

Christos Tsiolkas, *The Slap* (Penguin, 2008)

Christos Tsiolkas won the 2009 Commonwealth Writers Prize for *The Slap*, taking his place alongside other Australian laureates like Kate Grenville, Richard Flanagan, Alex Miller, David Malouf and Peter Carey. In its reception, reviewers seemed to fall over themselves to praise this 'contemporary Australian masterpiece,' as 'a perfect social document' 'presenting the diversity of the Australian experience' 'about our lives now,' examining 'identities and personal relationships in a multi-cultural society.'

It is quite a good book, but if it is so edifying for Australians, it is probably fortunate that Australia remains a remote island nation. The suburban society we meet are not the kind of people you or I would really want to have as our neighbours, friends, spouses or lovers. Among the drug abuse, alcohol abuse, sex abuse (rape), domestic abuse, verbal abuse, bigotry and racism, the titular slap may be the least reprehensible of the social problems portrayed. Which may be Tsiolkas' ironic point. They may be your friends and neighbours, but these are not stable people.

The premise of the book is the slap of a rambunctious three-year-old brandishing a cricket bat by a father, not his own, peremptorily protecting his own son at an outdoor suburban Melbourne barbeque party. The format presents eight vignettes of these people through the chronological aftermath of the party, showing their inner lives, past lives and present thoughts, hence mapping contemporary Australian society, or at least a slice of it.

The scope is broad, including three generations, four men and four women for balance, and multiple interrelationships. Three of the men are related by blood. Three of the women are soul sisters from way back in Perth. The other two are two high school best friends. As an example of the incestuousness of this crowd, Connie, Hector's high school heartthrob, works with his wife, Aisha, at her veterinarian clinic and babysits for Rosie and the slapped Hugo. Richie, discovering his homosexuality, also falls in love with Hector, creating a rivalry with his best friend.

Besides Aisha, who is Indian and Anouk who is Jewish, secondary characters add to the spice and cultural diversity, like the Aborigine and his white wife who converted to Islam (Bilal and Shamira), a Lebanese girlfriend (Kelly), Greek immigrants (Manolis and Koula), a Serbian wife (Sandi), a Vietnamese DVD pirate (Van), a hippy aunt (Tasha), a bi-sexual father (Connie's), the upper class (Harry and Sandi), middle class (Hector and Aisha) and lower middle class (Rosie and Gary).

Love, in its many manifestations, is a theme that pervades the novel, but often it is duplicitous, false, predatory or misguided. It also stretches the limits of loyalty. Aisha loves her husband, Hector, but feels more loyalty to her friend Rosie. Hector loves his wife and guiltily falls apart during a vacation in Bali, confessing to having had an affair, but not the one he is presently having with Aisha's co-worker. Harry loves his wife but is having a very casual affair with a very accommodating younger woman: 'She was not his wife. He didn't owe her commitment' (99). Motherless Anouk breaches her love and loyalty to Rosie and Aisha, based on the notion that the spoiled child Hugo got what he deserved.

The roots of some of these duplicitous relationships could have formed early, as we learn that many of the characters' mothers, fathers, or siblings were either drunks, drug addicts, gay, died of suicide or breast cancer, went missing or were just overly strict – in ways that make the present generation's problems almost mainstream. For example, Rosie's father was a fist-wielding abusive drunk, whereas Gary is a normal alcoholic who sometimes loses his temper and storms out of the house. And while the older generation of parents dealt more physically and verbally with their hard, rough-edged lives, the present generation freely takes drugs (Valium, cocaine, speed, marijuana, Ecstasy, and various other pills) to take the edge off potentially stressful interactions. Ironically, for this crowd, smoking seems to be most guiltily indulged of vices. The slap at the barbecue would never have triggered such a storm of protest in Manolis' time, and we can view the younger generation through him, whose long-suffering verbally-abusive marriage was the norm.

Almost all the characters have some likable qualities which make them appear normal and well-adjusted, but behind the successful or happy veneer, most are unfulfilled, insecure, self-doubting or self-loathing. Anouk makes the distinction between herself and Aisha and their friend Rosie: 'they had real pasts, real histories. Jewish, Indian, migrant; it all meant something, they had no need to make things up, to assume disguises' (71). The maskings take various forms. Gary is an unsuccessful artist who has had to put aside a talent he never really had. Anouk wants to be a writer but is caught in the lucrative world of scripting television soap operas. Her relationship with her actor toyboy, Rhys, is an easy substitute for something more mature. When she gets pregnant, she immediately gets an abortion. On the other side of the motherhood scale, Rosie continues to breast feed her three-year-old son in an excessive show of maternity, perhaps as compensation for her slutty background. As secure as Hector should be with his business, home and family, he is on psychologically thin ice, which cracks during his Bali vacation. Aisha, who should feel secure in her job and marriage, feels free to be attracted to and sleep with a fellow vet she meets at a conference. Connie and Richie, who seem to be on an upwardly mobile track into uni, use drugs, sex and betrayal to mask their adolescent insecurities. Manolis, the Greek patriarch, attends the funeral of an old friend and visits another dying of cancer, to question what the sum of his life and marriage has been. Despite their intermarrying and sharing pieces of suburbia, there is an underlying tension between 'native' Australians and the 'abos,' 'lebos' and other 'wogs'.

Tsiolkas has a great gift for dialogue, which captures the cadences of the novel's visceral, masculine, chick, philosophical, or youthful voices. Harry's section in particular is a bit of a rough, working-class, sexist, racist diatribe. Connie's and Richie's are filled with youthspeak; Manolis' more refined. References to places, music, movies and current pop culture give the novel a contemporary feeling.

Although the sections bearing their names are not written in the first person, Tsiolkas generously gets into his characters' minds to blend their backstories and interior landscapes, while foregrounding the shock waves of the barbecue slap. His rich monologues show the contradiction between feelings thought and words spoken. Domestic situations, with contemporary music or videos in the background, give the setting its familiarity and almost beg sympathy for its vulnerable characters. Many of the eight sections, untied to the slap context, could stand alone as powerful short

stories, especially the Manolis and Richie sections.

The Slap does, in fact, render a very densely populated cross-section of Australian society, but it is skewed to show the underside of suburban life, an Australian *American Beauty*. The main characters and supporting cast are well drawn, but not very likable. There is trouble in self-serving Australian suburbia, and after reading this book, we might feel that the slap was well deserved after all, if a bit misplaced.

Ron Klein