

## Torsten Krol, *Callisto* (Picador, 2007)

When a novel of the force and genius of *Callisto* emerges from out of nowhere, it is only natural to speculate that the author is fated to become Hot Property, the Next Big Thing, a novelist of such standing, and repute, that he or she will be called upon to give opinions and commentary on all the burning issues of the day. Such an outcome is, however, precluded in the case of the author of this landmark work of modern satire; for if publisher, literary agent and media hype are to be believed, nobody actually knows who 'Torsten Krol' is.

A single reading of *Callisto* may however lead one to conclude that Krol is a reclusive novelist who deserves to be left in blissful obscurity, free from publicity commitments, and free to focus on turning out novels like this.

Yet for a work of such devastating satire, how innocently it all starts out! What a simple, touching story *Callisto* at first appears to be. The first chapter put this reader firmly in mind of *The Catcher in the Rye* (an effect which I suspect may have been intended by the author). Odell Deefus, twenty-one years old, six-feet-three and not the sharpest knife in the box, is fleeing a deadbeat dad and miserable home life, and heading for that oasis to the downtrodden and destitute: the United States Army. When his car breaks down near the town of Callisto, Kansas, his decision to seek help from an isolated farmhouse propels him into one of the most bizarre, complicated and successfully-unfurled plots that could be conceived of. (By the way, I'll assume that's a reference to *The Wizard of Oz*: Odell seeks refuge in a farmhouse in Kansas, and, after someone receives a blow to the head, he steps out to find himself in an alien and often disturbing world).

Dean Lowry, the house's sole resident – his aunt, who owns it, is supposedly holidaying in Florida – is clearly not pleased with his unexpected guest. The explanation for this is soon enough revealed: without giving away too much, one can nonetheless say that Dean is one of those people who, if they know where the bodies are buried, acquired this information through having put them there. To reveal much more would spoil the surprise value of the plot, which unfolds like a chain of dominoes: one little tap, and Odell Deefus's life spirals out of control, until the good-natured, big-hearted, well-intentioned bumpkin from Wyoming finds himself the most wanted man in the US.

In mythology, Callisto is a nymph and follower of Artemis, the goddess of the hunt, who, like Artemis, has taken a vow of chastity. But she caught the eye of Zeus, who, in order to have his way with her, came to her disguised as Artemis, and, when she let her guard down, raped her. Having broken her vow, Callisto incurred the wrath of Artemis, who banished her to have her child alone. Far from being one of those pretentious mythological allusions, *Callisto* is therefore the most fitting of titles: for poor Odell Deefus seems fated to be preyed upon and then discarded by almost everybody he encounters.

Crooked cops, drug-smugglers, religious zealots, politicians – all, it seems, want something Odell Deefus can provide, and are therefore unhesitant about exploiting him for their own ends. The satire is too relentless to attempt to break down

into its component parts but, suffice to say, contemporary American society has been pilloried beyond its critics' wildest dreams. When historians come to write of intellectual opposition to George W. Bush's government and all it represented, they need look no further for an example of the contempt in which such a government was held, and just how its opponents expressed their unbounded rage against it. Had it not been published beforehand, *Callisto's* comic, yet unnervingly accurate depiction of how an innocent man can be hyped into a terrorist suspect might also have led to the perfectly reasonable conclusion that the author was taking a swipe at the Howard Government over its (mis)handling of the Dr. Haneef affair.

Whoever Torsten Krol is, he or she is the George Orwell of the twenty-first century, and as a satire on an ideology that causes incalculable human suffering – even if only from the very best of motives – *Callisto* is on par with *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Animal Farm*. Media speculation has included claims that Torsten Krol could be a cover for an established Australian author, an idea worth taking into consideration since Krol's first novel, *The Dolphin People*, was a more than competent first novel. It was in fact a very good one, and its portrait of Uncle Klaus, the psychopathic Nazi war criminal who genuinely believes it is acceptable for him to play God, was chilling. Yet there was nothing particularly original in its *Lord of the Flies* scenario, and it gave no indication of what was to come.

Yes, who Torsten Krol is, this reader neither knows nor cares. She has only one request: keep 'em coming.

**Judith Loriente**