
In the wake of *Time’s Long Ruin* (2009), winner of the 2012 National Year of Reading Award for South Australia and longlisted for the Miles Franklin Award in 2011, Adelaide based writer, Stephen Orr presents us with his latest novel, *Dissonance*, a re-imagining of the ‘Frankfurt years’ of Rose and Percy Grainger. Orr offers a harsh insight into obsessive love, manifested in the Bildungsroman journey of piano prodigy Erwin Hergert from one side of the world to the other. Struggling with commitment and sacrifice, alienation, confusion, death, war, sexual desire and ruthless reality, Erwin succumbs to ‘the one thing that ruins every man. Weakness’ (251), after discovering that his initial uplifting sense of being a ‘man and a child’ (105), is fleeting.

Orr introduces us to a fifteen-year-old Erwin practicing piano under the watchful eye of his dominating mother Madge, at their house on God’s Hill Road in Barossa Valley, South Australia. Vividly describing the setting, Orr delicately guides us to Erwin, ‘producing music that fell out of the window into a garden full of wildflowers’ (3-4). Music is a daily six-hour commitment that dominates Erwin’s spare time, forced upon him by Madge, who lives vicariously through her son and dreams for him to be Australia’s first great pianist. With this strict daily routine, Erwin’s home life is far from that of a normal child. He is awarded little time to play outside and is denied spending time with his German father Johann, who has been exiled to the back shed by Madge; her assurance to Erwin: ‘I saved you from him …You’ll thank me one day’ (20). Madge allows Jo back inside the house when he is diagnosed with cancer, but only long enough to die, further strengthening the community’s opinion of her as ‘a stingy old misery guts who’d driven her husband away’ (51).

Like Percy Grainger, whose mother Rose moved him to Frankfurt, Germany in the hope of achieving greater success as a pianist, Erwin and Madge depart for Germany to further Erwin’s talent, because ‘no one made their career in Adelaide’ (91). They arrive in Hamburg in 1938. Germany is under the control of Adolf Hitler and World War Two is looming. If the constant marching, protesting, sirens and air-raids aren’t enough of a distraction, Erwin meets Luise and realises there is more to life than music. His time spent with Luise increases and Madge slowly loses control of her son and the strict schedule she imposes on him. Adding to this, Erwin’s somewhat questionable father figure Professor Ivan Schaedel, makes him realise that ‘the piano is only a box of strings and hammers, hopes, fears and probably disappointments’ (158).

Aside from racism, violence and disturbing scenes depicting brutality towards Jews in a war-frenzied Germany, the twisted relationship between Madge and Erwin is dark, provocative and perhaps Orr’s strongest exploration in *Dissonance*. Madge’s possessive attitude towards Erwin infiltrates his life and moulds his mind as he grows into a troubled adult. While it is suggested by Madge that ‘Erwin is … peculiar’ (285), Orr allows us to delve much deeper into Erwin’s disturbed reality, with narration from his perspective. Madge commits her own form of torture, exposing her hypocrisy and likening her to the Nazi soldiers whom she despises for torturing defenceless Jews, when a young Erwin disobedies her and she whips him with ‘one of the old horsewhips she’d used on Jo’ (69). This violent scene is intensified as he uncurls himself ‘and lay across her lap like an overgrown baby’ (71). The vulnerability of Erwin, and Madge’s psychotic possessiveness over a teenage boy who goes from foetal position into the arms of his attacker, is strongly exposed and paves the way for a scene of flagellation that follows.

Erwin’s sexual fascination with pain and its disturbing connection to the domination of his mother is clearly demonstrated by Orr, when Erwin has his first sexual fantasy about Luise and imagines Madge watching and handing him the whip ‘as he unfurled it and started whipping Luise across the back and buttocks’ (180). Erwin begins to whip himself and what initially begins as perhaps punishing himself for being so weak and disobedient, soon becomes a way of empowering himself and asserting control over his own actions. This evolves into release of stress, frustration and sexual tension as he uses it to regain his manhood and suggestively the manhood that was stripped from his father. Orr’s exploration of possession and the struggle for power in a dissonant relationship crumbling amongst the chaos of war, is successfully and powerfully executed with graphic imagery and shocking insight into the victims psyche.

Despite Orr’s shockingly wonderful exploration of the psychological horrors of a heavily possessive and dependent relationship, cohesively complemented and reflected in the destruction taking place in the environment around the characters, Dissonance is not without its inconsistencies. While jumping between the past and present thoughts of the characters is successful in strengthening access to their intentions, thought process, and state of mind, while also providing back-story, these transitions aren’t always made smoothly. Initially, and even after getting used to it, the jumpy prose can at times be jarring and break the flow of narration. This isn’t so discordant that it takes away from the story, and therefore it is excusable, but other factors such as the introduction and disappearance of seemingly important characters leave the reader questioning and, at times, unsatisfied.

Dissonance is a gripping exploration of the extremities of love, power struggle and control in an unstable environment, expressed through pleasing prose from Stephen Orr.

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