Archived at the Flinders Academic Commons
http://dspace.flinders.edu.au/dspace/
This is the author’s radio script of this article.


The Trout Opera, Matthew Condon’s new novel, is huge and ambitious and took him more than ten years to write. His canvas is twentieth century Australia – or more precisely New South Wales. Wilfred Lampe, born in 1900, lives his long life in the shack in the Snowy Mountains where he was born. Working as a farm hand, his life is spent droving and mending fences, and his recreation is trout fishing. He sees the great events of the century from a distance, at second hand, until the Snowy Mountain scheme descends in the 1950s, bringing with it migrant workers and their grim memories, and ruining his beloved river.

Running parallel to Wilfred’s story is that of his great-niece Aurora, at the end of the century, trying to rebuild a life beset by addiction and violence. Meanwhile, the Olympics are approaching and plans for the opening ceremony get uncomfortably complicated when the organisers think they have found in Wilfred a perfect ‘Man from Snowy River’ to represent the century for Australia.

Condon sustains a large cast of characters each with a complicated history, each one’s story converging in 2000 around the time of the opening of the Olympics. The main characters, Wilfred and Aurora, are memorable individuals who we come to know intimately. We first meet Wilfred at the age of six. Travelling with his father on a droving trip, he visits an eccentric old man in the Alps:

He thought again of all the stories he’d heard of the mountains and the giant moths and the skeletons of the cows and horses and the broken wagon wheels
on the ledges of the bottomless ravines, and he knew as he was living it that

Carter and the cemetery of the birds were becoming a part of that story.

This kind of self-awareness seems precocious in a six year old. Wilfred grows up to be a cautious, private man who is frustratingly passive in love, and lets it slip away. Aurora is still young, and still discovering herself in many ways, fighting free of a hellish past. Her boyfriend Wynter is more troubling: his childhood, wrecked by an abusive uncle, is described with compassion but the abusive and deluded adult he becomes rapidly descends into caricature.

The trout motif surfaces from time to time, in all sorts of places – in the base of a lamp in Aurora’s dealer’s flat, or in the suggestion of Schubert playing in the background. The Trout Opera itself is a Christmas pageant ambitiously staged by the German schoolteacher in Dalgety in 1906, mirrored at the other end of the novel by ‘our national opera’, the opening ceremony of the games.

Don’t expect to read The Trout Opera in less than a couple of weeks. The first half is intricate and slow-moving, and feels rather diffuse, with too many different people and situations vying for attention. It is a stark contrast with Condon’s intense 1998 novel The Pillow Fight, though they are both sharp-eyed and unsentimental. The Trout Opera does a pretty good job of mythologising a certain kind of Australian culture, the gruff, taciturn variety, though some might find the grand narrative unconvincing. It is difficult to gauge the tone of the final scene: is Condon now buying into the ocker simplifications of the Olympic opening ceremony, having lampooned the process of creating it throughout the novel? The way he interweaves the ceremony with significant moments in his characters’ lives seems to suggest that he is. Nevertheless, The Trout Opera, though less than perfect, is undoubtedly a major achievement.