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***88 Lines about 44 Women.* Steven Lang (Penguin Viking, 2009).**

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded 22 October 2009.

Steven Lang's second novel, following his success with *The Accident Terrorist*, won't win any prizes for originality: it concerns a former rock star with a guilty secret in his past that threatens his new life. But the title, *88 Lines about 44 Women*, is intriguing in a slightly disquieting way: it made me wonder if I should be counting women, though it seemed that there were really only two of any significance, apart from a sister and mother. Halfway through the novel it's explained: it's a 1982 song by The Nails, a catalogue of snappy couplets about various women but really a love song about the one who is, I suppose, 'the real thing'.

Lawrence, or Larry, Martin was the keyboard player and songwriter for an Australian band in the eighties. Born in England, and educated in the English public school system, he was lured out to Australia by his school friend Roly, an Australian singer and guitarist who had been briefly in England in his teens. After years of bohemian penury, the band's success was brief, cut short by the death of Larry's wife, Gizelle, in a yachting accident, and Larry's subsequent discovery that she had been sleeping with Roly.

After spending the subsequent two decades in Australia, Larry has returned to the UK, ostensibly to spend time with his parents in their last years, but really, we are led to understand, to run away from his past which threatens to re-emerge when a reporter turns up asking for an interview. So instead of settling somewhere nearby in Kent, he fetches up in the highlands of Scotland, in a cold house on the edge of a loch, working half-heartedly on a symphony and unsuccessfully resisting the temptation to become involved with Sam, a single mother who lives nearby. Nearing fifty, Larry finds himself beset by embarrassing health problems, as well as the ongoing difficulties he has accepting a woman into his life. The build-up to the invasion of Iraq plays out inexorably in the background.

As I say, the plot is predictable enough. What is most arresting about this novel are the continual little stabs of insight into the Anglo-Saxon upper-class male psyche, and the way it is moulded to make real connection with another person almost impossible. Larry is a first-person narrator, so the critique is delivered self-consciously. Falling in love with Sam, he ponders his state of mind:

This is what I do – I meet a woman, get to like her, get into bed with her, and before I know it she’s become the source of all my balance. Not so unusual, I suppose, except that unlike others I tend to forget where my newfound ease has come from. I only remember when things go wrong. (133)

During the scene where he finally tells Sam the truth, he describes being ‘in a place that’s hard to describe because it lacks features. Perhaps that is description enough. A place where nothing matters. This is the trick, you see. This is what they taught us. This is how we protect ourselves’ (250). And most damning of all, he reflects on his schooling:

The worst crime of our education was not physical or sexual abuse, or the stifling of originality, or even the absence of love and the example it set for the rest of our lives. The dark and heinous crime at the centre of that institution was convincing us that their system was the best in the world, that theirs were admirable goals, and it was a rare privilege to be allowed to strive to achieve them. (206)

The prose is lucid and precise, the characterisation – especially of Larry’s parents – is often comic and almost unkind in its perspicuity: his mother’s world ‘was highly structured, but beneath its surface, kept in check only by manners, was a terrible savagery’ (93); his father, a physically dependent eighty-six-year-old, ‘still has the ability to wrong-foot me’ (97). ‘He is thirty-seven years older than me. That, I could not help but calculate, is as long as I’ve got’ (97). Full of such mordant reminders of mortality, and gloomy musings, *88 Lines about 44 Women* is nevertheless a thoughtful and eventually hopeful book about the possibility of redemption through honesty and openness.