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This is the author’s radio script of this article.


*Siddon Rock* is Glenda Guest’s first novel. Set in a remote inland town in Western Australia just after the second world war, it is a novel more about a place than about people; more about mood and atmosphere than about particular events.

‘Since leaving the west,’ according to the author bio, Guest ‘has lived in cities and country towns in Victoria, New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory and south-east Queensland, all experiences that add to the richness that writers draw on for their fiction. She is currently living in the Blue Mountains, enjoying being a “mountain-woman”.’ Reading this filled me with misgivings, but I resolved to resist my prejudice and read on with an open mind. Sadly, with the best will in the world I wasn’t able to revise my first impressions: I found *Siddon Rock* pretentious, overwritten and clichéd.

In the opening chapter Macha Connor arrives home from the war and marches through the town, stark naked except for her slouch hat, army boots and .303 rifle. The woman is obviously seriously disturbed – she seems to have lost the power of speech along with her clothes – but once she has arrived and been escorted through the town by two of the town’s aged wise women, she drops off the radar while we are introduced to more of the eccentrics of this small town. There’s the draper and dressmaker Alistair Meakins, a furtive cross-dresser. There’s the promiscuous Sybil Barber, who has inherited the family butchery and bakery business from the father who abused her in childhood. And there’s the mysterious barman Kelpie Crush, with one brown eye and one blue eye. After a while a stranger arrives in town: a German refugee, Catalin Morgenstern, with her young son Josis.
Symbolism and mysticism weigh heavily on *Siddon Rock*. Catalin has a magical cello which tells her when her mother has died back in Europe. The urine of a disappointed forbear has so polluted the local salt lakes that his descendants can’t make a living from their salt business. Even arithmetic is suborned to the twisted logic of magical realism: the businessmen can’t get their figures to add up and lose everything to the bank.

*Siddon Rock* might have been written to order for a certain faddish literary scene. There is the concern with the liminal – Nell, the aboriginal woman who cleans at the hospital and lives alone with her dingoes, thinks ‘Catalin was one of those people who are able to slip across borders, but had yet to learn the language of this place.’ There is Alistair’s gender-bending: ‘For me,’ he tells Catalin, ‘feminine is the essence. It’s the strength and desire under whatever surface the world sees, hidden away right at the heart of being.’ And there is a super-abundance of more or less mystical wise women, like Granna, who is some kind of immortal home help who has been around for at least four generations, and Nell, who knows a lot but is continually being ignored, especially by the men. Marjorie, the publican’s wife, used to be a jazz clarinettist and trails a cloud of visible blue notes everywhere she goes. Portentous epigrams, like ‘There comes a time when we have to recognise ourselves in the mirror,’ preface each chapter. The narrative voice is uncertain, sometimes becoming almost embodied and once only becoming ‘we’ as if the narrator was the town personified, but usually remaining impersonal and inscrutable.

This could work I suppose but it just doesn’t hang together. Guest doesn’t manage to make us really care about any of these people, each of whom is a symbol of something rather than a fully imagined human being. Overall, reading *Siddon Rock* is a dull and dispiriting experience.