

Brian Castro. *The Garden Book*. Giramondo, 2005.

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

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Brian Castro is a name I have heard accompanied by high praise for some time, so I was pleased when I was asked to review his latest novel, *The Garden Book*. I won't say I was disappointed with it. It's more that I felt defeated, and that made me start to think about literature and criticism. So I turned to some other reviewers to see what they said.

Peter Pierce in *The Age* says that '*The Garden Book* is another triumph of intelligence and imagination by one of the most exacting, yet rewarding of Australian novelists.' Ingrid Wassenar in *The Australian*, admits that '*The Garden Book* is not always likeable. Some passages defeat understanding. But that's kind of the point.' She goes on, 'You don't read Castro for the plot ...; you read him for the mood he creates in you as a reader.'

In that case I have to conclude that Castro is not the writer for me. The mood he creates in me is chiefly irritation. The language seems to me more often pretentious than poetic, and is occasionally so elusive as to be meaningless. Sometimes this is a sign of the madness of Swan, the main character, but sometimes it isn't.

But this is not the main problem with *The Garden Book*. I felt no interest in the characters and what happened to them, and to me that makes the book a failure, however many flights of poetry are contained within its covers. Intellectually, I can appreciate the tragedy of the story of Swan, the daughter of the first Chinese Ph.D. in Australia, a formidably erudite man who, in the xenophobia of the great depression years, is unable to keep even a job as a county school teacher and falls into a terminal decline. Swan, also highly educated, marries an Australian autodidactic misfit, Darcy Damon, former prisoner and sailor, who had encountered opium in his travels in China. But despite Darcy's appreciation of Chinese culture, it is a mismatch. Swan's family has lived in Australia since the middle of the nineteenth century, and she is not a proper Chinese woman after all. Darcy's disappointment with her seems to have the effect of making him a white supremacist. Into this unhappy scenario - the setting is the sunless side of a mountain in the Dandenongs, dank, dark and ravaged by tree-felling - flies the American architect and aviator Jasper Zenlin, who falls for Swan, or for her evanescent poetry,

written in Chinese on leaves. Their story is pieced together by a rare books librarian fifty years later, though there is nothing of the thrill of detection about his investigations: we are denied the pleasure of seeing him work out the puzzle bit by bit. We are merely presented with this or that bit of evidence and left to establish its significance or not as we may.

This implausibly hermetic librarian's name is Norman Shih, which he likes to think of as a perfect name for a silent nonentity – Norman Shhh. He doesn't live as a character any more than the others, and not even a rare books librarian in a university could live such a cloistered life in these days of industrial reform. Everyone is a symbol for something. Darcy Damon is demonic; Swan spends the whole of the book dying, with her decaying poetry echoing her morbid state. For me, there was one sentence which stood out, near the end of the book. Swan thinks of Jasper, 'She had not deserved him and had killed his love with her own pain.' I felt like cheering when I read that. But it was not enough to redeem this book, which I found schematic, pretentious and tedious. Katharine England, for whom I have the greatest respect, says that 'his work offers wonderful rewards to the attentive reader.' Clearly Brian Castro has immense appeal to many, but I'm afraid I can't count myself among that number.