



## REVIEW OF THE WEEK

### YEARN

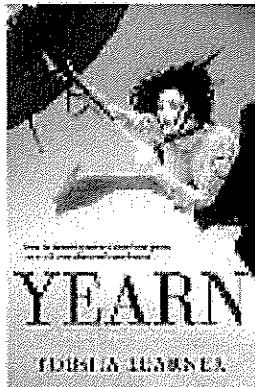
Tobsha Learner, Harper Collins, rrp \$32.99

Reviewer: John Bailey

There's something about erotic fiction that seems comfortably suited to the short-story form. Not that there haven't been excellent novel-length examples of the genre, but the most renowned of these — *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, say, or *Tropic of Cancer*, or *The Story of O* — are as much distinguished by their more high-minded literary presumptions as their focus on sexuality. Short stories get to the point, and there's usually little ambiguity about what that point might be.

Though the jury's still out over the precise distinction between erotica and pornography, Tobsha Learner has built a solid reputation by writing about sex in ways that prevent the dismissive porn label from being applied to her work. Her previous two collections of shorts — *Quiver* and *Tremble* — featured many of the fascinations that animate her writing for the stage and radio as well as the historical novels and thrillers that make up the rest of her back catalogue. The stories of *Yearn* frequently feature magic and the occult; the seductive lures of technology and art; and characters who are far more than interchangeable puppets engaged in mechanical couplings.

The nine stories offered here vary widely in subject: a young Sydneysider is left with a cat who nightly transforms into a purring African lover; a dissatisfied English wife discovers a strange sensual connection with the weatherman on her TV; a depressed American call centre worker attempts to reinvent her life online as a hyper-sexed virtual superstar. Some stick to the perspective of their protagonists, while others surprise by shifting the narrative focus on to new figures halfway through. All offer plot twists, often after the (literal) climax has been reached, though some revelations can be spotted a page or two into the tale.



As a collection, the works hold together well. There are cursory threads that weave between each — from frequent references to 18th-century botanist Joseph Banks to brief detours checking in on the various fates of the heroes and heroines at the centre of previous stories. But all of these feel almost like afterthoughts. This isn't the daisy-chain of affairs of the sort Schnitzler mastered in *La Ronde*, and the stories could easily be read out of order without much being lost.

If there is a persistence across the book as a whole, it's perhaps found in the undercurrents of melancholy and loss that consistently creep in at the edge of the frame. There are no happy marriages here, and adultery seems less desirable than simply necessary. Parents, particularly mothers, are repeatedly the source of self-hatred and sexual disgust. When ideal lovers eventually unite, the result proves disappointingly ephemeral, as one or the other is later reintroduced alone and withering.

All of this mightn't sound like the electric booster-shot erotic fiction often promises, but it's background stuff, really. On a more obvious level, the sex scenes here deliver precisely what they're contracted to, managing not to fall back into repetitive routine or recycled cliché. They're also fundamental to the development of each narrative, rather than functioning as tacked-on asides designed to keep the reader's pulse from slowing.

But for all its strengths, too often *Yearn* leaves us wanting more. Many of the stories present an original and intriguing scenario that never reaches its potential, while a couple just idle in neutral at the starting gates. The second entry in the collection is a case in point: a handsome Aussie actor on an international flight decides to seduce someone on the plane who doesn't recognise him. And then he does. That's sort of it. There's a one-line reversal of fortune at the end of the story, but the 24 pages it's taken to get there don't make it any more interesting.

There are also odd distractions that detract from each tale — the number of times La Perla underwear is specified almost seems like product placement, and it's unclear why a character has to answer his iPhone rather than his, well, phone.

It's only occasionally that a story really misfires, and in most cases it's in the weak resolution to an otherwise-engaging build-up (the last piece in the collection ends with a real nose-wrinkler). For the most part, there's enough here to maintain a lively, fast-paced run-through, with the odd surprise to spice up the experience and as much — and as varied — sex as a lusty reader could ask for. Not an encounter you'll regret in the morning, but not one you'll be itching to relive in days to come.



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