

Sick and tired

BOOK REVIEW

Craving

By Esther Gerritsen. Translated by Michele Hutchison. 192 pp. World Editions. Paper. \$15.99.

The Bus on Thursday

By Shirley Barrett. 304 pp. MCD x FSG. Paper. \$15.

BY MELISSA MAERZ

There's no right way to deal with cancer. But somehow, there seem like a million wrong ways, especially if you're a woman.

When the NBC News correspondent Betty Rollin wrote her groundbreaking breast-cancer memoir, "First, You Cry," critics called her narcissistic for worrying about how her breasts would look post-mastectomy. The Vatican called assisted suicide "an absurdity" after Brittany Maynard chose to end her own life rather than succumb painfully to brain cancer. When Nora Ephron died from pneumonia brought on by acute myeloid leukemia, the gossip writer Liz Smith called her a "control freak" for not telling friends that she was sick.

It's not exactly news that women are often unfairly judged — sometimes by other women — for not putting their loved ones' needs before their own. But when you're talking about women who are terminally ill, the whole thing is just bizarre. Here they are, dying, and they're supposed to focus on how to make everyone else more comfortable?

What a relief, then, to read two new funny, angry, feminist novels that give women with cancer the freedom to behave in the way that's right for them — even if that way is *badly*.

In "Craving," written by the Dutch novelist Esther Gerritsen and translated by Michele Hutchison, Elisabeth de Wit reveals her illness to her daughter, Coco, "at the wrong time, in the wrong place, in the wrong clothes." She stops Coco as she's cycling down a busy road and "smiles like a person about to tell a joke" before blurting out the news. Elisabeth seems to have an inappropriate response for everything. In one scene, Coco tries to get closure from her dying mother about her childhood, when Elisabeth would lock her in a room for days while she cried. "Darling, you don't have to feel guilty about it," Elisabeth replies. "You couldn't help it!"

Is this scene meant to be funny, or disturbing, or both? It takes work to figure out how to read "Craving," just as it takes work to read Elisabeth herself, but that work is extremely rewarding. Gerritsen's stark prose

leaves a lot of space for interpreting and reinterpreting Elisabeth's tone and motivations, which feels generous, both to the reader and to the characters. Coco's boyfriend, Hans, is quick to diagnose Elisabeth with autism. But when he asks if Elisabeth has trouble putting herself in others' shoes, Elisabeth suggests that Hans is the one with that problem. This feels like a warning to all the Hanses out there: Before you judge these characters, check your own empathy levels.

"Craving" ends up offering some deep insights into the ways women process emotions — or fail to process them — during difficult times. Coco confuses love with hunger, and hunger with panic, leading her to a cycle of binge-eating and reckless sex as her mother gets weaker. What Coco and her mother feel is always refracted through what others expect them to feel, as good mothers and daughters and women. "Elisabeth wants to help her daughter," Gerritsen writes. "She has to want to." It's hard to tell if Elisabeth understands the difference.

Feeling responsible for other people's happiness makes it exhausting for Elisabeth to even communicate with her family. I don't know if I've ever read a novel that captures the emotional labor of people-pleasing language quite so well. When Coco talks to Elisabeth about death, Elisabeth tries to brighten the mood with "light words" like "just a sec, a sandwich, abracadabra." There's a funny moment where Elisabeth notices that her husband, during drunken sex, speaks only in *aba* rhyme schemes. Later, he confesses to an affair, and she can't help internalizing the language he prefers, her shock and grief unfolding in an *aba* scheme in her mind.

Even as the book reaches its inevitable conclusion, Elisabeth talks to herself in painfully upbeat language, using phrases like *whoops-a-daisy!* as she approaches her own death. Droll and horrific and incredibly moving, the ending makes you feel the full weight of those "light words."

