

Gerard Windsor. *I Have Kissed Your Lips*. UQP.

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley in *The Adelaide Review*, May 13, 2005, p. 30.

Gerard Windsor's new novel presents intricate layers of mystery for the reader to ponder and perhaps solve, and one of the most teasing of the mysteries is what the novel is, at its heart, concerned with. Windsor provides a string of red herrings while he circles around the dark core of his theme.

In 1971, Michael English is a young Catholic priest, only child of an elderly couple, haunted by memories of his strangely distant mother. Moving backwards and forwards across four decades or more of Michael's life, the narrative involves dreams, stories and imagined conversations. Mothers are clearly significant, but at first the theme seems to centre on the difficulties of the clerical vow of chastity. A story of an old priest's lapse, told to Michael by a colleague in 1980, 'after the fateful years of his life,' leaves him feeling 'with a cold fear' that he 'could go just as decisively', causing 'eyes wide with distaste or revulsion or horror' to be turned on him, however involuntary his action might be. What soon becomes clear, though, is that by this time Michael has left the priesthood, and it is a more generalised fear of sexual indiscretion which plagues him.

A second theme is marriage. Michael meets a parishioner, Esme, an older married woman, who seduces him. Within a year he is no longer a priest, Esme's husband is dead, and they are married. At this point it seems that the novel will involve an examination of Michael's fall from grace with Esme, and perhaps a critique of the Catholic church. Once again, this is wide of the mark.

Windsor makes his readers work. This is not a book which can be read with half one's attention engaged elsewhere. Chapters are headed with dates, which makes it a little easier to go back and forth to check on facts which only gain significance later. The one fact that makes sense of the whole story is withheld from the reader until the end. Michael, it seems, never becomes aware of it.

This is not a judgmental novel, and the narrative is deeply subjective. Through descriptions of incest, adultery, paedophilia, male sexuality, motherhood and child mortality, there is much sharp evocation of feelings and little blame for any but the worst abuses of power. Most is told in the third person, through Michael's point of view, but occasional passages are narrated in the first person by Esme, leaving a faint impression of authorial trickery: Esme is the one person who knows the key to the mystery, but it is not until the end that Windsor allows her to reveal it, though a highly perceptive reader might suspect the truth earlier.

I Have Kissed Your Lips is not the novel of social comment that it first appears to be. It is deeply personal, enigmatic, strongly imagined and written with direct, poetic force.