

# A Double Fan

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Brian Castro

AFTER CHINA

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**I**N AN ALCOVE of Brian Castro's new novel, *After China*, there is a story about Tang Yin, a famous pornographic painter in the sixteenth century, who created a double-folding fan which, opened one way, depicted a traditional Chinese landscape in black and white, but opened the other way, the illicit way, revealed an elaborate erotic painting.

Open *After China* one way and it is apparently the narrative of the intimacy of a Chinese architect and a woman writer whom he meets on the beach near a hotel he himself designed, on the east coast of Australia. Open the novel the other way and it is a seductive work about the erotics of storytelling, literary contraception, seduction and the subversion of codes and genres. 'Writing is desire,' says the woman writer, in this novel of stories as consummation. The architect notes, 'I like dragging things out. The French have a nice work for it; *draguer*: To be on the prowl. To tell stories, To seduce.' Desiring, prowling, storytelling, seducing, these are the activities of *After China*, a work of wit and invention and a restraint which is somehow chaste.

Castro is undoubtedly one of the most inventive and original Australian writers and, apart from *Pomeroy*, which I feel is architecturally very unhappy, Castro has already displayed extraordinary poise in his work, first in *Birds of Passage*, which is a most graceful movement between a contemporary figure and his Chinese ancestor in gold-rush Australia, and last year in the splendid novel *Double-Wolf*.

Although the conception of this new novel is fascinating, it also seems to me a lesser novel than *Double-Wolf*. It is in temper and mode more detached, more *ceremonial*, but it is also less polished in language and sometimes in movement. Although short, *After China* is also a vast labyrinth of narrative. Like the hotel which is both its setting and its architecture, the novel has corridors and ramps through time, glass walls reflecting the passage of its two central characters, alcoves where stories are told, and amniotic, submarine levels, which are sanctuaries.

On the surface, the architect is detached, absent, but on his visits to the hotel over several years, through his stories to the woman writer who, he realises, is dying of cancer, he is able to retrieve and lay bare the anguish of the past. The narrative roves far and wide, through landscapes of the past in Shanghai, reflections on cultural change in China, and further, to ancient Chinese stories, which run along corridor notions of time, Taoism, change and death, before reaching to a brilliant millennial vision.

Yet, in the early part, the narrative movement seems awkward and strains after wit. It opens with Lao-tzu, author of

Teo Te Ching, in 449 BC, at work on his magnum opus, conceiving the ultimate aphorism — silence. The opening yin and yang links erotics with writing, the woman declaring 'I am the book you intended to write, the intention of which is jade resplendent.' At the outset, as the Chinese architect whose name is You (full name You Bok Mun, sometimes known as 'Old China') plays between 'I' and 'you', the protocol is intrusive and abrasive rather than engaging. As the novel unfolds, its movement become more delicate and poised [...]. The narrative in the present opens with a figure poised, posed, on the glass roof of a hotel and its geometry keeps returning to figures on roofs, balconies, skylines, up there above the *commotion* of things below.

It is a littoral geometry, too, of shores, beaches, sea and fishermen and the hotel itself like a great clipper ship floating between sea and sky, as the novel moves to Shanghai, France, later New York, reconstructing the architect's life, his childhood in Shanghai [...] his imprisonment as a political prisoner (inventing crimes to confess), his escape from China.

Amid stories of his own past, there are ancient Chinese stories of courtesans and desire and intellect and writers. Many stories are about elixirs, immortality, aphrodisiacs, concubines, Taoist sexuality, insipid moral codes. The stories are also, in a fine and delicate way, mirroring possibilities between the architect and the women, constructs that become a form of communication and, with increasing urgency, interventions designed to suspend time and so ward off her death. Castro also plays with a Kafka theme of opacity and infinite smallness as a transformation, as well as the writer's fear of buildings, and forms of dissent, the imprint of a death wish, *metabolising* and enzymes [...] of time, timeliness, cyclical change, permanence and the present moment keep surfacing in unexpected conjunctions.

Structurally, its movement is *untimely*, not simple breaking the expectations of time sequence, but deliberately jarring and breaking into the flow of narrative. Underneath the surface, at its submarine level, there is a growing urgency of desire and time. Writing is 'transience, smallness and the dying of many deaths', but stories are transformations, salves, oblations — and potency, suspensions of time, prolongations of desire.

Ultimately, the novel reaches an ending of brilliant design, resonant with millennial images of flood and cataclysm, and subsuming all the urgencies of the novel into notions of cyclical change, transformation, becoming, in a manner that is also the consummation of the philosophical and sexual architecture of the novel. Yet, if writing is desire, so is reading — promise, allure, consummation. And by the standards of readerly desire that the very notion of a new novel by Brian Castro now awakens, I must say that my own desires are not entirely sated by *After China* — not even when I open the double-fan of the novel in the illicit way.

**Helen Daniel's review first appeared in the July 1992 issue of *ABR*, along with David Gilbey's review of the same novel. Allen & Unwin was the original publisher. The reissue contains an introduction by Katharine England.**