reviews

New Australian Fictions in the Asian Century: Steve Jacobs and Kirsten Krauth

Three Women…One Man
Steve Jacobs
Wild Strawberries. ISBN 10:0987562319

just_a_girl
Kirsten Krauth
University of Western Australia Press. ISBN 9781742584959

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Writing a review of two novels simultaneously may seem bizarre, but there are connections between these two writers…at least in this reviewer's mind and experience. The backstory to this attempt goes back to when I was at Mosman High School with Steve Jacobs and we would cross Military Road from the school to stand in the news agent's shop reading books that were still banned or prohibited in Australia. This is while the Liberal government was still in power before Gough Whitlam defeated

them at the next election and started bringing Australia into the twentieth century…at least in terms of the arts. The novels we stood there reading but not being allowed to buy (as we were too young) were Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* and Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* among others. Later, while I was doing my postgraduate studies, I worked as a stage hand on Steve Jacob's first theatre production (Stoppard's *The Real Inspector Hound*) and then with him and Barbara Pepworth (a rising young novelist at the time) on a screenplay for the Experimental Film Fund of N.S.W. which was ominously titled "All Good Things". None of these projects were what would commonly be called a success, but we developed a sort of camaraderie between us, feeling that we were isolated from the Philistine life that seemed to infest Australian surburbia at the time, especially as that Philistinism seemed to manifest itself on the lower north shore of Sydney. My relationship with Kirsten Krauth, fittingly was developed on Facebook when I found her on a page of Sydney University graduates; she has a Master's in the Creative Writing program that Michael Wilding has set up before he took early retirement from the university. Michael now serves on the board of this journal. I asked Kirsten for a copy of *just-a-girl* when she announced its immenent publication on Facebook, and promised to write a review of it. In some ways, as I first read it, I was taken back to Barbara Pepworth's first novel (*Early Marks*) which she had just published when Steve Jacobs and I were working with her on "All Good Things". Since making friends with her, she has taken up a position at the N.S.W. Writer's Centre where she edits and writes for their *Newswrite* magazine. Again, there are connections as the Writers' Centre was set up by Irena Dunn and Michael Wilding who are on this journal's board. Irena did an interview with me in 2004 for the same magazine that Kirsten now edits. It does seem to be a small world; or at least, the connections and relationships between people seem to be getting stronger. And that can only be a good thing. All of this relates to

the essay I wrote for the previous issue of this journal where I talked about Wilding's collaborative spirit and suggested that Australian literature needs more real collaboration between its players.

I mention these connections and relationships because in their respective novels the relationships are quite different. For both writers, the focus of their narratives is on the dysfunctionality of relationships. For this reviewer, relationships between readers and writers is an important matter, as discussed in an article in an earlier number of this journal. The perhaps strange way I met Kirsten Krauth mirrors the experiences of her characters in her first novel and I try to write about a city, Sydney, that is the shaping location of her narratives even though I have not lived in that city for twenty three years but still call it my home city on Facebook…the place I am ostensibly "from".

Looking at Krauth's work first, the main character, Layla, is narrated through what sounds like her blog. We are not meant to know who she is writing to, even though her voice has an immediacy as though she were speaking to us. If her narrative is a diary blog, then she is meant to be writing to herself…only in a public forum. She makes no attempt to hide any of her thoughts or actions. Her mother Margot's narrative seems totally disconnected to Layla's thoughts…fittingly so, given the dysfunctional relationship they have which explains in part the wild life Layla now lives as a fourteen year old girl having casual encounters with men she meets on the internet. The third narrative centre of the novel, if the novel has a centre at all, is the story of Tadashi told by an omniscient narrator. This may be very difficult for an Asian reader to follow; but the structure is necessary in order for Krauth to bring out the ways society in Australia may be falling apart in the postmodern age. While it is tempting to se Krauth's novel as a version of Nabokov's *Lolita*, such a reading would need to deal with the absence of the

Humbolt Humbolt figure that dominates Nabokov's novel. I see the novel as closer to Erika Jong's *Fear of Flying*…as a feminist answer to the male writers who focus on women as sex objects, just as Jong's novel seems to be such an answer to Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*. To make the references more complex, the novel's title references a song by No Doubt ("Just a Girl") in which Gwen Stefani sings of her awareness of how she is looked at by men in American postmodern society as "just your typical prototype"…which she may be for the Layla character in Krauth's novel.

