
Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers’ Radio, Radio Adelaide

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*Snake* is Kate Jennings’ first novel, first published in 1996 and now re-issued in the wake of the success of *Moral Hazard*. It’s the mordant story of a marriage in rural New South Wales, told with economy and stabbing precision.

Jennings is that unusual writer, a poet who has succeeded in translating the distilling and evocative power of poetry into fiction which is neither obscure nor pretentious. *Snake* is a short novel. It covers only 150 pages. The longest chapter reaches a fourth page: most are only two and many only one page. Each has the lethal impact of a snake bite.

The novel is divided into four unequal parts. Part One and Part Four are written, unusually, in the second person. Part One is addressed to the husband Rex, and Part Four to Irene, his wife. It is an interesting technique which distances the characters more than first person writing, but validates their experience perhaps more than third person writing would. The speaking voice is cool and analytical, showing more sympathy for Rex than Irene, although it is clear that theirs was a mismatch neither could be blamed for. Rex, a taciturn country boy, nevertheless has depths which Irene doesn’t suspect, and which he keeps to himself:

You never minded the physical world into which you were born.

Drought, dust storms, erosion, this you accepted. What you have always found terrible is the region your heart inhabits, where your imagination
dwells. It is always dusk in this place; darkness is not far off. It is cool rather than cold. With a hint of damp.

Irene is more extrovert, and her initial infatuation with Rex soon turns to irritation and contempt, and frustration at the limits imposed on the life of an Australian farmer’s wife. The narrator addresses her in turn:

The literary figure with whom you most identify is Oscar Wilde. … As unlikely as the parallel might seem – witty fop, farmer’s wife – you feel as he did: pilloried by the ungenerous, exiled.

Despite leaving Rex and striking out with someone new, ‘following the migratory pattern of Australian adulterers, … north, to monsoons and mangroves swamps, water buffalo and brolgas, whip snakes and crocodiles,’ Irene’s dissatisfaction with life remains, evoked sharply in the 3 brief pages of Part Four.

Part Two, also short, gives scenes from the wedding; elegant, malicious vignettes of Irene’s snobbish family which are nevertheless tempered by the occasional glimpse of something beyond: Irene’s dreadful mother’s unsuspected ambition to be a civil engineer, for example.

The bulk of the book by far is contained in Part Three: Rex and Irene’s married life. There are two children, Girlie and Boy. Although Irene is the undoubtedly the central character, the narrative takes on a more vividly subjective quality when it is seen through Girlie’s eyes. The texture of her everyday terrors and night-time imaginings is made present to the reader in a way that Boy’s experience is not. Believed to be asleep, they see their mother skinny-dipping with a woman friend on a camping trip:
Boy filed the event under ‘interesting,’ to be thought about at a later date, and went to sleep. Girlie tossed and turned, ears alert. Leaves rustled. A bird flapped.

There is a suggestion that Girlie more sensitive and interesting that Boy, who is ‘sturdily masculine, with a winning manner’ and his mother’s favourite. ‘Girlie was the opposite of Boy: eager, earnest, graceless,’ and liked by nobody. The kind of outsider, in fact, who often becomes an artist. Perhaps there is a touch of autobiography there.

Jennings’ prose is effective, and beautiful, without being obtrusive: as in all the best writing, the substance is served by the style, not the other way around. It is easy to read Snake quickly, almost at one sitting. But in doing this you risk missing the intriguing enigma of the chapter titles. I constantly found myself racing through a chapter, only to bring myself up short and make myself go back and contemplate its title. There are 77 of these brief chapters, and each one has an evocative title. Many are quotations I could identify – ‘Oh such a hungry yearning’, ‘Sticks and stones and wallaby bones’. Others, such as ‘In Sicily the Black, Black Snakes are Innocent, the Gold are Venomous’ are more obscure.

So in spite of its brevity, this is a profound and original novel, worth taking the time to read slowly and more than once.