

BOOK REVIEW

Kerry Greenwood, *Murder in Montparnasse*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 2002, 300 pp., paperback \$19.95. ISBN 1 86508 806 4.

This sophisticated and witty detective mystery by Australia's front-ranking crime writer Kerry Greenwood is the latest in her Phryne Fisher private detective series. Greenwood is the popular and widely read author of eighteen novels, including, in the Phryne Fisher series, *Cocaine Blues*, *Murder on the Ballarat Train* and *Blood and Circuses*. As well as being a prolific author of popular fiction, Greenwood works as an advocate in the Victorian Magistrates' Courts for the Legal Aid Commission. Her legal experiences add authenticity to her crime writing as a latter-day Agatha Christie of considerable stature. She has an insightful capacity for effortlessly weaving social and cultural history into her plot with conviction.

Murder in Montparnasse is atmospherically set in a desperate Paris towards the end of 1918 and ten years later in Melbourne on the cusp of the Great Depression in Australia. Phryne Fisher as a fictitious character is a well-to-do individualistic amateur with influential connections in upper-class Melbourne circles. She is intelligent, sophisticated, elegantly fashionable and strongly feminist and has an art deco ambience about her, evocative of the 1920s. As well, she is given to producing sparkingly satirical one-liners that are reminiscent of Oscar Wilde and the mode of sophisticated living as an art form.

The central mystery and storyline of *Murder in Montparnasse* concern the murder of Sarcelle, a promising young cubist painter, pushed under an oncoming train while waiting on the Gare du Nord. The murder is supposedly witnessed by a matey group of wildly drunk Australian infantrymen, who, after spending eleven months in the trenches, are returning AWL from an illicit binge in Montparnasse and an exciting visit to a notorious brothel. There they spent all their money on "booze and women" before being thrown out into the streets. This group of soldiers from the Victorian countryside survive the war and return home to Australia. Ten years later they begin to be mysteriously and brutally murdered one by one . . . is it because of what they had seen ten years before on the Gare du Nord? Phryne Fisher is urgently called upon by the frightened survivors to solve the mystery, which is further complicated by misleading evidence and situations. Atmosphere and quirky characterizations, however, dominate over the clever twists and turns of the plot that are reminiscent of the coincidences of a Dickens novel. To say more about the series of events and

multiple narratives around which the thriller is deftly constructed will only begin to reveal the ending and so spoil it for the reader.

The localities of the bohemian cafés, streets and lanes of Montparnasse and the staid suburbs of Melbourne like Brighton where Fisher lives in style in a seaside mansion are skilfully juxtaposed. There are nice details of French cuisine and Australian habits of plain but large filling meals. There is a subtle subtext here of differences in cultural values and attitudes of the two nations and nationalities.

Prior to her detective work we find that Fisher, as an intrepid and independent young woman, was herself in Paris in 1918 at the time of the murders. The case she investigates ten years later thus opens up some sad memories for her. After becoming a decorated heroine—awarded the *Médaille d'honneur*—for her work with a famous all-woman ambulance unit in the front line attached to the French army, she found her way into the avant-garde artistic and literary world of Paris in late 1918, soon became an artist's model to earn some money, and had a disappointing love affair with a French musician before returning to Melbourne after the war in the early 1920s.

Wartime Paris in the Australian imagination is marvellously evoked in this novel:

“There,” said Phryne. “The public bathhouse was there. Corner of the Rue d’Odessa [where frontline Australian soldiers as well as Fisher headed when arriving on leave after the caked grime and mud of the trenches]. I used to bathe there. Five francs for as much soap and water as you could use.”

“Threadbare towels, but,” said Bert. The waft of carbolic steam came back to Phryne, a strong, clean smell. “. . . we walked along the Boulevard du Montparnasse like kings”.

By the turn of the twentieth century “la vie parisienne” was world-renowned, including in Australia. In early 1916 the soldiers of the First Australian Imperial Forces began to take leave in the great city directly from the trenches and were intoxicated by its seductive atmosphere. Such leave continued until the cessation of hostilities. Paris was paradoxically a metropolitan oasis, a paradise amidst a desert of death and destruction in the rest of France. Between 1916 and 1918 the influence of Paris was felt by more Australians, especially servicemen, than ever before. And they experienced

its modernity and tradition, its sophistication, and its reputation for the uninhibitedly saucy and salacious.

With the lightest of touches Kerry Greenwood successfully manages to evoke all of these aspects of Paris during the Great War as the narrative fragments unfold progressively towards the dramatic climax of her pacy detective fiction and as the morbid details of murder and mayhem in the shadowy streets of Melbourne are revealed.

John Ramsland

University of Newcastle

The cover illustrations are taken from *Retour de la Nouvelle-Calédonie: de Nouméa en Europe*.