Complete Fiction Reviews
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Transnational Literature, November 2013: Complete Book Reviews - Fiction in one file for ease of downloading or printing
Susan Hancock, *The Peastick Girl* (Black Pepper, 2012)

Susan Hancock’s novel is a rich and complex work that incorporates themes of feminism, national identity and transnational socio-politics into a hugely compelling narrative framework. Set in Wellington, New Zealand, the story concerns Teresa, Mollie and Cass Matheson, the three daughters of the mysteriously deceased Vivien Matheson. Each of these three main characters has their own distinct identity but, collectively, the strong and sometimes endearing characterisation works to construct a positive image of women and sisterhood.

The middle sister, Teresa, is given the central role, returning from Australia, where she has been living for five years and where she believes she has discovered a demon called Arkeum. Teresa’s return opens the narrative and her emotions are the driving force of the plot as she is shown to be a troubled figure who has suffered a traumatic experience that has left her psychologically and physically damaged. On returning home she is able to resolve some of the tensions in her family and to discover the secrets kept from her by her mother which have, unknown to her, continued to affect her throughout the rest of her life. The events of her past slowly return to haunt her during the course of this discovery as she struggles to resolve an intense psychological division between her angry and seizure riddled Red Queen persona, and her other, innocent and more fragile self, the Peastick Girl.

One of the wonderful points of this story is the way that the natural beauty of Teresa’s homeland is able to heal and soothe her at a tumultuous point in her life. Nature is an important motif in this novel and the descriptions of the country occur in connection with peaceful scenes to offset Teresa’s emotional state of disturbance and unrest. This complex relationship between the natural world and the emotional and social disturbance of otherwise peaceful people, then, has parallels with the social and semi-political issues that appear subtly but noticeably in the background of the novel. This is interjected with specific debates concerning the plight of Maori women and the need for them to regain the power that was stripped from them under British law. The Maori issue is conjoined with the idea of natural and native New Zealand life, while the contrasts and affinities between the novel’s main characters and the more peripheral figures of Maori women are shown to be of principal importance for reasons concerning both feminism and nationality. Cass is a film-maker whose most recent project is a film about the Maori people. She is the figure to whom the author assigns the responsibility of reminding her two sisters about the feminism with which their mother raised them. She is also the character who continually asks important questions about women’s treatment of each other and the meaning of feminism and femaleness in contemporary society.

In outlining some of the problems caused by colonisation, Hancock’s novel makes key reference to New Zealand’s political and social history and considers the effect of this on Maori women within the more established white Western women’s movement. The novel positions this issue in order to suggest that colonisation and the subsequent imposition of British, and largely Victorian, values concerning marriage, morality and gender roles has had adverse effects on the position and rights of all New Zealand born women.

At the same time, the male attitudes to women in this novel, though few, are shown to be less than egalitarian. Teresa, for example, is harshly criticised by Gil, the philandering but prudish husband of her older sister, Mollie. He makes sporadic and multifarious judgements in relation to her attitude to life, her previous experiences with drugs and what he sees as her

sexual promiscuity, thereby demonstrating one male perspective on the moral and largely gender-specific values to which women are still expected to adhere. Mollie offers a contrast to Teresa’s freer and more adventurous persona, being described as a housewife and mother whose opinions are, in some ways, informed and confined by her husband’s patriarchal and occasionally hypocritical values.

The problems of women, and the constriction that they feel, come to the forefront here, lending the novel a sympathetic tone which inspires a similarly sisterly affinity and understanding in the reader. It is this that makes the novel such a pleasure to read as it is so clearly female orientated and provides a warm and enveloping story with enough mystery at its heart to make it absorbing and enjoyable. The narrative tone engages the reader and inspires the imagination in such a way that scenes and characters come to life. Its overall effect is, therefore, a powerful one, working to promote understanding of the distinctive identity of New Zealand and its people while at the same time encouraging readers to discover more about the country and its history.

Michelle Austin
Adnan Mahmutovic, *How to Fare Well and Stay Fair* (Salt Publishing, 2012)

*How to Fare Well and Stay Fair* is Adnan Mahmutovic’s most recent short-story collection, revealing the trials and tribulations of refugees in a migrant country – the physical and psychological impact of war, the disorientation and the discomfort of self in an unfamiliar culture and country leading to displacement, internal exile, fragmentation and loss of identity, difficulties of communication, relationships, and no sense of belongingness to anywhere. The notion of home is reduced merely to ‘imaginary homelands’, a phrase created by the novelist Salman Rushdie.

The cataclysmic consequences generated by the war that broke out across Bosnia had a profound impact on the psyche of its people. In Bosnia, to create a pure ‘Serbian’ nation, the leaders adopted the harsh calculative method of ‘ethnic cleansing’ by killing and torturing thousands of people and throwing them from their own homeland. Thousands of women were raped as a military tactic to cripple a particular section of population – compelling them to leave their country.

The book exemplifies the struggle and survival of people who are forced into exile to a foreign country and ultimately unable to find a ground to settle because of their lifetime tag as ‘outsiders’ in an entirely alien land as well as their own homeland – creating the complex issue of identity and home. The unsettled mind that is produced due to fluctuating like a pendulum between two world ‘values’ gives space to a fragmented mind and identity which is vividly illustrated in the book through several characters who are the victims of war-driven situation.

Though each story has its own tale to tell, the way it is intertwined with the other stories describes the long saga of refugee’s agony – sharing the common strand of displacement and alienation. The fictionalised chapters featuring female protagonists are interwoven with writer’s own point of view on the complex world he is presently living in. Structurally too, stories are amalgamated with unusual ‘linking pieces’ – dictionary entries, letters and web chat that give a very inimitable texture to the book. In a recent interview, Mahmutovic says

I put them together and also wrote some flashes and poems that both created links and breaks between the ‘main’ stories. I wanted to introduce discontinuity between stories that naturally fit each other, and linking pieces between stories that did not. For me this book is more of a novella than a collection, or some hybrid form.¹

Almasa, the main protagonist of the book, migrated to Sweden, despondently leaving her family and her country. In ‘[Refuge]e’, the war leaves her so numb and muddled, that the significance of home is reduced to a question mark, ‘Ho?me’. In ‘Myth of the Smell’, there is no feeling of nostalgia for the soil of her ‘imaginary’ homeland with the ugly truth of war that she has confronted. She looks at the ‘insouciant clouds’ having ‘no boundaries to cross, their home a place so desolate it mocked destinations’ (16). On the contrary, she is a lost soul having boundaries to cross.

