



*Third Degree* may well be Tania Roxborough's best novel for young adults. In 1981 Ruth is 19, in her first year at Massey University and feeling slightly homesick when she burns her hand cooking an egg. This seemingly-minor incident triggers a rush of memories about a terrible accident in her childhood.

In 1973, when she was ten, Ruth was scalded and had to spend a long time in hospital. The description of her painful treatment is old from her ten-year-old perspective... *they have to pick, and jab, and pull and tug at the bits of flesh that lie dead on my body*. The other patients in her ward are sharply characterised and their activities and attitudes are fascinating. The reader also sees how Ruth's later life is affected by her childhood injury; not all the scares are physical.

The older Ruth gradually realises that there are gaps in her past and things that she has not been told. Her memories of some events do not match those of her family. Ruth has to confront her mother, and the result is completely unexpected but very moving. (A sub-plot about the testing of a new drug on the children in Ruth's ward, although based on fact, is not satisfactorily integrated into the story. This minor weakness is the only flaw in an otherwise excellent novel.)

The quotations provided by the author at the start of the novel are important: Janet Frame talking about memories rising to the surface in a whirlpool, and Cyril Connonally called memories disordered card-indexes. Ruth's memories of hospital are vivid and convincing reflecting the author's own experience as a child patient with burns) but it gradually becomes clear that her memories may be incomplete or misleading. It is the re-arranging of some of Ruth's memories and her discovery of new information that makes this story fascinating.

*Third Degree* is a gripping account of hospital life and healing, particularly for older teens and adults.

Trevor Agnew; *The Source* (Magpies Magazine) June 2005