Missing the Zeitgeist
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Alan Saunders
Alanna
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NARRATIVE IS A great teacher. I came to Alan Saunders’s intriguing first novel after reading Apsley Cherry-Garrard’s The Worst Journey in the World. Cherry-Garrard was a member of Scott’s ill-fated Antarctic expedition just before World War I, and lived to tell the tale. And what a tale of hardship and endurance it is, as Cherry-Garrard recalls in unrelenting detail the travail of plodding through seas of ice in atrociously low temperatures. More than anything, more than a mere picture of awesome Antarctica, his book is the revelation of an outmoded imperial pre-Great War sensibility, with its commitment to setting an heroic example and its supreme faith in the virtue of keeping on, and on. This is embodied in narrative form by an indefatigable linear forward thrust, a technique regarded as redundantly pedestrian in contemporary storytelling.

Cherry-Garrard’s survival story is a long way removed in every sense from the dense narrative thickets and disorienting cul-de-sacs of Alanna. The novel’s setting is the urban jungle of contemporary Sydney; its milieu the inner city’s swirling literary and intellectual circles; its purpose an exposé of the egregious cultural discourses of what is pungently dubbed ‘poststructuralist bullshit’. Saunders achieves the latter by deploying narrative strategies commonly associated with postmodernism: several voices, several plots, several loose ends (some deliberate, others the result of the want of more rigorous editing), intertextuality, transtextuality (and transsexuality) and any other kind of self-conscious textuality one can think of.

Alanna is transgeneric as well. It is a thriller, it’s a pulp fiction, it’s a traveller’s tale, it’s (in one hilarious scene) a kind of restaurant review. There are allusions, some shouted, some hinted, to canonised authors from Conrad to Woolf to Eliot — though I suggest Ita Buttrose and Bettina Arndt are also there in spirit. It’s a roman-à-clef, with fictionalised Germaine Greers and Helen Darville/Demidenkos, plus a gallery of cold-blooded right-wing polemists, randy academics and big-haired, big-breasted female investigative reporters who could be just about anybody. The general theme is fraud — artistic fraud, moral fraud, emotional and sexual fraud. The novel is essentially comic in tone, albeit of the black variety. And the joke is on us.

Has any book been more borrowed and bastardised than Conrad’s Heart of Darkness? In Alan Saunders’s novel, ‘Alanna Sanderson’ makes a splash with her first book, The People of the Interior, the fictionalised story of her journey down a river ‘like an immense snake uncoiled’ to commune with the indigenous peoples of ‘one of Australia’s northern neighbours’. These folk live lives of ‘extraordinary grace, beauty and magic’. Their pristine culture contains ‘a message for the world, a message of ancient wisdom’ — just understand that all living things are ‘part of the same universal oneness’ and global destruction can be averted. It is a message that is especially pertinent to ‘the anomalous white tribe of the south’. Film and serialisation rights are sold; Alanna becomes a media star and the book wins the prestigious ‘Malley Prize’.

But is it all a hoax (à la Ern Malley and Demidenko’s The Hand That Signed the Paper)? Alanna is the purported daughter of ‘Burmese’ Sanderson, ‘the Indiana Jones of anthropology’ who had been swallowed up by the South-East Asian rainforest three decades earlier. Her biography contains more holes than the proverbial Swiss cheese; besides which The People of the Interior reads suspiciously like a Conrad rip-off. As her publisher’s engagingly loopy son Karl Irving remarks: ‘a person nobody’s heard of writes a book about a tribe nobody else has seen.’

Quoted in lengthy instalments, Alanna’s opus is both banal and silly, a mixture of New Age baloney and pseudo-anthropology of the kind popularised by Bruce Chatwin in his glib celebration of Aboriginality, The Songlines: ‘The People of the Interior have no need of maps — they sing the forest and the forest sings them.’ Nevertheless it’s a ‘zeitgeisty kind of book’ (so says the big-breasted journo), and people love it — especially those who have never read it.

As a satire of the pretension, gullibility and downright silliness of contemporary Australian cultural politics, Alanna is highly diverting entertainment. But its textual ‘playfulness’ is, frankly, a bit passé. Good satire posits, either overtly or covertly, an alternative ethical system. I couldn’t detect one here; ultimately, the novel runs the risk of being viewed as just as vacuous as the world it scrutinises and represents.

The gung-ho theorist Karl opines at one point that ‘the free play of intertextual multivocalities effectively de-centres the discursive practice through which polymorphous identity is mediated’. This is the hideous jargon of an artistic environment that has lost its intellectual as well as aesthetic way.

Pity, it’s the kind of language that a novel such as Alanna encourages as well as lampoons.