Though being repeatedly tortured and raped, she manages to survive the distorted world in her own way – every time standing straight to take charge of her broken life. The writer describes the brutality towards women as they were reduced merely to ‘sexual organ’ during the war, ‘I told you to shut your mouth up, not your cunt! Open it, it’s dry! I don’t fucking like it dry’ (18) and were forced to accept their fate in a new-adopted foreign land.

She hopes never to encounter ‘a countryman, or woman’ but when she sees a Bosnian old woman – who like her homeland is ‘mystical and mythical, both native and strange’, Almasa ‘feels like running to her and hugging her’ (44). This approach-avoidance conflict describes her unsettled yearnings for her own homeland.

Another female character, Fatima, an illegal immigrant, gets driven into prostitution in the new land. She has been robbed of even her hopes and dreams due to uncertainty in life. She ‘just hate being in them [fantasies], I can’t do it or I’ll end up in a lunatic asylum’ (73).

Unable to relate to the adopted ‘values’ and yet striving hard to be accepted by their adopted country/new order, longing to go back home and yet unable to relate to ‘native’ values upon return – all the characters find that their exile becomes an integral part of their displaced psyche.

In ‘Gusul’, Emina’s plight as a refugee is sympathetic: ‘as a genderless refugee outside a corroded bus holding the hand of a mute mother’ (79). She describes how her mother became traumatised since they left their homeland. When her mother dies, she has to deal with different system of a foreign land as the Imam says ‘this isn’t Bosnia. We can’t bury her today … it’ll take at least three days’ (83).

They all struggle with the same feeling of alienation – they try to hold themselves in a deep ocean of otherness, at the same time desperately clinging to their native selves.

In ‘Butter’, Adam, another character whose life is determined by uncertainty, wonders whether he should suppress his innermost longings or cry out loud for the freedom: ‘the crack in the ceiling isn’t too bad, but I fear my mother’s singing of Bosnian folk songs will tear it open and expose our amazing family to the cold Swedish sky. That’d be great. Then I’d move out’ (100). However, steadily, he obtains higher education; he works with elderly people; and indeed, he has a family he can come back to after the persistent struggle with his identity.

The writer closes the collection with an essay, ‘Afterword: Homecoming’ – where he goes back to Bosnia only to see how things have changed there. Even people back home consider him an outsider: ‘you feel you’re coming back home and that everything is just hunky-dory. But you don’t that you’re foreigners now. You’re strangers here.’ The writer realises, ‘Right there and then, my home was, if anything, my strangeness’ (138).

Fluctuating between first-person and third-person narrative as in the last few stories, Mahmutovic’s autobiographical pieces merge with other fictional stories through his empathic insight into situations and people, creating a long united story of abandoned lives.

Adnan Mahmutovic’s How to Fare Well and Stay Fair is an honest book depicting lives that have been forced into exile from their own homeland. The level of uncertainty among his characters in relation to their identities is very touching. There is a ray of hope for his protagonists as they re-erect their crushed identities in the hope of a better tomorrow. It sheds light on the assimilation of ‘other’ culture and country to create a cordial relation with one’s inner self. Accepting reality is the only way to be free from any boundary to stay fair and say farewell.

Sadiqa Beg


What the *Questions of Travel* might be are apparently signposted in the novel’s epithets: the more we travel the less we connect, indeed the more references we accumulate the more the world is transformed into a spectacle that ultimately will never reveal the meaning even of itself, let alone of life. This rather undercuts the orthodox hope that the more attentive travellers move about, the better they will be able to appreciate others’ issues and remediate both their own and others’ cultures. And so it is that the novel builds up the counterpointed narratives of Laura from Sydney and Ravi from the hinterlands of Colombo in Sri Lanka, only to deny near the end what had appeared to be an all-too-conventional confluence of lives brought about by increasing contact between peoples. More than that, it comes to seem after all that the novel is not so much asking questions about travel in a conventional sense, but rather about that journey that is all of our lives, that which carries us from past to present, in chronological time, and on to the futures that psychological time allows us.

The novel really begins in the 1970s, when jet travel began to be more of a possibility in the West for a much wider demographic, and ends in 2004 as the tsunami surges into Sri Lanka. The book proceeds by means of short sections cutting back and forth between Laura and Ravi’s very different lives and options. Both of their lives, however, are conjugated in terms of the way in which travel may possess very different connotations: in Ravi’s case, it means the serious displacement of going to Australia and applying for asylum, while for Laura travel is first a dream (inevitably the iconic visual intensities of Europe), then something she is able to do because she can afford it and is free to choose, and finally a career in guidebook publishing. The imbalance can clearly be seen between the economic ability of the Australian to travel out of desire, and the constraints of travel structured by politicised violence and whatever options appear available. Travel becomes, above all, psycho-social.

Stated so simply, the point is hardly startling. Nevertheless, de Kretser occupies 500 pages with the two stories, bringing the characters slowly closer together – eventually they work at the same travel guide publisher – while also keeping them apart. The sentimental belief that the physical encounter which travel allows leads to understanding and shared projects is denied. In a way the book’s length is necessary in order for the narrative surprise at the end to be greater, brutal even. But it is also the result of what has been observed to be de Kretser’s particular strength, her attention to the subtle interstices of communication and small group dynamics. In this, it may be that her eye for detail is somewhat more finely observant in the Sydney scenes than in the Sri Lankan ones, but that might depend on what the reader is familiar with.

