

Etiennette Fennell. *So Far Away: An Unfinished Odyssey* (Table One, 2009).¹

If it is often said that a picture speaks a thousand words, then the cover illustration painted by the author's daughter, Sonya Fennell, tells it all. It shows two seemingly opposing landscapes one above the other. On the top half, the picture of a French castle with its familiar blue turrets is graced by stately green trees and suggests the enchantment of a high life; on the bottom half, a remote shack clings to parched earth besides a lone wind tower and a couple of spindly dry gums. The two perspectives stand in stark contrast to suggest perhaps the incommensurability of the choice to be made between two countries, two cultures ... *So far away* evokes distance and longing for a home that is more elusive than real as it is shrouded in childhood memories. However, as we find at the end of this book, appearances are deceiving, just as the seeds kept dormant in a barren landscape come to bear fruit, so is the life of the author which has come to blossom in Australia.

This autobiographical story tells of the life of Etiennette Fennell, who migrated from Paris, aged 11, with her parents and six siblings in order to settle in Adelaide. It richly documents her childhood in Paris in the post-war years and her early life as a migrant in Australia in the fifties and sixties. After the tumultuous war years life had its ups and downs and tensions threatened to disrupt the social fabric of French society. Indeed, it was difficult for the son of a small town provincial bourgeois family to sustain the social standing commensurate to his aspirations while crammed in a small apartment in the middle of Paris with a young family. His upbringing and artistic leanings had not prepared him to provide for his ever growing family. Etiennette, thus, was raised in a colourful, if somewhat unconventional family. Her father's need to keep up appearances inevitably met with frustrations when confronted with the demands of everyday living; for her father's preference for a bohemian life style led him to eschew his responsibilities as he considered work to be an incidental necessity. His seven children and wife regularly suffered from the effects of his depression and were occasionally on the receiving end of his violent outbursts. For the young family riddled by debts, life was no longer tenable in the Parisian apartment and the situation reached breaking point. The escape to a faraway country presented itself as yet another adventure, and the promise of better opportunities to raise a large family ... in Australia.

Initially, the culture shock must have been unimaginable, but the narrator describes these first Australian experiences in great entertaining detail as the children acclimatise to new customs in the antipodes much better than the adults. The strain was greatest, however, for the thrill-seeker father who had to roll up his sleeves and join the labour force in the new country. We learn that he eventually deserts the family for a more agreeable life in New Caledonia.

In spite of the hardship and poverty of early years for migrants in Australia at that time, especially when a mother had to raise her whole family singlehandedly, *So Far Away* is no sob-story that calls for the reader's sympathy or pity. Rather, the author engages the reader in sharing the discoveries of young Etiennette who delights

¹ An extract from this book was published as 'Of Bishops and Pasties' in the November 2009 issue of *Transnational Literature*.

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in recounting the surprises and shock experienced by her parents as they venture into the alien culture: 'I can still see my mother's disgusted expression the next day as she described what went on at the party' (69). Many entertaining anecdotes focus on the strangeness of food and social customs as the family goes about their everyday life, and draw their humour from the child's perspective adopted by the narrator. Evidently the child is more adept than her parents to stand back and observe these strange customs in a somewhat detached and whimsical manner. But Etiennette soon realizes that these experiences can be quite liberating and she relishes the freedom thus afforded to her away from her dysfunctional family.

It is against this background of somewhat dire circumstances that Etiennette is determined to pursue her musical ability, which had been revealed to her when she was called upon as a child to sing in front of her parents' guests in the drawn-out evenings in the Paris apartment. Now, in Adelaide, the availability of piano lessons and, later on, of learning the cello and performing in public provide the nurturing environment she needed for her imagination and musical talents to blossom – she always imagined herself singing like 'a great a prima donna'. The music seed that had been planted earlier by her bohemian upbringing eventually leads her to a sense of her own personal achievement, but Etiennette acknowledges that it is the freedom afforded by Australian society that allowed her to truly benefit from these opportunities.

As she becomes a young adult, gets married and has children of her own, Etiennette reconnects with her French heritage by spending some extended stays in France with her own family. This is the time when her allegiances are put to the test for she now sees France through the eye of a critical Australian. Things don't always work out the way she anticipates and these unexpected situations of in-betweenness, being neither entirely French nor entirely Australian, provide many more entertaining anecdotes for the reader. However, it is the pleasures derived from the tastes and smells, and the sights revisited, that bond the narrator to the country of her childhood. Definitely, France has made a claim on her emotional sense of belonging. After that, the three years spent in Paris have set in motion a longing for returning to France regularly and reuniting with long lost family members.

From then on, it seems that there is a tension within the narrator between her longing for the country of her childhood and the rational and pragmatic Australian sense of belonging. The rest of the book recounts her regular travels back and forth to France and, through the last few pages, one feels the author's urgency to catch up with time and personal history. In attempting to cover as much ground as possible the quest may be dangerously slipping into the travelogue genre. Seen from an Australian perspective, the French are arrogant, and stuck in their ways, full of faults and contradictions; seen from the French perspective, they have the human warmth and *joie de vivre* lacking in most Australians. Such comparisons could easily be interpreted as stereotyping, and freeing oneself from the filter of one's own cultural experience is a fine line to walk. However, as Etiennette reflects upon her life after nearly sixty years spent in Australia, there is no doubt that with hindsight, whether she is in France or in Australia, she views both cultural belongings through the eye of a stranger, and it is that which eventually makes her a richer human being. Most of all she delights her readers with a personal story which connects us all. This book is very much about places and what these do to shape the way we are.

Colette Mrowa-Hopkins

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