GENRE, STRUCTURE & LANGUAGE

Genre

Kennedy is a literary writer (a description that encompasses her fiction, her poetry and even her travel writing), and this collection is no exception, fitting the category of **literary fiction**. Literary writing is work that is judged as having both artistic and social merit. By contrast, genre fiction or popular fiction (such as romance, science fiction or crime fiction) has a greater emphasis on entertainment – although there can be overlaps between genres, and such distinctions are often more useful for commercial (marketing) purposes than for readers' interpretations of a work. However, the genre of a text can provide hints, clues, shortcuts and guidance as to how readers should expect to read and respond to the work.

Genre or popular fiction tends to satisfy a range of conventions, which can include pacing and structure; character types; plot type and plot resolution; settings; and even underlying values. Literary fiction, on the other hand, tends to encompass a broader scope when it comes to generic conventions, and as a genre it does not create specific expectations about these or the writer's other creative decisions. One of the most identifiable elements of literary fiction is its use of heightened and rich language, which may include features such as poetic, descriptive and abstract language; less common narrative perspectives such as the second person ('you'); and distinctive imagery including metaphor and symbolism. (See the 'Language' section for discussion of a number of these features in context.)

At the same time, though, literary fiction may employ very concrete language and construction and use an informal tone and voice – in creating realistic dialogue, for instance. Therefore content can vary distinctly between examples of the genre.

Perhaps the most useful analytical knowledge you can draw from classifying a text as literary fiction relates to the fine-level language use. You can generally assume that, in a piece of literary fiction, language choices at a paragraph and sentence level are very carefully considered, and there are no accidents when it comes to features such as repetition, rhythm, or allusions to other texts or ideas. (Of course, in any text, language choice can be assumed to be highly intentional and careful, but the sentence-level decisions are often less of a priority in genre fiction, for example, where the focus might be pace and plot rather than the construction of poetic rhythm within the prose.) Therefore any of these features that you identify in a literary text can be discussed as significant contributions to the text's meaning.

The other defining genre within which *Like a House on Fire* fits is obviously that of the **short-story collection**. Though it might sound like an obvious descriptor, the definition of 'short story' is somewhat fraught. While the simplest and most concrete characteristic of short stories is their length, this is still not clear-cut: how short (or long) *is* a short story? Formal definitions vary significantly, though individual publishers often have their own word-lengths for various forms. In Australian publishing, a short story is generally understood to be between 1000 and 19000 words. Anything shorter can be placed in other genres, such as flash fiction or micro-fiction, and anything longer is a novel or novella – which is shorter than a novel but longer than a short story. A straightforward guiding principle is that, due to their length, short stories are unlikely to be published alone but rather in literary journals and magazines (which is where many of Kennedy's stories were first published), anthologies (multi-authored collections) or single-author collections like this one.

Characteristics of the genre of short-story *collections* (as opposed to simply short stories) are also wide and varied, though generally there will be a factor or factors that link the stories within a collection. These might be thematic factors; the author's (or authors') cultural, geographical or historical context; a publication context (such as a

collection of competition entries); or the particular interests of the editors or publishers. With a single-author text such as *Like a House on Fire*, the obvious factor the stories share is their author, but there are also stylistic and thematic links, and this is why it is worth considering the collection itself as an entity. This is how you can analyse broader ideas, values and concerns and consider recurrent settings, motifs and character types, as well as looking at the differences and similarities across the stories and the ways these divergences and convergences serve to convey narratives and ideas.

Structure

When analysing structure in a text that is a collection, remember that there are two levels to investigate: structure within individual works, and the structure of the collection as a whole. Both can help you to understand and discuss the text.

Structure of individual stories: endings and resolution

The structure of individual stories varies. For example, some begin with the inciting event (like the tractor accident that opens 'Flexion' and therefore the whole collection), while others focus on the lead-up to a key event (as in 'Ashes'). Often this final key event occurs beyond the story's boundaries, as in 'Tender', when we are left guessing at the outcome of Christine's biopsy. Many stories conclude with a glimpse of hope or optimism suggesting that, despite the undercurrents of sadness and struggle in human lives, there is almost always the potential for things to change and, specifically, to improve, even in small ways.

