Reissued Realism

Delys Bird

Jean Devanny
Sugar Heaven
Vulgar Press, $24.95pb, 283pp, 0 9580794 0 4

Vance Palmer
The Passage
Halstead Classics, $23.95pb, 208pp, 1 875684 53 0

Louis Stone
Jonah
A & R Classics, $22.95pb, 213pp, 0 207 19846 2

Judah Waten
Distant Land
Halstead Classics, $22.95pb, 192pp, 1 875684 69 7

Reissued Realism

T

THIS IS A particularly interesting group of reissued ‘classics’, spanning just over fifty years in twentieth-century Australian literature. Although they have very different fictional styles, all are realist or social realist novels, and their politics and preoccupations are not dissimilar. Each is concerned with working people’s lives, differing contrasts between city and country life, and aspects of class.

First published in 1911, Louis Stone’s Jonah is described in the blurb as ‘the first great novel of Sydney’. Set in the slums, with some lyrical digressions onto the Harbour, it concerns the lives of slum dwellers. The novel, centred around Jonah, leader of the Push — a gang of larrikins who are ‘the scum of the streets’ — his friend Chook, their families, friends and lovers, is Dickensian in its vivid realisation of city and character. Stone’s fascinated ambivalence towards the city gives Jonah its enormous vitality. A scene at Paddy’s Market captures Sydney’s tawdry, corrupted beauty: ‘The three long, dingy arcades were flooded with the glare from clusters of naked gas-jets ... On Saturdays the great market ... was a debauch of sound and colour and smell.’ From Cremorne Point, with Clara, the woman who dazzles him when his wife becomes a drunkard, Jonah looks towards a very different city: ‘The buildings floated in a liquid veil with the unreality of things seen in a dream. The rays of the sun, filtered through bars of crystal cloud, fell ... with the mystic radiance of liquid pearls.’

Jonah’s love for his son, carelessly conceived and at first ignored by his father, drives him to leave the gang, marry Ada and make his fortune, first mending shoes, then opening shoe shops that in time become an empire. Chook and Pinkey, who struggle and gradually establish themselves in a fruit and vegetable business, are the heart of the novel; Jonah, despite his material success, and Ada, who never adjusts to leaving the slums, its lost souls.

Vance Palmer is often considered a kind of father to Australian literature. Since we have now found many of its mothers, not least his wife, Nettie Palmer, this reputation has shifted, but his writing has a significant place in Australian literary history. The Passage, published in 1936, deals with the lives of the people in and around a tiny fishing settlement south of Brisbane, focusing on the Callaway family. Here, implicit criticism is directed towards the materialist values of an encroaching urban society that, for Palmer, were eroding the democratic, nationalist ideals of the 1890s, forged in the bush. Neil James, in his useful Afterword, refers to Palmer’s belief that an Australian spirit could best be expressed through a close connection with the land.

Lew Callaway, a brooding fisherman who supports his widowed mother and younger siblings, epitomises that spirit. As Lew builds a fishing business from his inheritance of a single boat, the Passage and its way of life are threatened by radical change. A real estate entrepreneur succeeds for a time in his attempt to turn the area into a holiday resort called Lavinia; Hughie, Lew’s younger brother, grasps the opportunities tourism offers and becomes a successful businessman in the nearby town. Inevitably, according to the logic of the novel, Lavinia fails and, ironically, Hughie is rescued by Lew from bankruptcy and social disgrace. Not himself immune to the lure of ‘a more sophisticated life’, Lew marries Lena, daughter of a local station owner. This incompatible pair is finally separated by the tragic death of their son. Ultimately, Lew will marry Clem McNair who is as ‘anchored to the Passage’ as he is. The Passage is often oddly mannered and its prose overladen. But the novel’s depiction of the fishing community over a long period of change is captivating, and its nostalgia for older values is affirmed in Lew’s mother’s final thoughts about the ongoing life of the Passage — ‘There’s been Callaways here from the beginning ... Most likely there always will be now’ — and about Lew who ‘drew power from the earth beneath him’.

Jean Devanny’s Sugar Heaven, also first published in 1936, is edited by Nicole Moore. It is a substantial, scholarly edition of the full text of that initial version, and includes Moore’s substantial Introduction, essays by Devanny, Carole Ferrier and Amanda Lohrey, as well as an invaluable Critical Bibliography. This apparatus adds greatly to the new publication, making it an ideal teaching text, as well as one that offers much to the general reader.

A novel of class struggle, Sugar Heaven is based on a 1930s strike by sugar cane cutters in Far North Queensland. Having married Hefty, a cutter (whose name defines him), to
escape from the drudgery of six years as a waitress in Sydney, Dulcie is at once seduced by the tropical environment and by the friendly generosity of the community of cutters and their families — although shocked by their physicality and the openness of their sexual and social lives. Dulcie’s education into the political and emotional values that *Sugar Heaven* endorses culminates in her realisation that ‘the working men and women are *the* people in the world ... they are of most account’. Her radical transformation dramatises the novel’s challenge to conventional white Australian values — those ‘certainties’, as Moore calls them, of ‘women, race relations, sexuality, community and domestic life’.

*Sugar Heaven* has a vitality that overcomes its polemics. When Hefty tells Dulcie that the cane fields are ‘reeking with life’, he could be describing the narrative and its utopian belief in the uplifting nature of class struggle, despite the strike’s failure. *Distant Land*, first published in 1964, is more withdrawn, less celebratory of the natural environment than the other three books; more ‘European’ perhaps in its rather naturalistic style. This novel’s challenge, as Hsu Ming Teo points out in her insightful Afterword, is to ‘preconceived notions of “Australians” and Australian history and culture’.

*Distant Land* begins in Europe in 1914 (the year that Judah Waten arrived with his Jewish parents in Western Australia from Russia), shifts to Australia when Joshua and Soshanah Kuperschmidt arrive in Melbourne from Poland as a young married couple in 1925, and ends in the 1960s in the small Victorian country town where they settled. The history of European Jewry over that time is integrated into the story of Jewish migration to Australia. Joshua is the philosophical centre of the novel and recognises that the genocide of Jews in Europe demands attention in Australia, while other Australian Jews counsel caution. Alone at the end, Joshua thinks that ‘he had not achieved what he had wanted’. Then he remembers that devotion to his people has become a belief that ‘his people and the rest of mankind [sic] could not be separated into different worlds’, a sentiment that could be echoed in relation to each of these novels.