

Writer Anne Howell,
also pictured right



Andrew Rossaint

In part one of *All That I Forgot*, Anne Howell provides a surreal account of her experience of waking from a coma at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in Sydney at the age of 30, believing herself to be only nine years old.

Characters start to appear at her bedside, including a woman who has her mother's voice and eyes, yet seems too old to play the role, and a man called Marc, who kisses her on the lips, as a lover might do.

Yet it is another man, Luca, who her mother insists is her husband. He feels to Howell like a stranger, "unknown and unknowable".

Then comes Mia, her infant daughter, who resembled not a child, but rather a hairless monkey, yet she cannot help but love her.

"She was as nonsensical as an invented toy," Howell said.

"Daughter. Daughter. Daughter. How could my mind be so empty of the story behind her existence?"

These events happened three decades ago and, while the time frames may not be precise, Howell says that the memories of how she felt when she woke from her coma are intact.

It is her story and she is determined to tell her version of events rather than the differing ac-

When you don't know who you are

Anne Howell woke from a coma, believing herself to be a nine-year-old girl and unsure who to trust, writes **Tina Allen**

ALL THAT I FORGOT

By Anne Howell
Bad Apple Press, Memoir
201pp, \$27.99

counts provided to her by friends and loved ones at the time.

As part of her research, Howell immersed herself in movie adaptations of best-selling novels with a psychoanalytic theme, such as *The Girl on the Train*. She says these thrillers make amnesia seem glamorous, but in her case the condition was "just an embarrassment: something best not to talk or think about..."

Howell is discharged from the neurology ward after demonstrating that she can bake

Anzac biscuits. Still unsteady on her feet and unable to read or write, she returns to a house in the inner west of Sydney she does not know with a husband she cannot remember.

Migraines strike often, and her spirits are at times at "an all-time low". With her senses gone, the Thai takeaway Luca brings home only "registers a paste-like taste".

Howell is also trying to make sense of the complex relationships in her life, which brings us to the second part of her book, which details the first three years post-discharge from hospital.

Titled "Home is where..." Howell thinks of herself as a "detective investigating (her) past" as she searches the house for clues.

Do you believe in miracles?

TINY UNCERTAIN MIRACLES

By Michelle Johnston
4th Estate, Fiction
336pp, \$24.99 (HB)

Ria Pandey

Writer Michelle Johnston is trained as an emergency physician and has been practising medicine for more than three decades. Her novel is set in familiar terrain: rooms where the "smell was putrid, unplaceable... it was perhaps charred blood, petrified skin, the stench of hair..."

These are visceral, lacerating images of despair, and there is also bureaucracy and trauma behind hospital doors, but this book is about something much harder to define.

Miracles, which could be defined as instances of seemingly minute chance, delivered at the fractured junctures of our lives, propelling

monumental change. In its examination of these moments in time, *Tiny Uncertain Miracles* strikes gold.

To begin with, the title itself represents the novel with gorgeous acuity. "Miracles", concepts so firmly entrenched in the divine, and perceived to be large, overarching and extraordinary events, are placed on a equilibrium with language smaller in scale, associated with the agency of individuals, "tiny, uncertain," a suggestion that perhaps, in the potential presence of these giant, invisible gods, there is also a kind of magic in the smallest human moments of hope, resilience, and love.

Detailing a journey to reconcile faith, friendship and family, *Tiny Uncertain Miracles* follows Marick, a forlorn hospital chaplain, who attempts to make sense of the brutal realities around him, as well as the ghost of a past that



leaves him waking with nightmares every night.

As Johnston winds through the chaplain's daily routine, and eventual encounter with Hugo, a hospital scientist performing seemingly-miraculous research, the author, whose debut *Dustfall* was shortlisted for literary prizes, introduces the inventive crux of her plot: gold.

As Hugo's bacteria – originally used for protein production – begins to produce gold, the marvellous discovery kicks off a chain of events that probe the wonders of both science and the sublime.

From describing the birth of gold, "a deeply improbable event, an explosion of light and neutrons [that] had caused atomic spume to spray out to the edges of the nothing," and how they "hitchhiked their way to Earth on stray rocks," the novel, with poetic-like quality of Johnston's



When Howell realises that she is not, in fact, married to Luca, anger rises up and hits her in the face with a "keen beat".

The truth is, she only met Luca a few months before Mia was conceived and they had separated by the time their daughter was born.