But the main thing these two writers seem to share is a visceral language that is not shy of confronting topics that may have been off the agenda in recent years: explicit sexuality and the bizarre contexts that sexuality finds expression in.

In Krauth's *just_a_girl,* we follow three Faulkneresque narratives as a young girl Layla, her Christian fundamentalist mother Margot, and Tadashi, a Japanese man with a love doll move around Sydney. Not much talking in the "real world" occurs; Tadashi seems to address Mika, his doll, in his head but doesn't actually talk to others; Margot seems to report the impact of conversations she has, especially with God; Layla is too busy organizing assignations with men she meets on line to talk to them, but she seems to have the habit of talking to the reader in Netspeak. While she does record snippets of exchanges she has with some of the men she sleeps with, the exchanges (they can hardly be called conversations) are usually banal minimal pairs. The lack of dialogue seems to be Krauth's silent point: in this new age of socializing through technology, a young girl doesn't develop a taste for dialogue face-to-face and she has long since ceased trying to talk to her mother, while Tadashi seems to want a relationship where the female simulacrum does no talking. For the most part, speech is reported in the three narratives that form the novel, thus suggesting one aspect of the alienation process at

work in Sydney. While the two females' narratives are in the first person, the male's story is objectively narrated by an uninvolved omniscient narrator. All three characters' speech is marked by the various technologies – the internet, drugs and love dolls – that they rely on to live their lives. Layla's speech often sounds that of someone with ADHD; Margot's is self-obsessed or delusional and Tadashi's is non-existent. While this may suggest a bleak vision of social reality, Krauth manages to make the stories into narratives of black humour until at the end the true tragedy of Layla's "escapades" may (or may not) lead to her death in a Thelma and Louise like moment. But even then, the stories come across as a comedy of terrors. The language in all three of the interwoven narratives is appropriate to the characters; even the passionless cold language of the Tadashi episodes reflects the reality of his relationship with Mika, his doll that he carries all over the Sydney landscape. Krauth lets the reader link the meaning of this alienated Asian man's story to the ways men treat Layla and Margot in their stories; she does not spell the links out: we may start to see that there isn't much difference in the ways men treat women in the lives of Layla, Margot and Mika the inflatable doll.

While Jacobs' narrative is set in 1980s Thatcher's London, and so seems far removed from the narrative focus in Krauth's novel, there are similarities. There is a concern for the alienating impact of the social world on the characters who are reduced through the banality of their lives to seeking sexual gratification as a replacement for meaningful relationships. But the alienating forces back in the 80s were easier to delineate as the postmodern world was just then being shaped by the reactionary forces Thatcher and her ilk were consciously unleashing in explicitly ideological forms.

In Jacobs' *Three Women…One Man* we have the story of a troupe of actors caught in rehearsing a bad play blandly titled *The Bus Driver*. The play revolves around a bus driver who sexually

assaults his passengers as he drives around the city while the novel centres on the sexual relationships between the actors as they try to bring the doomed play to life. Somehow, there is a connection between the actors that is shaped by the theatrical production they are involved in. While the play isn't meant to be a farce, the impact of rehearsing and performing it on the characters in the novel seems to be turning their lives into a farce which in turn feeds back on their attitudes to the play they are "in", making it into a farce eventually too. Life imitating art and vice versa are the epistemological issues of this novel, which in Krauth's novel is also a force…but through different technologies and media.

In Jacobs' first novel, we have the implied reference to the standard dramatic trope of the Elizabethan theatre: life is a stage and we are but actors on it. We are all actors in Thatcher's world. Consequently, we are all performing…sexually, socially and theatrically. Because the idiot director of the play wants the actors to use Method techniques, they are forced to try to get inside the one=dimensional characters they are trying to represent. In such a bad play, they can do no more than present these characters and resist the techniques forced on them by the director whose one great idea is to have the bus driver (the ostensible main character) played by a mannequin dummy. (Here the link to Tadashi's "girlfriend" suggests itself). To be a method actor in such a situation requires one to be dehumanized.

