**Those Who Come After.** Elisabeth Holdsworth (Picador, 2011)

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded 30 April 2011.


The essay relates a visit by the author, now an Australian citizen, to her childhood home, Middelberg, on the former island of Walcheren in Zeeland in the south-west of the Netherlands. The central theme is the legacy of the second world war: during her travels she encounters a young German tourist who becomes the innocent and eventually disarming focus of her resentment at the brutal German occupation and its devastating consequences for her family and her homeland.

The novel is, naturally, more complex. As the novel begins, Juliana Stolburg is a high-level security attaché with NATO, followed around on her many overseas postings by her husband Oscar. They are just about to leave Luxembourg after Juliana’s final posting, going home to Oscar’s family farm in NSW.

From the beginning of the novel there is an air of oddness about her marriage, and it’s not long before we find out that Oscar is bisexual, and in nearby Goulburn he finds a lover more serious than the string of affairs Juliana has tolerated for decades. Although Juliana declares that her marriage is over, she doesn’t cut Oscar loose and they form an uneasy trio with Frederick. As we later find out, there is a reason for the uneasiness which goes beyond the hurt and jealousy of the present day.

This narrative thread is told in tandem with the story of Juliana’s childhood, much of which parallels Holdsworth’s own childhood as related in the essay. Juliana was born just after the war, to a mother who had been in Dachau and a father who was a hero of the Dutch resistance. A victim of rheumatic fever in pre-school years, she nevertheless becomes a brilliant student, a loner who makes no friends at school. In her early teens she moves with her parents to Melbourne, where they live an eccentric and slightly ramshackle life, especially after her father dies and she is left to look after her beautiful and emotionally fragile mother, with the help of Philly, a gay man twice her age who becomes her only ally.

The world of Holdsworth’s novel is a strange mixture of decaying aristocracy – the Stolburg family is an ancient dynasty with connections to Dutch royalty – bitterness over the war, and Juliana’s own resilience and resourcefulness. The humour is dark and mordant. An appalling Dutch couple greet the family on their arrival in Melbourne, and they are immediately and forever christened ‘the Dikkertjes’ – the ‘little fatsos’. These insistently unpleasant people steal the Stolburgs’ money and jewellery, at the same time claiming to be their best friends, Anglicising their names and trying to control their lives. A persistent theme arises when Mr Dikkertje introduces his wife:

> ‘We know all about Australia,’ he said. ‘We came from Holland in 1955.’
> ‘We are not from Holland,’ Papa said. ‘We are Zeelanders. The provinces of Noord and Zuid Holland are to the north of us in every sense.’
> ‘Oh, that depends on.’
Holdsworth also casts a cool assessing eye on the male sex. One particularly deadly predator is described thus: ‘His uniform had been altered by a tailor to flare less at the hips, emphasising his broad shoulders. The material was not too unforgivably tight around the crotch.’ This is a deliberate echo of something which has come before – this novel is full of history repeating and the plot is neatly worked out – but in it you can also sense the satisfaction of a woman turning the tables on countless male authors.

*Those Who Come After* is an idiosyncratic novel, absolutely itself, which fits into no mould. There are perhaps echoes of Evelyn Waugh, though none of his fatalism. Juliana is too strong a character to be buffeted by circumstances like Waugh’s hapless creatures. The novel is full of tragedy, but it is also a story of survival.

In her essay, Holdsworth writes, ‘Although I possess pieces of paper declaring me to be an Australian citizen, Zeeland is my heritage, the land of nightmares, my past. No matter how much I try to infuse my brain with kangaroos and drought-riddled plains, I am enraptured by the land of my birth.’ But she finishes her novel with a turn in the other direction: Juliana is in Zeeland, where her forbears are buried, and ‘Suddenly’, she thinks, ‘I long for the hard blue light of Australia.’