

Kate Holden, *The Romantic: Italian Nights and Days* (Text Publishing, 2010)

Readers who enjoyed Kate Holden's best-selling *In My Skin: a Memoir* (2005) might buy its sequel *The Romantic: Italian Nights and Days* hoping for more licentious detail about her European sojourns than her fortnightly column in the *Saturday Age* provides. Others will hope to connect again with her intelligent and cultured authorial voice, and they too will be rewarded. The two books cross over. The second last chapter of *In My Skin* dips briefly into Holden's Italian adventure, before her return to Melbourne; *The Romantic* resumes the narrative with more detailed exposition of fictional Kate's sexual adventures in Rome and Naples. 'This is work of imagination as well as truth,' her preface reminds us: 'All names have been changed and characterisation compressed. It is a sincere memory in shaped retrospect. The author is real.'

A sex memoir set in Italy should be a magnet for readers of a certain demographic: yes, that's right; literary middle aged men and women interested in arms-length food, travel and bonking, who can afford to buy a book; although, Holden's protagonist eschews the Tuscan idyll beloved by this market-constructed group and opts for Rome and Naples.

In this book, twelve months off methadone and heroin, paying bills by prostitution a thing of the past, protagonist Kate moves on in an almost diffident, yet at the same time desperate, search for emotional connection. Narrated in self-conscious third person present tense, the book is divided into seven main parts (Jack, Guido, Massimo, Rufus, Gabriele, Donatella, Kate), each representing a relationship or encounter, and each bearing its own epigraph to guide the reading.

Writing about six relationships that arrive chronologically but overtake each other must have made writing fresh sex scenes a challenge; as with Krissy Kneen's *Affection* (2009), there can be no argument about the main subject. Martin Amis suggested in an interview that writing autobiographical sex requires the author to strike an attitude and Holden does. Doll-like fictional Kate, dressed in 'barbaric black', is acutely aware of men's appraisal, as she 'strides' and 'storms' across piazzas hoping to get her needs met (28, 33). She is cash-poor but hell-bent on enjoying Rome, Romantics, Romance and Herself: 'tonight she will be fucking. Her slack body will twist and surge' (4).

The plot begins with two hooks – past lies – and the promise of vicarious seduction; indeed, performance and gamesmanship are the book's central conceits (10, 13, 19, 47). Holden constructs/creates a sexy self-confessed performance princess with a bewildered smile, a version of herself perhaps; her penalty 'having to take care of men's egos' (25).

Jack, a stitched up Englishman with stereotypically thin lips, enjoys her company until she falls, as she does with many others, into professional patter and confesses to her unsavoury past. While the authorial voice never suggests it, most readers might wonder why Jack never heads for a full blood screening at the local clinic, although he does lose some of his enthusiasm; he is old – could that be the point? – and controlling. Holden's dialogue nicely conveys Kate's anxiety and boredom with cautious and conventional courtship, frequently ending in phone-rage. Jack wants to sign a pre-nuptial delineating all the no-go areas for conversation.

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Lover after lover follows, one at a time and in *Ménage à quatre* and *trois*. In between, Kate engages in bouts of self-loathing and melancholy: ‘she is swept by gusts of grief that come and go like winter wind’ (136). Addictively, she reads, smokes and drinks limoncello and coffee.

Her adventures can be read across-genres – travel, grunge, life writing, confessional, soft-porn, cautionary tale, all laced with powerful evocation of place and well-articulated psychoanalytic yearnings. The narrative more closely resembles a belated bildungsroman than kindlesroman, the protagonist’s inner monologues stuck in a riff of hopeless fear and frantic activity, rather than in the plotting of a metafictional novel. Her habitual diary writing pays homage to Holden’s girlhood idol and subject of her Honours’ thesis, Anaïs Nin: erotic, visceral, aimless and self-seeking, in an endlessly repeating loop.

Sex is written, for the most part, in the fluid and profane register of soft porn but is occasionally, if not strictly speaking dry, graphic, mechanical and matter of fact:

‘There’s nothing wrong with me. And I promise I shan’t fall in love with you.’
‘Good’, she says, through a mouthful of cock (9).

Holden plays with the binaries of pleasure and pain, freedom and submission, alienation and jouissance. Her fictional men are adorable, naughty and irrepressible: ‘Oh men, she thinks. Oh me’ (102). Repeatedly they spoil everything when ‘all she wants to do is fuck and laugh’. The line between the liberties they take with her and abuse bears closer examination.

The protagonist loves sex but rarely climaxes, and on the rare occasions that she does, just takes one or perhaps two orgasms, like the good little princess she purports to be, making the initial premise hard to swallow (117). The complicated reasons why she believes that her identity depends on pleasuring men and sometimes women – ‘sex is currency; it is validation’ (58) – remains unresolved in the novel’s denouement.

Quotes from Byron, Keats, Casanova, Goethe and references to the sites of their Italian sojourns bolster and, at the same time, lighten Holden’s unrelenting melancholic inner monologue, which she peppers with interminable rhetorical questions that astute readers might prefer to ask themselves: ‘why not me?’ (81, 83); ‘is she meant to be jealous?’ A difficult back-story demands acknowledgment, especially in a sequel, but this reviewer would like to see fictional Kate move on to a new kind of adventure and away from paralysis by analysis.

Holden writes well. Her voice engages as it irritates, seduces as often as it repels. Voyeurism might satisfy a reader when – ‘his fingers are moving inside her as delicate as whispers ... she bites his lip as the spangles become spikes, and the sour-sweet piercing is more than she can bear’ (191) – but the tedium of other heightened scenes made me long for more ellipses such as ‘he says to her afterwards’. Some scenes collapse into farce and melodrama; the potential ‘tragedy’ of Massimo’s wife finding out about his multiple and simultaneous infidelities, for instance. But Holden must be tongue in cheek, taking nothing as seriously as her own lack of conviction. If it is true that love has taught her something (in Byron’s words that preface the final section of the book, ‘I am not now / That which I have been’ [235]). I look forward to

her next book, which I hope holds more of her artful metaphors and psychological insights about men's and women's sexual relations, more of the minutiae of a writerly life which in this book seemed more gratuitous than the sex, and more of the courage that transforms her reckless risk-taking into self-discovery, but less painful self-consciousness.

Gay Lynch