
Philip Hui’s first novel, Superbia, is set among the unconscionably rich in London in the recent past – pre-Global Financial Crisis. His first person narrator, Jason Roche, is a young Australian currency trader who finds making millions in days as disturbingly easy as spending even more on necessities like an unlimited credit line to keep his high-maintenance girlfriend on side, a top of the line kitchen in which food is never prepared, and party drugs to fuel a terrifyingly sleepless lifestyle.

Needless to say, Jason is about to learn some lessons. One of his instructors is his girlfriend’s brother Zach, a Buddhist who has spent the past years in Japan (in a sect, not a cult, as he keeps protesting) and who is back in London to make sure he really wants to devote his life to this rarefied and possibly life-threatening outfit. Another, even more improbable, is Bella, a prostitute with a heart of gold. Bella is a very attractive character, intelligent and warm-hearted, but I could scarcely believe that she would carry such an uncomplicated attitude to sex into a ‘unprofessional’ relationship, and the awkward aspects of the fact that she is continuing to carry on her career while pursuing a romantic relationship with a former client are almost entirely glossed over.

Superbia is the Latin word for pride, the deadliest of the seven deadly sins, and the book is arranged in seven chapters each named for one of them and prefaced with a quote from Aquinas’s Summa Theologica. It’s a very elegant structure, and one would expect satire to be the dominant mode. The emptiness and superficiality of the lives of these spoilt darlings is certainly laid out for our amusement, but I suspect that the novel developed slightly differently to Hui’s plan. For one thing, Jason clearly has a better nature than he himself realises. We see this by the way the more ethically sound characters – Zach, Bella and even Jason’s boss – are drawn to him and persist despite his often prickly and insulting behaviour, and also by various epiphanies he experiences throughout the novel. These moments seem more consistent with his nature than his outrageous antics, which are often drug-fuelled or designed to shock. And when he does behave badly, we’re encouraged to understand why, and even sympathise. When understanding and sympathy enter the mix, satire slinks away, and we’re left with the thought that Jason is really more psychologically disturbed than
sinful. I don’t often make such comparisons, but I often felt as I was reading that underneath Superbia’s sophisticated veneer there was a Nick Earls novel struggling to get out.

There’s another paradox about this novel. It’s warm and witty and carries the reader along compulsively. But far too often the language ties itself into impossible convolutions, with strangely contorted vocabulary, for no apparent reason. The narrative is peppered with phrases like, ‘None other than I audiences his predictable patter,’ and ‘I am berated for not making greater efforts to enjoy myself, spoiling his evenings as a consequence, which he goes on to snipe is unforgivable when he gets out so inoften like this these days.’ (This last clause is only the latter part of a much longer sentence; and that odd word ‘inoften’ appears again later on.) It’s a puzzle because Jason isn’t an intellectual: in fact he is thin-skinned about his deprived childhood and lack of university education. Neither is his dialogue unusually pretentious: this ponderous style appears only in the narrative sections. So it doesn’t seem to be an attempt at character development.

I’m looking forward to Philip Hui’s next novel, but I do hope he manages to iron out these ugly kinks in his prose, without losing his idiosyncratic and slightly wayward charm. If he does, he will be a force to be reckoned with in Australian literature.