Less charitably, and going against the grain of the widespread approbation the book has received, the observation of the minutiae of educated, well-off Sydney life is hardly something we are undersupplied with. The vignettes of office and personal life in Sydney are underwhelming either as representation, or as direct or indirect questions about relative values that the novel underwrites (so to speak). The lack of narrative risk-taking characterises the book from start to finish, its short sentences and short sections familiar from much other contemporary fiction in which readers are presumed to lack the attention span necessary for complex sentences or lengthy chapters. Given de Kretser’s apparent tutelary guide of Henry James (on whom the protagonist of her well-known *The Lost Dog* is writing a thesis), this is somewhat ironic.

Moreover, it is difficult to know what social observation teaches us about the meaning of a tsunami, unless such things as the unfairness of events, the absurdity of the universe, the illusoriness of planning, all of which are apparent in daily life in any case. The ending of the novel with the approach of the tsunami does end the lives of both of the protagonists, it is implied, so it is an appropriate place to end the book, but as the novel barely enters into the representation of the event, it also swerves from the question as to what it is about the size of a catastrophe that appears to alter something about the nature of the unfairness, the level of the absurdity, or the insubstantiality of the illusoriness of planning. The last character depicted is enjoying a fanciful fantasy of life with Laura, whom he has just met, when everything is about to be swept away. Is this as good a way to go as any, after all? Would his death have been ‘better’ if he had been seeing his situation more realistically?

The book’s dust jacket, which shows a small central Sydney as an island, surrounded by a vast, threatening-coloured sea, comes thus to seem a very good metaphor for a narrative about the opaque resistance of time to human projects. Just as the water ‘wins’ at the end, so also are we engaged in a losing battle with time. We might as well enjoy fantasies about sex with unlikely partners, for what will happen in our lives will only fitfully follow a rational script anyway. From Laura’s charity sex with her landlord and her love of a man who gives blandness a bad name, through Ravi’s logic-defying (for Australians) refusal of asylum when it is finally granted, to the large gallery of odd or fractured interactions and connections of different types, Questions of Travel slowly overcomes its deceptive character as a chronicle of a period to become a bracing meditation on time in general. As Ravi prepares to return to the Sri Lanka in which political violence had destroyed his life, and in which will shortly occur something he could not possibly have planned for, he says goodbye to a woman he had been interested in, but whom he realises he had not really had a chance with. As de Kretser has it, this character ‘belonged to that winner, the future’ (508). Our status as time’s possession is all too clear.

David Callahan

David Foster has been writing for years now. *The Pure Land*, which won The Age Book of the Year writing award, was published in 1974, and he has produced a significant amount of work since. *Man of Letters* is the third in a series that began in 1985, continued with a sequel in 1988 and here we are 20-odd years later with the final D’Arcy D’Oliveres adventure, a whodunit thriller that doesn’t have many thrills, and a comedy that is a bit too short on laughs.

D’Arcy D’Oliveres is an aging former postie who worked the beat on Dog Rock (a town of Foster’s own creation in outback NSW) in his youth, but is now an Australian Postal corporate security group operative working in the CBD. D’Arcy is investigating an incident of possible fraud within the corporation that led to local layabout and musician Ross Commoner finding his face on Australia Post’s Australian Legends of Music series of postage stamps. It is up to D’Arcy to interview the locals, uncover several other seemingly bizarre mysteries in the town, and still deliver the mail, including all his Big W catalogues. *Man of Letters* is weird, convoluted and sometimes downright confusing. That Foster can spread such a banal premise over 142 pages without it crumbling completely is testament to his often inventive writing, and the curious but grating protagonist D’Arcy D’Oliveres. *Man of Letters* is probably fifty pages too long: instead of keeping it short and sweet, Foster decides to fill *Man of Letters* with innocuous mysteries, including the case of the missing Bunnings voucher, the secret of the comatose Indian national, and a drug bust. What *Man of Letters* is left with is a plot that has so many twists and turns you can barely keep up, none of which are satisfyingly resolved or addressed. In the end, *Man of Letters*, for all its lofty ambitions, is rather light and runs out of steam long before the final page.

Foster’s writing is a sort of haphazard stream-of-consciousness, a reeling monologue that reflects D’Arcy’s sometimes aggavated and skittish internalisation. D’Arcy is an interesting character, an old fella raging at the world, discontented with a loss of tradition, a staunch protector of postal law, and at times a bit of a bastard. So while sometimes hard to follow, it is D’Arcy’s narration that offers the most pertinent point of interest. Foster has given his protagonist a consistent voice that is both idiosyncratic and contradictory. The reader is privy to every one of D’Arcy’s preoccupied thoughts, which are often colourful and humorous. And while this is where the fun is had, Foster’s focus on D’Arcy leaves the rest of the characters a little thin: they are mere functionary players in the unravelling mystery, peculiar for sure, but scarcely given room to exist beyond the backdrop. There is also something to be said in giving D’Arcy so much room to ‘think’, because although he can be a unique character, he is also full of largely unimportant information. Take this section for instance:

> Australia Post’s expansion plan – bearing in mind that small business *is* our single biggest customer – is increasingly directed towards using our trusted brand to compete with express delivery companies like Linfox, Toll and FedEx. Indeed, our future might be said to depend upon how well we can outdo our competitors here. And we cannot deliver wine from a Honda Ninety, which is another reason for putting contractors on all 7950 postal beats. (19)
Moments like these exhibit Foster’s exemplary and extensive knowledge of the subject matter, and they give D’Arcy strength in character, but they are not very interesting. I found myself skim-reading some of these sections simply because they did nothing more than help me with my trivial pursuit skills. There is too much stuffing in Man of Letters, and D’Arcy’s erratic and attention-deficit-ridden monologues do not help the cause.