In "The Bus on Thursday," a comedic horror novel by the Australian writer Shirley Barrett, the narrator is enraged by the burden of putting others at ease. From the moment Eleanor Mellett gets her first mammogram, she's criticized for not being "relaxed enough." By the time she's gone through a mastectomy and joined a support group, she's crafting furious blog posts about the pressure to remain optimistic: "If they are nudging you toward the scrapbooking table, then it is basically code for, 'You will die soon, so quick! Throw some photos in an album as a keepsake for your loved ones. Make sure you are smiling in these photos and have lots of hair. Decorate with butterfly stickers and



CRISTINA DALRA

inspirational quotes about dancing like nobody's watching, etc.,"

The whole novel is written in what Eleanor calls "funny-angry" blog posts, which might be why the jacket copy pitches the book as "Bridget Jones' meets 'The Exorcist.'" But it's closer to a fun, campy Tim Burton movie. Hoping for a fresh start during recovery, Eleanor takes a job at a school in Talbingo, a remote Australian town with no cellphone reception (uh oh) where a beloved teacher has disappeared. Here, she encounters a friar who looks like a praying mantis, a vacuum cleaner salesman who's almost supernaturally attractive, a mysterious 1960s power station, a paranormal bus, and a severed hand that appears to have a life of its own. If that sounds surreal, well, so does the experience of

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having cancer. Barrett also works as a screenwriter and filmmaker, so it's no surprise that she's a masterly world-builder. As Talbingo becomes more and more vivid, Eleanor gets increasingly unhinged, to the point where she's actively testing the limits of our sympathy. One of the funniest moments finds her giving a graphic talk about death to children; one of the most unsettling ones involves a child, too, but it's probably best left unspoiled here. Throughout the book, you'll be forgiven for wondering if Eleanor is a survivor in the crazy-making world of cancer recovery — or if she's just crazy.

There are no definitive answers in the sure-to-be-polarizing ending, which might leave some puzzled about the larger points that Barrett is trying to

make. When I first finished "The Bus on Thursday," I threw it down in frustration, only to pick it back up and reread the final pages. Now, I wonder if the lack of some profound ending is deliberate. "This is the problem with having cancer: Everyone expects you to have mysteriously acquired some kind of wisdom out of the experience, and if you haven't, then it's a personal failing," Eleanor writes early in the book. Maybe Barrett doesn't owe us any revelations beyond this one: Don't trust a cancer novel that can be wrapped up neatly with butterfly stickers and inspirational quotes.

Melissa Maerz is a journalist whose work has appeared in *Rolling Stone*, *Slate*, *Entertainment Weekly* and *The Los Angeles Times*.

By the Book

Natasha Trethewey



JILLIAN TAMAKI

The former United States poet laureate and the author, most recently, of "Monument: Poems, New and Selected" came to poetic language via Lincoln's Gettysburg Address: "Before I ever committed any poems to memory I had memorized his speech and would recite it to myself over and over."

What books are on your nightstand?

"Grant," by Ron Chernow; "Just Mercy," by Bryan Stevenson; "Poetry as Survival," by Gregory Orr; "Whereas," by Layli Long Soldier; and "White Rage," by Carol Anderson.

Who is your favorite novelist of all time?

Toni Morrison. I love the poetry of her prose, the way she handles the difficult knowledge of our shared American history with elegance and the formidable power of her fierce intellect. I constantly learn from her willingness to challenge everything we thought we knew about America and ourselves.

What's the last great book you read?

I read John Banville's "The Sea" a few months ago. When I finished it I waited a month, savoring the memory of it, then read it again. One of my favorite lines captures the experience I had of reading the novel: "The past beats inside me like a second heart." The intimacy of the voice of the narrator made me feel as though he were telling my story even as his experience was quite different from my own.

Did you read poetry as a child? What books made you fall in love with poetry?

My father, Eric Trethewey, was a poet, and very early in my life he began reciting all kinds of poetry to me, especially the poems of Wordsworth, W. B. Yeats and Robert Hayden. But my father's poems were some of the earliest I read, even before I could understand them, because I wanted to share that language — the language of poetry — with him.