For example, the ending of 'Flexion' offers a hint that the accident may have brought about a change in the dynamic of the Slovaks' relationship, as Frank's wife recognises her husband's vulnerability, and chooses to respond to it with quiet, gentle compassion and even love (as suggested by the word 'heart' in the final sentence, p.16). Another example is the ending of 'Laminex and Mirrors', where the final paragraph is full of song,

laughter and pleasure, and the protagonist is 'content … to believe … that this path before us will stretch on forever' (p.56). Here the content of the story offers a striking contrast with the structure, as the final words speak of an eternal experience while their position in the story provides a clear suggestion of finality (as the little excursion has likely cost the protagonist her job) and even mortality (for Mr Moreton).

Structure of the collection: contrasts and themes

One of the most important structural elements in a collection is the order in which the stories are presented to readers. Sometimes works are ordered chronologically, based on when the author wrote them (more common for posthumous collections), but more frequently the publisher or editor has selected an order that best suits the works. In this collection, the themes and tones are fairly consistent throughout, so other key factors such as the age or narrative perspective of the protagonist have been varied to keep readers' interest by offering contrast between the stories. Consider how this impacts on your understanding of key themes.

For example, had the stories been arranged to progress from those featuring younger characters to those featuring older characters, we could comment on how the collection as a whole presents a view of human lifespans, transitions and ageing. As it is, we can argue that Kennedy wants to present her themes as universal rather than as age-dependent human experiences. In fact, the final story features a young narrator, suggesting that the small tragedies in life are not restricted to any one age or period; they are an essential part of human existence. Note that the ending of this final story contains optimism, thus lending the whole collection a positive tone, despite containing much evidence to the contrary.

Language

While the text is frequently poetic and descriptive, at the same time the language is often sparse and simple. The length of the stories provides some indication of this: although each story contains strong imagery and figurative language, the longest is less than forty pages (and the text is well-spaced throughout, with pages averaging only around 250 words) with the others all around fifteen or twenty pages. This indicates that Kennedy uses concise, efficient language to communicate each story.

Repetition and language-play

Kennedy frequently uses repetition of words, phrases and imagery within stories, helping to generate cohesion as well as to emphasise important ideas, images and themes. For example, in 'Cross-Country' the phrase 'high lonesome sound' is used to describe both the music the couple once heard (p.121) and her ex's imagined voice (p.125); each use emphasises the story's exploration of the idea of loneliness and what it can make people do. By using the phrase more than once, Kennedy draws our attention to it and creates connections between the associated ideas, here linking the past (the music) with the present (the absence of the ex).

Kennedy plays with language in a number of other ways, including, notably, in the stories' titles, which often carry multiple meanings, as with 'Sleepers', 'Waiting', 'Static', 'Tender' and 'Whirlpool'. Consider the word 'static', for example, which, in the story of that name, has the literal meaning of static (crackling noises) on the walkie-talkies, but also the figurative 'static' (atmospheric disturbance) that exists between Anthony and his family, as well as between Anthony and Marie, interfering with clear communications. There is also a third connotation, as the title points us towards a distinct motif of the story: static in the sense of standing still. Anthony's life seems to be in a sort of holding pattern, where the same conflicts and disconnections recur and he doesn't know how to escape. As you study each of the stories, remember to look for clues about meaning, themes and ideas within the titles.

Figurative language

Descriptive, rich language is a characteristic of this collection, even while it often describes mundane, simple, everyday experiences, relationships and moments. Remember that Kennedy is also a published poet, so it is not surprising that her use of language is careful, lyrical and concise even when she is writing prose. Below is an example of a descriptive passage from one of the stories, with a brief analysis of the techniques used.

