

Courting disaster

By: *PETER CRAVEN*

This deft mix of literary style and gripping suspense recalls Graham Greene at his best

THE publication of Janette Turner Hospital's new novel is a reminder of a fact that has been apparent for some time: she is not only one of our most accomplished novelists but she has, together with her power of artistic realisation, an effortless sense of drama that bridges the gap between highbrow and popular fiction.

I became conscious of this when I was editing *The Best Australian Stories 2003* and she sent in a story called *Hurricane*, which presents the prospect of a hurricane from the perspectives of a small boy and an old woman.

It is a story of disconcerting richness because it is focused on imminent disaster and it has the frisson of the calamity that howls through it like a foreknowledge of doom as some apocalypse or epiphany touches the old woman's memory.

Here is a bit of the folk experience of such things in a rich African-American voice that indicates the traditional rhetoric which works its charm in this disaster fiction even as the plot tightens like a noose:

“She thought she was a fish,” Steven prompts.

“She thought God had caught her on his line. She thought she had swum to the end of days and the pearly gates.”

“And then, and then?”

“She saw an angel come stepping across the waves.”

Steven claps his hands. “And the angel came on board her pine tree and said unto her:

“I will guide you home.”

“Amen,” Marsyas says. “And she came to safe harbour in the old Slave Market itself, washed clean. And the waters receded and the islands rose back out of the sea as it was in the beginning. Now and ever shall be ... ”

Hurricane is a traditional story with familiar elements -- disaster envisaged, evoked and averted -- and it has the comforting reassurance of age-old verities: a black retainer's tall tale but true and then the strange, very different epiphany that the older woman has via the telephone. Two one-time lovers communicating over an abyss betokening God knows what.

There is an extreme dramatic economy in this art that is, in turn, linked to a sort of audacity that thinks nothing of courting the spectre of dramatic extremity.

Turner Hospital has become such a master of the drama of fiction because she has courted disaster as a subject matter.

In her recent work there is a striking preoccupation with the representation of literal or potential catastrophe. It's as if her religious upbringing in Queensland a lifetime ago has borne its dark, rich fruit in the American South, now that she is living and working in South Carolina.

She has gained, it seems, a sweeping new electric intensity now that the great imperium of America has become the field in which she imagines. And what she imagines is, to use the phrase from the New Testament, the abomination of desolation. It is essentially a drama of last things that has become Turner Hospital's abiding subject. She gives to the chiaroscuro of her apocalypse a brilliance of invention that burns and illuminates and creates a narrative light that shines through the representation of a darkness that's doing its best to overcome everything. The simple way of putting this is to say that in her previous two novels she has been preoccupied with the spectre of terrorism and the equally spectral war against it.

In *Orpheus Lost* the hero is a musician who finds himself in the vicinity of terrorists and is then subjected to the horrors of being mistaken for one. And his lover finds that their nemesis, the Thanatos figure of the book, is in fact a rogue anti-terrorist, an inquisitor of suspected terrorists who also happens to be the boy from her home town who pined for her in forsaken youth.

In her previous novel, *Due Preparations for the Plague* (HarperCollins, 2003), an ambitious attempt to represent the terrorist hijacking of a plane in the 1980s, the fact of terrorism becomes the obsessive (and threatening) nightmare of two young adults who are connected to the disaster.

They explore its dark shadows in a world partly constituted by their own shattered and fearful apprehension of life and partly by the cloak-and-dagger of secret-service treacheries and duplicities that wear the face of terror.

Indeed, *Due Preparations* is not only an overture to the stark and horrific misconceptions of *Orpheus Lost*, it involves a central character who has walked both sides of the terrorist's dark and crooked path.

It may seem odd that an Australian novelist (even one long domiciled in North America) should bite off this sort of subject matter; what is even more remarkable is that Turner Hospital has managed to engage with the terrible matter of terrorism in a way that is not only serious but, in the narrative sense, engrossing.

The seriousness is there, at a glance, in the cadenced, densely allusive prose that opens *Due Preparations*, with its deliberate echoes of Thomas Nashe's great poem "A Litany in Time of Plague", that becomes linked in the obsessed character's mind with the horror of what happened to the hijacked plane.

There is a verbal grandeur, an intense literariness both of reference and effect, but what is even more remarkable is the way in which a book that starts with the Nashe quotation, "Brightness falls from the air", is nonetheless a ravishing thriller.

And so in its more streamlined way is *Orpheus Lost*, with its strange and lucid interweaving of music and mathematics and the logic and anti-logic of the war on terror.

It would be easy to say that Turner Hospital has hit on terrorism and the raddled and treacherous complexity of the energies that confront it, because these are the most coherent metaphors we have for the paranoia and difficulty of modern life at the heart of capitalist democracy.

Well, that's part of it, but the suaveness and the dramatic authority of Turner Hospital's recent books goes beyond this. Joyce Carol Oates has said that Turner Hospital is "renewing herself as one of our major writers" and the form this renewal takes is to create what can only be called thrillers with terrorism (or disaster) close to the centre.

The most striking thing about Turner Hospital is that she is writing literary fiction that has the readability and the page-turning suspense normally associated with popular or trash writing.

By force of personal affinity and moral seriousness she seems to be doing for fiction in a post-September 11 world something akin to what Graham Greene did for the dramatisation of moral ambivalence during the Cold War.

She has something of the same gliding elegance and awareness of the duplicities that a complex, enshrouded plot line can confer and something, too, of the same sense of mercy and epiphany.

Orpheus Lost and Due Preparations are about the worst things in the world but both books are also about characters who, although flawed, are in central ways good, as if the soul were the immortal diamond of a dispensation where love and mercy reigned beyond all atrocity.

The new book is among other things a homage to the lyricism of the Orpheus-Eurydice story just as Due Preparations remembers, at some level, the collective heroism of Camus's *The Plague*.

And beyond this, the logic of these books is not pessimistic despite the black horror of the subject matter, because there is a restorative heroism and mercy at their heart.

The subject matter is dark, the treatment is exhilarating because of the excitement it generates, but the metaphysic that underlines the vision is (as it is in Greene) about grace and truth.

That may be one reason why *Orpheus Lost* and *Due Preparations*, like Greene's *The Quiet American* or *The Honorary Consul*, succeed in being ripping yarns that also have moral depth and reality.

This is not to say that Turner Hospital is as dab a hand at either narrative complexity or simplicity of articulation as Greene, but she does belong in the same ballpark and she has shimmering stylistic qualities and kaleidoscopes of point of view that are all her own.

But she is, like Greene and Oates, a serious artist who is also a master of popular form and its transfigurations. That is one of the harder acts for a highbrow writer to pull off, 80 years on from Joyce and Proust, and it makes her mesmerically attractive.