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This is the author’s radio script of this article.


Belinda Castles’ *The River Baptists* won the 2006 Australian Vogel Literary Award for an unpublished novel. It’s set in a small community at the mouth of a river, somewhere on the east coast. A collection of locals and newcomers work out their differences in this watery setting, where the river is their roadstead. Some, like Danny, the water-taxi driver, are quite at home on the water; the bitter, elderly and decrepit Tom is so used to traversing the water that he even manages to survive continual dunkings when his barge sinks due to imperfect maintenance. Others, like the heavily pregnant Rose, Tom’s neighbour, and Kane, the junky who lives in her boatshed, are newer to this watery world and less sure of themselves.

The setting, with the town, the cliffs, the freeway and railway bridges nearby, will surely be readily identifiable to some readers. I suspect it’s somewhere slightly north of Sydney: ‘the city’ is nearby. Perhaps it’s the Hawkesbury River. However, Castles for some reason doesn’t identify her river or her town by name. Perhaps it’s fictional, but its geographical preciseness doesn’t feel made up: you could practically draw a map, or a sketch, from her descriptions. Why does she hold out on us, I wonder?

*The River Baptists* is a thoroughly competent novel. Everything is as it should be: the writing is fluent, the characters are well drawn, the plot is dramatic and plausible, and the setting is vividly evoked. It was hard to put down as the climax approached. But the symbolism often seems forced. The river Baptists of the title make two appearances but though they are clearly intended to carry a heavy significance, their impact is slight and their presence feels inorganic, as if they were
inserted as an afterthought. It’s more natural when Rose says to Kane, ‘You need to baptise your firstborn in the river and then sacrifice a goat every full moon for a year before they’ll say hello to you in the pub around here.’ But even then, the question of acceptance into this small society is not really thematically central to what is basically a romance, and *The River Baptists*, as a title, seems to point in the wrong direction.

Perhaps the slight disappointment I felt with this novel was tied up with smooth inevitability of the plot machinery, and the way that characters who were individual, rounded and sympathetic to start with soon lapsed into stereotype. In the end, though I was gripped by the narrative, there were just no surprises.