

The Weekend

Charlotte Wood

(Weidenfeld & Nicolson, £14.99)

1 THIS BOOK is an example of what is both right and wrong with British publishing at the minute. Australian novelist Charlotte Wood isn't well known here – this is her sixth novel but only her second to be released in the UK. Her publisher has taken a chance with it, given it a bit of a push, and it's one that deserves to pay off. But there's something depressing about how it's being sold and received.

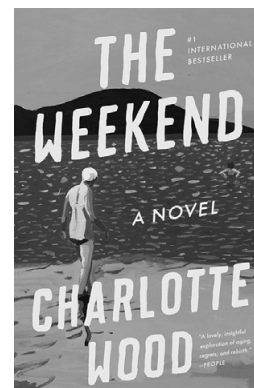
2 The publisher trumpets how Wood's books have done well in the Stella Prize – the Australian version of the Women's Prize for Fiction. The advance copy screams on the back cover: "MEET CHARLOTTE WOOD, THE WRITER OF FIERCE, REAL WOMEN YOU HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR", which could only be thought to be a novelty by someone who hasn't read much contemporary fiction. (And the patronising description of "fierce, real women" is reminiscent of the old joke about Hollywood's definition of "feminist" as "an attractive woman who is also feisty".) Obliging, British newspapers have assigned the book exclusively to female critics to review – 25.

3 *The Weekend* is, sure enough, about a group of three women, lifelong friends now in their seventies. Jude, Adele and Wendy are survivors, watching friends and husbands die and shuffling up the line towards the payout window themselves. Their friend Sylvie is the latest to go, and as a favour to her daughter who lives abroad they agree to meet up and clear out her house.

4 If strangers in confinement is the engine of great comedy and drama, then old friends might be a richer, more fruitfully complicated one. Having three main characters offers plenty of thinly buried history while giving enough space to define each woman properly. Jude is ascetic and sceptical of sentiment; Wendy is chaotic and has brought her deaf, lame, incontinent dog with her (an obvious analogue for senility and one of the few missteps in the book). Adele is an actor who fears herself to be trivial and frivolous and is retired by necessity, but with all her vanity intact.

5 Clearing out a house doesn't lend itself to dramatic action, but the book never seems static: it's fed instead by the three women's pasts and the way they work together like scissor blades, dangerous but mutually dependent. Jude controls the others by imposing generous gifts on them; Adele borrows money from Wendy; Wendy is moved that Sylvie kept an old postcard she sent – as she cheerfully chucks out everyone else's.

6 *The Weekend* is bracingly unsentimental about ageing and death. Adele "at times felt on the verge of discovering something very important about the age beyond youth and love. But she had not uncovered it yet". Jude observes, when witnessing a dead body, that the absence of muscle tone after death "made you



look younger, it was a fact". As a portrayal of ageing that's sympathetic but cynical, *The Weekend* brings to mind recent novels by Margaret Drabble or Elizabeth Strout – except that unlike those authors Wood, who is 55, is not writing from experience but using a little-known novelist's tool called 29, which was until recently believed to be obsolete in our age of "autofiction" and thinly disguised personal essays.

- 7 The story heads towards a bit of a reckoning, helped by careless words and a rare appearance by secondary characters (Adele meets every older actor's worst nightmare: a busy colleague), even if it hardly matches the blurb's promise of "a storm that threatens to sweep away their friendship for good". It's just a shame that only the most intrepid male reader will break through the book's marketing carapace and try it. Men are interested in women too, you know. Some, I'm told, even live with them.

Private Eye, 2020