Over the years I came to see that poetry was the best way we had of

communicating, of really hearing each other. Beyond that, I think that what made me fall in love with poetic language (if not exactly poetry at first) — the lyricism and rhythm of syntax, the power of the figurative to make the mind leap to a new apprehension of things — was Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. Before I ever committed any poems to memory I had memorized his speech and would recite it to myself over and over.

Was there a book of poems or a poet in particular that inspired you to write?

I loved stories when I was growing up, and for a while I thought I wanted to tell stories in prose, to be a fiction writer. Then my father gave me a copy of Rita Dove's "Thomas and Beulah." The narrative lyric mode of those poems, as well as their subject matter, opened a new pathway for me — a new way of thinking of how I might, as Phil Levine put it, "write what's given me to write." And it was also Levine's "What Work Is," Yusef Komunyakaa's "Magic City" and Seamus Heaney's "North" that first inspired me to write poems that could tell the stories I needed to tell. Though she is a prose writer, I would include Toni Morrison in this list.

Do you see your poetry as having evolved over the course of your career? In what ways?

My understanding of my calling to

write it has certainly changed. I did not know this at first, but I can see now that the inextricable intertwining of two existential wounds is at the heart of my work. "Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry," W. H. Auden wrote of Yeats. Likewise, my Mississippi — with its contradictions, its brutal history of racial violence and injustice and its terrible beauty — inflicted my first wound. My deeper wound came later, when I was 19, and my mother was murdered by her second husband — her then ex-husband, a troubled Vietnam veteran with a history of mental illness. I read Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" around that time and it helped me to see that I was not alone in feeling alone in my grief. Though I tried to write a first poem about that immeasurable loss back then, I think afterward I turned to history, and particularly the history of my Mississippi, in order to look outward, away from that core of grief inside me. But my calling was always there, in the past that "beats inside me like a second heart": my mother's.

If you had to name one book that made you who you are today, what would it be?

"The Diary of Anne Frank." I read it when I was in the fourth grade and it showed me how a young girl from another time, place, race, culture, experience and situation could be so like me, that I could connect to her through a shared need, the necessary utterance of her words, and that my capacity for empathy could be deepened by reading the intimate account she left us in her own voice.

What genres do you especially enjoy reading? And which do you avoid?

My first love was the short story. When I was in junior high school I found the plays of Tennessee Williams, which made me realize that I could enjoy reading plays as much as seeing them performed — each experience allowing me to focus on different things. I love mystery novels and academic satire, too.

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD

Escape Room

Edited by Will Shortz

- Across**
- 1 Shakespearean father of three
 - 5 "I agree!"
 - 9 Enjoys the sun
 - 14 Pants material
 - 19 Approximately
 - 20 Sycophant
 - 21 Earth tone
 - 22 Movie with a shootout at high noon, maybe
 - 23 ___ Major
 - 24 Band bookings
 - 25 Outside the city
 - 26 Any member of Abba
 - 27 Automotive debut of 1957
 - 29 Some univ. hires
 - 31 Turkish inn
 - 33 Horror writer Peter
 - 35 Stole, in slang
 - 37 Cold treat
 - 41 What's needed in order to escape this crossword
 - 44 Sandwich loaf
 - 45 Pitcher Hersher
 - 46 Declares to be true
 - 47 Indie rocker with the 2009 #3 album "Middle Cyclone"
 - 50 Not doing well
 - 52 A snap
 - 53 ___ jure (law phrase)
 - 55 Tobacconist ___ Sherman
 - 56 Virtuous ones
 - 58 N.Y.C. subway org.
 - 59 Words of denial
 - 63 Round fig.
 - 66 A little, musically
 - 67 Charcuterie stock
 - 69 Lycées, e.g.
 - 70 What to do with the items referenced in 41-Across
 - 74 Natural light display
 - 75 Move smoothly to the next thing
 - 76 Great ___
 - 77 Billy ___ Williams
 - 78 Like Russia prior to 1917
 - 80 One of a couple
 - 81 Neon and others
 - 83 Apollo, to Zeus
 - 84 Offshore
 - 86 Possesses, to the Bard
 - 87 Kind of battery
 - 91 Final desperate effort
 - 94 Tickle the ___
 - 97 Prefix on some first-aid products
 - 98 "___ had it!"
 - 99 After following the instructions at 70-Across, how to escape this puzzle
 - 102 Not as much
 - 105 Ratings pioneer
 - 106 Edmonton athletes
 - 107 "Fine with me"
 - 109 German name component, often
 - 110 Uncool one
 - 111 Unconventional
 - 114 James of the West
 - 116 "Just foolin'"
 - 118 Algerian port
 - 121 Get together
 - 122 "Give it ___!"
 - 123 Verdi soprano
 - 124 Grp. founded by 12 countries
 - 125 Luau, basically
 - 126 Brothers' name in R&B
 - 127 Symbol of fire prevention
 - 128 Vehicle that requires no fuel

