
Simone Lazaroo’s fourth book, *Lost River*, continues a theme around Asian-Australian relations. It’s a work of fiction, including the created southwest Australian setting, *Lost River*, where the events occur (Author’s notes). Ruth Joiner is facing the fact that she may die soon, but how is she going to explain this to her daughter, Dewi. Ruth’s life so far has not been an easy one: Dewi is a child given to happiness, not Pollyanna-style, but a luminescence (54-5) and Ruth is determined to fight the odds as long as she has strength to do so. She is equally intent that Dewi should know how much she’s loved.

David Matthews is Dewi’s father, but he doesn’t know that. Ruth meets him within hours of her arrival in *Lost River* as a 17-year-old on a quest to find her future (94). She notices him as she is strolling towards the river while savouring the fizz from her first-ever sip of Fanta. Older than Ruth, he is on a mission to document the landscape before it is forever changed by encroaching housing developments and the burgeoning tourist trade.

Discovering that Ruth needs a place to stay, David offers the spare room in the dilapidated old house he rents. The arrangement works well. Ruth thinks he is nice and interesting, and rapidly develops a crush. Ruth is happy.

It all changes when David suddenly announces one evening that he is going away for a while but that Ruth is welcome to stay on in the house. As a character in the book, David is the mysterious element to be teased as the story unfolds.

Ruth has always enjoyed rescuing lost things and having people considering it her special gift. Working at the opportunity shop suits her. She is good with people like Katy (47) and the disadvantaged women (44) who come looking for clothes and toys for their children. Ruth listens; she is kind to them all, pretending not to notice extra items stuffed into bags but not paid for (45).

It’s in a box at the shop that Ruth finds four unused photo albums, a well-used pocket diary titled ‘An Oriental Wisdom 1976’. Ruth has a fondness for quotations and this diary has lots of them: ‘Sure need some wisdom right now’ (1). She dithers over a travel guide to Bali, deciding to slip it into her knapsack along with the other items: after all, ‘no one’s looking’ (1). She drops a few coins into the cashbox, locks the dusty front door and heads for home.

Ruth sets to work and over time the four photo albums become a journal, a story of a family: a mother, an absent father whom the mother portrays as the love of her life, and a child named Dewi. Ruth Joiner never yields to the ‘victim’ mentality. The strength of this book is in Ruth’s transition from careless teenager to mature adulthood. She manages to make a loving home in spite of extreme poverty, to ensure that special occasions such as birthdays are celebrations. Her calm approach to parenting helps her daughter through disappointments to ensure the child’s self-respect and readiness to move into a life with a future. It is summed up beautifully in one of their conversations: “‘Am I different from you Mum?’ … “In lots of ways.” Happier for a start. Let it be. Please. Ruth prays …’ (86)

This could so easily have been a dark, bleak story. Instead it is an enjoyable, happy one. The child Dewi is delightfully portrayed. Ruth shows that no-one else can really be responsible for another’s happiness; it’s up to the individual, but it sure helps to have friends, some laughter and fun with people you care about and who care about you.

I enjoyed the writing craft on display, almost a master class in the skills that turn solid research into storytelling, showing rather than offering speeches about issues such as encroaching urbanization and tourism and their effect on regional communities that have initially been built
around farming. Characters such as Nellie (103-4) and Lizzie (89-93) at the mission or Katy (149-150), passing through Lost River on walkabout, offer insight into Indigenous life. An exchange between Ruth and her employer, Eloise, as Asian bus tourists request ‘Roo?’ (48) and the bus driver interprets ‘They want Skippys’, is a delightful moment about racism as Ruth’s Balinese-Australian adds to the confusion.

As Ruth and Dewi battle what life throws at them, the responses of bureaucracy and reactions from the broader community touch on matters such as child welfare, adoption, single parenting, and poverty.

If there is a weakness to be mentioned, perhaps it is the occasional feeling of interruption to the flow of the story because of the back and forth nature of the construct that had me re-reading some of the text to get back on track. However, this criticism is a minor matter. The style and structure are a big part of the book’s charm.

It is interesting that the blurb calls Lost River a novella in spite of its 300 pages. It is a very nice book to hold, a pleasant change from those bulky 500-800-page tomes that have become popular of late. The beautiful cover design might make one ignore the adage about not judging a book by its cover.

This is definitely book club reading material. It would certainly engender good discussion, and the publisher has developed notes for book groups, which are available via their website. It could also be a discussion starter in secondary school around the underlying issues, although it may not have enough ‘action’ to immediately cause teenagers to be lured into reading it.

Kay Hart

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