

# Reverting to type

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Kate Veitch

LISTEN

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**A**PPALLING AS IT SOUNDS, many of us never outgrow our childhood personae. Although people become adept at concealing their petulance and insecurities behind adult façades, among siblings and parents they revert to type, unable to resist lifelong family roles and patterns.

Kate Veitch's first novel, *Listen*, is a vivid dissection of a fractured family. Forty years after a young mother of four – the unexpectedly likeable Rosemarie – has abandoned her children and husband one Christmas Eve to escape Melbourne suburbia for Swinging London, the anguish of her flight still reverberates for her children, manifesting itself in different ways. Rosemarie's eldest daughter was effectively thrust into premature motherhood at the age of thirteen, due partly to her father's benign neglect. Deborah resents the injustices and sacrifices of her adolescence, when she was consumed with raising her siblings. She is constantly irritable with her husband, and unable to comprehend her teenage daughter Olivia's preference for animals to humans. Her anger drives a wedge between herself and her family.

James, her brother, is the blessed child of the family; his beauty and gentleness allow him to float through life. He harnesses his obsession with swimming, and successfully exploits it as the creative inspiration for his career as an artist. He shares a loving yet platonic relationship with his wife, the older and wiser Silver. James has lost interest in sex after years of effortlessly bedding women. He fails to notice that Silver yearns for him, only restraining herself for fear of driving him away.

As in most large families, the fraternal conflict has deepened with time. As a child, Deborah gravitated towards the serene James, and the two have remained confidantes, whereas Robert and his younger sister, Meredith, banded together against Deborah. Meredith's unwavering admiration for Robert is a shield against Deborah's merciless taunts. Robert in turn protected baby Meredith against the resentful Deborah.

Robert, now forty-eight, has developed an obsessive-compulsive disorder, which he is struggling to control. Despite his wife's patience, Robert is besieged by impulses to check his various electronic devices and possessions. He fears that

his disorder will jeopardise his position as school principal should any of his colleagues discover his habits. Yet his inner turmoil is countered by his happy marriage to Vesna and by their placid, if boring, daughters. Meredith, favourite of her 'Daddy' and still clinging to her role as the baby of the family, is floundering. Laurence, her seventeen-year-old son, looks after her. Meredith's days are marked by attempts at sobriety and by the construction of personal collages. She is unwilling to take responsibility for herself or her son.

It is not until Deborah's daughter, Olivia, finally speaks out about her grandfather's forgetfulness, which all have been studiously ignoring, that the elderly parents unwittingly precipitate events, forcing each of the children to address their individual dilemmas. When Alex is diagnosed with dementia, his children are initially unwilling to accept his condition. As his mental health deteriorates, Meredith finds herself adopting the role of her father's carer. While his sister is shouldering the most adult of responsibilities, James dredges up the past when he unintentionally uncovers Rosemarie during a visit to London. The reasons for his decision to keep this a secret from his brothers and sisters are intertwined with the four adults' shared past. Eventually, all of them are forced to confront their childhood and their personal relationships.

Each of the disparate characters is deftly inhabited by Veitch. Throughout the novel, we are offered glimpses into the minds of the four adult children, their parents, wives, husbands and offspring. These forays into various psyches, though different in length, are achieved with a depth that continues to engage the reader as the story progresses.

Alex's fall into dementia is poignantly depicted; Veitch evokes the illness with gentle humour. She is also generous to her less sympathetic characters; Rosemarie's terrible desertion, while perhaps not forgivable, is comprehensible because of her free spirit. Her frank lack of maternal instincts is at times amusing: she is 'cross-eyed with boredom' at a children's music recital ('sawing away at the violins and then the awful piping of the recorders'). Yet it is the uncanny realism of the relationships in *Listen* that is the heart of the story: marital bickering, sisterly sniping, the eye-rolling bond between cousins, a knowing aunt, side-taking siblings, adolescent outrage. With unpretentious aplomb, Veitch captures the myriad rivalries, alliances and unconditional loves that bind an extended family. Her most effective tool is the brilliant dialogue that seamlessly ranges from comfortable banter between husband and wife to teenage musings. A passionate fight between Deborah and Olivia yields the sort of pain that only mothers and daughters know how to inflict.

In a novel of this length, already lively with flashbacks and narrator shifts, the decision to split *Listen* into seven parts seems unnecessary; the placement of the sections do not seem to add any special meaning to the story. This aside, Veitch has created an enthralling tale of the private sphere that is all the more effective for its consciously minimalist style.