Howell uses pseudonyms for the people around her "who let (her) remain unaware" of these truths. Her mother and Luca are at the centre of the dark thoughts that crowd her mind, but girlfriends Frya, Joni and Becky are also complicit, by way of their omissions.

Howell's mother, Ruth, was "leaving relevant information out" of her life story, including information that Howell required to renew contact with her father, Henry.

While Howell will eventually forgive her mother for curating her own version of truth, it is clear that these events troubled her.

Howell's book is a memoir, but it is also a page-turner. The reader feels compelled to discover answers to the questions Howell herself had to ask: will she regain her memory? Why does Luca stay out all night? Will Howell leave Luca and move in with Marc, with whom she has fallen in love?

Readers will be moved as Howell recounts her gradual recovery as simple pleasures return, including the taste of citrus, when she bites into an orange segment. She teaches herself to read again using Mia's picture books and later enrolls herself in a philosophy course.

Memories begin to surface of her youth in Mosman, a stunning, harbourside suburb of Sydney, with lush greenery and beaches, "but so dark beneath the surface". Howell's suspicions about the dark side of the suburb are confirmed when she finds an article she had written for a Sydney newspaper about the rape and torture of a girlfriend by members of a gang, which operated from Mosman to Palm Beach.

Glimpses of the past are presented in italics, to differentiate them from events that occurred after the onset of the author's retrograde amnesia. "Sometimes the past became more real than the present," Howell says.

Towards the end of the book, she reveals more about the cause of her retrograde amnesia.

“There is magic in moments of hope, resilience and love

words, breaks down the cataclysmic significance of coincidence to beautiful effect.

Alongside the main narrative, the novel also weaves a parallel story, narrating Marick's memories of his previous life – his childhood, the serendipitous meeting with his former wife, Diane, and the birth of his child, Claudia. As Johnston's paragraphs move their way through time and space, and experiences of love, loss, joy, and despair, the emotion at the heart of the novel

Howell's clinical notes are provided by her "top-rate" neurosurgeon, who she refers to as Dr Jamison, and record the presence of an arteriovenous malformation, which had remained undetected inside her brain for 30 years.

The malformation was the "most advanced example" Dr Jamison had ever encountered.

Two days before Howell gave birth to her daughter, the malformation caused a sudden stroke, which presented as a searing headache and a droop on the left side of her face, referred to medically as Bell's palsy.

Complications from the brain surgery to treat the bleed were the reason for her memory loss.

Dr Jamison informed Howell that it is normal for memories of a person's early life to be the first to return after amnesia, because, he explained, "they have been embedded the longest".

The tests he performed revealed that she had a memory gap of at least four years, and it was likely to take many years for this "period of forgetting" to narrow.

This explains why Howell could not recall Mia's birth or Luca, but she could remember Marc as a former lover, because she had a connection to the time frame when they had previously been a couple.

Allowing herself to love Marc again brings her joy and restores her. Swimming at an ocean pool is also restorative.

Howell, who is now 60, believes that she gained something from having amnesia.

Whereas previously she had put herself and her career before anyone else, afterwards she had a greater capacity to love Mia "in a way the person (she) had previously been might not".

I won't give away much more as readers will want to discover for themselves what happened to this remarkable woman and her daughter, Mia, who is herself now 30.

All That I Forgot is a powerful story, simply told, of an ordinary woman experiencing extraordinary events: a brain malformation, coma, amnesia, disorientation – and deception.

Tina Allen is an author, medical writer and book critic.

that remains pulsating between the sequence of events is, ultimately, hope.

Hope, and a possibility of redemption, are some of several preoccupations that Johnston elegantly returns to throughout the novel.

Whether through the intimate moments of human compassion in friendship, love, and companionship, or the sparking fortitude of faith, the novel ascertains that no matter how tiny, or perhaps uncertain, these fractured junctures of our lives may be, there is always something – a miracle or otherwise – to believe in.

And while it does function as an examination of large, overwhelming existential questions, *Tiny Uncertain Miracles* is also written with warm empathy, and deep, intellectual rigour. All of this, in addition to the fluidity of prose and structure are the mark of a writer working at the height of her skill.

Ria Pandey is a journalist, producer and critic.

COME WRITERS & CRITICS

Caroline Overington
Literary Editor

Friends and family have been gathering this week at the lovely riverside home of poet Robert Adamson, who has been diagnosed with stage four cancer.

