

BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTES

Jane Turner Goldsmith, *Poinciana*, Adelaide, Wakefield Press, 2006, 216 p. + viii, ISBN 186-2-5469-91, rrp AU\$24.95

Poinciana is a very commendable first novel by the South Australian Jane Goldsmith Turner, an author who had previously written short stories, poetry and children's literature. Launched at the 2006 Adelaide Writers' Week, it explores the quest for identity, for identities, in stories involving France, Australia and, especially, New Caledonia. The three countries are weaved together, or rather pieced together gradually in a kind of puzzle, through the adventures and misadventures of its main protagonist, Catherine Piron. Born in France in 1958, she was taken by her family as a baby to New Caledonia, but her mother hated it there and took Catherine, then aged three, and her older sister back to Paris, while her husband remained in Noumea.

The difficulties and dysfunctions of family life mean that Catherine is subsequently cut off from the others (but not 'abandoned' as a three-year-old in the 1950s as the Wakefield Press media release would have it), being placed in a boarding school before gaining a scholarship to England at the age of fifteen; from there she migrated to Australia in the mid-1970s to become, by the time of the novel's setting in late 1994–early 1995, a lecturer in linguistics at the University of Adelaide. Responding to an urgent call from her sister, she returns briefly to Paris in late 1994 to see, for one final time, her mother who is in rapid decline. There, Catherine learns the truth about her father, namely that he had not in fact died, as she had always been led to believe by her mother and sister.

Following the death of her mother soon after her return to Australia, and spurred by the devastating yet promising news about her father and the possibility that he might still be alive, Catherine heads to New Caledonia to try to discover his whereabouts and in the process uncover hidden aspects of her own life. Indeed, although she does not find her father there, she discovers much more than she imagined she would, as her own story of loss, betrayal, conflict and search for identity becomes intertwined with that of New Caledonia itself, particularly through its strife-ridden years of the 1980s, known officially as '*les événements*' (the 'events' or 'troubles'). This was the period that saw the rise of the Melanesian/Kanak independence movement, land rights claims and 'loyalist' settler backlash, producing a climate in which ethnic and social complexities were reduced to a bi-polar black-and-white opposition where

violence became endemic. In particular, Catherine learns, as we do with her, that she has a half-brother, Robert, her father's son by a young Melanesian girl who died giving birth to him. Like Catherine herself, Robert never knew about his father. Adopted by a white settler farming family on the north-east coast of New Caledonia, he also comes to enquire about his past that was concealed from him, and the episodes devoted to him in the novel deal largely with his search for self.

The work reflects these parallel and increasingly convergent lives through its structure, with alternating chapters devoted to Catherine and Robert, the former mostly set in the narrative's present, the period December 1994–January 1995, the latter presenting key events from Robert's life in chronological order, from his birth until his tragic death at the age of eighteen at the height of *les événements*.

This pattern provides the vehicle not only for the reader to see how the jigsaw puzzle of the lives of the characters fits together, but also for an understanding of the recent past of one of Australia's near neighbours that is still little known in this country. Perceptions of New Caledonia still do not always extend far beyond the clichés of black-white antagonisms and of French colonialism wilfully deaf to legitimate calls for indigenous independence; or perhaps in more recent times the image of a now trouble-free nation on the path to 'independence', an exception in the Melanesian 'arc of instability'—whatever partial truth may lie in these, as in all clichés. In the very process of unfolding its personal stories, her story and his story, the novel fosters the reader's curiosity and succeeds in building tension, both about the individuals concerned and the broader history in which they evolve.

In a wider frame again one could see this narrative as realising a double *coup*: assigning to Australia, via a French woman born in the year de Gaulle came to power and now become an Australian citizen, the role of mediator, an impartial and sympathetic outsider, yet one sufficiently on the inside to have a sympathetic understanding of things and to know when she doesn't know. Jane Turner Goldsmith herself lived for several years in New Caledonia through the *événements* of the late 1980s, a time of very difficult relations between France and Australia; indeed, it was during this period, in 1987, that the Australian Consul-General to Noumea, John Dauth, was expelled by France for perceived

interference in New Caledonia's internal affairs. The novel thus confirms *avant la lettre* the 'reconciliation' that has taken place between Australia and France in the South Pacific over the past decade.

At the same time, it could be seen as engaging through projection in another kind of reconciliation, this within Australia, imaginatively compensating for the decline in the quality of race relations in the country in recent years. That is, New Caledonia could be the displacement of an Australian story—its transposition offshore in a kind of fictional 'Pacific solution', all the more poignant in that we have a strong hint at the novel's end of a possible reconciliation, or at least reunion, between Catherine and her estranged father, in Australia, where he too now lives.

