
In his 1956 poem titled ‘New Guinea’, James McCauley wrote about a

> Bird-shaped island, with secretive bird voices,  
> Land of apocalypse where the earth descends,  
> The mountains speak, the doors of the spirit open,  
> And men are shaken by obscure trances.

Drusilla Modjeska’s first work of fiction has a New Guinean mountain speaking to its characters, both the indigenous peoples, who live under its majestic shape, and the Western characters, who are enchanted by its beauty and the mystique of the rich culture of those indigenous peoples whose lands they visit.

Papua-New Guinea is our closest neighbour to the north, yet for most Australians (yours truly included) it remains a mystery, a mostly unknown land that was a colonial dominion until its independence in 1975. While the Kokoda trail keeps drawing thousands of Australian trekkers every year, mainstream Australia is largely uninformed about the rest of the country and its peoples.

*The Mountain* begins with a brief prologue that brings the reader to a restaurant opposite the Sydney Opera House in the year 2005. Jericho, who ‘first came down from the mountain to Rika, barely five years old’, is meeting Martha, his ‘other mother’, for lunch. We are told that Rika and Martha, who used to be best friends, ‘like sisters’, haven’t spoken to each other for thirty years (2). Thus, the omniscient narrator introduces the history of the conflict between the two women. This is one of the subplots of the novel, and it is certainly a gripping one.

Jericho wants to know what happened thirty years before, but Martha appears to be evasive: ‘Her heart feels tight. There’s a part of her that wants to say to Jericho, *Let us bear the burden of the past, it should not be yours*’ (4). Thus, the mystery of what caused the conflict between the two Western women is from the beginning interspersed with another (unavoidable?) conflict, that between the Western view of the world and the indigenous view embodied by the Mountain people.

Photographer Rika arrives in Port Moresby, the young wife of British anthropologist Leonard, somewhat older than her. Something she may not have been aware she had is almost immediately awoken by the place and its peoples, and that something is further stirred after she meets Aaron, a brilliant local academic recently returned from Australia. When Leonard goes to the highlands to film the tribes, Rika stays in Port Moresby, where she befriends Aaron and his ‘clan-brother’, Jacob (22). As Leonard remains in the highlands, a powerful and meaningful relationship develops between Aaron and her, which is tested when Aaron is bashed by racist bigots.

Modjeska’s novel connects many complex issues in a free-flowing narrative around the lives of a group of people who witnessed the end of colonial rule and the beginning of a country’s struggles to become truly independent. The background is solidly portrayed: the reader can feel the many tensions that characterise postcolonial societies, like the friction between the resistance (and the reluctance) of the traditional to give up its preponderance on the one hand, and the observable need for modernisation demanded by the younger generations on the other.

This tug-of-war between the needs of the collective and the individual aspirations becomes a major focus in Modjeska’s narrative in the central part of the novel. These
tensions, the ebbing and flowing of Rika’s personal expectations against the exigencies that the birth of the young nation will demand from Aaron are successfully reflected not only in the two central characters, Aaron and Rika, but also in their interactions with the numerous secondary ones.

Structurally speaking, The Mountain is broadly divided into two main parts. The first comprises the years before independence, and takes us to the moment that Rika is gifted a young boy, a hapkas, the child of a white man and a black woman. The child’s name is Jericho: he is the son of Rika’s estranged husband, Leonard, and a Mountain woman. The second part takes us to more recent times, 2005, when Jericho, by now a successful art historian based in a London gallery, returns to Papua New Guinea. Jericho is once again united with his childhood friend and sweetheart, Bili, a passionate lawyer defending the tribal people against the economic interests of powerful companies. Romance blossoms: ‘Before they fall asleep, still face to face, Bili rests her hand over his eyes. ‘You’re in Papua now, remember,’ she says, ‘If you look too long into a woman’s eyes, she’ll take your soul’ (262).

When Jericho returns to Papua New Guinea, his place of birth, we read how he will slowly undergo a very profound transformation. After a few days in Port Moresby, he goes to visit the teacher and author Milton, a former friend of Aaron’s circle. From his house, ‘the mountain will be in the line of his sight with nothing to obscure his view’ (302). He feels the call of the Mountain, but is it because he has never really left it? Does he carry within himself the ancestral spirit? Thus, the Mountain is constructed as more than a powerful symbol of New Guinea. It is felt as a force that draws Jericho’s spirit, and when he finally joins the clansmen in the tribal dance he becomes ‘pure rhythm’, he can feel ‘the pulse … that continues in another sphere of existence’ (365).

The novel closes with another lunch, this time in Port Moresby, in 2006. Martha meets Jacob, now a government minister and a very rich man, and whose secret relationship with Rika Martha has kept silent about for more than 30 years.

Intensely and richly written, in The Mountain the reader can hear many voices. Some come from the past and are far removed from our daily urban routines; they are the voices of the clans, the sounds of their ancient rituals of dance and hunting. Others are closer to our time and to our mindsets: the voices of the struggle against the abusive and recklessly destructive exploitation of natural resources. Modjeska carefully balances the narrator’s point of view so that the reader can remove the colonial tinge that otherwise might be unavoidable. Particularly at the beginning of the The Mountain, I often found myself re-reading passages in order to ascertain whether a certain character was white or black. The fact that the characters come across so utterly convincing simply adds to the value of this literary work.

Modjeska has authored a tasteful novel about a place in the world she obviously loves and feels part of, and the reader will be the more grateful for it. Even though the reason why the two friends fell apart after the sorrowful day of Aaron’s accident is not ultimately revealed, it matters not. The novel is a delicately if heavily layered literary construct that bridges us to a mostly unknown island. Despite the evident background of Modjeska’s own experience of living and working in Papua New Guinea for a few years and frequent subsequent visits, The Mountain bears all the marks of a work of well-wrought fiction. It is, as the author has explained herself, a radiant example of ‘informed imagination’. After this belated but terrific debut, readers of Australian fiction can look forward to more novels from Modjeska.

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