Lost Wings in Angel Rock

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Darren Williams
Angel Rock
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Perhaps the best way to understand the Australian anxiety of children lost in the bush, Peter Pierce writes in The Country of Lost Children (1999), is through comparisons with other countries. Whereas the Brothers Grimm imagine forests full of ‘malevolent people’, nineteenth-century Australian writers did not conceive human threats to missing children. North American fears of Indians co-exist with a sense that ‘limitless horizons’ offer a chance of escape and reinvention, as with Mark Twain’s character Huckleberry Finn.

The opening of Darren Williams’s second novel, Angel Rock, reminded me of Mark Twain, with its long sentences and description of a sun that ‘faded things, but also grew them’. This sun, we are told, nurtured the simple-hearted child Tom Ferry. Angel Rock revolves around the story of lost children. First, the two Ferry boys go missing, then a sixteen-year-old girl from the town. The anti-hero detective, Gibson, is also a lost child seeking answers to a crime committed in his youth.

In 1995 Williams won The Australian/Vogel Literary Award for Swimming in Silk, a novel about a group of friends in a small New South Wales coastal town. Its style is staccato: ‘Michael smelled the air. Miles away, rain.’ There are few adjectives or complex sentences, and little dialogue. Angel Rock could not be more different. It is hardboiled Gothic, a Nick Cave nightmare transmitted via Cliff Hardy. However, Williams’s fire-and-brimstone version of a detective’s quest story is only partly successful.

Reading Angel Rock, I was struck by its conflicting narrative styles. The novel is essentially a picaresque, within the crime fiction genre, but also a kind of Australian Gothic filled with evangelical preachers, forbidden desire and idiot savants. If Williams had followed the crime fiction genre more closely, Angel Rock might have ushered in something new in Australian writing. A tighter narrative would have improved the novel’s overall pace. Williams does, however, create a strong sense of place and community. For example, Tom Ferry liked sitting with the timbermen around fires and listening to their ‘filthy speech and their eerie tales of headless convicts and moans and cries in the bush or dead of night’.

What interested me most about Angel Rock was the flawed central character, Gibson. There is scope for an entire series of novels about him. After finding a teenage girl in a Sydney squat, he becomes obsessed. Taking her diary (a conventional nod to the genre), he returns to her home town, Angel Rock, with the hope of uncovering the reasons for her disappearance. Williams writes well about this strange detective, whose appearance is not unlike that of a wounded cowboy. Looking at his reflection in the mirror, Gibson takes in his features and notes that, ‘with a bit of work’, his face was ‘just about good enough for a new start, a second chance’.

Gibson leaves Sydney — its ‘pleasure boats, jaunty with strings of bunting and lights, passed by beetle-like in the new blackness’ — with a promise in his heart, made out to the missing girl. As Gibson departs, he senses something ‘fluttering just behind his shoulder’, which might have been the teenage girl given wings. This is Gibson’s own death, Williams writes, ‘shadowing him, the black negative to his blood’s red’. In Angel Rock, Gibson has an emotional collapse. It is here that Williams’s debt to crime fiction is most apparent, but his perspective is surprising. In the shower, Gibson remembers a childhood prayer said at his father’s funeral: ‘Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection unto eternal life,’ he repeats as the steam billows up around him:

When he finished he went to his room and pulled the .38 from his bag and just stared at it for a long time, finally tucking it under the mattress like a dirty magazine. He went and dressed himself in his cleanest clothes and drove up to the hotel. At the bar he ordered a whiskey and a beer and when he finished he ordered another pair.

Later that night, Gibson finds a ‘lady friend’ who takes chewing gum from her mouth and puts it on the bed frame before standing naked and bashful before him with a vein pulsing in her neck. Gibson kneels before the prostitute. He puts his arms around her body and presses his cheek against her soft belly for a long time, ‘just running his hands up and down her back and trying not to care about anything else’.

Nevertheless, Gibson is haunted by a presence in the bush around Angel Rock. Peter Pierce writes that in Australian folklore lost children are symbols of ‘anxieties within the white settler communities’. At the novel’s dramatic conclusion, Gibson finally remembers his rôle in a childhood crime and in the process reminds readers of other long-suppressed crimes.