

## Stephen Orr, *Datsunland* (Wakefield Press, 2017)

Stephen Orr is an Adelaide-based writer and teacher with several books to his name. Two of his works, *Time's Long Ruin* (2010) and *The Hands* (2015), were longlisted for the Miles Franklin Literary award. His latest work, *Datsunland* (2017) is a compilation of short stories, mostly set in Adelaide and country South Australia.

In the opening story, *Dr Singh's Despair*, an Indian doctor has been lured to South Australia with pictures of vineyards and beaches and the promise of a better life for him and his family. Upon arrival, he is unceremoniously deposited in Coober Pedy, where he is promptly forgotten about. The car that was meant to collect him from the airport never arrives. Dr Singh is forced to wait 90 minutes in 54 degrees celcius heat for a taxi that collects him, then abandons him overnight in the desert when the carburettor breaks down and the driver hitches a lift into town, leaving Dr Singh behind.

Dr Singh forces us to look at our country through a foreigner's eyes, and feel his insult and confusion. Unable to connect with his new Australian acquaintances ('He'd never be able to make conversation with people who were proud of their genitals' [21]) and take his continued misfortune with the good humour expected of him, he is quickly written off as not being 'the one'. It is assumed he will last six months in his new position, at most.

What surely marks one of the most frustrating and insulting times of Dr Singh's life is presented humorously, in typical Australian fashion.

With the exception of *The Confirmation*, which takes place in Ireland, each story that follows *Dr Singh's Despair* is definitively Australian. Orr's writing carefully evokes the overwhelming nothingness of the outback, and the defiant resolve of the people living in this void who somehow, for some reason, continue to live there. Orr's characters are not just people who live in the country, they are a part of it. They have been dried by the harsh sun, pulled into the red sand, and planted like a failing crop:

Barb watched her husband read. Grey hair. Bleached-boot skin, calcified by a sun that ruled and ruined everything. Wheatsack eyes that drooped as they emptied across a face of spreading liver spots and varicose decay. Fat chin. Permanently rheumy eyes. A shoddily ploughed forehead, the tynes set too deep. And all this on a man barely forty. (29)

The final story in the collection is *Datsunland* itself, a novella which was originally published in the 54<sup>th</sup> edition of the *Griffith Review* in 2016. *Datsunland* introduces us to William Dutton, a dispirited guitar teacher who never quite made it as a serious musician, and his 14-year-old student, Charlie Price. Charlie is equally as dispirited as William, having 'already worked out that most people [are] stupid' (193), as well as being weighed down by his own tortured genius and general teenage apathy. Seeing a lot of himself in Charlie, William feels a connection to him and they bond over their love of music and discontent with society. Perhaps not surprisingly, their relationship quickly becomes inappropriate. This is a common theme running through many of the stories in *Datsunland*: selfishness, self-obsession and denial.

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Though it is the title piece, *Datsunland*'s inclusion in this collection is perhaps a little misplaced. At 103 pages, it is almost as long as the preceding 13 stories combined. If you do not know that going in, you may find its length overwhelming. It also does not have much more to say than the shorter stories did, therefore I do not feel that its verbosity is justified.

Though the stories in *Datsunland* illustrate some of the uglier aspects of life and Australian culture, there are moments of subtle humour that can have the reader smirking in even the most serious of circumstances. In *The Confirmation* (which could be loosely based on the Kingsmill Killings in Ireland in 1976), a bus carrying mostly Protestant builders is pulled over by a vigilante gang with semi-automatic weapons: 'Each of the men on the bus had a vacant expression – as though they'd just cut a piece of expensive timber to the wrong length.' (117)

Orr forces us to look at the aspects of Australian culture that we would prefer to pretend don't exist. We are the lucky country: a country of sand and surf, barbeques, shark encounters and casual alcoholism. But maybe we are not so lucky. In *Datsunland* Orr highlights our shortcomings: our abandonment of our country folk, who reside too far from any major city to be given much thought. He shows us our selfishness, depravity and racism.

The strength in Orr's prose comes not just from his dark reflection of our culture, but in his ability to know when to say nothing. We don't need the characters of two grieving parents to tell us how they feel when they are told that their soldier son's name will be placed on the coward's list, published in their small town local newspaper, because, it is presumed, he ran away from his troop during battle. We don't need the abused child to explain how the abuse affects him. The pain and the sadness of it all is right there. Orr offers his characters little chance for redemption, so in the end pain and sadness is what the reader is mostly left with.

**Lauren Dougherty**