
Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers’ Radio, Radio Adelaide

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Loubna Haikal, in her first novel, *Seducing Mr Maclean*, writes about the age-old problems of adjustment and culture clash which face the children of migrant families. These are serious and pervasive problems, touching every area of their lives, but Haikal’s book is far from solemn.

There are elements of satire in this novel. Many of the characters are two-dimensional and at times the comedy is broad. The narrator – never named – is a young Lebanese medical student, a refugee, with her parents and seven brothers and sisters, from the Lebanese wars of the late 20th century. The second daughter of the family, she gets into Melbourne University medical school on the strength of high marks in French (a result of her bilingual Beirut education), and the appreciation of her personal charms by the Dean, who thereafter monitors her progress with an inordinate amount of personal attention. This is Professor Maclean, the Mr Maclean of the title. The narrator is naïve in many ways, desperately trying to make sense of the strange language and customs of her new Australian friends, and incidentally giving a fresh and sometimes disturbing perspective on our own culture and its idiosyncrasies. She describes her first visit to the pub with some fellow students, in her second year at university. Professor Maclean joins them, and she ‘was surprised to see him. But rumours were that he liked drinking at the pub with the students and I was moved by his modesty.’ As the evening ends, the professor becomes embarrassingly amorous in front of the other students – our heroine’s mother has schooled her thoroughly in the etiquette of seduction, and he is stretching
the limits – but the situation is defused when he mocks her French accent.

“‘Nossing.’ He imitated my accent as he left to get another drink. The others laughed and said ‘nossing’ like him and spoke with a French accent – and, thank God, it remained funny and I was safe.”

The strength of this novel lies in scenes like these, rather than its overall plot structure. At times the plot even seems a little irrelevant, merely the machinery to place the characters in situations where they can reveal themselves. The emotional heart of the story is the doomed relationship between the narrator and her Australian boyfriend Robby. She is thoroughly caught between her parents’ frank and impatient expectations of marriage on the one hand, and Robby’s refusal to be rushed, and his parents’ laconic approach on the other. Her family accepts Robby despite his foreignness, but although he tries, finally it all becomes too much. ‘I could understand what he was going through. I needed to protect him from the Lebanese, my family, me included. I was ready to change, to stop being too emotional, to love him less, to say it less, less intensely, not in a dramatic intolerable way … [but] Robby was burnt out. He couldn’t take the whole Lebanese thing any longer. … It was all too much for someone bred on silence and grins and weather reports.’ This is good writing, insightful and eloquent, and this is the best part of the novel, dealing with problems at the very heart of the migrant situation. The high points of the plot – the comic set-pieces, like the fight between her mother and her father’s lover, the bombing of their restaurant, and the revelation that Maclean’s mother, who gave him up for adoption as a baby, was Lebanese, don’t work quite as well. The book is better at describing situations than incidents, better at gentle humour than outrageous satire. ‘You understand my dilemma,’ she explains in
one tricky situation. ‘I tried to clear my mind and tackle the problem clinically, go through a sort of list of dos and don’ts – like, don’t ask questions, don’t bargain, don’t ask for discount, for pickles, don’t argue, do speak softly with a melody that doesn’t grate on the ears and is not too monotonous, an Australian melody, speak as if there is one nature working, freely working and not two. But I felt like two – you know, like two people, one local and another imported, and they wrestled … it dawned on me – I would never be one again. I’d never lose my looks, my accent, my family.’

It would be possible to read this novel as a riotous satire, but at the cost of ignoring its best qualities – its unsentimental, honest handling of the kind of problems everyone faces as they grow up, only in this case compounded by the difficulties of learning the unfamiliar set of social and cultural skills which are essential in Australian society, without repudiating their own very different family and cultural background.