
When a novel is described as containing a circus, a brothel, or even both, there is a danger of cliché. Such themes used to be associated with novels by Angela Carter, and have more recently come back into fashion in a new development of Neo-Victorian fiction with such novels as Michel Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002). While some of these novels, like Faber’s, form compelling reads, however, many fail to live up to their publicity and some are hugely disappointing.

Edwina Preston’s novel, on the other hand, is an evocative piece of fiction that begins with the introduction of a travelling circus to the fictional town of Canyon. When the narrative opens, the first character to be introduced is a prostitute, Marianne Ward, in the neighbouring town of Pitch, who is sent to Canyon by her brothel madam and quickly becomes sexually entangled with the aptly named circus owner, Arcadia Cirque. Marianne, becoming pregnant by the morally dubious Arcadia, absconds from Canyon in disgrace, never to be seen again and pursued by Otto, Arcadia’s brother. The added mystery of Arcadia’s murder is then left tantalisingly unexplained in the opening part of the story.

The opening is promising and evokes further curiosity in the main text of the novel. Here the narrative shifts forward forty years to detail the discovery of an old man, believed, and eventually proved, to be Otto Cirque, living in an abandoned outhouse and accused of the murder of Arcadia following the discovery of skeletal remains during the excavation of an old and dilapidated house. The man then disappears, in homage to Harry Houdini, just before the occurrence of another suspicious death. These mysteries are juxtaposed with the much more obscure identity of the main protagonist, Ivorie Hammer, who is pregnant at the beginning of the novel and questioning her own parentage. It is revealed early in the novel that she has been raised by a midwife by the name of Morag Pappy, but that she has no clue as to the identity of her mother besides a single earing, a coin-like token and a lock of hair.

While there are several rather obvious clues in the early part of the novel that suggest what the denouement will be, the story has enough mystery and energy to drive it satisfactorily. The main action in this novel is divided between Canyon and Pitch, where Ivorie makes several new discoveries, and this protects the plot from the dangers of stagnation that inevitably arise when setting a mystery tale in the confined and unvarying space of a small town. However, because of this, there is also a noticeable lack of smoothness and subtlety in the narrative construction, which gives a slight sense of a *deus ex machina*; the solution being unavailable in one town it will naturally materialise in the other.

Preston’s decision to shift the time period from earlier events to a later period in which the previous happenings are investigated and judged is also far from original, though it does fit the novel into a current trend for historical family saga novels that contain a hint of the mysterious, such as those of Kate Morton. The use of the circus is also a well-used motif as seen in recent works such as Sara Gruen’s *Water for Elephants* (2008) or Erin Morgenstern’s *The Night Circus* (2011). Such works contain a magical element which adds a spark of mystique to tried-and-tested constructions of stories focused, primarily, on human relationships and self-discovery; yet such novels also find wide readerships for these exact reasons.

Preston’s story, therefore, is intriguing and engaging, while the narrative tone, as of a conspiratorial and omniscient narrator directly addressing the ‘dear reader’ at various points,
is reminiscent of the work of William Makepeace Thackeray or Henry Fielding and works well to draw the reader into the plot. The unknown history of central characters also lends this novel a kind of Dickensian undercurrent as of *The Pickwick Papers* or *Our Mutual Friend*. Also like Dickens’ work, this novel boasts an eclectic cast of characters with highly unusual names from the well-respected Mr Borrell Sweetley, who is elected Acting Bailiff in the murder case, to the singular figure of Mrs Po, on whom Ivorie has to rely when she goes into labour.

All of the stylistic choices serve to earn the novel its place within the Neo-Victorian canon, but there is also a clear determination to enforce the Australian setting and to make clear that, although many of the literary influences are British the novel itself is not. This is further affirmed by allusions to Dickens as ‘a British gentleman who writes [novels] very well’ (146). The overall achievement is, therefore, rich in scope, and something of a hybrid in terms of authorial voice, narrative style and literary influence. Though it suffers slightly from the same clichés that all Neo-Victorian or Dickensian pastiches naturally carry with them, as the address to the ‘dear reader’ only emphasises, the plot and fluent writing style does its work to produce a compelling tale of intrigue, murder, suspense and discovery that makes Preston’s debut novel a treat to read.

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