

Lloyd Jones, *Hand Me Down World* (Text, 2010)

In *Hand Me Down World* Lloyd Jones uses a structure not unlike a talking heads documentary, with multiple voices relating versions of truth about an African woman in a blue coat who is on a quest to find her lost child. As the various reports unfold these people who have had contact with her document their stories, a technique that enables the author to sidetrack occasionally from the central theme of the woman's quest. Jones mentioned during an interview¹ that a news article he read whilst resident in Berlin was a catalyst for the novel and elements from this article have made their way into the story (62-63). When the interviewer asked if he risked being accused of 'pamphleteering' he hoped not as he sought to avoid pushing particular platforms preferring the reader make their own interpretation of situations.

Generally he has succeeded although he admitted to straying towards politics a little when the hunters clash with the food writer about helping the woman (53-55) and when writing about the Roma in the testimonial of the film researcher (79-82).

I thought the analogy of boat people as seeking invisibility, becoming ghosts was a wonderful one. As the inspector begins his search among the cafes surrounding the station where he says the barmen 'have been trained to listen in such a way that they do not remember what is said. They are like the elected representatives of ghosts' (26-27). This is expanded further in the testimonial of the black priest of the Ibo order (61-64). Perhaps Jones also strays a little into 'pamphleteering' when speaking about the authorities in this section, but it's not inappropriate at this point and in no way dictates readers' response to the pastor's testimonial.

Throughout the novel is the thread of how we interpret another individual, how well do we know them whether in their company briefly or as a long term partner. Lying to one's wife, lying to oneself about why your hand was bitten, late night car theft causing a logical orderly man to 'borrow' a car and also lie to his wife.

The truck driver says he remembers the woman because he gave her a lift and because she bit his hand: 'there is some discolouration, some damage. For months after I had the tooth marks on my hand.' He says he told his wife he was attacked by a dog and admits that 'when I told her that I did not think for a moment that I was lying' (35).

An elderly snail collector who deviated from his usual routine to help her recalls the moment of meeting: 'It was very early in the morning when I saw her ... the giant African snail ... strange that I should think of that just then, but I did. A plastic bag filled with clothing was her pillow' (37).

The analogy of the snail without a home and the woman without a home fit beautifully. The woman can be forgiven for the theft of the street directory although she had only to ask and it would have been given to her. It's a nice twist illustrating subtly the woman's desire for invisibility; after all can a ghost ask for anything?

When the chess player sees her sleeping on a bench in the park nearby, he detours from a usual routine walk to sit 'on the same bench where I've seen the

¹ 'An Interview with Lloyd Jones author of *Hand Me Down World*,' The Book Show with Ramona Koval, ABC Radio National, broadcast 22 November, 2010.
<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/bookshow/stories/2010/3072587.htm>

person sleeping. The bench is worn, shiny. I try lying along it but I can't get comfortable. It's too short, and it's hard' (40-41). That detour impacts on the old man's normal life as he is challenged by the physical fact that being homeless is uncomfortable.

The hunter's story subtly reminds that it can also mean hunger. 'She ate with real appetite. But not with any appreciation. She ate to fill herself up ... not to savour the tastes' (52).

Slowly the testimonials build a picture of the woman and her life on the journey to find her son.

Bernard, a Frenchman who calls himself Millennium 3, is the first to call her Ines (71). She is with him almost 24 hours a day, 'except for two hours every afternoon when ... I don't know where she goes or what she does' (72).

The observations of the young film researcher once again reference ghosts, invisibility, and dislocation. 'Hers was a different kind of presence. She wasn't someone who constantly demands your attention. ... All her attention went into not occupying space' (83). Earlier testimonials mention similar behaviour; she was up early, used the bathroom, made the bed, everything tidy as if she was not there; and always the silence (39).

Towards the end of Part Two Ines comes to live in the household of Ralf, an elderly blind man, who employs her as both companion and housekeeper. His blindness makes him dependent and he misses his estranged wife Hannah, he wants conversation and company. However, Ines is doesn't speak German and even in English is no chatterer. The security of her position in Ralf's home increases her singular self-focused, silent behaviour patterns. She appears incapable of relaxation and performs the minimum duties she can get away with, succeeding only because Ralf is blind. He even gave her money to enrol in German lessons in the hope that would help, but the wall of silence that Ralf often feels as a sense of absence continues.

This lack in Ines creates the situation for Defoe to join Ralf's household. Part Three presents Defoe's testimonial and a very different side to Ines emerges. Her absences, the missing household items, the housekeeping money that should have abundantly provided enough to eat but doesn't appear to do so, become evident because Defoe can see and he's free to move through the house. He's a good conversationalist and settles into the household and as he does Ines becomes even less present.

It is Defoe who notes that Ines is not always truthful in her answers to Ralf, not always kind in her actions towards him. When Defoe discovers why Ines does what she does he faces a dilemma; to tell Ralf all, some, or none of it. His procrastination is his undoing, leading him into the default position of feeling he's an ally to Ines's deviousness. Ralf's indecision leads to a sense of complicity and guilt, raising questions such as whether the end justifies the means. Can there be a place where it is better to pretend, tell a small untruth, to avoid harming another's wellbeing?

At this point I was wondering about this mysterious African woman who calls herself Ines. Is she what I'd been led to believe or is my empathy misplaced? This is a good set-up leading into Part Four, and it is some relief that Ines's version of events is true. I won't elaborate on what occurs, as it would be a spoiler. Suffice to say it's

quite a story.

I am glad that this evocative thought-provoking book is faithful to its aim of allowing the reader to interpret events for themselves. What is it to become dispossessed, yet retain one's dignity and hope for a future?

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