

LIKE A HOUSE ON FIRE

‘Like a House on Fire shows that family relationships are never perfect. Do you agree?’

In Cate Kennedy’s short story collection Like a House on Fire, she explores the different dynamics between how families interact and cope with life changing events. Although most of the relationships in her stories are portrayed as ‘imperfect’ with characters feeling disconnection towards other family members, she also shows that nearly all of the situations are ‘perfect’ through hope for the future. Throughout the series, Kennedy’s characters are faced with a variety of challenges including physical and emotional problems, struggles over inability to face reality, and dysfunctional parenting styles, however these challenges ultimately allow most of the characters to create stronger bonds within their families to carry on through difficult times.

In some stories, Kennedy explores how disadvantages, both physical and financial, lead to disconnection and breakdown of relationships. In title story Like a House on Fire, the protagonist’s back injury changes his ‘entire identity’ (p78), as he cannot face the fact that he is forced to lie down in humiliation and helplessness, watching his family live on and slowly loosen ties with him. Kennedy further emphasises this through the extended metaphor sharing its name with the title; his injury has caused disconnection in his marriage like ‘flickering small resentments’ which eventually will go ‘roaring out of control’ (p87) resulting in relationship turmoil. Flashback is used heavily in such stories to contrast the happiness or expectations of the past to the struggles of the present day, often emphasising how the characters feel guilt and cannot accept their lives need to change in order to overcome these new challenges. Cake explores how mother Liz struggles returning to work after the birth of her son due to financial hardship. Flashback is used to show how Liz cannot fit back into her old job as nothing has changed ‘one iota’ (p163) except for her, and the repetition of physical cake also signifies her emptiness over the lack of empathy and understanding felt towards her situation by her colleagues and husband. Kennedy uses these unwilling relationships to exhibit the stubbornness of human nature, and how unexpected events and reluctance to accept situations have negatively played a toll on character’s relationships.

Kennedy also portrays how differences between expectation and reality have caused the breakdown of relationships. In Static, Anthony faces tension in relationships with both his ‘Ice maiden’ (p220) mother and his wife Marie, who has grown distant over their problems trying to conceive a child. Kennedy uses cacti as a symbol for Anthony’s marriage; Anthony describes how the couple ‘haven’t grown an inch’ (p237) since their marriage and ‘zero care’ (p234) between the two is only just keeping them going. Similarly, in Waiting, the expectation of having a child has ‘knock[ed] the edges off’ Pete and the protagonist’s marriage, with the protagonist feeling she needs to ‘spare [her husband]’ from the pain of another miscarriage, rather than letting him help her through her suffering. While reflecting over her life, Christine in Tender regrets how she and her husband Al have been forced to modify their expectations of a ‘grand theory of sustainability’ into a ‘more prosaic reality’ with her children- the ‘makeshift and unfinished’ house a symbol for how her initial hopes for her life have turned around. Kennedy uses this difference between expectation and reality to show how characters’ inability to face their new reality has caused the simultaneous breakdown of marriage.

Dysfunctional parent-child relationships are also used by Kennedy throughout the series, showing how many families have disguised problems. Kennedy’s choice of using a child narrator in 72 Derwents allows her to explore issues of domestic neglect and violence through Tyler’s innocence and misinterpretation of the underlying issues throughout her family. The use of gradual reveal eventually allows the reader to realise how her Mum needs

constant validation, the treatment of Tyler's siblings and boyfriend Shane 'needing... favour[s]' (p265) is not as it originally seems. Whirlpool also explores the negative connection between Anna and her scheming mother. Kennedy implies the strain between the family members through Anna and sister Louise's 'pattern of avoidance' (p145), and describes the mother's need for control as a 'treacherous and irresistible tide' (p147). The Christmas setting and posing for a family photo displaying the mother's need to live in a false sense of reality to keep up appearances rather than accepting the uncomfortable family situation. The pool is a motif for Anna's emotion- it is her and her sister's way of escaping from their mother's control. By portraying such relationships with seemingly no hope, Kennedy indicates that the families are not perfect however the characters seem to have accepted or cannot yet understand their fates.

Despite their struggles, Kennedy does portray hope for characters who are willing to try and make their relationships work again. Frank Slovak's injury in Flexion shows him and wife how they must change their 'unbending' (p9) ways and learn to work and 'flex their muscles' (p15) together to make their relationship work again. In a similar way, Kennedy continues the extended metaphor at the end of Like a House on Fire as the characters begin to rebuild their relationship 'stick by careful stick [into a] controlled burn' (p92), showing that they will be able to overcome the serious injury. Chris's realisation of how his mother's sorrow over the death of her husband in Ashes is similar to his grievance over his ex-boyfriend Scott allows him to 'tenderly and absentmindedly' (p33) break the physical barrier of resentment between the pair and indicates their reconnection in the future. Although Kennedy does mainly portray negative relationships, many of her stories do have hopeful endings that demonstrate that family relationships may have their problems but are perfect in their own right.

Although Kennedy's stories are often inundated with relationship issues causing disconnectedness and, in some cases, breakdowns, she also shows how hope makes relationships survive and become 'perfect', despite it not being in a literal sense. Cate Kennedy's novel ultimately demonstrates how human nature cannot allow any relationship to be truly perfect, but how hope and love allow them to work.