His partner, celebrated photographer Juno Gemes, posted the news to Instagram, saying: "Dear friends, after months of not feeling well and many tests we have learnt that Robert has inoperable liver cancer. This morning we heard from the professors at St Vincent's that he has only weeks to live. We are posting this for those friends who want to send him a message, only love Juno and Bob."

There has since been a steady stream of guests. Adamson, 79, is adored by the many poets whose careers he kickstarted, encouraged and nurtured. He spent time as a kid at the Gosford Boys Home for Juvenile Offenders and, in his 20s, he spent time in prison, where he discovered poetry. He was a founder of Paper Bark Press, where so many poets got their start. He has received the Patrick White Award, established by White in 1973 from the proceeds of his Nobel Prize for Literature. He has also received the Blake Poetry Prize and edited *The Best Australian*



Robert Adamson, 79, with his friend Bruce Williams

Poems. The Arts Minister, Tony Burke, has called to thank Adamson for his contribution to Australian culture.

For much of his adult life, Adamson has lived and worked on the Hawkesbury River, and it is the river that now sings him home.

Pip Williams has sold the screen rights to her international bestseller *The Dictionary of Lost Words* to South Australian production houses Highview Productions and Closer Productions. Williams herself will be the executive producer.

The Dictionary of Lost Words (Affirm Press) is one of those delightful books embraced by booksellers, who pushed it into the hands of book clubs, prompting brilliant word of mouth, and 300,000 sales in Australia alone.

The book, inspired by real events, tells the story of Esme, a motherless and curious child who spends her childhood under a desk in the garden shed in Oxford where her father and a team of dedicated lexicographers are collecting words for the very first Oxford English Dictionary.

Secretly, she begins to collect words for *The Dictionary of Lost Words* – the ones that flutter to the floor, many of which relate to the female experience.

The screen adaptation of the book is quite separate from the stage adaptation of the novel, which will premiere in Adelaide in September 2023, before playing at the Sydney Opera House in October 2023.

Warmest congratulations to Monica McInerney. A statue of the Australian author



has been erected in her home town of Clare in South Australia. McInerney, who has written 13 international bestsellers, grew up in the Clare Valley, one of seven children who lived with their parents in the railway stationmaster's house. She often escaped to the roof to lose herself in books.

It makes sense that the statue (below) by Paul Laditschke, isn't a dull bronze bust but a colourful sculpture of a girl on a tin roof, with her back against a chimney pile of books. McInerney said: "The child – me – looks like she's lost in her imagination... I had a very big family, they were noisy and had lots of visitors, so the roof was the quietest place to sit."

McInerney was a student at St Joseph's in Clare, and she remembers being just eight when she wrote – and illustrated – her first book, *The Smith Family Go to Perth on the Train*. A kind teacher covered and catalogued it, and put it on the shelves, inspiring young Monica to believe that she could be a writer.

The statue is on the Riesling Trail, a 35km-long walking and cycling track between Auburn and Clare.

The Furphy Anthology – 16 perfectly executed short stories, anchored by Cate Kennedy's winning piece – has been published in time for Christmas.

More than 600 stories were entered in the 2022 competition, judged by Anson Cameron, John Harms, Margaret Hickey, Tara Jane Winch, John Kerr and Thornton McCamish.

Award director Sam Furphy, who represents the family and the company that supports the award, said: "We are so pleased with the mix of established writers and relative newcomers featuring in the anthology. It proves that a significant and important foundation of the competition – a genuinely open competition for all – is paying dividends."

The award is for stories of 5000 words or less. You need to get yours in before April 2023.

More information can be found here: www.furphy.com.au/furphy-literary-award/open-short-story-competition/

Treasurer Jim Chalmers announced the winner of the inaugural Collins Booksellers Political Book of the Year at the Press Club Canberra last Wednesday. It went to Dean Ashenden, for *Telling Tennant's Story: The Strange Career of the Great Australian Silhouette* (Black Inc). Congratulations!

Today's pages imagine waking up thinking you're a nine-year-old girl. It happened to Anne Howell, whose book about memory loss is reviewed today. We also have new Australian fiction, some Notable Books, a lovely new poem, and some sport. Joy Lawn examines two literary novels, and Sam King interviews a Nobel Laureate. Enjoy.