
Sumner Locke Elliott is an Australian writer who many feel has not received the attention or acclaim in this country that he deserves. One reason for this could be that he lived most of his adult life in the U.S. and even took on U.S. citizenship, so perhaps America claims him as its own. On the other hand his novels are set in Australia and three of these novels, *Careful He Might Hear You*, *Water Under the Bridge* and *Eden’s Lost* were adapted for film and television. He was awarded the Miles Franklin Award in 1963 and the Patrick White Award in 1977. His first novel, *Careful He Might Hear You*, which won the Miles Franklin Award, was translated into many languages and became an international bestseller. His plays were performed on Broadway, and the American television networks. Despite this Sumner Locke Elliott is not a name that springs to mind when one lists major Australian writers. Given his output and focus, however, it is fitting that The Text Publishing Company has decided to publish Elliott’s largely autobiographical novel *Fairyland* as part of the Text Classics series.

Text Classics are described as books that are by ‘our most loved writers who tell our stories’. To claim Elliott as a ‘most loved writer’ may be stretching the truth a little. To claim that he tells our stories is arguably more accurate, for, like many writers who live overseas he set his stories in Australia. We need to acknowledge that the Australia he depicted was that of the thirties and forties, not contemporary Australia, but they are the more valuable and interesting for that because they hold up a mirror to an era few of us know personally. In the introduction to this edition of *Fairyland* Dennis Altman states that Elliott’s ‘punctilious evocation of the details of class and geography is evident throughout the novel … Contemporary Sydneysiders may be ruefully amused by the observations of Surry Hills when it was still too rough for respectable folks to live there’ (xi).

*Fairyland* was first published in 1990, and is regarded as a ‘coming out’ novel, although by then the revelation of one’s homosexuality was not going to shock many people. The life of the protagonist, Seaton, follows that of Elliott quite closely. His mother was a writer who died soon after his birth. Seaton’s mother is a writer, but as a war widow she devoted her talents to writing verses about her lost husband, and the sorrows of her situation, which Seaton finds immensely embarrassing. His father, although a decorated war hero, died not on the battlefield, but in a bar room brawl. Elliott’s father was a freelance journalist who had little to do with his son’s upbringing. When Seaton’s mother dies he is ‘inherited’ by a cousin, who gives up her own ambitions to raise him. Elliott, himself, was raised by several aunts who fought for custody, and this is described in *Careful He Might Hear You*.

So while *Fairyland* is classed as fiction it follows the life of Elliott very closely, and in particular the difficulties he encountered growing up as a homosexual in a society which could never have countenanced a public celebration such as the Gay Mardi Gras. His is a lonely childhood, never quite fitting in, looking for love and acceptance. His early experiences in a theatre group allow a respite from his boring job repairing book covers, and when the handsome leading man, Byron Hall invites him to join his group Seaton was ‘almost deranged with pleasure and embarrassment’. When Byron further invited him to ‘call me Buck’, a name only used by close friends, ‘Seaton carried the words back with him to his pasting and gluing like a gentle phrase of music’ (74).

His relationship with Buck is short lived and the ending painful. No relationship brings him lasting joy, and most bring him a great deal of frustration or alienation. This is the theme that runs through the novel so that despite a feeling sympathy at times I wanted to...
shout at Seaton to grow up and accept that life was like that and to make the best of it. The novel rapidly becomes a list of men and women, brief encounters and longer relationships that never work out. His need for a fulfilling love relationship constantly eludes him. As Seaton expresses it: ‘But suppose the gradual attenuation was one’s own fault? Suppose one never felt the transmutation? Fell? Imagine the poverty of never finding. The waiting and waiting. And suppose no one ever came?’ (125)

My desire to bring him into the real world is, to a large extent, to fail to appreciate what it must have been to be a homosexual person at a time when it was against the law, when such men were regularly bashed, when sexual encounters tended to be brief and brutal, and were you to find a partner, you would have to live a life of subterfuge and deceit. It also ignores so much of the very vivid writing in *Fairyland*. As would be expected from a playwright, the dialogue is convincing and moves the narrative expeditiously. Many characters take on an almost Dickensian eccentricity such as the sad Rat, who loves him, but who is far too ugly to inspire reciprocal affection, and Camilla, who wears stiletto heels, is ultra-glamorous, and who invites him away for the weekend, a practice she has with gay men, to serve a purpose of her own. Add to these Captain Smollett, who made his life a misery in the army, only to grope and rape him in a car, calling him a ‘little corker’ then warning him to secrecy and telling him to ‘drive on Corporal’ (230). One should not leave out from this selection of characters Mr. Lemoyne, the owner of the bookshop where he works, who has pretensions of culture: ‘I orfen say to our teetaller chums “You don’t know what you are missing if you don’t have the je ner say quaw of a nice wine avec le Pwosson”,’ while making it clear he has designs on a less cultural nature on the body of Seaton. ‘If you will allow me to quote the tragically ill-famed Oscar who was sent to prison for it, it is the love that dare not speak its name’ – as Lemoyne breathes over a book of pornographic photos (68).

*Fairyland* takes us back to a time where there were no magic wands or godmothers to assuage the sufferings of the orphans and those whom society rejected. It transports us back to a different world, so that the reader is taken back in history. The story begins and ends with a murder, and this circular plot device takes the reader from a triumph, curtailed by death and returns the reader there in the final page, although the motive for the murder is clear: ‘There’ll be no more of your harmful love, Seaton’ (6). Where it has taken the reader in the meantime is a journey well worth undertaking.

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