

A Large Harmonium

by Sue Sorensen

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Reviewed by Dave Williamson

In *A Large Harmonium*, a first novel by Winnipeg's Sue Sorensen, Dr. Janet "Janey" Erlicksen is an English professor at a fictional Winnipeg university. She tells us about a year in her life – what it's like to balance a full-time teaching load with the demands of a three-year-old boy and a horny husband.

The novel begins in April, at the end of a typical academic year, and ends in March, a year later. Each of the twelve chapters covers a month, making the narrative episodic. Present tense gives the story immediacy, but too often scenes that are anticipated are skipped over and dealt with as flashback.

The "large harmonium" of the title is a bit of a red herring. It does exist, gathering dust in Janey's university, where her husband Hector is a music professor. The main reference to it is in Hector's plan to use it as a prop in a conference presentation involving their colleague Tom:

[Hector] wants me to write an erotic poem where all the key words about naughty bits are replaced by the word *harmonium*, which he will read with dry academic rigour. And Tom, who is tall and ungainly, will try to push the harmonium around the room on wheels or some sort of dolly. (38)

Meeting with classes seems to be the least stressful part of Janey's job. She's continually planning for a meeting or a retreat, marking papers, planning an article for publication – will it be on English novelist Iris Murdoch or on Canadian comedy? – and dealing with the foibles of other professors. Making her life even more complex are a lengthy visit by Hector's womanizing pal Jam, an unwanted visit by Hector's parents, a declaration of love for her by one of her male students, and her nightmares about a rapist. Then of course there is the responsibility for raising her son Max. All of this is nicely modulated in Janey's telling.

Oddly, on page 1, Janey says, "I'm done my morning honours seminar." On page 2: "I am done teaching today." This language is a little jarring when you are told she is a Victorian literature specialist. Later, on page 136: "And then him and his Christian group, last night, they started papering the windows." On page 166: "My favourite line in the book is when . . ." Are these meant to be Janey's lapses? Janey, who later speaks like this: "Will it become one of those legendary pieces of nonsense to which meaning accretes, accidentally, over the eons?" (210)

The fact is, from a reader's point of view, it doesn't matter. The only real plot thread concerns whether Jam is finally falling for someone – Janey's colleague Blanche. Does the absence of a strong plot matter? No.

What does matter is Janey's infectious storytelling voice. She's like that rare person you meet who is loquacious, not garrulous, the kind of person you can listen to for hours. You

don't care what she talks about; she makes any topic funny or exciting. Janey is a keen observer of academic life, with just enough of a sardonic slant to make you smile and nod in recognition.

And she is remarkably honest about motherhood:

It is boring being a mother. But what is bothering me is more than that. It is something about the entire basis of domestic life, about what it really feels like, from top to bottom, to be a wife and mother, about the way that no one can explain the feeling to you ahead of time, and once you are inside it, you are too tired or too overwhelmed to articulate it for yourself. Maybe that is it: that there is a secret about family life that no one has ever spoken of because if you are experiencing it your ability to speak it is, by definition, destroyed by exhaustion . . .
(103)

She's also honest about little Max, who becomes nasty on the bus. He starts to yell when Janey pulls the cord instead of letting him do it:

He . . . hurls his Bugs Bunny lunch kit down the aisle of the bus. I scramble to get it, and no one moves to help me. The kid is getting louder . . . I pick him up, trying to face him away from me so that his teeth and nails and kicking feet can do the least damage. . . .
We emerge on the hot pavement, Max yelling and spinning, his feet and arms, surprisingly strong, swinging at me. I stand there, submitting to him. . . . There is no anger in me, just acres of sadness that open in front of me in an alarmingly familiar way.
(49)

Then, at another time, after Max's bath: "Wrapping him in the towel has to be one of the favourite parts of my day. Did any child ever, wrapped in a towel, not look adorable?" (119)

Refreshing too is Janey's happy marriage, a rarity in today's fiction.

But it is Janey's narration, filled with irony and good-humoured candour, that makes Sue Sorensen's *A Large Harmonium* a treat to read. ♪

Dave Williamson is a Winnipeg novelist and reviewer.

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