Consider the following sentence from 'Waiting':

> This careful professional detachment while they're gazing at the human map of you, the intimate, failed, faltering misstep, in ghostly black and white. (p.213)

Some of the language techniques used in just this one sentence include the following:

- metaphor (a person as a map)
- alliteration ('**f**ailed, **f**altering') as well as assonance ('hu**m**an **m**ap … inti**m**ate')
- personification (describing a medical condition as a 'misstep')
- descriptive figurative language (emotive and poetic words such as 'gazing', 'faltering', 'ghostly')
- concrete description including allusion to senses ('black and white')
- second-person perspective ('you') – a less common perspective that puts the reader in the protagonist's position, increasing audience connection and engagement.

The subsequent sentence extends the metaphor of the human as a map, expanding it into a broader analogy of the scan as a landscape: 'white cloud coursing grainily over a black landmass, some cyclone gathering its bleary force offshore' (p.213). Again the language is poetic and descriptive, using the weather as a metaphor for the protagonist's 'gathering' emotion.

Symbolism

The cover of the Scribe edition (designed by Allison Colpoys) uses simple visual symbolism the way Kennedy uses symbolism in language, and it perfectly encapsulates the miniscule griefs and sorrows of the domestic stories. The household objects represented are all familiar, mundane symbols of domesticity, and most carry connotations of comfort, beauty and pleasure: flowers, jewellery, a teacup, wine. Yet on closer inspection each of these objects (with the possible exception of the doily forming the 'o' in 'House', and the chicken on the book's spine) is somehow damaged or distorted: the picture frame is empty, the flowers in the vase are drooping and losing their petals, the cup of tea is spilled, the tap dripping, the necklace broken, the iron unplugged. The associations are of domestic bliss shattered, of objects unable to fulfil their potential. At the same time, however, many of the objects do not seem destroyed beyond repair: the smashed plate looks as if all its parts are there, available to be glued back together; the dirty single socks could be washed.

These ideas resonate with the themes and tones of the short stories within: while personal tragedies permeate nearly all the stories, most contain or conclude with glimpses of hope, of the possibility of better futures. Often when Kennedy uses figurative language, motifs or images, symbolism and analogy in her stories, they perform a similar role to these images on the cover, helping us to visualise the ideas and themes.

STORY-BY-STORY ANALYSIS

Flexion (pp.1–16)

Summary: *Frank Slovak survives a serious tractor accident on his farm. His wife cares for him as he makes a slow, stubborn recovery. Gradually they both accept their new reality of his limitations and dependence on her.*

This first story in *Like a House on Fire* introduces many of the recurring themes, ideas, motifs and character types within the collection. It also inducts readers immediately into the emotional tone that permeates the collection. For example, disconnection and sadness between partners is a recurring relationship style in many of the stories.

In this first story, the marital relationship between the Slovaks is strained at best, becoming more uncomfortable with the impact of the tragedy of Frank's accident, which forces him to become dependent on her in a practical sense. He is resentful and, at first, so is she: she feels 'cheated' when he does not die from pneumonia during his initial hospital stay (p.6). But gradually she finds strength and agency in her position as a carer – a strength she was denied in their past, for instance when Frank dictated their emotional journey following the loss of their unborn child – and this slight shift in power in their relationship, while challenging, is not unwelcome to her. When she insists he swallow his pride, anger and sullenness to thank those who have helped him in his recovery, she feels 'exhilaration' (p.13) at being able to force him into an action he is resisting.

This small, rare victory for her seems to prompt miniscule, cautious expressions of affection between them: Frank's admission that dying at the scene of the accident would have been the one kindness he could have afforded her (p.15), and her active compassion in the act of reaching out to hold his hand as they lie in bed (pp.15–16). Despite 'hating him' (p.8) and feeling a 'pure' 'loathing' (p.10), she finds herself 'determinedly' (p.16) reaching out to help ease his suffering. The story