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This is the author’s radio script of this article.
Brian Castro’s latest novel, *The Bath Fugues*, builds upon a pun. The word ‘fugue’ being able to denote both the musical form brought to perfection by Johann Sebastian Bach and a rare dissociative psychological state characterised by ‘unplanned travelling or wandering’, Castro has written a three-part novel full of references to Bach’s Goldberg Variations and troubled souls entering into dissociative states, sometimes while travelling miles on bicycles, but at other times, as suggested in the title, sitting in a bath.

Part one of the novel is narrated by Jason Redvers, an artist and forger, grandson of a Portuguese poet Camilo Conceição and Chinese woman he met in Macau. He has a curious friendship with a Sydney academic named Walter Gottlieb, who is writing a biography of his grandfather, and his doctor is a Frenchwoman named Judith Sarraute. He meets, apparently by accident, a beautiful widow named Fabiana, and moves into a converted silo on her farm outside Sydney. Jason has a particular interest in and affinity with Michel de Montaigne, the sixteenth-century French essayist.

The second part is apparently Gottlieb’s biography of Conceição, narrated alternately in the third and first person. This biography, called ‘Walter’s Brief’, is described towards the end of Part one as a remarkable success which tarnished the poet’s image and portrayed ‘him as degenerate’. According to Gottlieb, Camilo, ill-favoured and anxiously influenced by the French poet Charles Baudelaire, escapes a frustrating life in Portugal for the more sexually promising climate of Macau, where women can be obtained by means of more or less straightforward monetary transactions. Here he not only fathers Jason’s father, but also the mother of the mysterious Fabiana, whose grandmother, Julia Grace, an Australian artist, passed through Macau with her lesbian lover.

In Part three we move to the narrative of Dr Judith Sarraute and discover more connections – for example, that Gottlieb’s twin daughters (one of whom drowned in childhood) are also descended from Julia Grace. Judith now lives in Queensland by the sea, and studies jellyfish. The surviving twin, now 24, is visiting. The two women are observed by an unnamed grifter who has stolen Judith’s diary. Her narrative is
headed ‘From the Journal of Doctor Judith Sarraute’ but since the events she recounts begin after the diary is stolen, it can’t be the same document.

So what do we have here? An intricate web of relationships over several generations and continents, a collection of recurring motifs – baths, bicycles, sea creatures, French authors, Chinese art, drugs, Bach fugues, death. There are gnomic utterances, like ‘all motion in the world is rotary, sitting yet moving, stationary while in motion’ (142), and ‘it is not stretching things too far by saying all Bach’s fugues were gloriously ill; schizophrenic, obsessive-compulsive, bi-polar, oracular, well-organised voices of prophetic intent’ (274), and ‘All stories began in hot springs or baths’ (275). Sentences and paragraphs are slippery, often changing direction midway through so meaning in elusive. There is an immense intellectual superstructure, and reading the novel is like playing a kind of elaborate memory game. But what is at the heart? There are pleasures in the first three-quarters of the book, but they are purely intellectual: Jason, Walter and Camilo are tortured souls, we understand, but we hardly feel it. Only the last section, with Dr Judith and the elusive grifter who observes her, begins to engage with the reader’s emotions at all. I, for one, wouldn’t have persisted that far if I hadn’t been reviewing the book. Perhaps The Bath Fugues is an attempt to create a novel which is somehow analogous to a Bach fugue. The result is clever in many ways but falls far short of the sublimity of the greatest works western music has to offer.