In the play, the novel's central male character, the One Man of the title, plays a German psychiatrist in love with his Nazi patient, or so it seems. The clichéd scenario is part of the humour of the novel as Ambrose Palmer, the novel's hero, tries to keep his sanity by subverting the rehearsals of the play to bring out the absurdity of the play and the actors' situation. To keep his sanity, Ambrose has to take Method Acting a step further and become a bad actor in a bad play in order to keep his sanity in his relationships with the three women and the play he is meant to be in. One has to be

as bad as the characters one is trying to represent on stage if one is to succeed. Ambrose sees their relationship in terms of "a group of misfits worshiping alienation" when they are taken to a lunatic asylum (a metaphor for Thatcher's England) and forced to interact with the damaged people there. Ambrose finds reality impinging on his consciousness there and flees following the directions of an inmate there who seems also to be playing a part in the presentation of the asylum.

When one is in such a situation, one is in "the real world of make believe" and one had better start laughing at oneself if one is to survive. There may be references to Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of a Play* or Scorcesi's *Taxi Driver* in this scenario of the novel. It seems more an attempt to renovate Modernism than a celebration of Lyotard's postmodern condition. Ambrose's realization that "he had to get out of here quick" when he sees a sedated patient come to life reminds me of Poe's "Professor Tar and Doctor Feather" where the inmates of the asylum Poe's narrator visits to observe the cutting edge ways the patients are given a free run of the asylum end up turning their keepers into the inmates as the lunatics play the roles of the keepers for the visiting narrator. Is the world Jacob's represents a play or a lunatic asylum…or has the distinction between these two metaphors been so blurred that they become fused as one? The absurdist humor of the omniscient narration that only really looks at Ambrose's point of view keeps the reader's sanity firmly anchored in the distance between the perception of reality as a fubar place and the representation of that place as a joke. We can laugh at the shenanigans of the characters and so judge them in ways that we feel uncomfortable doing in *just_a_girl* where life has become far too serious for us to mock the absurdity of it all. In her world, the confusion between perception and reality is far too unsettling for us to laugh at the characters' foibles for we would be laughing at pedophilia, child exploitation, racism, insanity without any

redeeming feautures. While Jacob's give us the narratological space in which to laugh, Krauth cuts this space away from us as we are always inside the heads of her characters or determinedly kept out of that space in the case of Tadashi.

While Jacobs' novel may be a farewell to the theatre in its present form, as he works in adapting novels into his films (with his film *Disgrace* in 2010 winning such accolades as the Fipresci Prize at the Toronto film festival and the Grand Prize at the Taipei International Film Festival), the next novel of Kirsten Krauth awaits for us to read. Her first achievement will be a hard one to match. The problem for both writers is that as reality is changing so quickly now, the task of the novelist in capturing those changes will be harder. The media involved are still developing at an apparently break neck speed…perhaps faster than the novel as a form can adapt to them if the novel is to remain postmodern. But if the novel decides to return to the techniques and frames of a renovated modernism, then perhaps we can still find ways of representing that reality in a critical realist way that resists the impacts of a world it is trying to immerse itself in. Jacob's novel may be a way out of the trap of the novelist who can adapt the ideas of Method Acting in the context of the novel instead of in film or on stage. Krauth seems to be heading in that direction too as she bravely writes from points of view that are seriously damaged in terms of the psychological traits of her characters.

We live in interesting times as the battles over contested realities rage about us. The frontier of these battles may be the interface Australian writers will have with Asian relationships as Australia self-consciously tries to move into a space that remains unexplored in Australian fiction and film. Will postmodern approaches work better in realizing these new worlds or will a renovated modernist realism (along the lines suggested by Gao Xingjian as mentioned in one of my previous articles in this journal) be more successful in contesting reality? Until I get a

firmer grasp of the Australian realities I have been outside of for the past two decades, I don't have any way of knowing. But sitting in Asia looking at the new shapes of Australian fiction, I try to follow these developments in ways that perhaps those involved in the realities back in Australia may find strange or alien.