

Leaning towards infinity, Sue Woolfe, 1996

This novel won the 1996 Christina Stead Prize for fiction. It's a beautifully written, and cleverly thought out story, about three generations of women; grandmother, mother and daughter: Juanita, Frances and Hypatia. The narrative moves between the three women drawing them together by their mother/daughter relationship but also by their experiences of being a mother and the happenings that moved them towards infinity.

Woolfe cleverly explores the relationships and life experiences through an obsessive preoccupation, by the mother and grandmother, with mathematics. Juanita (the grandmother) was abandoned by her mother to a catholic orphanage as a child, and whilst there, became fascinated by numbers. She read Greek classics and became absorbed in the historical explanations of both mathematical theory and practice, from Ancient Greek texts to modern day understandings. Juanita developed her own mathematical axiom which she wrote out and then abandoned. In the fullness of her youth her daughter Frances (who was trying to get closer to her mother while at the same time exploring her sexuality) became fascinated with her mother's theories and mathematical propositions. Woolfe somehow describes experiences in life by juxtaposing them with mathematical formulas, showing the symmetry but also the inexplicable depths of experience; leaning towards infinity.

An interesting and important aspect of the story is the inherent association between mothering and infinity. Anyone who has been a mother, or maybe a parent, may well have experienced a sense of infinity in the eyes and life of their baby. It is the possibilities that are present in the life of a new child. The potential for what - art, music, adventure, wisdom - all of this and more, infinity, is present in a new baby and can be overwhelming to any parent.

There is some criticism of the book both for its mistaken mathematical propositions and its portrayal of women within the mathematical realm, "its nothing like that at mathematical conferences" says Frans Beijer. Even though the book starts slowly and just seems to fade away, rather than finish, I found it a great read! Woolfe holds up and values relationships, experiences, introspection and the mysteries of life through her female characters; and through them the reader can drink from the cup of life. A more recent work by Woolfe is *The Secret Cure* published in 2003 a book for another day.

Joan Garvan