

**Mandy Sayer, *Love in the Years of Lunacy* (Allen & Unwin, 2011)**

This is *the* setting for an Australian love story: Sydney, World War II. It's a time and place full of desperation and longing, when the young lived like they are dying because, in these times, they were. Pearl is an eighteen year-old saxophone player in an all-girls' jazz band, who plays at the Trocadero, where her twin brother Martin also plays. When the siblings sit in on a hopping session at the Booker T Washington Club – the only joint that allows black soldiers in the doors – and Pearl hears James screaming away on his saxophone, Pearl is hit hard. He's a damn good musician and an extremely handsome man, and he's straight away sweet on her. No matter that he's black. In times like these, everything is dangerous and new. What ensues is a love story that spans a very brief but intense time in Pearl and James' lives.

It's clear that Mandy Sayer's *Love in the Years of Lunacy* ticks every box ever created for the category 'love story'. It also ticks every box that Hollywood creates for 'box office hit'. If this book isn't made into a film, I'll be very surprised. I suppose that is the main reason that *Love in the Years of Lunacy* didn't work for me. I basically envisioned every scene as if they were larger than life, in celluloid. Perhaps that's a sign of skillful writing: Sayer paints such vivid pictures in our heads that we imagine we are seeing them, rather than reading them. But it's the formulaic aspect of book that got me to the 'seeing' of the scenes that ultimately bothered me. I could not relate to these characters unless I was relating to them as fictitious film characters. Is that an issue with the way I view the World War II era (film reels of bubbly girls dancing in great rhythmic delight with their grateful-to-be-on-leave soldier-beaus, their hair bouncing to the music) because I was not alive during that time, or is it an issue with Sayer's drawing on overdone romanticised clichés? This is taken from the second page of the book:

'Hey!' she cried as Martin, holding his tenor sax case, dodged an overflowing gutter and leaped over a puddle. 'Wait for me!' She too dodged the waterfall and jumped the puddle, but landed in another one, splattering the side of her dress with muddy water. Martin laughed.

All this leaping and bounding and laughing in the rain signals *INNOCENCE* in very large letters, the sort of innocence we equate with teenagers learning to master the swing dances of the World War II era. Immediately Sayer set me up. I had a pretty fair idea who my main character was.

The foreground sound of jazz fills the book, giving the narrative a visceral texture, as well as providing Pearl and James with an outlet for their passion. It's perfect in that it, too, plays heavily on the characteristics of the era – jazz was finding its feet amongst the hip and tragically musically aware. It made heroes out of its African American musicians who, at home, were being culturally and institutionally minimalised as human beings. That, and the fact that it was something entirely rhythmically innovative, made it dangerous. The perfect soundtrack.

Whether it was their fever for jazz that made the passion between Pearl and James so epic or the war, I was sunk. I fell for their falling. I wanted them to win. I imagined tears would follow. And had I not been able to foresee the untwisting of the

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plot due to its very prescribed feel, I might have cried in various places throughout the book – no doubt many, *many* readers will. I wanted something more literary from Sayer, less commercial and black and white. I think Sayer might have been approaching that level with the Aboriginal crime-writer and family member who is meant to pen Pearl's posthumous story told to him on cassette, but she doesn't give him enough space to become a character in his own right. He's a device and, with quips such as 'my agent got me a four-book deal with Allen & Unwin, an independent publisher based in Sydney', he seems to be not much more than a bit of fun for Sayer. And considering the weight of his story, he needed to be more than fun, more than structural. I felt he needed to be as important as Pearl and James and was therefore sadly disappointed in his narrative.

The majority of the plot was too convenient. I don't see the realism in two grown twins – different sexes, mind you – switching identities and getting away with it in domestic settings, and I especially don't see them getting away with it on the battlefield. And the way Pearl and James reunite just reeks of swelling orchestral music one can only find in Hollywood.

I have no doubt Sayer has written what will be an enormously popular book, and it should sell well for Allen & Unwin, just as I have a strong feeling that movie rights will be coming at the pair in all sorts of directions, so well done on writing a fine example of an enduring love story. I just wanted more. I wanted to take the story off the screen and get a little bit gritty. For instance, why were the gay soldiers accepted with great mirth from those who knew their secret? And why is there not greater weight to the disturbing duality of the mother-daughter role? Though I hate to end on such a sour note, I can't fail to mention the problematic title: Pearl almost marries a Master of Lunacy (the psychologist who cares for her). Due to the title, I expected his role and their impending marriage to be pivotal, almost deadly. That it wasn't, was probably the book's only surprise for me.

**Heather Taylor Johnson**