Susan Hancock, *The Peastick Girl* (Black Pepper, 2012)

Susan Hancock’s novel is a rich and complex work that incorporates themes of feminism, national identity and transnational socio-politics into a hugely compelling narrative framework. Set in Wellington, New Zealand, the story concerns Teresa, Mollie and Cass Matheson, the three daughters of the mysteriously deceased Vivien Matheson. Each of these three main characters has their own distinct identity but, collectively, the strong and sometimes endearing characterisation works to construct a positive image of women and sisterhood.

The middle sister, Teresa, is given the central role, returning from Australia, where she has been living for five years and where she believes she has discovered a demon called Arkeum. Teresa’s return opens the narrative and her emotions are the driving force of the plot as she is shown to be a troubled figure who has suffered a traumatic experience that has left her psychologically and physically damaged. On returning home she is able to resolve some of the tensions in her family and to discover the secrets kept from her by her mother which have, unknown to her, continued to affect her throughout the rest of her life. The events of her past slowly return to haunt her during the course of this discovery as she struggles to resolve an intense psychological division between her angry and seizure riddled Red Queen persona, and her other, innocent and more fragile self, the Peastick Girl.

One of the wonderful points of this story is the way that the natural beauty of Teresa’s homeland is able to heal and soothe her at a tumultuous point in her life. Nature is an important motif in this novel and the descriptions of the country occur in connection with peaceful scenes to offset Teresa’s emotional state of disturbance and unrest. This complex relationship between the natural world and the emotional and social disturbance of otherwise peaceful people, then, has parallels with the social and semi-political issues that appear subtly but noticeably in the background of the novel. This is interjected with specific debates concerning the plight of Maori women and the need for them to regain the power that was stripped from them under British law. The Maori issue is conjoined with the idea of natural and native New Zealand life, while the contrasts and affinities between the novel’s main characters and the more peripheral figures of Maori women are shown to be of principal importance for reasons concerning both feminism and nationality. Cass is a film-maker whose most recent project is a film about the Maori people. She is the figure to whom the author assigns the responsibility of reminding her two sisters about the feminism with which their mother raised them. She is also the character who continually asks important questions about women’s treatment of each other and the meaning of feminism and femaleness in contemporary society.

In outlining some of the problems caused by colonisation, Hancock’s novel makes key reference to New Zealand’s political and social history and considers the effect of this on Maori women within the more established white Western women’s movement. The novel positions this issue in order to suggest that colonisation and the subsequent imposition of British, and largely Victorian, values concerning marriage, morality and gender roles has had adverse effects on the position and rights of all New Zealand born women.

At the same time, the male attitudes to women in this novel, though few, are shown to be less than egalitarian. Teresa, for example, is harshly criticised by Gil, the philandering but prudish husband of her older sister, Mollie. He makes sporadic and multifarious judgements in relation to her attitude to life, her previous experiences with drugs and what he sees as her...
sexual promiscuity, thereby demonstrating one male perspective on the moral and largely gender-specific values to which women are still expected to adhere. Mollie offers a contrast to Teresa’s freer and more adventurous persona, being described as a housewife and mother whose opinions are, in some ways, informed and confined by her husband’s patriarchal and occasionally hypocritical values.

The problems of women, and the constriction that they feel, come to the forefront here, lending the novel a sympathetic tone which inspires a similarly sisterly affinity and understanding in the reader. It is this that makes the novel such a pleasure to read as it is so clearly female orientated and provides a warm and enveloping story with enough mystery at its heart to make it absorbing and enjoyable. The narrative tone engages the reader and inspires the imagination in such a way that scenes and characters come to life. Its overall effect is, therefore, a powerful one, working to promote understanding of the distinctive identity of New Zealand and its people while at the same time encouraging readers to discover more about the country and its history.

Michelle Austin