

Jesse Pentecost, *The Con* (ABC Books, 2008)

How nice it is, in a world glutted with unreadable fiction by well-practised hacks and journalists, to occasionally come across a novel that feels like it has been written by a real author, who actually has some literary talent. Yes, a real author: one of those creatures so revered in principle but so ignored by those who subscribe to the supposedly harsh realities of the publishing industry; one of those creatures so unappreciated in their own time, and yet so worshipped once they are safely dead, preferably at a romantically tragic young age.

The Con, admittedly, is far from perfect, but then, as Somerset Maugham insisted in *Ten Novels and Their Authors*, no novel can ever be perfect, as the novel is an essentially imperfect form. Indeed, the first five chapters are so bad that they might easily mislead some readers into thinking there is nothing better to come, and giving up. It is not until page 42 that the novel really gets going, and, before that, one must wade through a morass of grungy student culture, drug-taking, and unnecessarily crude jokes.

But with the start of Discourse One: Genius and Beethoven, one really gets to the good stuff. A free-standing essay, it has almost no relation to the rest of the novel, aside from the fact that its subject is classical music and that Derek Gunderson, the main character, is a student in his last year of study at a conservatorium of music. But what a masterly essay it is: it's one of the funniest things this reviewer has ever read. Ruminating on musical genius, Gunderson singles out Beethoven as a supreme embodiment of the artistic temperament and musical history's greatest composer. Why? To quote:

In Beethoven's personality we can isolate many of the characteristics allegedly typical of the Genius: unruly appearance, poor social skills, ineptness with financial matters, sub-par hygiene. From this it has been argued that Beethoven's mind was incapable of dealing with mundane matters, so stratospheric was the plane upon which it generally manoeuvred ... Conservatoriums boast no shortage of hapless wannabes who turn the inability to cook, drive a car or wash themselves into a moral postulate ... However, many people are scruffy, antisocial, poor and unclean, yet fail to achieve any lasting notoriety. (44)

The explanation for this conundrum? 'Clearly, then, it's the quality of Beethoven's music that elevates him above other dyslexic hobos' (44).

This discursive, informal, essay-style format is *The Con*'s chief strength: above all, it's unpretentious. Unlike so much published fiction, there is nothing cheap, gimmicky or painfully contrived about it – nothing that insults the reader's intellect. It is as if, with cool-headed assurance, the author has simply set out to tell life as it really is, all the while confident that his comic powers will more than make up for the book's lack of a plot.

As is perhaps to be expected from a first novel, it is certainly uneven in tone: slow to start, it soon picks up, with several chapters of brilliant high comedy, only to then slow down again and become uneventful, before picking up again in the last

ninety pages. But in the greater scheme of things this is a minor flaw, and the quality of the observational humour more than makes up for it. One scene, in the chapter entitled 'In Purgatory', highlights, perfectly exquisitely, the issue at the heart of the comedy of manners: that the battle is not just between those with good manners and bad, but between those who have manners, and those who do not – and who are constitutionally incapable of grasping just how they have managed to give offence. Derek's somewhat loutish friend Martin, with Derek in a café, begins swearing his mouth off (his usual manner of speech) in front of a family eating their breakfast. The result is perhaps only to be expected: 'As the father got up, he leant over their table and hissed in an English accent, "You two ought to be ashamed of yourselves." His left hand, planted on the table next to Derek's cup, shook badly' (64). Martin's response, far from being one of profuse apology for swearing in front of the man's children, is a genuinely bewildered query that includes yet another four-letter word. The entire scene, from Derek and Martin's entry into the café, throughout the gradually building tension and the father's twitching at the expletives, through to Derek's final twinge of sympathy for what the children's home life must be like, 'away from the moderating gaze of the public' (66), is flawless, and clearly the work of a master comedian. Not one further stroke of the brush could have bettered it.

The depiction of the family, too, is worth noting as an example of the author's magnificent flair for cool, detached, ironical observation:

On their other side, Derek's right, was a family eating their breakfast. They deserve a mention for the tense quiet in which they sat, an aural black hole in an otherwise rambunctious atmosphere. ... It seemed to be emanating primarily from the father, a tall man seated nearest to them, glowering at the remains of his Eggs Benedict with concentrated zeal. ... For this family, silence at mealtimes was obviously a longstanding rule, and reeked of nothing so much as ill-suppressed rage. (63)

There is something almost Seinfeldian in this type of on-the-ball observational humour: *The Con* is filled with these sort of jokes, ones which are so deadly accurate that one cannot help but laugh out loud at them but which, obvious as they seem after the fact, one wouldn't have stopped to think about until they were so astutely pointed out. To give one last example, again from Discourse One:

No one tunes into daytime talkshows to watch the upper echelons of society describe how they've managed to increase their already considerable fortunes. No, we want to hear about the rise from zero to hero, about sales assistants who marry princes, about illiterates with IQs of seven who become astronauts, or president of the most powerful country on earth. (47)

These swipes at modern and not-so-modern society, these occasional, unexpected flashes of wry comic genius make *The Con* well worth reading in spite of its flaws, at least for lovers of comic novels. They make up for the fact that the book really is a tad too long – a short, sharp comic novel, in the manner of Evelyn Waugh's early comic masterpieces, might have been better – and for the fact that the humour occasionally

flies firmly in the face of questionable taste. But then, how many novels are there out there that are consistent in tone throughout, and devoid of even a hint of risqué humour, but which possess not a spark of wit or originality from cover to cover? Genius is difficult and, if one wants it, one has to take the bad with the good. Anyone who thrives on lightweight middlebrow fiction will no doubt be appalled by the bad in *The Con*, and equally unable to appreciate the good, and is best advised to steer clear of it. But to someone who has long-overdosed on just this type of uninspired commercial fiction, and concluded that mediocrity, coupled with pretentiousness, is the one sure-fire means to a publishing deal, it seems astonishing that someone with this much talent managed to even get published. Had it not been highly commended in the ABC Fiction Award, might *The Con* still be languishing in undeserved obscurity? In any case, rarity of rarities when it comes to new-release fiction: I'm seriously looking forward to the author's next book.

Judith Loriente