Yet for all the overstuffed exposition there are some clever and genuinely funny sections of prose. They are usually downright bizarre, but Foster injects the writing with enough silly humour that they are infectious. Add to the fact that they are being conjured by a disgruntled and cynical D’Arcy and you cannot help but smile:

In September, we watch for duckling here as this is where they cross the road. Like Wonga pigeon, the wood duck have moved into town of late. If you saw 12 ducklings Monday, you’d see 10 Tuesday, 8 Wednesday, 7 Thursday, till eventually you’d be down to a workable 3 or 4. (77)

Foster’s prose is sometimes morbidly hilarious, dark without being too serious, and often simply crass. Man of Letters is not filled with enough sections like the one above, but I could still appreciate them when they came around. However, Foster’s running gag of using acronyms in his prose, an apparent play on the way people talk to one another in text messages and how it crosses over into real life, is a bit clumsy and jarring. D’Arcy’s use of the term ‘LOL’ more than once is near unforgivable. Similarly, Foster fills Man of Letters with so many pop-culture references, trying to make every one of them funny, that none of the satire bites particularly hard at all.

Man of Letters comes deep into David Foster’s career as a writer, a profession that has yielded several awards over a large number of books. I say this because Foster is obviously a talented writer who knows what he is doing. Yet if you are looking to begin an engagement with this writer Man of Letters would not be the place to start. The initial premise is bizarre, but proves not to have enough steam to make it to the finish line. That Foster has had to shoehorn a series of other similarly ridiculous mysteries into the mix attests to this, and left me confused and ultimately disappointed. Too many twists do not add up, fall flat or lack any sort of tension. By the end, the initial interest in D’Arcy’s monologue wanes significantly, and none of the other characters offer respite. While D’Arcy is a rich, if not increasingly annoying character, the rest of the players in this thrill-less whodunit are flatter than a postcard. David Foster is an inventive writer, and is probably worth further study, but Man of Letters should not be your first port of call.

Piri Eddy
Emily Sutherland, *The Paraclete Conundrum* (FeedARead Publishing, 2012)

*The Paraclete Conundrum* is the creative component of a PhD thesis, ‘Framing the Portrait’, by Emily Sutherland, which examines the part of invention an author can introduce in a historical novel. Sutherland states that ‘History and historical novels are linked by a common element, namely that events from the past are presented as a narrative within a literary form.’ Therefore the basis of a historical novel must stem from actual personalities or places and the writer of such a novel ‘is obliged to make more than a passing reference to the truth’, exercising his or her imagination and creativity.

In this novel, the author uses well-known historical characters all of whom lived in the second half of the twelfth century and sets the story inside the ‘Paraclete’, an abbey near Troyes in France which had been founded by Pierre Abélard. The characters are Hildegard of Bingen, an abbess, Héloïse (of Abélard fame), also an abbess and Eleanor (real name Aliénor) Queen of Aquitaine and of France, and Bernard de Clairvaux, an abbott. The author weaves a story based on topical themes of the time such as the status of women and the question of religious intolerance. Thus in one fell swoop she makes the novel pertinent to the modern age. However, to what extent she can interfere in the veracity of the historical times is the question. In her thesis the author asks: ‘Could the three [women] have ever met?’ This is precisely where the author intervenes. She develops a credible plot within the historical truth by making the three women meet for a particular reason which becomes the central part of the novel. A letter is at the centre of the intrigue which develops slowly through philosophical and religious discussions between the three women and there are also some discussions between Abélard and Bernard de Clairvaux as reported by the latter. There is an excellent scene of latent dramatic impact during a meal in the abbey, followed by the sickness of the putative villain of the piece, Bernard de Clairvaux, but that potential does not develop fully until later. Apart from the central intrigue created by the letter and the meeting, the author has by and large kept faithfully to historical truths, but further revelation here might spoil the dénouement for the reader.

The book is divided fairly equally between the three women, each one relating the problem created within the plot from her own point of view and thus somewhat differently from the others, or adding a point hitherto not mentioned by the other two. Towards the end, there is a smaller section given to Bernard de Clairvaux. As each woman, narrating in the first person, attempts to resolve the author’s contrived problem in a different way, her life and personality, both based on historical facts, are revealed.

The author has obviously done a great deal of research on mediaeval life and the narrative is peppered with historical anecdotes. For example, we are given an insight into mediaeval monastic life and its often useful integration with the outside world. There is a rich description of the various uses of plants for medicinal purposes, including a recipe using cinnamon with other ingredients to heal a liver complaint, we read of what must have been the arduousness of travel. The author has Hildegard travel from Bingen in Germany to Troyes in France as she seeks out Héloïse’s wisdom to deal with the problem on which the story is based. We are treated to some of Hildegard’s verses. We read of her uncertain childhood and of her fear of being locked up. We learn how she would have loved to ride a horse with her cloak spread across the horse’s rump, as was done by knights and noble men and women (and portrayed in the Duke of Berry’s ‘Book of Hours’.) Hildegard was aware of the need to improve the standard of hygiene by obtaining running water in the abbey, she had modern
ideas in her approach to drainage around a building and on how to keep waste water away from a stream whose water was used for domestic purposes.

Héloïse, abbess of Paraclete, is shown not only as a gentle and refined woman of mild character but also as a great scholar and thinker. We are given details of her life with and love for Abélard and of her great suffering brought about through her association with him. She is also forward-looking when it comes to modernising her abbey.

Eleanor, wife of King Louis VII and thus queen of France, is the intruder in this story, in that she does not fit in, either by position or temperament. She comes to Paraclete from Paris, as she too wishes to seek advice from Héloïse. She is a woman of action. Although not unreligious, she has little time for saintliness and is not bogged down by the endless recourse to prayer which is the problem-solving method advocated by the two nuns. Eleanor’s life as queen is totally out of kilter with the lives of the two other women. A woman of the world, she is of child-bearing age and must produce a male heir, but she is unhappily married to a man who would rather say his prayers than have sex with his wife. She lives a worldly life in a castle surrounded by whatever luxuries might have been available in the Middle Ages and she is not afraid to speak her mind. We are party to a description of her travels as she accompanied her husband on the ill-fated second Crusade to Jerusalem and we have an account of her near-death at sea.

