Missing Pay Off

Michael Williams

Catherine Jinks
THE GENTLEMAN’S GARDEN
Allen & Unwin, $29.95pb, 437pp, 1 865088 85 4

If The Gentleman’s Garden is anything to go by, Catherine Jinks is well acquainted with the tricks and traditions of romance novels. At first glance, all the necessary elements are present. Dorothea Brande is a model of English refinement and gentility. When her husband, Captain Charles Brande, a rotter and bounder whom she married because he was ‘beautiful’, is posted to colonial New South Wales, Dorothea’s life is changed forever. In the company of their manservant, the mysterious and rugged Irish convict Daniel Callaghan, Dorothea learns about life in this new world, and her own strength and resilience. As glib as such a précis might seem, it has nothing on that offered by the novel’s publishers. While the book’s blurb emphasises its historical setting, the front cover leaves no doubt that this is a love story: ‘Love can be a fragile refuge in a harsh and unforgiving land’.

For what is ostensibly a love story, there is remarkably little love on display. From the outset, Daniel is set up as the obvious romantic hero of the piece: we anticipate lingering glances, forbidden touches and, finally, open love. Instead, the focus is less on the romantic elements of the narrative and more on Dorothea’s ongoing attempts to adjust to life in New South Wales. Her development affects little more than her attitude to convict and settler Australians, from declaring that Daniel’s presence is to be ‘endured’ to swearing that he is ‘an honest man’. Hardly the most romantic sentiments, or the most impressive shift in social conscience.

Dorothea’s suitably dated sense of morality pervades the novel, and Jinks fails to interrogate this. Daniel is to be admired because his only crime was to attempt to help his sick baby. He is redeemable because, although a papist, he responds emotionally to Dorothea’s reading of the Bible. He is worthy of love because he demonstrates the loyalty, obedience and devotion to Dorothea appropriate for one of his low social standing. Dorothea’s letters to her sister Margaret, back at home in Devonshire, only serve to demonstrate how little Dorothea’s attitude to life in New South Wales changes over the course of the novel. While such a device might have been an effective way of conveying our heroine’s inner uncertainties and unspoken preoccupations, it only serves to further distance us from her.

Thematically, the question of British adjustment to colonial life is interesting, and the different coping mechanisms of the book’s various characters are effectively portrayed. The depiction of Governor Macquarie and his attempts to develop Australian society in a humane and compassionate way, however historically debatable, and of the divide in Sydney society between his supporters and detractors is one of the book’s most rewarding themes.

The title comes from Dorothea’s determination to withstand the harshness of her new life by re-creating ‘a little piece of England’ in which she can find peace. Jinks’s meditations on whether this is possible (or wise), and her reflections on alternative methods of coping with colonial dislocation, complicate the narrative and help the novel break its generic constraints.

Nevertheless, The Gentleman’s Garden lacks impact because, beyond their reactions to early nineteenth-century Australia, none of the characters displays an independent or particularly interesting personality. Jinks, justifiably, given her evident talents, aspires to literary fiction; her previous novels (particularly The Notary) demonstrated her skills as a novelist. Her ability to re-create another period, so impressive in her earlier novels, is again on display here, but her attentiveness to the importance of a good story and her ability to create endearing, enduring and sympathetic characters — qualities demanded by both literary and genre fiction — are regrettably absent.

At least Dorothea has enough personality to be unappealing. Daniel is rarely given a greater role than that of the faithful manservant. Sydney society figures are largely indistinguishable, and Dorothea’s procession of failed maids is bizarre. Just as it appears that Jinks is creating actual characters with complex motivations and narrative significance, she dispenses with them in the most cursory-fashion, reducing them to generic colonial types. Those characters who are not doomed to a sticky end are depicted as wilful, uninteresting or, quaintly enough, common. None of them advance the novel’s threadbare plot, and their contribution to Dorothea’s supposed adaptation to her surroundings is scant. Charles is suitably awful, and his friend and sympathiser Captain Sanderson an even more delightfully detestable villain. But they, like the book, come to little. Dorothea is rewarded with a brief showdown with Charles but Sanderson disappears from the dénouement altogether. This is the novel’s greatest shortcoming.

For genre fiction, the ending is all-important. Crimes should be solved, lovers kissed, social order restored. Jinks provides no such pay off. After enduring the glacial growth in trust between Dorothea and Daniel, all we receive for our troubles is yet another letter to Margaret from Dorothea, revealing in retrospect (and in greatly expurgated form) the sort of stuff with which the second half of The Gentleman’s Garden should have been concerned.

The matter of climax is summarily dismissed in a few bloodless sentences. As literary fiction, The Gentleman’s Garden is too formulaic; as a genre novel, it is not formulaic enough. The result is ultimately unsatisfying.