

Review of *Mrs Cook* by Marele Day. Allen and Unwin, 2002.

Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers' Radio, Radio Adelaide.

Broadcast on 16 November 2002.

Historical fiction is difficult to write, especially when real people are involved. Decisions about tone, characterisation and atmosphere are crucial. Knowledge of the facts of everyday life is essential but must be used with care and imagination. And possibly the most important problem of all is the choice of language to use for both narration and dialogue; should one try to recreate the idiom of the time, or is it better to use present-day speech to communicate more directly with one's readers?

Marele Day's book *Mrs Cook: The Real and Imagined Life of the Captain's Wife* is a valiant and earnest attempt to recreate the life of Elizabeth Cook. Its structure is sound and she has done the necessary research. But she has failed to mould the elements into an imaginatively convincing whole, and the book's shortcomings are ultimately failures of language. The simplest example is that the character of Elizabeth as presented in the book speaks faultless English, but when a letter the real Elizabeth wrote is quoted, we can see that she was not in such perfect command of the language: there are grammatical errors and awkward constructions. But worse is the language of the narrative. Day has tried to convey the sense of eighteenth century England by using the occasional old-fashioned sounding word. James left the navy with 'a tidy sum' owing to him; Elizabeth is never pregnant, but becomes 'with child' six times. The result is a 'birthing' – making the poor woman sound like a new age dairy cow. Some expressions are just plain wrong: her editor should have

pointed out that ‘James rose and attended to his toiletries’ doesn’t mean what she thinks it does; and ‘bequeaths’ is a verb – ‘bequests’ is the noun she needed.

Her James Cook is an improbably sensitive new age guy, although at the same time he is overwhelmingly virile. On their wedding night we have the unfortunately obligatory description of what Day insists on calling ‘the intimacies’, but ‘when it came time for the ultimate intimacy, Elizabeth gasped, overwhelmed by the sheer size of him ... James pulled back. “Are you all right, my dear?” “It is a little uncomfortable,” Elizabeth replied. ... “It is of no consequence,” said James, rolling onto his side. “We will wait until you are ready.”’ Fortunately, she shortly became ready and the sex remained fantastic from then on.

James, also, it seems, doesn’t get up from the dining table to use the chamber pot in the same room the way Elizabeth’s step-father and other less refined men do. I have no doubt this is a habit of the time Day has discovered from her research, along with the type of underwear Elizabeth would have worn and the locations for collecting the mail at Clapham in 1788. Such facts are often inserted too intrusively into the narrative, but at any event she needs to be more careful to get easily-verifiable references right. Her editor should have alerted her to an embarrassing confusion between the American Declaration of Independence and the American Constitution – the right to bear arms is mentioned in the Constitution but not in the Declaration of Independence as she asserts.

Near the end of the book, Day includes what was for me the most interesting chapter of all. In it she reveals the structure of her book, based mainly on surviving relics from Elizabeth’s life and times. Each chapter is

named for an object – a picture, a letter, a piece of embroidery, a building. She explains that, as ‘Mrs Cook was a great accumulator of objects ... it seemed in character to structure her story thus.’ In this chapter she explains the history of each item, and, if it survives, where it is held. Although in practice an object is sometimes quite peripheral to the themes of the chapter it purports to illustrate, the concept is pleasing, and it is satisfying to discover the solid basis for Day’s story.

Overall, though, *Mrs Cook* fails as a work of imagination. Day might have done better to write a straight biography. Perhaps then she would have avoided her mawkish descriptions of the Cooks’ married life, and the anachronisms of her characterisations. We can’t know exactly how people felt and behaved 250 years ago, but if their surviving letters are any guide, there are more differences than Day allows for. And the lack of vitality of the prose with its larding of pseudo-archaisms makes this book rather heavy going despite its potentially fascinating subject.