Despite their differences, the three women agree to disagree. The problem is finally solved through the intervention of each woman in turn, in her own way, or so they think. Even a perspicacious and historically informed reader could not guess at the conundrum suggested in the title of the work.

The book has not been well edited for publication and the rather too numerous infelicities should have been found and corrected. Nevertheless, we have here a gently religious mediaeval novel in which the author has intervened with fiction in a masterly manner. This intriguing work, dealing with topical themes will keep the reader interested and guessing to the end.

Etienne Fennell

John Kinsella’s *Post-colonial* is indeed, as his subtitle proclaims a récit. According to Dictionary.com a récit is a brief novel, usually with a simple narrative line. Récits also have the distinction of being studiedly ‘simple but deeply ironic tales in which the first-person narrator reveals the inherent moral ambiguities of life by means of seemingly innocuous reminiscences.’ Kinsella’s novel set in Western Australia and in particular the Cocos Islands, a coral atoll administered by the Australian government but densely populated by Malays who are Muslims, is a poetic and experimental narrative about cultural intrusion and appropriation. The Cocos Islands were known in Australia as the territory of the eccentric Clunies-Ross family whose notoriety lay in their ability to turn the islands and their copra industry into a personal fiefdom/kingdom. The workers, most of whom were imported Muslim Malays, were considered no better than slaves and were paid in a currency called the Cocos rupee that could only be redeemed at the company store. It was late as 1978 that the Australian government succeeded in evicting the last of the Clunies-Ross descendants and the following year that the Islands received some form of political autonomy and self-determination.

Kinsella’s narrator David travels to the Cocos Islands to collect oral histories of the Malay-speaking people and to delve into their colonial past. The story that he unearths is ‘reconstructed from oral histories, from marginalia on official scientific documents’ (152). He soon discovers that there is a dichotomy even within the Cocos Islands. On the one hand a Malay Muslim population lives on Home Island (HI), while a predominantly white Anglo Australian community (foreigners) lives on West Island. What is of greater interest and importance is that the Cocos Malays are not ‘natives’ but brought to the islands through trade and migration as a result of European colonialism. However, although the Cocos Malays are themselves from elsewhere, they are much more connected to the Cocos through their folk wisdom and collective memory than the Westerners can possibly be. Various hybrids and dissidents move and connect these communities.

The narrator offers a sophisticated exploration of issues of history and self-determination among the local Cocos Malay of Home Island and the non-Cocos Malay foreigners of West Island. Not only does Kinsella through his narrative, expose the colonial past of the Cocos Islands and the fact that a part of Asia and Islam is very much a part of Australia however much the Australians may wish to deny its presence, he also foregrounds and critiques the internal imperialism and class hierarchy that exists even in the present times. Tomas of the Home Island succinctly and trenchantly underscores this when he points out: ‘When they build the tourist resort it will mean a new and substantial source of income for the Islanders. They will work there and they will supply it with fish … But then the Australian Government will take a large slice of the profits – you can be sure of that’ (142). Notwithstanding the fact that *Post-colonial* is a critical and panoptic re-writing of an important part of Australian history, it makes pleasant reading due to its intimacy and interconnectedness with its subject.

Rajyashree Khushu-Lahiri


I begin to read this novel, sitting in the garden on (yes) a particularly warm day for England; 28 degrees merits a note in the daily news, as the voice of Malala, the girl shot in the face by the Taliban for going to school, drifts through the garden. This extraordinary young woman is at a summit meeting, talking about education and the rights of young people who listen to her and speak up with energy, vigour and pride. My wish is that Malala continues to flourish, to grow up and see the world for all that it is, and all that it is not.

There are many forms of oppression intrinsically linked; it seems, to the human search for meaning, for the placing of you, or I, within a context of one’s own belief of what is right and what is wrong. This seemingly endless source of conflict rears its head in every generation; perhaps never more so than during the Nazi rule in which Hitler and his army committed the most appalling crimes towards Jews and those persons within Germany who did not conform to the Nazi rule. For example, my grandmother was imprisoned in a concentration camp for joining the anti-Hitler protest marches in Berlin. A distant cousin with special needs was taken from Berlin City, out to relatives the countryside and kept hidden from the army until he died a natural death. Neither of my relative’s stories comes close to what others experienced during that terrible time, they merely serve as a further example, perhaps, of what it was to be human in an inhumane society.

The novel *Between Sky & Sea* takes on an age-old narrative of voyage. A group of Jewish refugees fleeing the Nazi invasion, board an old Greek freighter to Australia – a foreign land, a place unknown and strange. Homer’s *Odyssey*, that epic voyage written so long ago, takes the reader to strange lands, strange times and then back to a home that Odysseus recognises. It is this notion of home, or Heimatland (homeland), which is examined in the book *Between Sky & Sea*. The boat seems to represent a no man’s land, a place that is forever in-between, an unsteady place that rocks and heaves on a never-ending sea under a never-ending sky. The crew: a lost ill-prepared lot, are thrown together to live through a seemingly endless narration of day and night. The story moves from a wide lens in which we see the passengers ordered ‘to stay in their cabins and go to bed early’ (3) to a tight lens through which we meet the characters and learn about their prior life situation, their relationships and their loss. The structure of the book is solid, if a little predictable, each section given careful weighting so that the whole is balanced. Most interesting is the fact that under scrutiny each character becomes a mass of contradiction that is revealed through a complexity of life experience and compromise. For example Ida utters ‘words she regretted’ (134). She ‘began to spit out pieces of truth which cut like sharp knives.’ She asks ‘Why didn’t he remember his wife and child whom he had left in the fire without any protection?’ (2). She abuses her one true soul mate, and in doing so eases the pain in her heart, for just a moment. Ida (in her past life) was married to a man she detested, yet he and her child are dead. She has to blame someone, as the pain is all too consuming for her to manage. She blames the one person who knows, the one who was there and has always been there: Nathan, who she loved before her arranged marriage, and still loves. The Greek café owner is returning to Australia with a Greek wife, as he ‘was not attracted to the Australian girls’ (39). His wife, the one hope he has of happiness, dies on the way. The ‘distinguished Warsaw doctor’ (67) on board, is unable to help anyone and becomes an object of embarrassment. Everyone on the ship is a sadder, less effectual representation of whom they were in their prior lives; apart from Bronya, whose prowess grows as the others weaken and die. She is the...
only one able to adapt to her circumstances like a chameleon. She is unlikeable, untrustworthy, yet the only person on board who looks at things as they are and doesn’t live as if her life is already in the past. Her character is written without sympathy. Her needs and wants exploited, so the reader dislikes yet grudgingly admires her survival instinct: ‘she never parted and met the tall, elegant steward. In a corner hidden from prying eyes she sat with him until late into the night. And it was not all for love! for from him she got biscuits’ (51).

