

**Kazuo Ishiguro, *Nocturnes: Five Stories of Music and Nightfall* (Faber and Faber, 2010)**

Holding together this collection of short stories is a deftness of touch, a wry assured writerly voice that has us at once wincing, in the story ‘Malvern Hills’ at a mid-adolescent’s love affair with his *talented* guitar playing (my italics). His stropky ‘But I’m working on something important’ to his sister’s less than favourable rejoinder ‘Things are going well for you are they love?’ (117) describes a continuing idealism and the possible (or likely) wreckage for those who dare to dream. From the crooners in Venice, in the story ‘Crooner’, to the ‘Krauts’ (97) in the story ‘Malvern Hills’ who play covers – ‘Yes, indeed, we even do some Abba. “Dancing Queen”. That one always goes down well’ (110) – we meet similar types who leapfrog through life deluded by what they perceive as their talent, and character types who have talent but no striking features, ageing crooners, and of course all those who settle for second best.

The writer plays his characters like a song, a symphony of hope rising and hope dying. The overriding theme of dreams and aspiration calls to us, as much as do the subjects of nostalgia and (thankfully) outright humour. For example, in ‘Crooner’ (3), Tony Gardner nostalgically croons to his younger wife before she leaves him for a younger model. There is hilarity in ‘Nocturne’ (127) as Lindy and Steve, swathed in bandages following plastic surgery (a measure to make Steve famous, and keep Lindy famous) run amok in their hotel and steal the ‘Jazz Musician of the Year’ (160) statuette. These moments of story are delightfully similar to scenes in an Alan Ayckbourn comedy. Take for example the waspish Emily in ‘Come Rain or Come Shine’ (37) where the absurd turns Kafkaesque as Raymond, our hero of a life spent doing very little, decides he must become a dog in order to wreak the havoc ‘Hendrix’ (76) the dog might wreak. And all this to avoid the rage of the fearfully central, pivotal Emily, whose diary drippy Raymond has inadvertently read:

So I got down on all fours, and lowering my head towards the magazine, sank my teeth into the pages. The result was not at all unpleasant. I opened a second fallen magazine near its centre and began to repeat the procedure. (76)

Kazuo Ishiguro sets the first tale ‘Crooner’ (3) in Venice where you might expect Venetians playing as you slurp your latte, cappuccino or red wine. But no, even here a clever twist of humour introduces us to: ‘Jan,’ I said quickly. ‘But my friends call me Janeck.’ (8) A guitarist who plays ‘outside the piazza’ (3) in the cafe orchestra. His choice of instrument in such a setting is as incongruous as his nationality: ‘Anywhere else, being a guitar player would go in a guy’s favour. But here? A guitar!. The Café managers get uneasy. It looks too modern, the tourists won’t like it. Last autumn I got myself a vintage jazz model’ (3)

Into this place of misfits, losers and well known crooners comes Tony Gardner, a hero of Janeck’s mother and an all round star of American numbers such as ‘By the time I Get to Phoenix’ (14) and ‘One for My Baby’ (15). Imagine my delight when this all-time, all-round, super crooner cleverly re-appears in the story

Book reviews: *Nocturnes* by Kazuo Ishiguro. Anne Lauppe-Dunbar.  
*Transnational Literature* Vol. 3 no. 2, May 2011.  
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

'Nocturne' (125) as famous (swathed in bandages) actress Lindy Gardner plays the song of (yes, you guessed it) her ex-husband:

But the voice that eventually came on belonged to Tony Gardner. The song – I just about remembered it – was something called 'Back at Culver City', a ballad that never quite made it and which nobody plays much anymore. (142)

The stories raise questions about morality, dignity – 'Now I was just another pathetic hustler, getting my face fixed in a bid to crawl after the Lindy Gardner of this world' (138) – and hope. Hope that we will make the most of what we have. Central to each story is music, the remembrance of shared Broadway songs in 'Come Rain or Come Shine' (37). The playing of mainstream jazz in 'Nocturne' (125). The cover rendering of an Abba song that taints a young man's dream as he sulks between his guitar practice and serves sandwiches in his sister's house dreaming about his own compositions in the story 'Malvern Hills'.

Through this confident rendering of short-story writing, we get only a glimpse of each characters' shy dreams and their humiliatingly embarrassing ploys to climb, crawl and sing their way to a better life, and although there is a sense that these stories were as much of a joy to write as they are to read, the tales are deeply sympathetic in tone, using dry humour to highlight how shallow, how confused, how jaded we become under that umbrella called fame.

**Anne Lauppe-Dunbar**