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This is the author's radio script of this article.

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writer’s Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded 3 November 2011

For the first fifty pages or so of Stephen Daisley’s fine novel, *Traitor*, I was in a state of irritation, resisting the spell it was working hard to cast. ‘Why?’, I complained to anyone who would listen, ‘why do writers have so little consideration for their readers as to refuse to use quotation marks for speech? I have to re-read every line of dialogue to work out what is spoken and what is part of the narrative. Surely a writer doesn’t want to annoy his readers?’ Nobody could give me a satisfactory answer and I’m still puzzled.

But the irritation gradually wore off. I got used to the rhythm of the prose and the way Daisley does manage to demarcate his characters’ speech. And perhaps there is something about this particular novel, with its stillness and awareness of silences and gaps in speech which would be impeded by conventional typography.

In 1965 David Monroe is a shepherd, a gentle, solitary old man living in a hut on a property in New Zealand with his horses and dogs and his memories of two great forbidden loves. The first was Mahmoud, a Turkish doctor he met on Lemnos in 1915, a Sufi, wounded while trying to save the life of a young Australian soldier. David, also wounded at the same time, is by a somewhat irregular arrangement assigned to guard him. Their bond becomes so strong that David tries to escape with Mahmoud and help him return home, an attempt which is doomed and leads to David’s court martial, punishment and disgrace.

The second love is Sarah, driven mad by grief for the death of her teenage son, a comrade of David’s in the Great War. Although he does not want to talk about her son, and tries to lie to her about witnessing his death, truth and desire overcome them in spite of themselves.

He still carries with him memories of his mother, drowned when he was a teenager. ‘She often could not finish speaking, her throat closing with noises of grief. As if what she would feel was best borne in silence. Left half said or not said, gestured at. The power of utterance holding qualities of destruction and betrayal. The thing and the thing done remaining true.’ This seems to capture Daisley’s approach to writing perfectly.

The title, *Traitor*, is deeply ironised, by implication, throughout the book. The epigraph is from EM Forster, ‘If I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country.’ The most complex irony, it seems to me, is that David is absolutely true to himself. His treachery is not a deliberate repudiation of the conventional, but he cannot avoid the damage he does just by living, by being human. And perhaps he feels that his survival itself is a form of betrayal as well, when so many others have died.

This is a poetic, mystical novel, profound and moving. It does ask for the reader’s forbearance, in the same way, perhaps, that David, passive and inarticulate, waits for things to happen to him. One is reminded of other novels occasionally – perhaps Coetzee’s Michael K is a kindred spirit – but *Traitor* is unique and Daisley’s is a new voice on the Australian literary scene which quietly demands to be heard.