Black Jests

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BRETT D’ARCY’S NOVEL, arrestingly titled The Mindless Ferocity of Sharks, is one of the most unusual and accomplished to be published in Australia for years. The setting is a decaying town called the Bay on the coast of Western Australia, south of Perth. Its abattoir and tanneries have long since closed. The locals are sufficiently hostile to have fended off development — so far. They endure the summer invasion of the ‘townies’ who come for the great surfing. During the rest of the year, they enjoy it without interruption.

Their leader is the Old Man, who is, ‘where surf history is concerned, a final authority’, especially so with his laid-about band of mates, the Cronies. D’Arcy concentrates on one strange family: Tom (the Old Man) and his wife, Adelaide, an older son Eddie, the infant Sal and Floaty-boy, the eleven-year-old from whose point of view the story is told. Floaty-boy is afflicted with ‘some imbalance in his head’. From time to time, he ‘suffers a gap’, feels himself ‘slipping into a vacancy’. To his father’s astonishment and chagrin, he won’t surf with a board. School is a pointless blur to him. His talent is with cameras, although when his mother says, ‘It’s all feel with you’, he resents her hewing with words that which he does instinctively.

The management of Floaty-boy’s narration is the technical triumph of the novel. The events around him have the heightened and disconnected qualities of a dream. The details of his physical environment are nonetheless sharply observed. It is as though we are dropped into a hyper-naturalistic stage set. The parents’ home and shed are full of the junk and the Cronies’ intestine is an acute depiction of the strains and compromises in his family life. The Bay is like a smoke.’ And then this chilling reflection from Floaty-boy, on being dragged deep under the sea by a wave: ‘The details of Down Below came rushing back at the boy — the perfect darkness, the secrets, the treachery — like nothing so much as the inside of his head.’ D’Arcy can also pull us up by writing tersely. Floaty-boy tells his mother that the worst thing about his medication is: ‘It stops me laughing.’ And, in a moment of empathy for a father whose life is dedicated to masking his own vulnerability: ‘It can’t be easy being the Old Man. The onus is always on him.’

Venturing into the sea, surfing heedlessly at night, Floaty-boy temporarily frees himself of the aggravations of his family. Yet he also subjects himself to terror. He thinks always of ‘the mindless ferocity of sharks’, one of which nearly killed the Crony Gav, who has remained somewhat apart from his mates ever since. And there are sharks in the Bay. Floaty-boy glimpses ‘a dark broiling and a matt black flank’ as a shark feeds. The novel’s climax brings on a shark, a bronze whaler, but to no effect that has been telegraphed or could easily have been anticipated.

It took so long for Australian novelists to take to the beach and sea. One thinks of Katharine Susannah Prichard’s Intimate Strangers (1937), also set on the coast of Western Australia, and Watson’s Bay in Christina Stead’s For Love Alone (1944). Then one has to jump to Winton and to Robert Drewe’s The Bodysurfers (1983). Aptly, there is an encomium from Drewe on the front cover of D’Arcy’s book. Whether or not it wrestles ‘the Australian collective unconsciousness’ to the ground, as Drewe reckons, The Mindless Ferocity of Sharks is an acute depiction of an insecure hedonism that is the mask of Australian nihilism, and of the desire to escape from any obligation save the self-imposed. D’Arcy’s achievement is to plumb such despair, while rendering as well the black jesting that attends it.