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


The title of Letters to the End of Love, Perth writer Yvette Walker’s first novel, is both accurate and misleading. The novel does consist entirely of letters – written with pen on paper – but if anything, these letters revive or reinforce the love between the couples who write them. Enstrangement and distance, even death, are not strong enough to kill these loves. Perhaps, then, the title could be paraphrased as Letters with love as their end, or as their aim.

There are three couples, in three periods, in three countries. Their lives do not intersect, though there are some common referents, the principal one being Paul Klee’s 1930 painting Ad Marginem – but even more powerfully, these three threads of this novel are linked by their restless intelligence, their melancholy, and their recourse to dreams and memories of a long shared history. This is not a novel of activity and incident. The emphasis is on the importance of time to remember, contemplate and attend to the other person.

Walker doesn’t provide us with anything but the letters. All the backstory has to be gleaned from them. Intriguing clues stud the letters, and though she sometimes resorts to the device of one saying to the other, ‘remember when…’, this is of a piece with the tone of nostalgia and memorialisation which suffuses the whole novel. But mysteries remain, as they must when an outsider witnesses the interaction of any couple. Each of the fifteen sections, marked not by chapter headings but by running headers – ‘The Cork Letters’, ‘The Perth Letters’, ‘The Bournemouth Letters’ – contains one exchange between the couples, except in the one case where the correspondence is one-sided. In Bournemouth, in 1948, an English doctor, John, addresses his lover David, a German artist taken by the Nazis. His letters are his way of staying sane:

This line of communication between you and I, this thin grey line between us, seems to me at times the most absurd piece of artifice, and at others the greatest, simplest way to remember you. I am worried that without it I could wander into myself in such a way that I will never find my way out again.

He is the saddest of the letter-writers, the one whom time has defeated. ‘As much as I love you,’ he writes, ‘I still don’t fully understand you. I thought I had a lifetime to try.’ At the other end of the timescale, in 2011, a Perth bookseller, Grace, writes to her estranged lover, Lou, a celebrity’s minder travelling the world with her famous pop-singer client. Grace is not a traveller, embedded in her small-scale life in Perth, where she is haunted by her brother, a journalist killed in Iraq, and kept company by a cat named Crow Bait. But despite their incompatible lives, Lou and Grace will manage to bridge their differences.

Halfway between these two couples we have Dmitri and Caithleen, a Russian artist and his Irish novelist wife, living together in Cork with their adopted pet, a nameless animal usually referred to as ‘the notorious dog’. Dmitri has a fatal disease and is painting his last work, a large white painting, to the accompaniment of the Beatles’ White Album, which has just been released. The year, of course, is 1969. Dmitri is utterly beguiling – his dry humour, his love for the dog, for his dead brother Viktor, and for Caithleen. He will die – ‘Death sits with me and the notorious dog here in this greenhouse. He says nothing, a small man in an unpressed shirt, unremarkable trousers, tired and unkempt, his socks a sad shade of grey’ – but unlike John, he has had time to know and love Caithleen.

Letters to the End of Love could have been overwritten and pretentious – Beckett, the Mahabharata and Akhmatova are all name-checked in the first three pages. It is full of the retelling of dreams which notoriously risks alienating readers. But it manages to be none of those things. The voice is so beautifully handled for the most part, that the few errors – ‘you and I’ used instead of ‘you and me’, for example, or ‘like’ instead of ‘as if’ – are doubly jarring. One does so wish a careful editor had worked on the manuscript. Then I could say that this book, as a sophisticated portrait of what love is and can be, approaches perfection.