The boat journey, for most, is a slow dying – they are sailing away from all they know and love, into the unknown. Will they arrive? Will they perish?

The holocaust theme is never far away; echoes of an ominous nature seep into the text as first one child is ill, then dies. The boat is disinfected. On board ‘The Jews became frightened, fell in line and allowed themselves to be driven like a flock of sheep’ (77); a ghastly parody of the lines of men and women awaiting extermination in the gas chambers. The voyage is biblical in style as ‘several white seabirds’ (187) are seen as they near the shore, the ship ‘which had been silent for so long … wailed hoarsely like a lost animal’ (188); a doom-laden scenario that, sadly, plays out in the final pages: all are killed, not by silent gas, but by ‘a loud crash’ that heralds the end of their journey.

Hauntingly sad and evocative, this book certainly stands the test of time; being as relevant to today’s reader as it was in 1946.

Anne Lauppe-Dunbar
Sleeper’s Almanac No. 8 edited by Zoe Dattner & Louise Swinn (Sleepers Publishing, 2013)

From the small Australian press dedicated to promoting new voices in fiction, the Sleeper’s Almanac series is an annual anthology of the press’ top short stories. This year’s installment, The Sleeper’s Almanac 8, is a collection of stories in which characters seek out their own singular identity, succeeding as often as they fail. While such a statement might sound like a general formula of the short story or the necessary element of every plot, these voices do so against the post-global anxiety that the distinguishing features of values, voices, cultures and identities have been blurred by the homogenising mechanisation that John Tomlinson identified over twenty years ago in Globalization and Culture (1991). And this anxiety over sameness is a legitimate one: critics of previous Sleeper’s Almanac editions have cited a lack of diversity among the represented voices that has not been significantly remedied in this edition. Furthering the lack of diversity, most stories here lack any real sense of place; despite the occasional reference to Melbourne or Perth, the various settings might easily be the American city of Chicago or the suburbs of Tokyo. There is no conscious attempt to define what it means to be Australian or the ways in which Australian culture participates in or resists global homogeneity. Which is fine. In fact, this collective blurring of place and voice is rather the point, providing a backdrop for this anxiety that everything has become the same, beige boredomness that each individual must actively resist, carving out his or her own individual niche or risk being blurred into boredom along with everyone else. The similarities of voice and place might then actually be necessary in order for this collection to do what it does best: successfully imagine a broad spectrum of distinct subjects that stand in relief to this homogenous landscape, ranging from a Serbian immigrant to a Chinese expatriate to an Australian housewife.

Perhaps the story to most directly grapple with the anxiety of cultural homogeneity is Rhett Davis’ ‘Salad Bar’, the very title of which recalls the various post-colonial food analogies used to describe mixed cultures. This story examines the loss of singularity when personality does not stand in relief to homogeneity, but rather is defined by it. The protagonist is George, a man who, due to some predecessor’s overly zealous reproduction, shares the same unfortunate physical traits as hundreds of others in his small town. George is, essentially, a mass-produced product. Initially, his homogenized appearance does not encourage our protagonist to set himself apart in any way other than to isolate himself from any meaningful relationships. He has no interest in carving out a unique persona, but rather despises and isolates himself from the rest of the Georgeish-looking population, shutting himself in his office and avoiding his responsibilities as a restaurant owner, father, and husband. Yet, ironically, this homogeneity becomes the means of connection and solidarity. When George defends himself against an aggressive customer by spraying him with pudding, George recognizes his own features and traits in the pudding-covered man. This recognition of Self in the Other enables him to connect with not only his antagonist, but prompts engagement with and celebration of his surroundings and the people within. George helps the man wipe off the pudding, delegates the duty of managing the restaurant to his competent head waiter, and goes home to move his wife and children off to live near...
the Dordogne where he imagines a future in which they will participate in and celebrate
the distinctness of the region and each other: returning daily from the morning markets
with ‘pungent cheeses, sweet pastries, golden potatoes roasted in duck fat and a
hundred variations of raspberries and where I will grow, maybe, to know them’ (75).
This final imagining is rich and also distinct, suggesting not only an ability to identify
and ‘know’ one’s own self and family, but also an intense desire and hunger to do so.

Not every story adopts this ironic acceptance of homogeneity. While Davis’
definition of self emerges in the escape towards a specific and distinct culture, Isabelle
Li’s ‘Narrative of Grief’ loses definition via too many escapes. Lili, a Chinese
transplanted to London at the early age of 5, feels herself the product of too many
cultures, lacking the distinction that of any of them provide. And while settling in
Vancouver just as easily as Beijing might initially seem worldly and exciting, it also
creates a profound ambivalence of space and of Self. Lili can only identify herself as ‘a
person with no first language’. She is essentially without nationality or identity. And in
this way, she is also another version of Davis’ George, a product without any
distinguishing features. Yet, as she mourns this fact, the reader is distinctly aware of the
strength and intelligence of the voice belonging to this character. And while the abilities
and freedoms are enviable, she spends much of the story mourning her rootlessness.

