

*Cockfosters* by Helen Simpson

Most of the geographic titles in *Cockfosters*, Helen Simpson's wonderful new collection of short stories, allude to foreign places. All of these tales, however, are deeply rooted in contemporary Britishness: specifically, the experience of middle-class, middle-aged professionals struggling with parenthood, ageing, marriage and loss, but ultimately keeping it together and carrying on.

Simpson is one of very few prominent writers to specialise in the short story, and her sixth collection continues to delight with her pitch-perfect ear for dialogue and delicate handling of weighty subtexts. Like an iceberg, the heft lies beneath the surface of deceptively simple action; her understated yet insightful conjuring of characters' pains and fears strikes to the icy core of universal truths.

Her women tend to be at a place in life where they "crawl up out of their burrows" of consuming motherhood to wonder at the state of their lives. "Oh don't," says one character of being squeezed by childcare and ageing parents, "I'm up and down the M1 like a yo-yo." There's plenty of humour in Simpson's work: the irony of a heart-attack patient lying next to an inmate from Wormwood Scrubs, who quizzes him on how to fake cardiac symptoms for the sake of a "holiday" from prison; a solicitor attempting to convince a friend's son, over an awkward City lunch, that he should consider a career in the law. Freed from the stuffy restaurant, the sullen boy rips off his tie, "wriggled his shoulders, gave a little skip like a goat or a lamb, then started to run," quite literally – following a comically depressing account of the solicitor's circumstances – running for his life.

Simpson's strongest subject, as ever, is the dilemma of women struggling to carve out meaningful lives in a world structured to benefit men. She dismantles the "strong man" myth, of the puffed-up, sometimes violent masculinity that harbours weak egos, in both *Moscow* and the longest story, *Berlin*. In *Erewhon*, one of the most powerful stories in the collection, Simpson drives home the injustice of gender imbalance by simple role reversal, grafting typically female worries onto the male protagonist. In the middle of the night, he lies awake next to his insensitive wife, fretting over how "the overwhelming majority of men who were murdered were murdered by their own wives," and how "he knew she loved him too, really; what puzzled him was how she could be so happy to exploit him in such an obviously unequal set-up." The effect is so bizarre it's almost like science-fiction, underscoring, in its ridiculousness, the inequality of our "natural order" and how much the status quo remains in need of change; which proves, in turn, what a vital (and pleasurable) voice Simpson continues to be in fiction.

- Reviewed by Melanie White