

**Kenneth Mackenzie, *The Young Desire It* introduced by David Malouf (Text Classics, 2013)**

In 1937, Kenneth Mackenzie's first novel, *The Young Desire It*, was awarded the Australian Literature Society's gold medal. Amongst the widespread acclaim, however, there was one prevalent objection to the novel, as David Malouf recalls in his excellent foreword to Text Classic's recently republished edition: 'a common complaint against *The Young Desire It* is that it is a book in which ... "nothing happens".'

True, the plot is thin. It is a year-in-the-life of Charles Fox, an adolescent country boy whose idyllic life on an isolated Western Australian farm is disrupted when he is sent off to boarding school. There he must learn to cope with the bullying of his peers, the increasingly uncomfortable advances of his schoolmaster, and a strenuous academic workload. Charles' only respite is the love of a young schoolgirl, Margaret, who, after a chance meeting back at the farm, becomes the centre of his awakening adolescent desires.

These are the bare bones of a coming-of-age narrative, but from them Mackenzie fashions a wholly muscular, hot-blooded portrait of a young man; a psychological profile so precise that every shift in Charles' mood carries the tension of a thriller. It is amongst the best written in the genre, a true Australian classic whose power has not diminished over the generations.

The novel starts in terror, with Charles nearing school gates that loom 'like the blind open jaws of a dead shark, sinister and smally cathedraline' (8). After years in the company of only his mother and a handful of servants, Charles arrives with an 'angelic innocence' (5), entirely ignorant to the 'the awful horror of the danger of human beings' (61). His delicate features soon mark him as prey to a crowd of cruel boys, 'lips curled with a certain gleaming expectancy' (15), who carry him off to be stripped and humiliated in an empty classroom. Worse even than the physical intimidation, is the realisation that Charles' old life, in 'a world where he had been left alone, happily free' (6), is over, his identity now coalesced into a society of others: 'he had never seen so many beds; his own present insignificance began to dawn on his consciousness' (19).

In such an environment, Charles is forced to grow up quickly, discovering a heretofore-untapped reserve of defiance, and 'learning how to use his clenched hands' (38). Mackenzie laments this transformation as one in which the instinctive innocence of childhood is polluted by an adult's need for reason and suspicion: 'The brilliance of his own dawn had gone like the day's, clouded over by a high wind from the north-west and distressed by a questing breeze of doubt' (96). Charles is frustrated by the loss of his 'simple perspective of faith and innocence', and he rails against adulthood to Margaret: 'Can't we just live, without thinking? It spoils everything. I was terribly happy, and now I feel sad' (213).

The anxiety of adulthood is encapsulated perfectly in one of Charles' masters, the Englishman Penworth. Educated at Oxford, and possessing 'an intelligence not frequently to be met' (247), Penworth is nonetheless deeply dissatisfied with his life, viewing his post amongst the 'little wretches' (27) of Australia as a sort of intellectual purgatory. When he first meets Charles, the boy is naked – victim again of the school bullies, and the sight of his pale, bare body stirs in Penworth 'some strange sensation of pleasure and shame' (50). The master circles his pupil for a time, confused by his own urges, and at 'great pain to explain ... what were his objects in cultivating the boy' (118). Eventually, intellectualism gives way to

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action, and Penworth, desperate to find ‘some response to his own will’ (140), kisses Charles ‘clumsily and hard on the lips’ (140). Charles is bewildered by the incident, but no more than Penworth himself, who is ‘abashed by his own damnable desire for the whiteness and innocence of the boy’ (182). Mackenzie handles this potentially sordid plotline with a deft touch: his interest is not in the scandalous nature of Penworth’s advances, but in the torment instinctive desires can bring to the rational adult mind.

The beating of Charles’ own erotic pulse begins when he meets a pale, round-faced schoolgirl named Margaret, whilst holidaying back at his mother’s farm. Appropriately for Charles, a boy ‘deeply sensitive to all weathers’ (171), Mackenzie sets the arc of their young love against the changing of the Australian seasons. They meet in autumn – the brilliant summer of Charles’ childhood has ended, and like ‘the dagger-points of the first new green coming through’ (94), his body has begun to germinate, ‘aching as though for rain’ (96). Almost miraculously, Margaret appears, her presence affecting Charles ‘as unexpectedly and enchantingly as the telling of some romantic secret’ (101). Separated over a lonely winter, they are reunited when the landscape, like their burgeoning desire, is ‘green and flowered and springing in its growth’ (188). Amongst ‘a madness of bees’ (190), they quietly gaze into each other’s eyes, and Mackenzie is perceptive enough to recognise the deep impact this confirmation of another’s lust has upon Charles: ‘its effect upon him was like that of a burst of thunder to one who has watched the lightning and waited’ (207).

Finally, comes the heady summer of the couple’s consummation. In a lengthy, glorious passage Mackenzie sends his young lovers marching through the hot day in search of a cool spot to lie down together, the heat ‘like a wave bearing them, too strong, too urgent now for pause’ (324). This should be a joyous time, and yet there is something quietly tragic about the scene; Margaret’s face is ‘flushed and grave, with a frown darkening her grey eyes’, and Charles senses something ‘moving with inexorable leisure to a close before he had realized its event’. They are free at last, and it is freedom that the young desire, but what a strange freedom, helplessly impelled as they are by ‘the terrible willingness of the flesh, and the mysterious purpose of its desire’ (325). In the end, Mackenzie gently mocks the triumphant actions of these young lovers, not because they have ended their childhood, for this is inevitable, but for doing so under ‘the illusion that what they did they did by the blind volition of their own single will’ (339).

## Alex Cothren