid extinction. And the devotion that she inspires in those who have lived close to her is further testament to her generosity and distinction. Dedicated to Noah, Emma's son, the book also records his childish part in the family's drama, heightening the realisation of Emma's and his loss, but lightening some of the most terrible scenes with his playful personality.

For Sonia, too, the struggle with Emma's illness involves rapid and absolute change. Looking back after half a year, she reflects: 'I am a different person to the one I was six months ago. I have been forced to go somewhere new inside — an increased level of sadness has etched itself into me, right to the very edges. I am a different person.' Early in Emma's decline, Sonia cuts off her long hair in an instinctive ritual of grief, and disposes of most of her clothes until she is 'free of the inconsequential beauty that grated like old skin'. Remarkably frank and open about the dehumanising effects of painful terminal illness, *Something More Wonderful* is also a humanising story of ordinary courage, perseverance and love.