

SHORTLISTED FOR
THE MILES FRANKLIN
AWARD 2019

'Masterful.' Julie Koh

JENNIFER
MILLS

THE AIR WAYS

'Sensational.'
Josephine Rowe

READING NOTES



BLURB

I had a body once before. I didn't always love it. I knew the skin as my limit, and there were times I longed to leave it.

I knew better than to wish for this.

This is the story of Yun. It's the story of Adam.
Two young people. A familiar chase.

But this is not a love story.
It's a story of revenge, transformation, survival.

*Feel something, the body commands. Feel this.
But it's a phantom . . . I go untouched.*

They want their body back.

Who are we, if we lose hold of the body?
What might we become?

The Airways shifts between Sydney and Beijing, unsettling the boundaries of gender and power, consent and rage, self and other, and even life and death.

A powerful, inventive, and immersive novel from award-winning author Jennifer Mills.

'Sensational. *The Airways* is an intricate, existential wonder – Mills' ability to inhabit boundlessness is astonishing. A deeply empathetic genius flows through these pages.'
– Josephine Rowe

'A haunting and intimate examination of violence, alienation, dislocation and possession, and the need to reckon with the past. *The Airways* is a masterful novel: Mills writes prose of rare distinction.'
– Julie Koh

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jennifer Mills is the author of the novels *Dyschronia* (Picador, 2018), *Gone* (UQP, 2011) and *The Diamond Anchor* (UQP, 2009) and a collection of short stories, *The Rest is Weight* (UQP, 2012). In 2019 *Dyschronia* was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Literary Award, the Adelaide Festival Awards for Literature and the Aurealis Awards for science fiction. Mills' fiction, essays and criticism have been widely published, including in *Best Australian Stories*, *Best Australian Essays*, the *Guardian*, *Lithub*, *Meanjin*, *Overland*, *The Saturday Paper*, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Sydney Review of Books*, and the *Washington Post*.



PLOT SUMMARY

University student Adam lives in a Sydney share house with Marita, Kate and Yun. Yun is an enigmatic microbiology student. They are also someone Adam likes to watch as they sleep.

When a young woman is found murdered near the university, it's all anyone can talk about. Adam is reluctant to listen, though. And when the housemates hold a seemingly uneventful party soon afterwards, his life begins to unravel. Past neuroses once again make themselves known. He cannot stay. He needs to move.

After Yun, too, is killed, Adam returns to live with his mother for a time, then flies to Beijing, poised to reinvent himself in a city that seems as unknown as possible, but really, it's one he's drawn to for reasons that – like most things now – are wholly to do with Yun.

Determined to forget, Adam assumes a new life, his activities dictated by the numbers on the day's air quality index. He finds comfort belowground in the labyrinthine Beijing subway, befriends and eventually works with Canadian entrepreneur Manu and his partner, Eliza, and even finds a girlfriend while attempting to learn the local language, but that relationship ends abruptly when she, too, discovers Adam's voyeurism.

As all this plays out, another character – searching, bodiless – also finds their way to Beijing. With the ability to move from person to person to take brief residence in those bodies, their inextricable link with Adam becomes clear. But what does Adam know of them? And do they wish Adam good or ill? Only the intensity of their longing is clear, and so, indefatigable, they seek him.

Adam, meanwhile, brought low by illness, finds his world ever more blurred at the edges. With his friends wary he is coming undone, Adam stumbles through the city's polluted haze, eventually meeting with Yun once more – and the truth of what happened the night of that house party is revealed.



THEMES

Life and death

There are two important deaths in the story – the young woman’s murder near the university in Sydney, and Yun’s, each dealt with differently. In addition, Adam’s father’s death also features, possibly as an inciting event for Adam and his unusual behaviour. The ongoing conflict of life and death is pivotal to *The Airways*, with the importance of the body – so determined to live and yet so vulnerable – underscored throughout.

- Adam is reluctant to engage with his housemates about the young woman’s murder, but we know he considers it: *‘It bruised like accusation. A random attack; these things happened. Why should he have to establish his innocence?’* (p65). Why is this? Do you think he had a role in this first murder? Or does his guilt stem from elsewhere?
- *‘The march didn’t make the TV news. He forgot about it until he saw the photos on Facebook. End violence against women, said the main banner. He scrolled past it without reading the comments.’* (p184) Adam does not attend the vigil following the young woman’s murder, nor the memorial. Likewise, the matter drops from media attention fairly swiftly. What does *The Airways* have to say about society’s approach to gendered violence?
- When Adam informs Marita he will be moving out, her response seems quite casual, despite their housemate’s recent death. *“‘That’s fine. We’re already looking for someone for the front room anyway,’ she said.’* (p180) Why do you think Marita does not show more emotion? How does this compare with her response to the first murder?

