

LIKE A HOUSE ON FIRE

“Very little eye contact these days, my wife.”

‘Communication problems are the focus of each of the stories.’ To what extent do you agree?

Cate Kennedy, in her collection of short stories, Like A House On Fire, presents a world of familiarity, centred around ordinary people and their relationships with others. Communication between characters is of vital importance to the understanding of the deeper meaning of the text and Kennedy portrays this through the problems her characters face in this aspect of their relationships. Kennedy demonstrates that many of the character’s qualms are caused or worsened by a lack of communication and it is evident through Kennedy’s storytelling that in order to find a solution to their problems, the characters must communicate. Furthermore, Kennedy shows that an inability to communicate can lead to the damaging of the characters’ emotional wellbeing, which dictates their way of life and therefore the tone that pervades the short story.

In Like A House On Fire, all of the short stories centre around one character and a particular key conflict which they struggle to overcome. In many of her short stories, Kennedy has constructed complex characters whose major conflicts are worsened by the lack of communication they have with others. *Ashes* demonstrates how unresolved issues never go away and remain at the forefront of the relationship between people. As Chris recalls visiting his father just before he died, he remembers hoping his father wouldn’t “address [the fact that he was gay] now, when it’s all too late.” Chris’ struggle, growing up with parents who judged him for who he truly was, was only worsened by the fact that his father waited until he was on his ‘death bed’ to address him properly. *Like A House On Fire* also demonstrates how a lack of communication fosters ill-feeling towards another. As the protagonist in the story is unable to help out around the house and lives lazily, as his wife tends to believe, resentment builds for his wife and leads to “very little eye contact”, judgemental glances and an unwillingness to communicate. The protagonist’s guilt over his injury not healing as quickly as it should have and being unable to do anything is increased by his declining relationship with his wife. It is only when the couple sit down and reminisces over last Christmas that they connect, communicating to allow the resentment and anger to begin to dissipate.

Likewise, Kennedy suggests through her writing that in order for people to overcome their struggles, communication is vital. By producing short stories of an ‘ordinary’ nature, in terms of the situation and people they contain, Kennedy suggests that their conflicts are also ordinary and can be solved through something as simple as communication. *Flexion* demonstrates how communication can be powerful enough to allow the protagonist to gain her confidence back. As she attempts to rehabilitate her husband, Frank, she forces him to communicate and thank the community for what they’ve done for him. He’s “got some phone calls to make” and she “feels a surge of courage” as she gains confidence in communicating with her husband, who has put her down emotionally for so long. In *Laminex and Mirrors*, the protagonist realises that communication for one of the lonely, old patients, Mr Moreton, is what allows him to feel welcome and happy. While the protagonist of this short story is initially punished for conversing with the old man and told “it’s best not to fraternise too much with the patients”, she realises that following the rules isn’t always the right thing to do. As she talks to him more, she comes to find a more meaningful sense of purpose in her job at the hospital. Rather than being there simply to save money to go abroad, she comes to see how her relationship with Mr Moreton abolishes the loneliness and isolation he felt in being close to death and without any family by his side. In this sense, Kennedy uses the communication between the protagonist and Mr Moreton to express the values of selflessness and caring for the wellbeing of others.

Leading on from this is the idea conveyed by Kennedy that an inability to communicate can result in damage to one's emotional wellbeing. It can be argued that none of the characters in Kennedy's collection of short stories are happy, that there is some conflict in their lives which inhibits them from reaching a state of emotional fulfilment. This is conveyed by the fact that Kennedy sought to emulate real life and ordinary people, who do face tough situations and experience real emotions. In *Little Plastic Shipwreck*, Roley's ability to communicate with his wife was severed when her accident caused damage to her brain and doctors were forced to put her in and out of comas in an attempt to reduce swelling. Kennedy positions the readers of this short story to feel sympathy for Roley, as his life is dramatically changed and his relationship with his wife falls apart. This is embodied through the death of Oceanworld's resident dolphin, Samson, and the "special bond between humans and dolphins" that Roley experienced. His emotional wellbeing is extremely inhibited by his inability to connect with and simply talk to his wife, as she is no longer the person she used to be and he feels more isolated in himself. Similarly, Ray in *Sleepers* had experienced the figurative 'death' of his relationship and describes his own "sapped, exhausted feeling" felt, seemingly, for simply existing. As he internalises his feelings, he finds himself becoming more and more lonely and doesn't recognise his need to communicate his emotions to others. His emotional wellbeing is hindered by his mid-life crisis and the fact that he continues to isolate himself from the comfort of communicating his feelings to others.

Kennedy's collection of short stories, [Like A House On Fire](#), demonstrates that communication is vital to the welfare of the character's relationship and their emotional wellbeing and is ultimately the solution to all of their struggles. Kennedy places communication problems at the forefront of her writing and demonstrates this through ordinary people with familiar lives.