

Nicholas Shakespeare. *Snowleg*. Random House. \$32.95pb. 386 p. ISBN 1-843-43194-7

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley in *The Adelaide Review*, June 2004, p. 30.

‘You can make a life in a night,’ says the mother of Peter Hithersay in Nicholas Shakespeare’s novel *Snowleg*, which hinges on two brief and passionate affairs, accident and impulse changing lives forever.

Peter’s mother visits Leipzig in 1960 as a young English musician, to compete in a Bach festival. A chance encounter with an escaped political prisoner results in Peter’s conception; but Henrietta knows little more of her lover than his first name (also Peter). He is recaptured, and she is never able to discover his fate. She returns to England and marries the kindly Rodney Hithersay.

Snowleg begins with Peter, at sixteen, learning that Rodney is not his father, and what’s more, that he is half German. He overcomes his initial shock and revulsion and decides, in effect, to become the German he is by birth. He abandons England to study medicine in Hamburg.

Echoing his mother’s experience, he visits Leipzig in 1983 with a student theatre group during the Trade Fair, partly hoping to trace his father. He meets a beautiful East German girl whom he knows only as Snowleg – his version of her Icelandic nickname. After one passionate night together, he is put to the test and betrays her. He lives with remorse for seventeen years, strangely inactive even when the Berlin Wall falls. Only in 2002 is he impelled to visit Leipzig and, by coincidence more than investigative prowess, finds Snowleg. At the same time, he happens upon some information about his father.

Snowleg has the makings of an absorbing novel, but several things troubled me. I found Shakespeare's narrative at times obscure. Many of the unobtrusive orienting devices that readers rely upon are missing. I found myself re-reading passages over and over to fit them to a time scale, or to make sense of them, when a single well-placed word or phrase would have left no doubt.

Descriptions of the characters are often strangely grotesque or selective. It is difficult to understand what attracted Peter's mother to his father when virtually the only observation she made of his appearance was that 'when he chewed he became repulsive.' Peter's sister Rosalind has 'thick crinkly hair that reunited in the cleavage' of her dress. At first reading this seems like a severe body hair problem. And not until page 143 do we discover that Peter is unusually tall.

The ending is suspenseful, but it is hard to credit that, until the end, Peter fails to see the coincidence which the reader begins to suspect half-way through the book. And the prose often strains for effect: '... his tiredness like the insects that appeared after the thunderstorm and crawled on his thumb and over his brow and flopped exhausted into her plate of herring and curry sauce.' The novel might have worked better with more attention to the basics of story-telling and less striving after colourful imagery.