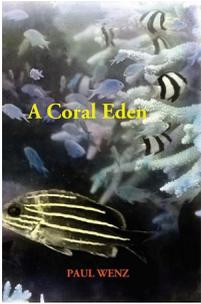


Book Note

Paul Wenz, *A Coral Eden (Le Jardin des coraux)*, translated by Maurice Blackman, Sydney, Exile Bay, ETT Imprint, November 2021, 120 pp., rrp AU\$ 24.90, ISBN 978-1-92247-383-7.



In 2021, continuing his Paris-Link series, publisher Tom Thompson of ETT Imprint added to his collection of Paul Wenz publications with *A Coral Eden*, translated by Maurice Blackman. The previous Wenz books in ETT's Sydney-Paris Link series are *The Thorn in the Flesh (L'Écharde)*, translated by Maurice Blackman (May 2018) and *Their Fathers' Land: For King and Empire (Le Pays de leurs pères)*, translated by Marie Ramsland (May 2018).

A Coral Eden is inscribed 'In memory of Jean-Paul Delamotte'. Delamotte was closely associated with ETT and will be remembered also as the publisher and ardent promoter of Paul Wenz's writing. Further information about Paul Wenz and Jean-Paul Delamotte may be found in ISFAR resources mentioned at the end of this note.

First published in French in 1929, *A Coral Eden* is set in Sydney, around 1905 to 1910, where the central figures, Jock and Joan, meet as young teenagers when Jock comes to live next door to Joan and her father, Dr Kirving. In the calm before the First World War, living beside the harbour at Rose Bay and listening to travel stories, especially those of Joan's father, they develop a mutual love of the sea and a longing to travel and explore the world. Kirving's friend, Captain Ross, tells Joan about the Great Barrier Reef, his 'Coral Eden', and she decides she will one day go to see its marvels for herself. The author works memories of his own travels into the narrative—he and his wife Hetty were great travellers and had explored Queensland and the islands of the South Pacific as well as many other countries.

Despite her longing for the natural world, Joan has to go to London, presumably for 'The Season', although this is not explained. After eighteen

months she returns and the couple marry, deciding to spend their honeymoon on a deserted island near the Great Barrier Reef, living off the land and enjoying an escape from their urban lives. They spend an idyllic month there, together with their dog Wolf, and decide to stay for another month. But their plans are interrupted by the arrival of an escaped convict from New Caledonia....

Historically a few escapees from France's penal colony did arrive in Australia but probably a little earlier than the suggested time-line of this narrative. *A Coral Eden* was published in 1929, so Wenz is writing in a partly imaginary past, apropos of which Maurice Blackman writes:

this historical blurring was already common practice in all his bush stories, right up to his final novel, *L'Écharde* (1931). The outback stories are set in an almost legendary past, a kind of 'dreamtime', covering the late colonial period from about 1870 to 1900 (17).

Wenz, the writer, is at his best when describing nature:

The turquoise blue water over the white sandy bottom soon became shallow enough to reveal its magical treasures. Living corals of every colour, from pale violet to dark red, strange sea urchins with long spines, appeared beneath the keel, which seemed to be floating on air, so transparent was the water. Fishes of all sizes, striped like tigers, painted with dazzling colours, darted left and right (56).

Most of Paul Wenz's short stories and novels portray the people and customs of the Australian bush or outback, perhaps because of their novelty value to his French readers. *A Coral Garden* is an interesting departure in that it deals with privileged Sydney urbanites at a time when Australians were beginning to look outwards, tourism was developing and the atmosphere was 'comfortably optimistic'. This, of course, was shattered by World War 1 and the Depression.

Wenz wrote only one book in English, the novella, *Diary of a New Chum*, published in Melbourne in 1908, so we are indebted to Tom Thompson for bringing us this series of translations.



Texts relevant to Paul Wenz and Jean-Paul Delamotte published in *Explorations* and *The French Australian Review*:

***Explorations* 23, December 1997**

M. Blackman, 'Transculturalism and Hybridity in the French-Australian Writer Paul Wenz', pp. 3–11.

***Explorations* 24, June 1998**

C. B. Thornton-Smith, 'The Delamotte Phenomenon—Cultural Reciprocity', pp. 6–16.

Jean-Paul Delamotte, 'Reciprocity', pp.18–37.

***Explorations* 42, June 2007**

Wallace Kirsop, 'Paul Wenz and Forbes', pp. 39–40.

***The French Australian Review* 56, Australian Winter 2014**

'War, Writing and the Wenz Family', pp. 51–64.

The Delamotte-ALFA Archive Index is available on the ISFAR website:
https://www.isfar.org.au/resources/delamotte_alfa_archive_index/.