

Stefan Laszczuk’s *The Goddamn Bus of Happiness* is last year’s winner of Best Unpublished Manuscript in the SA Festival Awards. It is not as impressive as Corrie Hosking’s *Ash Rain*, the 2002 winner, but it is an entertaining read.

*The Goddamn Bus* is set in Adelaide and familiar places come up from time to time, but it could be any Australian city: there is little real sense of the location. At heart it is a simple morality tale of growing up. Mico is a 28 year old in a rut. He drinks far too much and does little of anything else. However, he has an unusually tolerant girlfriend, Nina, who works for an unscrupulous boss, supporting them both. This is not just an outrageous comedy of the bohemian life. Despite the superficially comic set pieces, all involving prodigious consumption of alcohol, Laszczuk doesn’t exploit all the comic possibilities he introduces. There is a bottle of urine in Mico’s pocket in the first chapter which seems certain to cause some kind of mayhem, but after a few pages it just ceases to exist.

In fact, this novel has quite serious intentions. Mico is at pains to prove to us that his criminal and antisocial behaviour stems from a certain incident with an older man when he was 17. Parallels are implied between this and the lucrative arrangement his 16 year old sister Janey has with a voyeuristic neighbour, cut short violently when their father finds out. At that age, Mico says, ‘I was just a kid. I didn’t know what life could throw at you. I didn’t know I had to make those choices. I wasn’t ready to make them.’
Strangely, when his best friend, Couper, also in his late twenties, takes up with Janey, these objections melt away.

Mico displays a strong, if rather skewed, sense of morality. Drunk driving is normal, and though it might lead to unfortunate accidents, this seems no reason to refrain. Robbery and arson, even at the risk of killing someone, are apparently of little account, as long as they are carried out in a spirit of revenge or spite. Crime pays, quite nicely, thank you. The only inexcusable crimes are involving someone under the age of consent in a sexual relationship – even a non-intrusive one – if you’re over 30, and exploiting the poor. For these crimes any kind of rough justice is condoned.

Mico is presented as an innocent abroad. This is part of the humour of the novel. He is obtuse to the point of blindness about Janey’s relationship with Couper, and his readiness to go along with his friend’s crazy and illegal schemes betrays the irresponsibility of extreme youth. But despite the warm glow of Mico’s sudden insight that he hasn’t missed the ‘bus of happiness’ after all, in the end the novel leaves the impression of an inadequately thought out exercise in special pleading.