Admittedly, in many of these stories, the future is unclear because it is limitless,
the characters facing as many possibilities as there are international airports. These are
essentially ‘first world problems’ that coalesce to create an amorphous cloud of
opportunities serving to intimidate rather than empower the characters. The result is a
collection of people in limbo between homes, devoid of a distinct place to connect to or
identify with. They are products of everywhere and nowhere. And if place is what
shapes personality, they themselves are in danger of becoming vague and featureless.

Perhaps the story that plays with and resists featurelessness in the most
entertaining way is Helen Adison-Smith’s ‘Flatpack’, which trails two hipsters
browsing that pinnacle of globalised domestic consumerism, Ikea. Like most hipsters,
they are amusingly ironic, but apathetic in their search for and definition of self. And
this apathy causes them to become lost in and imprisoned by the vastness and sameness
of the store. The story is funny and idiosyncratic, standing alone wel

While the stories seriously examine a reaction against a growing anxiety, this
examination is performed through an idiosyncratic lens: there is Davis’ use of pudding
as a weapon, a white substance coating and further obfuscating any distinguishing
features. Likewise, Adison-Smith marches an intimidating and hyper-sexualised Ikea
employee through her text, one that interrupts and undermines the corporate entity
while simultaneously frustrating and thwarting the consumers. Even the stories that
initially seem less interesting are themselves experimentations in constructions of
meaning-making, or the ways that different cultures ‘make sense’ of issues. Michelle
Radtke’s ‘Happy Monday,’ presents a depiction of beige normalcy that many readers
might find dull: tragedy has limited the protagonist’s life, forcing her to occupy the
domestic sphere, everyday brushing against the unlikely hope of escape. It is a familiar

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enough trope. But the story successfully disrupts this familiarity with a plague of frogs, a beloved addict, and at least one body to dispose of.

Largely, these stories are a call to create one’s own identity through the agency of engaging with and participating in one’s immediate surroundings. And if those surroundings aren’t engaging enough, well then, find some that are. Move to France or to Vancouver, find solidarity with your own personal antagonist. Or kill them with a shovel. The world is small enough. One choice is as plausible as another. Your greatest obstacle is selecting from that mountain of options.

Jennifer Marquardt
Margaret Merrilees, *The First Week* (Wakefield Press, 2013)

How would you feel if you received a phone call telling you that one of your children, or someone very close to you, had been arrested for murder and there was no doubt that the person was guilty? It’s not a situation you expect to find yourself in, but given that murders feature prominently in our daily news, and that many of the accused are ordinary people, why should it not happen to someone you know? If the murder seemed to be without motive that would make the situation even more traumatic.

This is the position facing Marian Anditon and the first week referred to in the title is the first week of her life after the shattering news. A morning begins like any other, as Marian goes about her chores on the farm, but by the evening she is on the road to Perth, uncertain of what she will discover when she arrives.

Merrilees takes us into the mind of Marian as she drives along the road, trying to come to terms with what she has learned:

Normally, driving at night, she would sing to keep herself awake…. The words came out as a grotesque croak, sending shockwaves through the quiet hum inside the car. Heat flooded up into her face. How could she think of singing at a time like this? (19)

Marian goes through the expected states of denial, confusion, searching for an explanation, examining her memories to see if she was to blame for her son’s actions. Along with her thoughts her physical reactions are taut and stretched like fencing wire. In that first week Marian learns more about her son, and much about herself. She is forced to confront the way in which the indigenous people have been forced from their land, and the way in which European settlers have degraded that land. At the end of the week she returns home, to a world that had changed for her forever, but one in which she knows that she will survive.

The narrative is told with deceptive simplicity, through the thoughts and reactions of Marian, a woman who is in no way exceptional, yet who is unique. As she searches back through her own life, her marriage, her two sons and the struggle to keep the farm going after her husband died, we can recognise that Marian’s was a life of struggle and compromise. Does that make her culpable?

In Perth she goes through the experience of the preliminary court hearing, seeing her son in the dock, but not being able to talk to him, conferring with his solicitor to whom Charlie is just one client. She finds the solicitor’s card reassuring because there seem to be three phone numbers, which suggest that he is important and successful. Then, ‘She put on her glasses and looked more closely. Phone Fax Mobile. Oh well. One secretary. But it did sound business like’ (42).

At the same time she meets the friends with whom Charlie shared a house, and a young indigenous woman who had introduced him to social activism. These encounters challenge Marian’s views on sexuality and racism. Prejudices have to be reexamined and abandoned. This part of her first week is one of the incidental consequences of Charlie’s action. There may have been pressure on Merrilees to explain more fully why Charlie shot two people he did not know, but the senselessness of these murders serve to highlight Marian’s distress and bewilderment and allows the focus of the book to remain with her.

The scene where Marian first visits Charlie in prison reveal the gulf between them, his self-absorption and her sense of helplessness.

‘Why didn’t you come yesterday?’
‘I’m sorry,’ she said stricken. He needed her. How could she have stayed away?
‘I waited.’
A seven year old Charlie, waiting at the school gate.
But this Charlie was not seven, and she wasn’t the one who had done something wrong, she had to hang on to that. (121)

The visit does not improve.

‘I would like to know what happened, what went wrong.’
But he wouldn’t look at her.
‘You can’t tell me, I can see that.’
‘You don’t have to stay,’ he said
‘Yeah. Perhaps I’d better go. Evie’s waiting.’ Marian got up, feelings in a jumble. Guilt, anger, despair. (124)

Marian wonders if she can just walk away, if she has the courage for this. But even as she thinks that, ‘the cobweb strings of motherhood were tugging at her gut’ (125).

_The First Week_ was written as the creative component of a Ph.D. The manuscript won the prize for the best Unpublished Manuscript at the Adelaide Festival 2012, and was deemed by the judges to be a clear winner. What is presented is a reflective and deep exploration of one person’s personality and inner thoughts. What might seem, at first glance, a slight story, is rich in detail and understanding of how a woman, faces a horrifying situation, one over which she has little control, yet might come to accept and learn from the experience. Nothing could bring her life back to what it has been, but in the end she accepts that Charlie must take responsibility for what he has done, and she must take responsibility for her own future. It is almost stream of consciousness writing and we are privy to Marian’s innermost musings and reactions, many of which are refreshingly ordinary, but which convey the depth of her distress.

