



# The Left Atrium

## Migraine chronicle

### Claire's head

Catherine Bush

Toronto: McClelland & Stewart; 2004

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Catherine Bush is a young writer of some prominence, her two earlier novels having gained an appreciative reception (shortlistings for the City of Toronto Book Award, mention as a *New York Times* Notable Book, plus others). *Claire's Head*, her third novel, offered Bush an opportunity to consolidate that reputation by writing more than a merely good book; this was her moment to write a *great* book, one that is mature, thoughtful, surprising, intricate, sympathetic, and ... well, great.

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 headache-ologues 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 always 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 neurochemistry, 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

language through feats of fantastic metaphor and sinuous syntax. Bush's prose does not dazzle. Rather, it slowly accumulates and adumbrates, doing a fairly standard job in the process, though whole swaths read as rather flat and plain. The boring quotient to this book eventually becomes too formidable, its serial blandness making me wish at times for a prose Ferrari to whip across the page, for Bush's pedestrianism to suddenly get swept up in hot exposition. My wishes were answered with space-wasting character chat, with lacklustre, inert paragraphs that serve only to move the plot along. At a basic level this

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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