Power and consent

Power and consent are additional themes threaded through *The Airways*. They are present in Adam’s hold over those he watches, Yun’s ability to transcend death and infiltrate bodies, Manu’s capacity to wheel and deal, hire and fire, and even Adam’s mother’s power to shame him. Adam invades others’ privacy without first asking permission or even thinking he needs to. There is also a lack of consent in Yun’s entering of various bodies, though this is obviously far less straightforward.

- Which character do you feel holds the most power in the story? Why?
- Adam convinces himself Yun is complicit in his watching them: *‘The invitation was there, the door left open.’* (p140). In Adam’s refusal to delete the video, too, he seems to believe he did nothing wrong filming Natasha without her knowledge. Are there any other times in the novel Adam demonstrates a lack of regard for consent?



Searching and vengeance

As the blurb suggests, the story's 'familiar chase' turns out to be anything but, as the protagonists' search is far from a love story. Each searching, Yun's need for retribution intensifies as they grow stronger and closer to Adam.

- Yun is not the only one searching. Adam, too, finds comfort in it and has done so from a young age: '*Over many months, he had learned to be consoled by the search itself*' (p67). Do you believe either character ultimately finds what they seek? If they are united, will they continue searching? If so, how?
- Yun describes one of the people they infiltrate as: '*Fighting the body's demands for rest, vengeance, rest.*' (p103). Adam, too, needs a great deal of rest throughout the novel, including either side of Yun's murder. What do you think his role was in this death, and how does he process it?
- Yun's thirst for revenge burns slowly, as they gain assurance of who they seek. From early uncertainty, they eventually '*want to destroy him.*' (p344), before ultimately softening when they realise all Adam can offer. Did your enjoyment of the book change as it progressed? Did you find you felt more, or less, connected with Yun as their lust for vengeance grew?

Transformation and survival

Another of *The Airways'* key themes is transforming or adapting to survive. This theme extends even to setting, as Adam notices Beijing remodelling itself, seemingly overnight. Though we are unsure if Yun really had another option, those who transform, it seems, are rewarded with life, whatever its form, leaving us to question, to what lengths might we go to survive?

- When Yun, in their new form – be it a soul, spirit or ghost – returns to China, they ponder that '*They left this country two or more transformations ago.*' (p283). What do you think they mean by this – two or more?
- As Yun transfers from person to person, body to body, they become more adept at it and finally, when they join Adam, they can '*enter him like light*' (p361). What is it, do you think, that so strengthens Yun's resolve?



Breath

Synonymous with life, breath plays a pivotal role in the story, particularly in Beijing where it is so often laborious due to the poor air quality. Steadying, transportive, this simple act is a powerful tool. Adam monitors his inhalations to keep a handle on his anxiety while Yun uses it to enter the bodies that serve and transport them on their ultimate campaign.

- Oriental lilies feature in *The Airways* in both the Sydney share house and Adam's Beijing apartment. At various points, Adam struggles to breathe around them: '*The flowers were ripe and beautiful, the water clear. But he caught the scent in his mouth when he breathed, and it tasted rotten.*' (p348). Discuss the symbolism of the flowers.
- *The Airways* is set in real cities in the modern day, however it is without mention of the global pandemic. Do you feel that, given its emphasis on breath and ongoing reference to contagion, you read this differently compared with how you might have before having any knowledge of COVID-19?

CHARACTERS

Adam

Adam is one of the two protagonists in the story. We first meet him half-heartedly studying media communications at university in Sydney, and follow him to Beijing, where he works in a vague marketing role for Manu. Adam was a boy when his father died, and we learn that his mother's response upon discovering her son's penchant for looking through her underwear was to send him to specialists. In Sydney particularly, Adam has few friends. At times he tries to curtail his interest in stepping, unknown, into others' private spaces, while at others he justifies it plainly.

- Adam seems almost constantly afflicted: *'All these minor pains kept clamouring for his attention'* (p123), but is he really sick and/or in pain? Are his physical symptoms simply manifestations of his mental torment? Or something else entirely?
- Throughout the story, Adam insists to himself that he is a 'good guy'. On what, do you think, he bases this definition? Who do you think he might look to as an example of the opposite – a 'bad guy' – in his life?

