Donald Denoon. *Afterlife*. Pandanus, 2004

Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers’ Radio, Radio Adelaide

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It’s an old idea that the gods envy humans their mortality, with all its possibilities of ecstasy and intense experience. Donald Denoon plays with this idea in his novel *Afterlife*, subtitled *A Divine Comedy*. Denoon is a historian and self-confessed ‘furtive writer of fiction,’ but this is the first of his novels to be published.

*Afterlife* is a genial, philosophical book. The hero, Geoffrey Kingston, dies and goes to heaven. Both these facts are unexpected: he is in the prime of life, and his conduct hasn’t been such that he expected to end up in heaven. But then, he didn’t think that heaven existed.

Denoon has fun with his fictional heaven. The Archangel Gabriel is the epitome of urbane top management, and the seraphim are faceless and tedious. The concept of eternity, difficult for any human to comprehend, gives Geoffrey some trouble, but Denoon doesn’t quite master it either. Indeed, it’s hard to imagine a novel which has no sense of time at all. So the vacuous seraph who is showing Geoffrey around invites him ‘to attend the premiere of … Beethoven’s 99th symphony … due to begin quite soon.’ In a timeless world, both ‘premiere’ and ‘quite soon’ would have no meaning.

Meanwhile, one of Gabriel’s minions is visiting Geoffrey’s home town, Brisbane, embodied as Angel Milan, a Slovenian Visiting Medical Officer in Post-Traumatic Rehabilitation, the unfamiliarity of Australians with Slovenia and their unthinking acceptance of anyone in a white coat making this the
perfect cover. Because Geoffrey has not in fact died. He has been co-opted to heaven for a special project, but his comatose body is lying in hospital. Angel provides Denoon with a chance to present a view of human life from an unfamiliar angle – like Doris Lessing’s Canopus books, without the bite. He is clever about ‘the embodiedness of language itself. … Every single part of the body, every bodily function, however repulsive, can be used in an allusive way,’ Angel observes with some bewilderment. But the longer Angel spends on Earth, the more he is beguiled by physical pleasures. Inevitably he succumbs to the charms of one of Geoffrey’s female relatives, and pleads to be allowed to trade in his immortality for a longer stay on earth.

The other target in this very mild satire is economic rationalism. Geoffrey has been a management consultant, ‘the PM’s hatchet man,’ which is why he has been summoned to heaven. Management (which is the term Gabriel prefers to ‘God’ to describe the higher power) is finding that the number of souls admitted to heaven under the regulation criterion of ‘Poor in Spirit’ is blowing out, and he needs someone with Geoffrey’s particular mix of skills to help deal with the influx. At first this seemed to be developing into an analogy with asylum seekers, but that doesn’t really fit. Indeed, for a ruthless hatchet man, Geoffrey is surprisingly likeable. Through the ‘reports’ of Angel to Gabriel, Geoffrey’s wife, children, and past and present lovers all have their say. Thus Denoon is able to provide a full range of viewpoints on his hero, none of which is finally unfavourable.

Afterlife is an enjoyable novel. Denoon overdoes puns like ‘where on earth am I?’ but for the most part he writes in a clear, unmannered style.
Afterlife is an ode to human life and its light and shade, in the end preferred to immortality even by the angels themselves.