

## Madeleine St John, *The Essence of the Thing* (1997; Text Classic, 2013)

Many Australian readers will have discovered St John – an enigmatic literary figure, who took odd jobs to support her writing habit, lived alone but with cats, and smoked furiously – late in her life, as I did because she published her first book after the age of fifty having lived as an expat in London for thirty years. She set only one novel in Australia, about a Sydney shop girl: *The Woman in Black* (1993).

*The Essence of the Thing* was shortlisted for the 1997 Booker Prize, and is St John's third novel. Text republished it as one of their Classic series, with an introduction by Helen Trinca, who wrote *A Life of Madeleine St John* (2013). Readers interested in St John's backstory – the suicide of her mother, her difficult relationship with her father, her tearing up of her biography of Helena Blavatsky – may also enjoy Trinca's book, winner of the 2014 Prime Minister's Prize for Non-fiction. After St John died in 2006, a flurry of interest arose in the Australian press.

*The Essence of the Thing* opens on the first page in a compelling way: Nicola Gatling, who works for an arts organisation, returns from the shops with a packet of cigarettes and is confronted by her boyfriend, who, in caddish fashion, is attempting to evict her from her flat in Notting Hill, indeed, from their relationship. He no longer loves her and assumes that as her office salary cannot match his own, she is not in a position to buy *him* out. It is no spoiler to mention, therefore, that the awkwardness of who to tell and what to do, drives early action.

St John may have averred the term feminist but it quickly becomes apparent that her engaging and intelligent protagonist does not deserve to be treated with such contempt. Jonathan is a bit of a bastard: “*Please* don't cry anymore”, he said. “It really isn't helpful” (10). Her reasonable willingness to give up a place she has made home with inexpensive but tasteful effects seems surprising. The meaning of love, the status of women, social class, and commitment-phobia in men, including their attitude to reproduction – on which the plot turns – are the main subjects of the novel. Contemporary readers may identify with Nicola's disappointment when her hopeful love for Jonathan turns out to be ‘friends with benefits’:

‘Oh, that,’ said Jonathan. ‘That means nothing. Sex ... It has *nothing* to do with love’ (105);

‘You're an attractive woman, obviously any man in my situation would have been glad enough to fuck you, it doesn't mean anything one way or another’ (118).

The action plays out over several weeks in 1990s London. The novel's open ending suggests a potentially circular plot, although one that folds back upon itself in flashbacks, and is focalised in a disconcertingly bouncy way through several of the main characters: his friends, Lizzie and Alf, and hers, Susannah and Geoffrey. Apart from Jonathan, who is frequently described as a prat, they are intelligent and likeable, thirtyish, married Londoners. Gender differences are well delineated:

‘Honestly, Geoff. This is no time for joking. Nicola might be in *real* trouble.’

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‘Not her. That chic little Notting Hill set-up with the deluxe plumbing and the stuffed shirt laying down the old claret. No way. She probably just wants help with her vol-au-vents’. (14)

‘Do you have to be tolerant, and humble, and imaginative, to know anything about love?’[asks Geoffrey of his wife]

‘Yes.’

‘I think,’ he said slowly, ‘you’ve just made a serious point. How disconcerting.’ (28)

The dialogue sparkles with wit, underlining the tensions of modern marriage, especially the affording and caring for children; Nicola proves unfashionably generous and adept at the latter. Several times, St John metaphorically presents ironing as a site of domestic politics in a way that is quite prescient for present-day Australian women.<sup>1</sup>

Nicola distinguishes herself in quiet intelligent ways, showing stoicism and moral fibre. She also takes a submissive role in relationships: “‘Yes, master,” said Nicola. Bliss’ (61). Post breakup and out with gay friends, she obediently smokes their spliff, undergoes a makeover and swallows a pill before a long night of drunken club hopping. But the novel charts her personal growth and, on several occasions, the reader might well admire her elan, her forthright speech and, indeed, her physical aggression. Sympathy for Jonathan, even when he is weighed down by doubt, darkness and self-pity, may be in short supply. Nicola and Susannah come to believe that women need to be ‘Tougher. More ambitions. *Ruthless*’ (212).

Well-paced and replete with now commonplace short chapters, the novel’s sadness is laced with satirical humour: ‘I suppose you’d rather be *pumping iron*, isn’t that what they call it, in some foul gymnasium, with a lot of blacks, and women wearing silver leotards’, Jonathan’s mother says (77).

The prose is spare, supple and elegant, and constructed for the most part in dialogue that, occasionally, falls into a mechanical ‘jolly hockey-sticks’ register, with frequent play on the words ‘whizzy’ and the suffix ‘ish’ (15). With few attributions to support the identification of character or mood, readers will need to pay attention. The third-person omniscient narration sometimes sounds perfunctory or slick: “‘let’s go to bed, shall we.’ So they did’ (32); ‘He did. There were’ (88); ‘So they did, and, as a matter of fact ...’ (196). Nevertheless, St John is a fine writer and this book is no grungy Australian *bildungsroman*; it is more a comedy of manners, perhaps or a Roman à clef.

The text offers sparse clues to her Australian background apart from odd slang which may prove to be Cockney-derived in any case, and a wry intertextual reference to her first novel: ‘some footling tale about some shop assistants in an antipodean department store, fretting about their wombs and their wardrobes and other empty spaces’ (74). Having French-Romanian heritage and living as a London expat for thirty years, St John disavowed herself Australian, although she was born and raised in Sydney. Her protagonist vows ‘to live through this as decently as she can. She was not British for nothing’ (123). For some reason riffs recur around her surname: Gatling, ‘like the gun’ (108).

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<sup>1</sup>In late 2014 journalists reminded their readers of 2010 statements made by Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, on this subject: ‘What the housewives of Australia need to understand as they do the ironing is that if they get it done commercially it’s going to go up in price and their own power bills when they switch the iron on are going to go up.’ <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/politics-news/abbott-repealing-carbon-tax-best-thing-i-did-as-minister-for-women/story-fn59nqld-1227164048700>

Notwithstanding the absence of mobile phones and digital technology – a word processor is mentioned – the novel has a light contemporary tone that should still appeal to twenty-first-century readers. Its genre straddles literary realist/marriage plot/refined post-chick lit with scholarly reference, including ‘*bricoleur*’ and ‘*malheurs*’. It is curiously bereft of party or national politics. Nicola is interested in homemaking, wining and dining with friends, and love. Newly single, ‘she was free, she was horribly, abominably free’ (103). By the end of the novel, we are in little doubt that she has agency, is imminently employable and an attractive candidate for marriage – but will she be successful? We leave her in Chelsea about to cross the river on her way to a new life and engulfed in sadness

## Gay Lynch