I

T’S NOT RACISM that makes my mother — once a poor
girl from the Welsh valleys — side with the Howard gov-
ernment on the refugee issue: it’s an instinctive territorial
defensiveness that can be easily exploited by emotive phrases:
illegals, queue jumpers, people smugglers. She’s not alone,
if her friends, other relatively prosperous, tax-paying senior
Australian citizens, are anything to go by; but it’s not
a hardline position. All it might take to soften their attitude
is a copy of The Haha Man by Sandy McCutcheon, a rollick-
ing good read that highlights the refugee plight without
a whiff of the lecture hall.

McCutcheon, no doubt familiar to
many readers as an ABC radio journal-
list, has a remarkable number of other
strings to his bow. He has written
twenty-two plays and six novels, lived
and travelled abroad a good deal, dabbled in various jobs, and been a Bud-
dhist for twenty-five years. Judging
from the awards he has collected along
the way, he brings to his interests a
well-informed flair. He joins a list of
high-profile Australian writers who
have, in very different ways, questioned
this country’s response to asylum seekers, by and large with one purpose
in mind: to change public opinion.
(I can’t think of a single book that
endorses the government’s stance.)

With this in mind, it’s a fair bet that
The Haha Man, a paperback emblazoned with the typography
of the thriller, has the edge over its most obvious prede-
cessor, Tom Keneally’s The Tyrant’s Novel.

The rule of thumb for both these books, indeed for all of
their ilk, is to persuade readers that asylum seekers are just
like ‘us’: that is, vulnerable human beings of some affluence.
It is perhaps easier to identify with people who have a lot to
lose, just like so many Australians; neither author tackles the
altogether thornier path of economic poverty as a motivating
force for exile. Keneally set his novel in Iraq, but gave his
characters English names to push his point. McCutcheon
uses Afghanistan, and relies on the notorious violence of the
Taliban to ram his theme home.

On 8 August 1998 Ahmed Mazari and his son, Karim, are
catched in the marketplace when their city, Mazari-i Sharif, is
overrun by the Taliban. The subsequent relentless butchery
of their Hazara ethnic group reminds us that one positive
aspect of the so-called war on terrorism was the fall of the
Taliban. Father and son are separated, and each presumes the
other dead; after more than a year of living on the run, mourn-
ning the loss of his family, Karim is lucky to end up in a Pakistan
refugee camp, from where he is able to reach his wealthy uncle
in Peshawar. For a reason I won’t divulge, Karim decides to
go to Australia and is helped in this tricky endeavour by a
number of people, not least a group of Australian activists.

McCutcheon is careful not to castigate the Australian
public — the emphasis here is on the government’s clever
manipulation of notions of decency: ergo, the people who
come here by boat are not desperate, but queue jumpers who
will do anything to achieve their ends — and Karim, once
safely ensconced in Glebe, is surprised by the friendliness of
the man on the street. Such a man is embodied in the journalist
Fossey, the other main protagonist in this novel. He is an
essentially honourable human being who is inclined to go
along with the government’s stance on refugees, and so is
persuaded to become a spin doctor for his old school chum,
the minister for immigration. This task
eventually sickens him and sours his
relationship with his wife, an Afghan
exile brought up in the US.

On the couple’s return to Bris-
bane from Canberra, Fossey joins the
other side and becomes the Haha man:
the link between those seeking refuge
and those willing to help them. A haha
is an old English dry moat which,
instead of an ugly fence, was used to
protect aristocratic gardens from
livestock — it’s an apt name tag, and
a nice flourish in this cannily con-
structed novel. As with any good
thriller writer, McCutcheon keeps
a number of subplots rolling, all of
which eventually interconnect. A ter-
rorist organisation, modelled perhaps
on al Qaeda, sets about unleashing a
deadly virus in Australia, a reprisal for the country’s close
involvement with the US, and a warning to other nations. It is
terrifyingly easy for the two Saudi Arabians to establish a
fragrant aerosol business: indeed, the minister for immigration
fast-tracks their visas. In the meantime, a group of sassy
women, masterminded by the enigmatic Rabia, plan a daring
break-out of detainees from Woomera, and the tension mounts
as they set off on what seems to be an impossible mission.

McCutcheon pokes fun at ASIO and has no qualms about
 caricaturing Canberra’s bureaucrats or the people who run
the detention camps: from the minister down, they are oily,
pompous, ruthless and venal, and, in the case of the camp
guards, murderous. Stereotypes abound — even Walter the
dog is a parody. It’s all hugely enjoyable, made doubly so
because of The Haha Man’s quite profound moral theme.
My mother shall be reading it soon.

Oily Types

Nicola Walker

Sandy McCutcheon

THE HAHA MAN

HarperCollins, $29.95pb, 406pp, 0 7322 6495 2

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