Elizabeth Harrower, *In Certain Circles* (Text, 2014)

Set in post-World War Two Sydney, Elizabeth Harrower’s latest novel entrances with intriguingly everyday dialogue and dynamic characters. The book follows the intersecting lives of privileged siblings Zoe and Russell Howard and the orphaned Stephen and Anna Quayle. The idyllic middle class life of Zoe and Russell unapologetically clashes with Anna and Stephen’s perception of the world. Often dark, it is a tale of love, class and destruction.

Harrower wrote and then retracted *In Certain Circles* from her publisher in 1971. The reason is shrouded in mystery. Despite the book having sat on the shelf for 43 years, it has been dusted off and deserves to be well received.

In part one of the novel, Harrower comments on class with exchanges between the Howards and Stephen and Anna. Harrower states, ‘Zoe had wakened in this square stone house on the north side of Sydney Harbour, and learned soon afterwards from her family and their friends that she was remarkable’ (6). It is this sense of entitlement and the comfortable elitism held by the Howards that fosters a sense of class antagonism. Stephen and Anna cannot grasp the middle class rituals around conversation, and, much to the Howards’s disgust, do not wish to.

Tension is perpetuated by the elite family’s lack of understanding that it is luck that decides who is born into privilege. Zoe and Russell’s mother fosters these ideas through an emphasis on family status and history: ‘Her husband had… a few black-sheep labourers in his background’ while ‘her side was blameless: academics, solicitors, reliable men and women’ (50). In contrast, Zoe naively says, ‘You only think of orphans in fairy tales’ (9).

While Harrower writes about brothers and sisters, it is the female characters in the book that are the most vibrant. Anna, Zoe and Lily, who is Russell’s wife, each embody particular roles: Zoe the Wife, Lily the Mother and Anna the Independent Single Woman.

Harrower says as much in what she leaves out in her characterisation as in what she includes, fostering mystery through gaps in time and learning about characters through the lens of another character rather than an all-knowing narrator. This is especially so with Russell, whose character is never fully explored. We know he is charismatic and attracts people, but this is not shown. He remains on the periphery of the story, as Lily’s husband, Zoe’s brother and Anna’s love interest.

Part three of *In Certain Circles* has strong themes of emotional abuse. Harrower movingly shows the systematic criticism and cruelty of Stephen towards Zoe. He hates her for her carefree childhood, and so over the period of their marriage strips away her youthful energy. Zoe’s thoughts and reflections on their conversational wars are so realistic that this reader consumed them with a locked jaw and tight chest.

Towards the beginning of the novel, the narrator says, ‘If you could believe what you read, Sydney was one of the largest cities in the English-speaking world’ (7). At the end, Sydney is ‘the world’s twenty-eighth largest city, with a population more or less equal to Rome’ (183). The author cleverly aligns the world’s view of Sydney with Zoe’s view. The difference in the city’s perception over time speaks to Zoe’s character where the brightness and strength of Sydney is aligned with her. By the end of the novel, Zoe, like Sydney, is rather small and is no longer unique but comparable to others. *In Certain Circles* spans from post-war to the 1970s, and with this comparison also comments on a change of worldview. There is a growing acceptance that there is more to offer than the ‘English-speaking world’, with Harrower cleverly comparing Sydney to Rome, something that wouldn’t have been done in the 1940s when Australia was elevated through being the child of the Monarchy. At the same time, Harrower also comments on how Australia is conveyed as at the
periphery of Europe, being seen as less worthy and less culturally valued by the book’s English
descendants. This is what Zoe refers to as a ‘national inferiority complex’ (127).

But part three of the novel remains the weakest. While the previous parts have been driven by
closely examining the characters’ thoughts, everyday conversations and lives, the final section is
thrust forward by an unlikely plot. Anna accidentally sends two suicide letters to Zoe and Russell,
letters that she had written years ago. These she somehow confused with Christmas cards.

Zoe and Stephen’s marriage woes are resolved in a quick and unlikely fashion. This seems
implausible considering the years of Stephen’s vicious emotional abuse. Further, Stephen’s ultimate
passivity is unrealistic and therefore insulting to other women who have struggled to leave abusive
partners out of fear. Zoe ends the book, stating, ‘the day was lovely… And now she could move on’
(252). It is unlikely that a woman who, as Harrower has described, been stripped of the carefree joy
she once possessed, could suddenly feel such unbridled hope. Not much earlier, Zoe said, ‘I’m the
guilty party… [I] agreed to be devalued to the point where I’m of less consequence than anyone in
the world’ (152). Lily, Anna and Russell’s resolution is somewhat more believable but also suffers
from being too tidy.

Harrower ties up the story in a rush, with a tidy resolution. It feels jarring and out of place in a
novel which so intricately discusses the complexity of life and relationships. The ending is a product
of the flaws of the novel, these including Harrower skipping over large passages of time between the
three books. She glosses over the decay of Zoe and Stephen’s marriage, leaving the reader feeling as
though they are missing out on the nuanced emotional hardship that Harrower writes so well.

At 250 pages, the book could have easily been extended to four hundred. The hastening of the
novel meant that the ending was forced to escalate, giving a false sense of suspense and unlikely
circumstances that ultimately disappoint the reader.

A wonderful novel is potentially ruined by an ending that is undeserving of Harrower’s
flawless writing and portrayal of emotion. Harrower portrays the difficulties of women in a nuanced
way: Anna struggling to live as a single woman on a low salary in the 1950s, Lily’s identity being
connected to her children to her detriment, and Zoe suffering from emotional abuse and coming to
terms with the failing of her marriage. These are the ultimate takeaways from the book. And because
of this, despite weaknesses, *In Certain Circles* reinstates Harrower’s reputation as an influential
Australian writer.

Katerina Bryant