

## Christos Tsiolkas, *Barracuda* (Allen and Unwin, 2013)

*Barracuda* is Danny Kelly, totally dedicated to becoming a world champion swimmer whatever the cost. *Barracuda* is Christos Tsiolkas's searing account of his inner life, from the child Danny to the man Dan. Danny's Dad is a truck driver, his Mum is a hairdresser, they live in 'dirty-pissy-scummy Reservoir' in Melbourne's suburban north-east. But Danny's drive and talent win him a swimming scholarship at a private school known to us only as 'Cunt's College' where he has to find his way among the spoilt sons of the rich and privileged. Never believe anyone who says there are no class divisions in Australia.

I could write about the narrative structure (complex but tight as a drum) and the characterisation (unnervingly recognisable); the point of view (always Dan/Danny's, but switching from first to third-person) and voice (urgent, unrelenting). If I analysed all that I could find out something about *how* Tsiolkas compelled me to keep reading through all the venom and shame and hatred of the first part of this novel. I could write about symbolism and patterning (all precisely controlled and orchestrated) and themes, values, morality, even politics (all explicable and powerfully managed) – *what* he is saying – but that would be a poor surrogate for the experience of reading, fighting through, this novel. What I want to write about, if I can, is how it feels to be trapped in the thwarted, constricted mind of this young man for the few days it takes to read his story. By degrees it becomes unsettling, then upsetting, then distressing. The boy Danny is so terrifyingly at the mercy of his own driving ambition and the expectations of his family and his snarling coach, so coldly single-minded in his repudiation of everything which might impede him – his swimming rivals, any sexual release and its resulting enervation, the slightest nick in his perfect skin – that he lives on a knife-edge of violence, hatred and shame, and the sense of impending catastrophe is almost overwhelming. The man Dan is shamed by his failure, haunted by despair and hopelessness, dogged by self-loathing. As Part One ended, I was ready to cry, Christos, have mercy!

And he does. Part One is 'Breathing In' – holding in breath and guarding secrets and hiding feelings. Although the narrative is not chronologically linear and in both parts moves back and forth before and after the event that changes Danny's life, Part Two is gentler. In it Dan breathes out, gradually releases his pent-up aggression and tension, forgives himself and makes peace with his father. Tsiolkas will take us to the darkest places – as he did in *Dead Europe* – but the undeniable faith in humanity which surfaces at the end of the earlier novel almost – almost – shades into sentimentality towards the end of *Barracuda*.

Some might say that at 513 pages the novel is longer than it needs to be. Few would accuse Tsiolkas of an elegant prose style. He can skewer a pretentious character or a hypocrite, but he is no satirist. There is no comedy or irony. He wants to provoke, to get under the reader's skin. But his style is perfectly suited to his purpose, with barely a false note. And despite the jaggedness of this narrative, effected by the sometimes disorienting shifts backwards and forwards in time, there is nothing sloppy or half-baked about its construction. I was drawn compulsively into the book, and wanted nothing more than to be carried along and subjected to its buffeting without stopping to make notes, but I couldn't help noticing how well it was pieced together, how satisfying the arc of the narrative, how many little resonances and echoes there were binding the whole work together. The tone of much criticism of this author has been suggestive of a raw, explosive, untamed talent, a rough

diamond. If this were ever true, it is true no longer. *Barracuda* is passionate and uncompromising, violent and profane, but it is a skilful, accomplished – and intensely satisfying – work of art.

**Gillian Dooley**