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

Recorded 21 November 2003

The Slapping Man in Andrew Lindsay’s new novel of the same name is a young man named Ernie living in the seaside town of Salvation – a setting with no definite place or time in the real world. The story is a fable in the post-modern style. It starts with the birth of the hero, his outsize jaw alarming the midwife, and proceeds to tell the story of his short but eventful life.

Ernie has trouble finding his vocation, especially after the death by drowning of his parents in his late teens. One day, however, he finds that his enormous jaw is the perfect outlet for the frustrations of his fellow citizens: he is able to sustain their continual slapping and charges a small fee in the marketplace for this service. This career entails certain problems, especially when he becomes too successful.

An interesting premise for a novel, but *The Slapping Man* is not a great success. It feels too much like a pale imitation of Peter Carey’s *Tristan Smith* with overtones of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and every other magic realist novel of the last 40 years or so.

But my problem with the novel is not that it is unoriginal in its conception. Good novels don’t have to be ground-breaking, but they need some coherence and feeling of authenticity: however unworldly the setting is, there must be some feeling of a real place at a real time with real human relationships. The narrative of *The Slapping Man* is episodic and lacks a strong forward impetus. The characters interact with each other in pairs, but three or more people rarely appear together except in the overblown, chaotic crowd scenes. There is a prodigious amount of blood, sex, sudden death and general bad behaviour, explained by the origins of the town in a shipwreck in which many perished and the survivors had recourse to cannibalism. The need for the town to come to some accommodation with their regrettable past is the theme of the novel, but the culmination of the action in a riotous spree of indiscriminate violence is not a convincing form of reconciliation.

Lindsay has a habit of piling several incomplete sentences on one initial complete one: “He gathered twigs and driftwood and made a small fire on the
pebbly beach. Jean, glad of this warmth, rubbing her arms and legs … Shaking her wet hair like a dog …” Unfortunately, this soon becomes irritating. There are a few outright errors – “glutinous” for “gluttonous”, for example, which should have been picked up by an editor. And often the allusive subtlety which is important to this style of writing is spoilt by too much elaboration. After Jean punches the publican John Gobblelard in the crutch, for example, he feels that “Jean had somehow managed to castrate him.” This interpretation is too obvious to warrant mentioning in the post-Freudian world.

The romantic involvement between Ernie and Jean is clearly the inevitable culmination of the story, but it takes so long to come about that the reader might be pardoned for losing interest. It is, however, the best part of the book. There is a real tenderness in their extravagant love-making. As characters, they are the main saving grace of the novel, both likable and vulnerable. But Jean, though she has been given a past to explain her strange behaviour, lacks a convincing present. And this is typical of the whole novel. Although Lindsay has gone to pains to describe the history of the town and its inhabitants, there is no feeling of the texture of their communal lives, no feeling that while one thing is happening, there might be something else going on elsewhere in the town at the same time.

Ultimately, then, *The Slapping Man*, for all its exaggeration and inventiveness, fails to gel satisfactorily into a cohesive work of art.