And Me Among Them
by Kristen den Hartog

Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

And Me Among Them is Kristen den Hartog’s fourth novel, following Water Wings (2001), The Perpetual Ending (2004), and Origin of Halos (2006). The research that has gone into this book is impressive. After all, how often do you come across a story about a giant that isn’t an ancient Greek fable or a fairy story?

The novel tells the story of a young girl, Ruth, who, as a result of an undiagnosed brain tumour, soars in height to over seven feet and the effect of this both on her childhood and on her parents’ relationship. Her mother, Elspeth (referred to by everyone other than her husband as Elsie), was raised in London, England during WWII. Her brother was killed in the war and her parents in a London blitzkrieg. She goes to live with her two aunts, who become known in the story as Gog and Magog. It is there that Elspeth meets James, a Canadian soldier, whom she marries and with whom she moves to Canada.

The devastation that Ruth suffers as a result of her condition is set out in poignant passages such as the following:

When at recess a boy put on my coat and ran back and forth with my long sleeves flapping, the teacher sent him to a corner and made him stay there until class resumed. I thought I had an ally then, but once everyone was seated again she made him come to me and apologize. (33)

Ruth recognizes quickly that this is a mistake: “He, and the others watching, were lost to me for good.” (33)

Here is where the doctor initially misdiagnoses her condition:

His hairy fingers pressed on my stomach and my neck, and I could feel my heart racing with the chance that he would find whatever he was looking for – something wrong with me – but, as with every year, my body held on to its secret, and he pronounced me “healthy as a horse” and released me. I thought of the taunts, Horse Face and Monster Girl. I said nothing about my headaches or the shooting pains in my shins. The sense of my muscles stretching inside me, the tendons pulled thin. When he asked me, “How do you feel?” I said, “Fine. Thank you.” Just the way I had been taught. He put a note in the file for Ruth Brennan: age ten, six-foot-two. (49)

The research to which I earlier referred has to do with gigantism. There are some incredible passages peppering the delightful prose, such as this one, where Elspeth looks into the topic:

Elspeth thought she had read about all the giants – the one with no heart in his body, the one with the beanstalk, and so on. But she had never looked outside of storybooks, into the lives of actual giants. It hadn’t occurred to her that my condition was a condition. Her cache of giant legends was still tucked away in her half of the closet, disappointing because it
had never offered what she’d sought: stories that might comfort me, or her, or all of us. (144)

den Hartog has a way with fairy tales, which she intersperses throughout her text. The story about the giant without a heart concerns a girl who has been captured by the giant and kept in a cage. Prior to her capture, she had been taking a walk during which she assisted a wolf, a fish, and a raven, each of whom promised to help her in return. They do so by retrieving the giant’s heart, which the girl will destroy in order to gain her freedom:

As the giant grumbled and snored through the night, the wolf tore through the countryside. When he reached the lake, he passed the message of the heart to the fish the girl had helped, and the fish swam across to the island, where he passed the message of the heart to the raven the girl had helped, and the raven flew to the edge of the well and called down to the duck, cawing and cawing until the duck fluttered up and off its nest, and there lay the egg, gleaming. The raven retrieved it, and took it to the fish, and the fish took it to the wolf, and the wolf took it to the girl, who kept it in the pocket of her apron all day until the giant came home and unchained her. (57)

Ruth has a glimmer of hope that her life will improve when Suzy seemingly befriends her. But as with most children, Suzy turns out to be self-centred and eventually betrays Ruth by getting her to steal a record from a record store and then, due to the presence of David to whom she is showing off, denies this:

“So?” said Suzy. She brushed her cheek with the end of her ponytail. “Did you get it?”

I glanced around to be sure no one was watching, and lifted my shirt to show her the album.

Suzy laughed. “What! Why did you get that one?” She reached out and took it in her hands, and I felt it peel away from my stomach. Suzy recoiled, nearly dropping the record. “Yuck, Ruth! Why is it all wet?”

I grabbed it back and put it under my sweaty shirt again. David was laughing, and so was Suzy. (158)

This ultimate humiliation sends Ruth running blindly off into a street, where she is struck by a logging truck. As a result of this accident, Ruth’s tumour is discovered. However, the only subsequent improvement in Ruth’s life is the fact that, by the time she finally gets home from hospital, Suzy and her mother have moved away.

Kristen den Hartog has created a character-driven story with a minimalist plot. Although the point-of-view is that of Ruth, with the lyrical “I” being used throughout, somehow this “I” is able to see into the minds of others and to describe others’ emotional states. This would normally be a distortion of the first-person perspective, but it seems to work here, not calling undue notice to itself. den Hartog has learned well the writer’s craft and has given us an enjoyable story that does not sink into melodrama and invites our empathy for Ruth. " 
John Herbert Cunningham is a Winnipeg writer. He reviews poetry in Canada for *The Malahat Review, Arc, The Antigonish Review, The Fiddlehead* and *The Danforth Review*, in the US for *Quarterly Conversations, Rain Taxi, Rattle, Big Bridge* and *Galatea Revisits*, and in Australia for *Jacket*.

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