Introduction

Cate Kennedy’s name will already be familiar to many VCE English teachers as her other short story collection, Dark Roots, spent the last four years as a popular choice on the VCE Literature text list. Some will have heard her speaking at the VATE State Conferences or other venues in Victoria. A resident of rural Victoria, Cate Kennedy has published a novel, The World Beneath, and poetry anthologies, one of which won the Victorian Premier’s Literary Award for Poetry in 2011. Her work has been nominated for other literary awards including the Stella Prize for which Like a House on Fire was nominated in 2013. The Stella Prize judges’ report makes an excellent starting point for a close study of this collection. Its observation that ‘Kennedy focuses on the small moments of revelatory tenderness that can redeem even a toxic situation’ and is ‘alert to the darker side of life’ is echoed in the VCE text list annotation which suggests that the stories contain ‘mature themes’ and ‘potentially controversial topics’. The depictions of child abuse and family violence in ‘Seventy-Two Derwents’ remind teachers about their mandatory reporting obligations, and the story’s themes may need sensitive handling.

Although some of the stories take the reader into the dark, challenging and complex realms of ordinary people’s lives, there are also moments of happiness, kindness and affirmation. Kennedy uses the paradoxical cliché of ‘a house on fire’ to explore what goes on in a range of different families. The various families live in the city, in towns and in rural areas, and a home is often the setting. These homes are occupied by married couples (some with children and some without), lonely singles, and sometimes extended or blended families. Several stories focus on characters that are away from home; one character is back at work for the first time after eighteen enjoyable months at home with her baby, another is at work thinking of his injured wife back at home, others are in a hospital setting, as employees or patients. A mother and son are headed to a lake to scatter the ashes of their husband/father. What all the stories have in common is an insight into the problematic nature of the families in which people live. Whilst some stories explore strong family bonds being tested by the unexpected events of life, the inhabitants of other homes are living on the edge. The tensions of poor communication, partners finding themselves redefined as carers, environments of physical and emotional danger allow Kennedy to demonstrate that not all houses are homes, to use another cliché. We like to think of homes as sanctuaries where love, compassion and a listening ear are always found; however, this is not always the reality of life.

Many of Kennedy’s protagonists show us that people are fallible, that the world is not always black and white, and that we do not always get the ending or the moral lesson we want. Kennedy has said in an interview that her goal is ‘to make a reader practise empathy; when I add those dimensions to a character, another layer opens up.’ Her characters are often fighting to hide something about themselves: a health issue, their unhappiness in a relationship, family rivalries, guilt or self-loathing. Something happens though as Kennedy delves into their lives and brings all these tensions to the surface. She invites her reader into an interior world to witness what happens when these people flounder and falter when the unexpected happens in their lives. We watch how characters react, sometimes in predictable ways but often in a manner that both surprises and affirms us.

There is wonderful opportunity for student creative writing in Unit 3 in response to these stories. A worthwhile starting point, as you head into studying Like a House on Fire, is to reflect on the validation of the short story genre in the statement accompanying Alice Munro’s awarding of the 2013 Nobel Prize for Literature. She received it for stories that can encapsulate a life within a dozen pages, and for a tender but unsparing gaze on the ordinary events that assume giant dimensions in all our lives.

This is exactly what Cate Kennedy achieves in her short stories.


2 M Robyn 2016, ‘Top Shelf’ interview