

Salley Vickers. *Mr Golightly's Holiday*. Fourth Estate. \$29.95pb. 356 p. ISBN 0 00 717394 6

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley in *The Adelaide Review*, May, 2004, p. 31.

There might be a competition for readers of *Mr Golightly's Holiday*. The winner would be the person who correctly identifies the title character earliest in the book. I must admit it took me an embarrassingly long time: I was almost two-thirds of the way through when light dawned. When I re-read passages like this, on page 109, I cannot understand how I was so obtuse:

Earlier in his existence, as Mr Golightly was the first to acknowledge, his character had included a punitive streak, but time had softened his responses and nowadays he tried to let tenderness rule. His son had had a liking for miscreants and malefactors.

My excuse might be that I was not reading for the sake of solving a mystery but was enjoying a well-written and entertaining novel. Iris Murdoch, when discussing her book on a similar theme, *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, said that she was not too concerned about whether or not her readers saw the allegorical structure, as long as they enjoyed the story as a human drama. Salley Vickers' book is a little different in this respect. Without understanding the myth beneath, *Mr Golightly's Holiday* would make very little sense. And indeed, she makes sure that by the end even the dimmest of readers will have understood. In her author's note, wisely placed at the end of the book, she admits, 'It has been pointed out to me that a God in the shape of a middle-aged man also visits an English village in T. F. Powys's *Mr Weston's Good Wine*. As Mr Golightly and

Mr Weston would probably agree, there is nothing new under the sun and I can only say that the idea came to me independently.'

Mr Golightly is a very reassuring incarnation of God the Father. Slightly old-fashioned and unused to modern life, he is kindly and broadminded, and likes a pint at the local, though he is reluctant to involve himself in the petty affairs of the village. He has difficulty remembering what he wrote all those centuries ago in the Old Testament. The novel is full of gentle theological jokes, but the point of the story is a serious one. However hard a creator tries, once his creatures have independent life, they are out of his control. As he is told by 'his old rival' with 'eyes ... like ruined stars,' 'no author has the last word on his own work.' Vickers claims in her note that comedy is the province of Mr Golightly, and tragedy is his rival's; an interesting idea in these days of black and devilish comedies. But Iris Murdoch's notion that comedy is basic to the novel, and tragedy, however hard it might try, cannot prevail within its pages is also relevant. Beautifully written, amusing and profound, *Mr Golightly's Holiday* is wise and disarming and highly recommended.