This possibility of renewal operates in the novel at various levels, including the inter-personal. We understand that Catherine's emotional life has been rather limited and lonely, given her fear of commitment and what would seem to be a series of failed relationships in the past. The exploration of the past in New Caledonia thus turns into a search for a new future. Indeed, the novel develops a Romantic undercurrent, as Catherine—diffident, gauche, very un-French—sees in Henri Boulez, a journalist working for the local newspaper in Noumea, the chance to pursue personal growth as well as receive professional advice and guidance. She had been given his details through connections in Australia, and, like her, he is an insider/outsider ('both from all over the place'), and yet there is a hint of her long-lost father about him, an older man, also a *piéd noir* who, in another hint of de Gaulle, proclaimed no nostalgia of 'Alger-la blanche' to be sought, transposed, in Noumea.

Indeed, the title of the novel reveals parallels between the two countries, Australia and New Caledonia. The Poinciana (named after a 17th century French colonial governor, de Poinci) is an imported species that thrives in both places at the same time of the year. Also known in English as the flame tree, its bright red flowers are on vivid display during the hot summer months, and, in the novel, where many crucial events over many years take place during this period on the cusp of the old year and the new, it is a symbol of passion and violence, but also of hope.

The structure, the story line(s) and the writing in *Poinciana* generally serve the author's purpose very well. The number of coincidences can appear a little forced at times, but the novel does strive to avoid exoticism and its use of interior monologue focuses our attention effectively on the psychic

energy of the characters, particularly Catherine, working as agents in their own 'postmodern' (of sorts) construction of history, willing events to occur. There are, however, some weaknesses in the device of having a Frenchwoman serve the didactic purpose of exposing background information, even if this is very relevant to the personal stories unfolding. Sometimes heavy-handed in its translation of its own French, this can also be inconsistent: Catherine is said to have 'such beautiful French... perfect',² yet she does not know some simple expressions, like 'ne te casse pas la tête',³ 'pied noir'⁴ or 'communard',⁵ for instance; similarly, she, who had spent her early years in New Caledonia and had visited the island again, albeit briefly, in 1983, is ignorant of some basic facts of its recent history, including *les événements* themselves, which seems rather implausible in the context; and people in New Caledonia would typically refer to *la Métropole*, not to 'France'.⁶ The book's editing, however, is very good, this reader picking up just one typo, a misspelling of the name of the former French president: 'Mitterand' for 'Mitterrand'.⁷

Despite some minor quibbles of this kind, one can say that the writing, taut and economical, generally carries the day and shows much promise for future work by the author. It is occasionally lyrical in its description of nature, but it is especially good in its deft poetic touch in dealing with individual psychology, evoking the unspoken, the unfulfilled aspects of existence which define character: 'The waiter watched her leave, a strange, solitary soul. Like a bird bobbing across an empty beach, too late for the crumbs'.⁸ Sometimes the external world and internal tensions seem one and the same: 'The farmhouse creaks. In the night under a starless sky, sound travels along the paddock lines. Palm fronds flap, damp in the rising mist. Flap, flap. Like a moon beat, a pulse in the grey-green light. Mosquitoes pierce the heat'.⁹

At its best, the novel is able to combine the process of character formation with its pluralist understanding of conflict and its plea for tolerance, expressed in a tense, dramatic poetry: 'When he looks in the mirror his face is sallow, his skin puckered with patches of light and dark, vestiges of uneasy adolescence... When he looks into his pupils, dark and huge, he sees himself drowning with longing for another life. The shadow of his skin fights itself, his blackness, his whiteness vying to shake off the label of *métis*, of fatherless, motherless, orphan, bastard'.¹⁰

One can look forward with interest to more work from Jane Turner Goldsmith.

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Notes

- 1 *Poinciana*, p. 84.
- 2 *Poinciana*, p. 61.
- 3 *Poinciana*, p. 79.
- 4 *Poinciana*, p. 83.
- 5 *Poinciana*, p. 102.
- 6 *Poinciana*, p. 53.
- 7 *Poinciana*, p. 49.
- 8 *Poinciana*, p. 70.
- 9 *Poinciana*, p. 168.
- 10 *Poinciana*, p. 163.

Paul Wenz, *En époussetant la mappemonde, L'Haÿ-les-Roses, La Petite Maison, 2009, ISBN 978-290-70228-3, 192 p., rrp 30 €.*

Since his periods of residence in Australia in the 1970s Jean-Paul Delamotte has steadfastly supported Australian literature and, through his small publishing house La Petite Maison, has published a number of Australian authors including the French-Australian Paul Wenz.

Paul Wenz was born in Rheims in 1869 and died at Forbes NSW in 1939; he is best known for his short stories written in his native language and the novella, *Diary of a New Chum*, his only book written in English. *Diary of a New Chum* is now available as an ebook, sponsored by Austlit: The Resource for Australian Literature for the SETIS (Sydney Electronic Text and Image Service) electronic texts collections.

En époussetant la mappemonde is a collection of Wenz's travel diaries and also includes two short stories first published in 1905, *En Nouvelle-Calédonie* and *Fausse Alerte*.

See also: <<http://alfalapotitemaison.free.fr/start.php>>

<<http://setis.library.usyd.edu.au/oztexts/austlittxts.html>>.

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