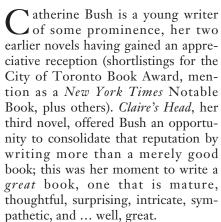
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Migraine chronicle

Claire's head

Catherine Bush Toronto: McClelland & Stewart; 2004 336 pp \$32.99 (cloth) 0-7710-1752-9



Structurally speaking, Bush has definitely succeeded. The story of Claire Barber and the pursuit of her missing sister Rachel around the globe is well paced, and the characters are believable and compelling. The greatest success in this novel, though, is Bush's ability to make migraine, an affliction suffered by both Claire and Rachel, into a virtual character. It is clear that Bush has done her homework on the nature of migraines; her fictional treatment is medically sound without being overbearing. It is also the stuff of good storytelling, for her protagonists' migraines are portrayed as capricious and debilitating, an implacable force. Migraines have personality in this book; they dominate the lives of Claire and Rachel, who cannot be understood as characters with the migraine element taken out. Almost every decision these sisters make is made in some way with an eye to the potential for a migraine attack. Bush describes Claire's migraine-sense:

And how was it possible not to think of them, not consider their possibility, not be aware of each subtle fluctuation of sen-



sation within her head, her body? It was like an awareness of the weather, the internal weather of her nervous system.

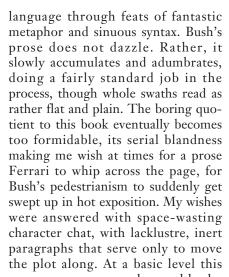
The reader cannot help but sympathize with Claire, given headacheologues like this one:

Claire had migraines long before her parents' death. She'd had migraines since childhood. She'd suffered from them even

before Rachel had. She could not remember anything as decisive as a first headache, rather she had a growing awareness of their being part of her life's landscape. They were not as frequent during her childhood, however. And when they came - when they shook her, then she was capsized into them — the headaches alwavs took her by surprise. She had no sense, then, of warning signals. Nor was she able to attribute the migraines to any obvious cause, if they were in fact caused by anything outside her body and its complicated neuro-

chemistry, her faulty nervous system with its particular sensitivity to pain ... the pain simply appeared. It was. She became it. One side of her head was seized, one side of her body. It took her over, like a fit. Even without a headache, she'd feel suddenly at sea and vomit ...

Despite such strengths, I have misgivings. As can be seen from even this brief excerpt, such is not the stuff of an *auteur*, a stylist willing to recast the



novel could be deemed a failure, for it fails at the level of the sentence. The sentence is not a beautiful instrument in Bush's hands, and consequently greatness has not been grasped. It is true that in Claire's Head the migraine has been captured competently; there are compelling relationships; things happen. All markers of a developing novelist. But the next crucial stage in the evolution of Bush as artist is to take hold of the

potential of the sentence, to give over to the sentence the power and emphasis she places on plot and dialogue. Then devices like migraines will be incidental, characters superfluous, plot an afterthought. We will be convinced in all of these things because we trust the author's sentences.



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