
Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers’ Radio, Radio Adelaide

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*The Last Love Story* is Rodney Hall’s latest novel, subtitled ‘A Fairytale of the Day After Tomorrow.’ It’s a fable set in a city divided along economic lines which have become religious and ideological. The residents of the poor north defiantly assert their independence, and ring themselves with landmines to keep the enemy out, only to find that they also prevent their own escape. This city could be anywhere: it corresponds to nowhere in particular.

Stranded in the prosperous southern half of the city after the revolution, Paul is looking for the perfect woman. We are not in the author’s confidence at first about what the role of this woman is to be. We only know that Paul finds what he is looking for in Judith, a young woman who has been brought up by a fearsomely protective mother who has little understanding of her daughter, though her love is strong.

Hall’s fable is suspenseful and intriguing. The characters of Judith and Paul are rounded and convincing. Judith has always understood, from her mother and others, that she is ‘simple’: she has had some trouble learning to read and write. However, she is brave, loyal and loving and knows what to do when the need arises. Paul is more complicated. He has needs and desires which it takes him some time to sort out, and which drive the plot. The fable of course has a moral, or more than one. There is a political one, probably best stated by Judith’s mother when confronted with the ‘pure evil’ of the Lieutenant in charge of the border patrol on the repressive north side of the river. Speaking rather
implausibly on behalf of womankind, she charges the male sex with creating ‘a whole tangle of difficulties and heresies, taboos and catastrophes – all conjured out of thin air.’ It is clear from Mrs Stott’s behaviour that despite her sex she is not herself a harbinger of peace. Nevertheless, isolate her speech from the context of the sexual divide, and it makes perfect sense as a critique of the trap too many societies have found themselves enmeshed in. The other moral tends towards a preference for the virtues of unquestioning love and loyalty, embodied in Judith, over cleverness and sophistication – though I would be loth to label this an anti-intellectual novel.

_The Last Love Story_ is not long, and is increasingly absorbing as it builds to the climax. I found the final pages so gripping that I travelled five bus stops too far and had to walk a mile in the dark. Hall’s style is occasionally over-elaborate to my taste. I enjoyed his description of the heat wave: ‘the bulldozer of heat … spooling through the divided districts leaving gardens so shrivelled that a belated sideswipe of forgetfulness carried off their nutrients on a single aromatic gust.’ But I found an extended metaphor characterising Judith as ‘an old groper, long secluded among weeds and sediment’ became a bit much after the third or fourth page. But this is just a personal prejudice: the imagery, even if occasionally overblown, doesn’t interfere with the strong dynamics of the narrative. _The Last Love Story_ is a novel full of passion and ideas, well-structured and brimming with the skill and confidence of a major novelist at his peak.