

Searching for Clues

By Gillian Dooley

Hymns for the Drowning by Christopher Cyrill. Allen and Unwin, 1999.

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Towards the end of *Hymns for the Drowning*, the young man who is the principal narrator, the writer of the journal which centres the novel, begins to understand that his search for the identify of a man (or god) and woman depicted on a tapestry in the municipal library is bound to fail:

I realised that I was no longer searching for any landscape that existed in the world in which I write but a landscape formed within the mind of the weaver, a landscape perhaps assembled on her travels or gleaned from an imagined journey and fleshed out by her reading of other ages, other cultures. (174)

The searcher's predicament carries a warning to the reader, and mimics the impossibility of finding equivalences to the novel's geography in the real world. The novel is set in 'The New Country' which is and is not Australia, a land of kangaroos and kookaburras, but also of unfamiliar rituals, of a native population which is respected. The boy and his family have migrated from the Old Country, which is India and not India. To make this point explicit, Cyrill has added a paragraph to the acknowledgements included as an afterword: 'Reader, please note that the world in which you read and the world of this work of fiction do not align. Any inclination to align them will only end in tears' (192).

This is a novel which needs, and rewards, a second reading. The mystification inherent in its imagined worlds, on the first reading, engages the reader's desire to find solutions and make identifications. Finding no satisfactory answer to questions of

correspondence between the novel's universe and that in which the reader exists, the reader is then warned against this mistake. It is interesting that the warning is left to the end: acknowledgements more conventionally appear before the text, and rarely contain instructions to the reader. Cyrill also warns of the dangers of literal readings of his work in an essay in Meanjin. He observes that his first novel, *The Ganges and its Tributaries*, 'was written off by some as being pure autobiography ... [but] the life of the narrator of *The Ganges and its Tributaries* is a life that runs parallel to mine. I have ascribed meaning to his life as I have to episodes of mine. It is a work of fiction' (654). However, he too, when he reads, becomes 'like a detective searching for clues to what I loosely call the book's meaning. Often when the writer's "point" or "message" becomes obvious, I too feel cheated. I realised ... that my own work [that is, *Hymns*] was heavy-handed and prescriptive, and yet again I began to cut' (655). The point that detective activity is intrinsic in the act of reading, and is irresistible, is countered by the point that it is not equivalence to an external reality which makes a book meaningful.

The events of the novel are few and undramatic. A man spends a day searching in a library for the blue-skinned god and his lover, assuming the tapestry depicts a pre-existing legend. While searching he remembers dreams and imaginings, events and people in his life: his grandfather, who disappeared, presumed drowned, his mother, who died soon after his birth, his lover Mirren, who vanished without explanation. His journal is interrupted periodically by other narrators: his aunt Ida's fragmented monologue of memories, hopes and disappointments, and his vanished grandfather's dialogue with the god Ganesh. Heteroglossia is thus present in full measure: the aunt's voice is colloquial and disreputable, while the grandfather's recollections are lyrical, becoming in the end

incoherent as he succumbs to death by drowning. But there are, in spite of the multiple narrators, no quoted conversations between the characters, and this gives the book a poise only slightly ruffled by the aunt's interjections, which never last more than a page. Time and place are distorted in the grandfather's story, as he comes upon the prehistoric Indian city of Harappa in three different eras en route from his home in the New Country to the town of Morning. Time is stretched in the young man's narrative as well: the research he undertakes on one day could not be achieved in that time, encompassing as it does the legends of dozens of civilisations. He has sealed himself off, and observes the extravagance and excess of his city's annual parade from within the library. He concludes that the blue-skinned god is Krishna, from the country of his birth, 'blue as an adult, blue as a child,' and that he had 'averted my gaze from what was before my own eyes' and 'lingered amongst those civilisations whose dress and customs were immediately foreign to me, because I hoped there to recognise something far beyond myself' (182). But he cannot match any legends of Krishna with the rivers of the tapestry, or with a single lover: 'I felt sure then of my earlier intimation, that the weaver had paired a god and woman across the histories, across the legends of the world, and it seemed to me that around the lover had been woven a disguise of centuries, of customs I could not unravel' (188). Even so, he cannot resist the mystery: 'I have never truly relinquished my quest for Krsna's lover. I have tried to look into the weaver's mind, the weaver's soul, and have sought her fabrication in further texts, in further lore' (190).

Hymns for the Drowning is an enchanting and original novel. The narrator's voice, similar to that in Cyrill's first novel, is detached and lucid, even while recounting flights of the imagination, and despite what the publisher's blurb calls the novel's 'choreography

of words,' it does not rely on an carnivalesque extravagance or verbal wit for its effects. Its beauty is contemplative and intelligent, steeped in awareness of the pains and losses of love, and of the myths developed by the myriad civilisations of the world to account for them.

Works cited

Cyrill, Christopher. *Hymns for the Drowning*. St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1999.

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