

Lucy Lehmann. *The Showgirl and the Brumby*. Random House, 2002.

Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers' Radio, Radio Adelaide

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Lucy Lehmann's novel *The Showgirl and the Brumby* was runner up in the Vogel literary awards in 2000. I have read the winning novel, and I believe this one is better. I would have given it first prize.

Lehmann spent six years writing her book, and the time and care she has taken is obvious. It is stylishly written, full of stunning figurative language but also at times delightfully down to earth. It might have lost out in the prize-winning stakes because its setting is not topical or currently fashionable. It is a story of family rivalry across three generations set in the New South Wales country town of Cowra. Nothing extraordinary in that. It is the writing that is exceptional, and the characters are drawn with unusual perception and sympathy. At first I thought this novel was merely a clever satire, but then characters began to develop. The spoilt brat Grace Cox, the showgirl of the title, is a rounded character, capable of growth and forgiveness. Her adversary Donna Doyle is neither a faultless heroine or a delinquent. Although their rivalry comes to a head in the local beauty contest, the Cinderella conclusion one expects doesn't eventuate. Instead, there is a satisfying but not romantic sense of completion and even redemption at the end of the book. There are revelations which surprise the characters, but Lehmann quietly reveals the facts to perceptive readers as the story proceeds, so there is drama at the end but no sensational denouement.

Lehmann is one of the best writers on sex I have read. It might be her generation –born in the 70s. There is no coyness, euphemism, or prevarication. But neither is she writing to shock. Sex is just something people do – whether they should or not. Perhaps all the over-writing, reacting against the ban on *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, is finally over, after forty years. Then again, perhaps Lehmann is just a very good writer.

Lehmann trained as a film-maker and has won awards for some of her short films. A strong visual imagination is evident in this book. Often the writing is cinematic, the perspective of one character standing in for the camera. There is the police inspector, for example, who is one of the visiting judges of the beauty contest.

Her eyes were almost as dark as her pupils and seemed to lock onto whatever she turned them to. Her gaze didn't soften the way most people's did – intense and purposeful in the first moments of meeting a new face, then glazing over as the features were classified and became familiar. The Inspector's eyes seemed to discover more and more every minute, pushing aside earlier, superficial impressions. ...

The Inspector had assessed Snowy's smooth, roundish face. Faces like that stayed the same, just got a bit rounder. But Damon Cox looked as if his face were broken and put back together on a regular basis, with the pieces no longer interlocking seamlessly, as they had once. His mouth moved crookedly, and the creases caused by even a brief smile gave the appearance of a crumpled blanket about to slide off a bed.

This description, though highly visual, is more than that. It has a lot to say about the character of Damon. A crumpled blanket is not only a simile for his appearance, but a metaphor for his hopeless, disordered way of life.

The perceptiveness is always more than just visual. There is a wonderful scene where Grace, the rich girl, sees her despised rival Donna's drab home for the first time. She watches Donna hanging out some washing, and begins to understand her:

[Donna] turned to give her wet clothes one last look. Grace knew exactly what Donna was thinking, as if Grace had known her all her life. She knew that the bare yard didn't exist for Donna, just as the clothesline wouldn't have existed for a child, except as something to swing on, or the pale swoop of an owl wouldn't have existed for a person with no interest in birds. ... All that existed for Donna was the satisfying sight of her own world – her triumphant Showgirl outfit hanging in the warm night air.

*The Showgirl and the Brumby* is a funny, perceptive, moving, beautifully written novel. It shows a generous, clear-sighted understanding of all the characters, who we all grow to like at least a little. Although it starts as satire, it develops into much more. It is one of the best novels I have read this year.