

The novel follows the course of Anise's hospitalization for anorexia nervosa (not her first). The early chapters take ample time to establish Anise as a character and follow her life in the ward, preparing us for a scattered plot organized around the narrative spine of Anise's personal growth.

Some subplots do emerge—her brother's descent into drug addiction, a budding romance with a bipolar boy who has a habit of picking locks—but the story is Anise's through and through, as we witness her piecemeal transfiguration from a force-fed close-watch patient with a vindictive streak into someone who begrudgingly edges her way to her prescribed target weight. There is no specific, singular event that compels Anise to grow as a person, nor is there any predictable certainty to how she will end up by the end of the novel. Rather, it is her combined experiences in the ward that motivate her to think outside herself and attend to the impact individuals have on the other lives with which they intersect.

As she prowls through the dictionary and writes in her journal, Anise searches for a definition of self that amounts to more than her weight and medical condition; she learns to think of her body as a subject, not an object. Her struggle is about more than anorexia, after all: it speaks to a general adolescent crisis of existence that regards adult society as so bleak, it is not worth entering. *Gravity Journal* remains compelling because it gives us the sense that it isn't enough for Anise to achieve and maintain an acceptable weight. She must also find a way to belong to the world outside the hospital, and reintegration with the family she so dislikes is, to put it lightly, not the preferred solution.

That is where the journal comes in. As averse as she is to feeding her body, Anise thrives on a diet of words. She assembles them in a private collection, leaving us wondering how she will digest them and pass them back out in the form of public artistic expression. The answer to the flood of Barbie-doll media figures around her, it seems, is for Anise to produce and disseminate her own set of imagery. Overcoming her compulsion to be thin is a corporeal battle in a much larger campaign: to find life through art.

It would be facile, however, for any account of anorexia to pin the blame on the fashion-magazine cult of beauty and take the analysis no further. Not satisfied with this reductive explanation, *Gravity Journal* implicates a complex web of social causes at the root of not only eating disorders, but the all-too-common mystery of how troubled children can come out of upper-middle-class nuclear families that have every reason to be stable.

To do this, Gail indulges in a bit of caricature that would be disconcertingly simplistic if it were not so believable. *Gravity Journal*, narrated in the third person though it may be, presents an utterly unsympathetic portrait of Anise's mother. "Loathed" is less of a person than she is an antagonistic social force. As a believer in the power of self-help,

she admonishes Anise for being an self-absorbed drama queen with no sense of personal responsibility—an all-too-easy appraisal of your stereotypical self-cutting teenage poet. As an acolyte of the almighty dollar, she expects the anorexia clinic to operate like a car-repair service: pay to send in your sick kid, and get it back cured.

What the book acknowledges, and what some wealthy suburban families do not, is that you can't expect to raise model children (note my choice of words) by throwing money at every obstacle to that end. One of the byproducts of a commodity culture is the commodified body: after all, who do you think paid for the Barbie dolls and fashion magazines stuffed in Anise's closet? While it is initially a surprise that *Loathed* is as unpleasant a mother as Anise makes her out to be (the default assumption being, she's a teenage girl, so of course she'd dislike her "parental units"), the family situation in *Gravity Journal* allows Gail to advance an isolated social critique far more persuasive than the typical prosaic attack on consumerism.

Like all good books aimed at younger readers...*Gravity Journal* disguises its intellect and its powers of social observation in a cloak of accessible language. It also succeeds as an act of printed-page ventriloquism: here I speak of the authentic flavour of Anise's teen angst poetry, which progresses from self-hating introspection, borrowed verse forms, and crude pastiches of Shakespearean English as perceived through a high-school filter ("O, creature vexing awesome / I envy thee thy tresses golden") until it starts to take shape as something more universal in power which Anise can call her own.

At 162 pages, Gail's novel is as rewarding as it is quick—dare I say thin?

by Nicholas Tam

For the full review, please visit www.nicholastam.ca/2008/10/08/wednesday-book-club-gravity-journal/