Solution to puzzle of November 3-4

B	O	B	S	F	O	R	A	P	P	L	E	S	M	I	D	R	I	F	F				
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PUZZLE BY ERIC BERLIN / EDITED BY WILL SHORTZ THE NEW YORK TIMES

- Down**
- 1 Name one can "skip to"
 - 2 Goof
 - 3 Confidently said
 - 4 Pre-GPS staple
 - 5 Subject with variables
 - 6 Daily ___ (British paper)
 - 7 Part of some physicals: Abbr.
 - 8 Attribute of many political ads
 - 9 Soup with a red color
 - 10 Prefix with pressure
 - 11 React with fear or delight
 - 12 Ralph and Alice, on old TV
 - 13 Actress Ward
 - 14 Trig function
 - 15 Native Iowan
 - 16 Citizen of: Suffix
 - 17 Actor Beatty
 - 18 It's mined, all mined!
 - 28 Common middle name for girls
 - 30 Constantly fidgeting, say
 - 32 Game with 42 territory cards
 - 33 Slovenly type
 - 34 Prefix with byte
 - 35 "Famous ___" (slogan on Idaho license plates)
 - 36 Pause
 - 38 Went on and on
 - 39 Yiddish cries
 - 40 Second of April?
 - 42 Wretched smell
 - 43 "Hey! That hurts!"
 - 48 Kind of Hollywood romance
 - 49 Literary scholars debate what's in it
 - 51 Getting to the point?
 - 54 Solution to a maze
 - 57 Specks
 - 58 They might drop down
 - 60 Almost forever
 - 61 Nothing more than
 - 62 Latin 101 word
 - 63 Petty disagreement
 - 64 Also
 - 65 Beleaguers
 - 67 Horrible headache
 - 68 Anesthesiologist's concern
 - 71 "The Bridge at Narni" painter
 - 72 Internet sensation
 - 73 Nut whose name sounds like a sneeze
 - 79 Shock, in a way
 - 81 Flowering evergreen shrubs
 - 82 Bucks
 - 85 Administrants of corporal punishment
 - 86 "Can you explain that further?"
 - 88 Requiring intellect
 - 89 It might end in a ZIP code: Abbr.
 - 90 Ph.D. requirement: Abbr.
 - 91 Tiny "tiny"
 - 92 Forum greeting
 - 93 Former Yankee nickname
 - 95 Soft and smooth news for schoolkids
 - 96 Happy wintertime news for schoolkids
 - 100 Semi fuel
 - 101 Golfer Michelle
 - 103 Kinds
 - 104 "Awesome!"
 - 108 California city north of Ventura
 - 110 Mythical queen of Carthage
 - 111 Your and my
 - 112 It has a big deck
 - 113 Aunt: Sp.
 - 115 Toledo-to-Columbus dir.
 - 117 A Kardashians
 - 119 Dined
 - 120 Silent approval