_The First Week_ is thought provoking and absorbing. The writing draws you in and leaves you shaken, somewhat battered but strangely exhilarated.

**Emily Sutherland**
Emma Chapman, *How To Be a Good Wife* (Picador, 2013)

This chilling contemporary novel has the same title as an advice manual reputedly given to brides in the 1950s: *How To Be a Good Wife*. ‘Make your home a place of peace and order’. ‘Your husband belongs in the outside world. The house is your domain, and your responsibility’. Phrases like this are scattered throughout the text of the novel, to be read as the story unfolds.

Marta Bjornstad is struggling to be a ‘good wife’. She lives on the outskirts of a remote Scandinavian village with her ageing husband, Hector. Her adored son, Kylan, has long since grown up and left home. Marta spends her days locked into an obsessive routine of cleaning and cooking. When the novel opens, she is waiting for her watch to read exactly one o’clock. Then – and only then – can she leave the house and go to the market to buy food.

Marta is the creation of first-time novelist Emma Chapman. The text was written for the Masters in Creative Writing at the Royal Holloway in England, selected and edited by Picador and published early this year. If I were asked to provide an example of exceptionally talented work that has emerged from a university’s Creative Writing program, this is one of a handful of titles that I wouldn’t hesitate to select. Chapman’s novel is remarkably insightful and a genuine pleasure to read; she has written a clever and subtle psychological thriller. She has also made a thought-provoking contribution to the fictional representation of women and marriage in the twentieth century.

Doris Lessing’s *Mary Turner* (*The Grass is Singing*) succumbs to the ‘impalpable but steel-strong pressure to get married’¹ and bitterly regrets her decision. Richard Yates’ *April Wheeler* (*Revolutionary Road*) aborts her third child and ends her own life rather than continue to pretend to be a ‘good wife’ and mother. Michael Cunningham’s *Laura Brown* (*The Hours*) leaves her conventional 1940s suburban home before her unhappiness drives her to suicide. And as Marta Bjornstad comes to despise her life with her husband Hector, she retreats into a frightening world of her own making.

Hector tells his mother and his friends at the pub that Marta is suffering from ‘Empty Nest’ syndrome now that their son has left home. But Marta’s malaise is far deeper and more complex than this. She has stopped taking the ‘little pink pills’ that her husband’s doctor prescribed for her many years ago. Without her medication, she is starting to remember incidents from her forgotten past, from the time that led to her becoming Hector’s wife: ‘For all these years, I have thought of that day in the city as one full of light and joy. Hector and I, beginning our lives together. Now it’s as if I can see shadows for the first time’ (83).

Marta has always accepted Hector’s version of their shared past: they met when she was very young and seriously ill, overwhelmed with grief after her parents’ sudden death in a car crash. Hector took care of her, nursed her back to health and kept her ‘safe’; they moved to the isolated house in the valley, married and had a child. Marta’s memories of her early life are disturbingly vague and hazy. But she does recall, with joy and clarity, the first years of her son’s life:

> I watch as the front door opens and a woman walks out onto the stone doorstep. She carries a child on her hip, a boy with blond hair, and she is wearing my red apron, splattered with what looks like cake batter. She smiles as she puts the little boy on the


ground and begins to sweep the leaves. I hear her humming to herself. The little boy watches her with wide eyes. He reaches his arms out to her, and when she is finished, she scoops him up and runs back into the house with him. I can hear their laughter intertwining. (31)

There is no question that Marta loves her young son, and draws purpose and happiness from her life during his childhood. However, it is also clear that she resents Hector’s efforts to be a loving father, and her relationship with her son, now that he is an adult and independent, is fraught with tension. The chapters that cover Kylan’s arrival at the house with his girlfriend, Katya, and the announcement of their engagement, are painful to read. While Hector opens celebratory champagne, his wife hides in the kitchen, drinking too much wine and spoiling the dinner. Made shrewish and spiteful by jealousy, she treats Katya as a rival for her son’s affections and deeply resents the girl’s presence in their home.

Deprived of the fulfilment of motherhood, no longer in love with her husband, Marta is unable to continue to be ‘a good wife’. She becomes obsessed with memories of her past and begins having strange sightings of a young girl, ‘a flash of white-blond hair, a shriek of laughter, her muscular limbs pushing forward. The ballet shoes she wore on her feet’ (58). These recollections form part of a story that Marta begins to tell herself about her marriage, a story that becomes increasingly horrifying and bizarre. Is she uncovering repressed memories, tormenting herself with nightmares or experiencing hallucinations? Chapman’s skill as a writer prevents easy answers or simple conclusions: every incident in the novel can be interpreted in different, conflicting ways. Marta is drawn as an unreliable narrator and, like the governess in Henry James’ The Turn of the Screw, she exists on the brink of reality and madness.

Emma Chapman has cited Sylvia Plath’s harrowing novel The Bell Jar as an influence on her work; and other examples of female insanity in literature come to mind. The anguished female narrator in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s The Yellow Wallpaper, driven to madness by the ‘rest cure’ that imprisons her in her room, is an obvious antecedent. Doris Lessing’s Mary Turner, condemned to live on her husband’s isolated farm, and Susan Rawlings, the married woman who commits suicide in Room 19, feel as if they are losing their minds.²³ A careful reading of Chapman’s novel reveals the same concerns: women, defined as wives and mothers, restricted to conventional lives, can suffer intensely in roles that stifle and entrap them. Chapman’s protagonist can find no reason to go on living her joyless life after her son leaves home and marries another woman. On his wedding day, she chooses her own way out of her terrible dilemma. It is left to the reader to determine whether this choice is the result of female madness, or the consequence of Marta’s recovered memories and the appalling truth about her marriage. Neither conclusion is reassuring.

Jennifer Osborn


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 … Contemporaries 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.

Emily Sutherland