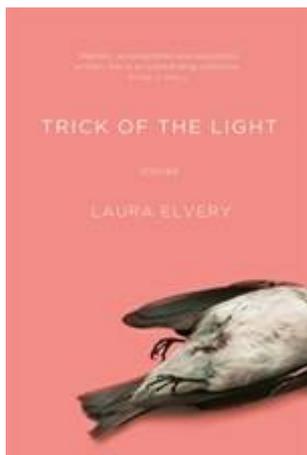


TEXT review**With the confidence of a magician***review by Kate Cantrell*

Laura Elvery
Trick of the Light
 University of Queensland Press 2018, Brisbane
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A trick is an action or scheme that is designed to deceive, but a trick of the light is something more benevolent, closer as it is to an optical illusion or an architectural charm. A trick can take the form of a prank or a hoax, but a trick of the light isn't planned. If you trick someone, you deliberately outwit them. But if you encounter a trick of the light, what you see is not a gimmick but a distinct impression: an effect caused by the way the light falls on a thing and makes that thing, which doesn't exist, appear to be real.

A sort of paradox.

Laura Elvery's short story collection *Trick of the Light* (2018) is full of these effects.

In the stand-out piece, *Mountains Grow Like Trees*, Beth, a conservation scientist with an interest in pygmy possums, borrows her friends' mountain cabin to work on a grant for a preservation project in Kosciuszko Park. Stressed and alone, with an unrelenting headache that threatens her vision, she is visited by a teenage girl who claims, at first, to be the daughter of the cabin owners: a happily married couple named Jeremy and Mel. "Okay, that's not true," the girl admits. "You guessed the truth, though, right?" (55). The truth, which is slippery and always just beyond our grasp, is that the girl is, by her own account, Jeremy's girlfriend. "We had sex," she boasts, "at a hotel around the corner from the servo" (55). Beth is initially appalled by the girl's 'backward snobbery' (59) but soon feels affection for the girl when she says, "Yes, please," in such a way ... that Beth was sure she'd never had much in her life' (59). Meanwhile, the distorting effect of Beth's headache persists, and in its 'starry expansion' (55), we remain

uncertain, even at the story's end, if the girl is telling the truth. 'People can say what they like,' Elvery writes, 'and they still won't know the truth, even if they believe it' (228). Truth, in this sense, is merely one edge of a multi-faceted jewel; what we see depends on the way the light falls.

In another of the collection's highlights, *The Republic*, a young woman, Cora, returns home to London for the trial of a man who is accused of murdering her best friend, Kit. "The man is sure to get life," her father says. "No loopholes. Witnesses and everything... Straightforward" (88). But for Cora, whose life is now 'far, far emptier' (87), and for Kit, who was 'nipped and chased and baited' (84), nothing about life, or death, is straightforward. Even *The Republic*, a fictionalised land that Kit imagines, is a complex foreshadowing of the liminal space that he comes to inhabit after his death and before he is metaphorically put to rest. His conviction that people can form their own countries is a self-fulfilling prophecy that is realised, not during his life, but through his death. When he dies, Kit becomes *The Republic* because he is his own land. "Kit knew things that were true," Cora says. "The image of *The Republic* was right there, behind his eyes" (82). Cora, at times, is envious of Kit's imagination, but she is also frightened by the fantasies that he projects. When the school turns *The Republic* into a play of the same name, Cora's initial elation turns into 'a trembling nervousness' (85) when she realises that the boundary between reality and fantasy has been crossed. In the final act of the play – and of his life – Kit stands on stage, under 'the blazing lights' (85), with his flag raised to the audience's applause, and the next morning, he disappears. Whether he foresees his death isn't clear, but at some point, he slips down a trap door, never to return.

In all of Elvery's stories, there is a breach in the fabric of space-time, a rupture in the 'natural' order of things. These rifts destabilise the text and displace the characters, many of whom appear like illusions, but whose depth and complexity makes them real. In *Foundling*, a middle-aged man named Martin resists his social invisibility by connecting with other survivors of childhood abuse. His story is collective – 'he is one of those poor boys' (94) – but singular too, entwined as it is with his memories of a furtive attempt to resurrect a dead bird. 'It'll never stay a secret,' he says (95). In another story, we meet Gary Simmonds: a thanatophobe who is obsessed with cryonics and who secretly attends life extension meetings without his wife's knowledge. "The idea is to keep on living," Gary says. "To just take a pause, while your body is kept alive" (185).

Thematically, Elvery's preoccupation with death materialises as explicit musings about alternative ways to die, and as both figurative and literal attempts at preventing death or at least transcending its effects. Martin, for example, refuses to believe that his baby bird is dead. Even as it 'flops sideways ... like a wet balloon' (90), he imagines the bird 'high above him, soft and fed and warm with its mother' (95). Similarly, Gary's fear of ageing culminates in his estrangement from his family, but like all of Elvery's characters, he remains true to himself. He meanders on, with his own idiosyncratic way of seeing, but he acts consistently, according to the fixed determinacy of his character. Even as his marriage breaks down, and his wife leaves him, he remains adamant that "we are close to a *cure* for ageing ... scientists already know how to keep bodies alive after death" (184).

As a collection, *Trick of the Light* represents itself as an account of the fears and fantasies of everyday people searching for meaning. But Elvery's debut is more than this. With the confidence of a magician, Elvery gifts us

complex renderings of growing up, growing old, and growing out of shape. Her characters are everyday people, but they are always on the verge of metamorphosis. They are scientists on the brink of discovery, or teens on the cusp of adulthood; they are souls in the midst of reincarnation, bodies on the line between illness and health. At times, they even find themselves in the relational space between human and non-human, or as in *Fledermaus*, between girl and bat. These characters are, in all regards, everyday people, but their lives are distorted – sometimes by delusion, sometimes by obsession, but usually by a trick of the light. In this way, Elvery's stories are moments of illumination: swift realisations or brief epiphanies that, due to their intensity, cannot last. However, like all good stories, they linger after reading.

Kate Cantrell teaches creative and professional writing at Queensland University of Technology and the University of Southern Queensland. From 2014 to 2016, she was a visiting lecturer at City, University of London, and a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Oxford. She was the first Arts researcher in Australia to be awarded a Queensland Smart Futures Fellowship for her work on female wandering. She is an award-winning writer and editor.

[Return to Contents Page](#)
[Return to Home Page](#)

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