

Zanesh Catkin, *Pangamonium* (Midnight Sun Publishing, 2012)

Pangamonium is Zanesh Catkin's first novel and the second work by Midnight Sun Publishing, a newly minted Adelaide publishing house. The novel is brimming with ideas; there are car chases, fire fights, a conspiracy surrounding some not-safe-for-work unmentionables, and all of this within the vibrant and bustling world of an imaginary Asiatic nation, Panga. The characters are often quirky and endearing, and Catkin's description of Panga is fully realised; he builds a weird world that seems almost tangible.

Catkin is not a bad writer: his problem is that he overwrites. Jokes get overplayed, wrung out for every last drop; the narrative breaks away and meanders on curious but unfulfilling tangents; sentences often give one extra puff too many. There is no doubting that Catkin has really enjoyed writing this novel. However, there is a distinct sense that what *Pangamonium* needed was a more ruthless editor, someone to cut the extraneous fluff without being overly precious. Much of what is here is good, some of it is great, but there are too many moments when Catkin's relentless description simply does not quit.

Pangamonium is supposed to be a comedy; it says so on the cover. Roughly speaking, it is a satire on capitalism and globalisation, with elements of travel writing spoofed for good measure. And yes, there is a thread of critique of capitalism, the evils of money and the oppression and human sacrifice it engenders. Sometimes this works; sometimes, it feels clumsy:

Daid's fortune – Easter's inheritance – my pension plan – it wasn't fated to do ill, but ill had been done with it in the hands of less than scrupulous people. That did not make money evil; it made it a force that could be used either way. (262)

The tone of the piece, both bizarre and frantic, means that the impact of any such critique is largely lost. Whenever Catkin tries to get serious it jars and feels inconsistent with the rest of the novel.

And as a purely comic fiction, *Pangamonium* suffers this same inconsistency. The jokes often feel forced, and rather than chuckling as I read this, I groaned. Catkin uses parody, slapstick, puns ('to be known as a shoe company would have horrified them – what if the bottom fell out on footwear' [40]), and while they fit the overall tone of *Pangamonium*, they fall flat far too often. Successful comedy is usually built on timing; the punch line has to come at just the right moment, otherwise the audience won't laugh. A good author can pace their prose, but with comic writing the timing needs to work just right, and Catkin doesn't have the chops yet to pull that off. Add this to Catkin's penchant for using big chunks of exposition to describe some of the more comical scenes, and it just ends up feeling laboured.

Which raises the question: why tell this story as a novel? I had the feeling that it would have worked better as something animated; think *South Park*, or *The Simpsons*. Catkin spends so much time setting up visual gags that would be seamless in the medium of television, but here they become clunky and overplayed. I wanted to find *Pangamonium* funny, if only because it tried so hard to be, but for me, it simply did not work in this written form.

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Where Catkin best succeeds with his comedy is in his characterisations. Francis is a cynical and sarcastic freelance travel writer, looking to find some meaning to his life by way of losing himself in exotic Panga. He is paired up with larger than life Easter, a genial and comforting man, except when his blood sugar levels are low. Their odd coupling is fun and I got the most enjoyment out of their back and forth bickering. Daid in particular, an ex-military man who believes in honour above all else, is great. He is obsessed with Bollywood films, and we get these scenes that play out like a Bollywood actioner through Daid's eyes. '*Prince Rajid calculated the distance and angle required to shoot the driver, at the same time registering the presence of his companion, a shabby European*' (182). And it is here, where Catkin lets his quirky characters do the work, rather than trying to force a joke out of them, that *Pangamonium* is exciting and engaging.

Still, there are some nice passages of pure prose here. Catkin does prove himself to be a good writer, and there were one or two moments of inspired writing that I really wish could have featured more:

Even on a still day the maize tassels hung east, away from the prevailing westerly; jitterbug butterflies flew into the breeze, and so generally moved to the west; iron ants tasted of steel and built tall spires of mud that were oriented to the magnetic pole; and the village dogs within their home range were like sentries, keeping their backs to village. (178)

Passages like these really showcase Catkin's skills; he is not forcing a joke, and he is not getting caught up in untangling and teasing out one of Francis' digressions. Rather, moments like these feel relaxed and natural, and the narrative is better for it.

I think it is important to place *Pangamonium* within the context of a first time novelist's career, and a young publishing house in its infancy. Catkin's potential is evident, but I think he still needs to find his voice and discover his strengths. He has wild imagination, and he certainly enjoys writing, but Catkin needs to know when to reel back on his writing, to bring a level of nuance to his prose, and achieve subtlety. A larger, more experienced publishing house might have been more demanding with their editing, and turned *Pangamonium* into a tightly tuned and restrained novel. As it is, however, *Pangamonium* suffers from overwriting, and a glut of ideas which might not all work together as smoothly as one might hope. It is great that Midnight Sun Publishing has taken a chance with Catkin, and while I don't think he has crafted a particularly inspired novel, he has been given room to experiment and play with his writing, an experience that will hopefully help Catkin grow and mature as a novelist.

Piri Eddy