

***The Prosperous Thief* by Andrea Goldsmith. Allen & Unwin, 2002.**

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

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Andrea Goldsmith's novel *The Prosperous Thief* is as exciting as a thriller, but has much more to offer. It is not strikingly original in theme, being a family saga with its roots in Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. However, it is well written and absorbing and for the most part avoids sentimentality, treating the dilemmas and contradictions of the dreadful history of World War Two and its aftermath without simplifications: there are no heroes or villains.

Goldsmith achieves this by presenting the subjective points of view of her characters one by one. In this way she presents their errors of thought and perception as well as the reasons for their actions. There is enough third person omniscient narration to sketch in the social and psychological background as well. So we have a view of several characters acting upon each other in various ways, across several generations, their psychological motives explained without being overstressed, and we are left to judge for ourselves. Goldsmith never overtly directs the reader's opinion, and although she might give some gentle guidance, it is actually not easy to determine exactly what her own opinions are.

There are some points where one might tentatively identify the author's perspective. Laura Lewin is the daughter of the prosperous thief of the title, who would be the villain in a lesser book, and Polish holocaust survivor Etti. She grew up hearing about her mother's experiences. As a law student, however, she found that 'the law was silent. Only the words of her mother and other persecuted people seemed to be blooded with truth. Laura learned from them

that it's only when you tell the incomparable individuality of horror, each dreadful act recited one at a time, hundreds of horrors each with its own description, each with its own location, each with its own victims, that you break genocide into its austere, blood-curdling bits. And then, only then can the sober, indecent, heart-stabbing meanings emerge.' This is as good a description of the power of narrative, as good a justification for this novel and all fiction and life narrative, as powerful an argument for the place of subjectivity among the objectivities of law and politics, as one could desire. It is a central statement in this novel, appearing half-way through and spinning out all through its themes and techniques. Near the end, too, Laura's would-be enemy Raphe Carter, the grandson of a German Jew who might have survived but for the actions of Laura's father, realises that his fantasies of revenge 'readily removed identifying details from Laura: her face, her voice, her laughter, her *humanness*. And they eclipsed the ethics of justice and revenge, managing to right all wrongs in the absence of any conflicting considerations.' This Hamlet-like figure wavers between general ideas of revenge and the particular fact of his attraction to Laura. I won't reveal the ending, but I think it's clear that Goldsmith is quietly endorsing the view that attention to particulars has the power to break down fanaticism and obsession with dangerous notions like revenge.

Goldsmith's technique of presenting subjective views is on the whole very powerful. However, she occasionally overdoes it, and dilutes the strength of her narrative by presenting the viewpoint of a minor character. It is clear why she does it: Laura's brother Daniel, for example, is criticised by other characters for becoming ultra-orthodox, and a few pages are devoted to him to justify his

choice. But it is not really necessary. The whole book tends to encourage the reader to see various points of view, so we understand already that Daniel would have his own good reasons for acting in a way which upsets the rest of his family. Another slight flaw in the novel is the initial presentation of Laura's life with her lover Nell. The relationship is certainly important in the novel, but the Lesbian idyll is overdone, and Nell's past doesn't need to be recounted in such detail. Oddly, the most convincingly realised relationship in the book is the marriage of Raphe's grandparents in Germany before the war, rather than any of the present-day partnerships, perhaps because they are partly autobiographical and haven't sufficiently 'passed through the crucible of [the author's] imagination,' as Henry James put it.

But this is a terrific book with only minor faults. The style is for the most part eloquent and direct, the structure is strong and compelling, and although there is a slightly schematic tendency it is outweighed by strong characterisations and psychologically compelling situations.