Yun

Originally from China, Yun was sent to live with his grandparents in Australia when their mother sensed they were different. The Yun we meet as a student in Sydney is obviously very different from the form they assume once they leave their body. At first, seen only through Adam's eyes, Yun is quiet and polite, sharing knowing looks with their housemate from time to time. Later, we learn Adam's attention was wholly unwelcome – those looks weren't knowing at all. Flitting through the world in their new form, moving from body to body, Yun searches for Adam, their determination and thirst for revenge becoming ever stronger.

- *"Anyway, it was for the women, really," he said. He drank the rest of his coffee, which had gone cold, and set the cup on the counter. "I went," Yun said, pulling the paper towards them. "You're different," Adam said. It was the wrong thing to say, but Yun seemed to take it lightly; they sighed, a half-smile directed to the page.'* (pp113/114) How else has the author shown us some of Yun's experience as a non-binary person?
- Do you think Yun's gender has something to do with why Adam pursues them? What is Adam's motivation? Is Yun's killing a gendered crime?
- *'I remember swimming. As a child, before the body grew complicated.'* (p351) We are acquainted with Yun's point of view only once they are in their new form. While they miss their body and mourn its loss deeply, do you think they also feel somewhat freer without it and those attendant complications? Can you imagine what it might be like to be bodiless? Could life be simpler? How?



Manu

Wealthy Canadian expat Manu is Adam's boss. Cool and charismatic, he has lived in Beijing for a decade and operates an inner-city business, though we're never quite certain what it is the business does. Fluent in the language and familiar with the city, Manu has helped arrange much of Adam's life in Beijing, and Adam holds him in high regard.

- The friendship between Manu and Adam appears genuine, but as the story unfolds, we see Manu putting more distance between the two of them. When Manu announces he and Eliza are pregnant and returning to Canada, he treats Adam coolly and Adam has *'the disloyal thought that he might decide to dislike these people, if he could muster the energy. He wasn't sure that they would actually notice.'* (p300). Has Manu's approach changed due to Adam's increasingly odd behaviour? Or was the friendship only ever one-sided?

Eliza

Eliza, Manu's partner, is *'Chinese from Toronto'* (p21). She works with Manu, is also wealthy and attends the many networking events alongside him. We learn towards the end of the story that Eliza is pregnant.

- Though she says little, it's Eliza who seems to pick up on Adam's increasingly strange behaviour. It's sometimes unclear whether Adam's troubled thoughts translate into unacceptable action, and it's then through Eliza we learn his outward behaviour is strange: *'He saw Eliza again, managed to catch her eye this time. A faint look of concern crossed her face'* (p196). What do you think motivates her reactions? Do they even register with Adam?



SETTING

The Airways is set between Sydney and Beijing, cities that seem about as different as it is possible to imagine, as well as the strange otherworld Yun inhabits once they have left their body. Author Jennifer Mills grew up in Sydney and lived in Beijing from 2014–2016; which gives an authenticity to her descriptions of both cities.

- In Sydney, *'Heat had been soaking into the walls for days and now it seemed intent on crushing him'* (p109), while in Beijing *'the fridge was only slightly cooler than the room'* (p345) – the cities' juxtaposed climates reinforce the importance of bodily sensation, but does weather affect characterisation as well? How might it impact the characters' moods or journeys?
- Already foreign to Adam, Beijing continues to confound in its ever-changing nature: *'He'd been living here four months and the street had already transformed. He marvelled again at the city's capacity for quick erasure.'* (p17). Does Adam enjoy this, do you think? Is he happy in the city? Or merely existing?
- *'He has come all this way to put history behind him, to be relieved of his own weight. A white boy's fantasy.'* (p344) Is Adam in Beijing merely to forget or also to atone? How important do you feel this setting is for the story?

WRITING STYLE

Jennifer Mills writes from two perspectives – Adam's and Yun's/the ghost's – each with a distinctly different voice. The story from one perspective is told linearly, while the other jumps between the past and present.

- The ghost's chapters are very fragmented, perhaps confusing at first. Why do you think this is? Did these chapters become clearer by the end? Did the use of language help or hinder you orientating yourself in the story?
- What do you think of the chapter titles in the story? Adam's chapter titles signify place while Yun's are nouns and verbs relating to the bodies they occupy. Did these titles impact your reading?
- In her praise for *The Airways*, Josephine Rowe writes: 'Mills' ability to inhabit boundlessness is astonishing' and Mills herself has described *The Airways* as a 'queer ghost story'. Do you think of this as a ghost story? How might it differ from the traditional understanding of one?