

Alex Jones is a retired Sydney English academic, and his novel *Morris in Iceland* is about a retired Sydney English academic. His nameless narrator is urbane, erudite and not immune to the charms of a young student of performance theory who catches his eye while his wife is away overseas.

But this is no soul-searching examination of the erotic impulse in the ageing academic male, like Coetzee’s *Disgrace* or Philip Roth’s *The Dying Animal*. Our protagonist is quite able to admire from a discreet distance while acting as the fairy godfather to the young woman’s performance group, which rejoices in the name ‘The Inner West Creative Mime Atelier’ or Yewkma.

Yewkma is developing a mime opera, drawing heavily on the music of Björk, and laden with archetypal semiotics, on the subject of William Morris’s sojourn in Iceland. And alternating with the genially satirical narrative of the present-day activities of the narrator, his family, and the four young members of the group, Morris narrates his journey, with three friends, through Iceland on ponies – the ‘raw material’ of the Yewkma performance.

*Morris in Iceland* falls squarely into the category of literary fiction, however one might choose to define that term. Its readership will be select: the arcane literary jokes will be lost on the vast majority of even the highly educated. Our modern-day hero, though his own narrative is turgid with intertextuality and constantly alive to the symbolic possibilities of everyday life, is quite capable of mocking the pretensions of the younger generation. When one of his young friends tells him that ‘Ψ-j is Pseudo-
Jakobson – big on the west coast right now,’ he thinks: ‘West coast of what, you pretentious so-and-so, I could have said: New Ireland, maybe? But I allowed him his discourse: after all, one of the points of communication is to make people feel excluded.’ (84) Indeed: and Morris in Iceland will make many people feel excluded should they be somehow beguiled by the title or the attractive cover to dip into this novel.

Nevertheless, it’s a likeable sort of a book. The William Morris sections are rather monotonous: got up early this morning, mounted the ponies, rode till evening when we were greeted by the pleasant folk of this or that tiny village. Jones seems to have caught the Morris idiom quite neatly, though there is perhaps a slight overuse of archaisms – ‘mesemed’ and ‘methought’ etc. – which sometimes tips the Morris sections into a rather solemn parody. The present-day narrative is more lively, though hardly teeming with drama. The narrator is surely being highly ironic when he says, ‘I had first opened the book [he’s reading Norman Douglas’s The South Wind] some weeks ago, but how much had happened since then!’ The plot later takes on some mildly frenetic and absurdist twists and turns, but the main incidents of the narrative to this point have included attending Yewkma rehearsals, babysitting his four-year-old grandson, cooking liver curry and beetroot soup, and taking phone calls from his absent wife.

To be quite at ease reading Morris in Iceland you’ll need to have a higher degree in literary theory and a solid knowledge of the life and work of William Morris, not to mention Tennyson, Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare and a host of more minor literary figures. But as the narrator’s young girlfriend says, ‘I’m up to here with theory. … Theory is just CSI stuff – talking about a dead body when the life has moved on.’ If you have a few hours to while away and enjoy poking mild and gently satirical fun at overblown theorising, you might just enjoy the experience anyway without worrying too much about the semiotics.