



father she refuses to believe is dead gives the narrative a new and fiendish twist.

Some readers will see Messud's seemingly discrete sections and series of unconnected incidents as a sign of overall disjointedness. Others will grumble that she spoils surprises by telegraphing too much information: slow-witted caretaker Rudy Molinaro, who cruises the woods and asylum estate in his truck, his "jelly-bean eyes shining dully in their pouchy sockets", is an obvious bogeyman; similarly Shute, described as "the Dark Thing" by Julia, an "odd duck" by her father, and "just off, right?" by Cassie, is surely too sinister for his own good.

However, Messud knows exactly what she is doing, and it is a delight to be continuously wrong-footed and bowled over. The novel may feel plotless in places, with characters coming and going, emotions running high, and events ranging from small-scale disturbances to earth-shattering upheavals, but it accurately mirrors that bumpy, choppy and sometimes messy journey from childhood to adolescence.

The girls' personal trials convince, and we come to feel for a cast-off Julia making sense of her rejection and a ground-down Cassie attempting to be "fierce in her distress".

"Cassie was my best friend," Julia informs us;

Uncannily textbook Freud

Nadia Bailey

Such Small Hands

By Andres Barba

Translated by Lisa Dillman

Allen & Unwin, 112pp, \$24.99

In 1919, Sigmund Freud published an essay called *Das Unheimliche* (*The Uncanny*) in which he identified a set of conditions that evoke a certain kind of dread or anxiety in a person. Repetition is one: say, when you take a series of turns and end up back in the place you began. The doppelganger, or double, is another. So are dolls, eyes and coincidences.

The uncanny, Freud posits, occurs when something familiar is underwritten by something threatening or unknown. No matter how many turns you take, you still end up in the same place. The mirror shows you a face you no longer recognise. The doll slowly opens her eyes.

Spanish writer Andres Barba's 2008 novel *Las Manos Pequeñas*, now released in arresting and lucid translation by Lisa Dillman as *Such Small Hands*, is almost a textbook examination of the uncanny. It begins with a car accident. Marina, seven years old, is the sole survivor. Her father dies instantly and her mother shortly after.

Suffering both physical wounds and psychic distress, she spends a period of convalescence in hospital, where doctors and psychologists fuss over her in a perfunctory way. As a form of therapy, she's given a doll that she names after herself. Shortly after, Marina is shipped off to an orphanage, doll in tow, where her arrival disrupts the soporific lives of the 12 other girls who live there.

Marina becomes an instant and all-consuming point of obsession. They are

seduced and repelled by her, overwhelmed with love but only able to express it through acts of cruelty. That cruelty, channelled into a night-time game invented by Marina, escalates into something monstrous.

Barba deftly builds a creeping sense of the uncanny: in the way Marina interacts with her doppelganger doll (she has a habit of licking the doll's glass eyeballs so that she can "see"), in the unnerving atmosphere of the orphanage, with its ancient statue of Saint Anne out the front that looks like "a black, childlike little old lady", and especially in the orphans themselves: 12 girls who speak in one voice and whom Marina struggles to tell apart.

In a memorable passage, she imagines the leg of one girl leading to another's body, crowned by a head that doesn't belong to either. Through this Freudian *unheimlich*, Barba builds an inescapable sense of impending horror. We know something terrible is going to happen. The only real question is whether Marina will be perpetrator or victim.

This is a strange and disquieting book: sinister, often surreal, at times uneasily erotic. Barba excels at capturing the strange rituals of childhood: the killing of a caterpillar and its subsequent tender burial; of one day simply deciding not to eat; of playing elaborate games that seem more real than real life itself.

Adults hover at the peripheries but never emerge as flesh-and-blood characters. It's only the children who are endowed with inner lives. There's been a pop culture moment in the past few years of stories about powerful, and powerfully dangerous, girl-children: *Game of Thrones'* Arya Stark, Eleven from *Stranger Things* and Laura Kinney in the unexpectedly

brilliant X-Men movie *Logan*, to name a few. In *Such Small Hands*, Marina is similarly dangerous, and made all the more terrifying by the fact that she's just a normal girl.

Barba's vocabulary tends towards the sensual. Logic breaks "like a melon dropped on the ground, split open in one go". A decision is "sealed tight like an almond". Desire is experienced as "stagnant water that suddenly begins to drain, imperceptibly".

The prose is lyrical, portentous and eerie, rife with Freudian repetitions that have a hypnotic effect. Barba's work shares much in common with poetry, alert to the rhythm and musicality of language. Reading it, you forget that it's in translation. It's not the first time Barba has worked with Dillman, and her sensitive handling of the prose is so exacting that it's invisible.

Unfolding over three parts; this taut novel's strength is in its two overlapping perspectives: that of Marina and that of other children in the orphanage, who share a single, incantatory narrative voice.

This technique, used to similar effect in Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides*, creates a sense of stifling intimacy while absolving any one character of agency or guilt: "How did our desire begin? We don't know. Everything was silent in our desire, like acrobats in motion, like tightrope walkers. Desire was a big knife and we were the handle."

The device highlights a kind of literary mob mentality: without a sense of individuality, violence is all too easy and when the final, terrible act occurs, all the children can ask is: "Who leapt first? Was it me? Was it you?"

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