A bloke's view

DAVID PAPINEAU

Justin Cartwright

IN EVERY FACE I MEET
218pp. Sceptre. £14.99.
0 340 63782 X

This is a novel about a man who is out of tune with the times. Anthony Northleach was once a first-class rugby player, but now, in his early forties, he commutes to a job as a middle executive in the City. It is February 1990. Nelson Mandela is about to be released from prison, and Wiil Carling's England team have trounced the French in Paris. These events raise Anthony's spirits, but his life is out of focus.

His mind keeps jumping around, especially when he is at work. After the boom of the 1980s, businesses like his are running down, and he is stranded in a job that is leading nowhere. His wife, by contrast, is gaining in strength, teaching children with learning difficulties and taking diplomas at the local college. His best friend Mike has been made redundant, and is increasingly given to drink and violence. Anthony misses the moral certainties of his colonial childhood in Swaziland.

The action of the novel takes place over the course of one day. Anthony takes the train to work and has a liquid lunch with Mike. His wife cooks supper and puts their son to bed. In another part of London, a young prostitute worries about her baby and goes to the police station to pay a fine, while her black boyfriend, Jason, concocts schemes to raise money for their cocaine habit and a new BMW. The paths of Anthony and Jason are clearly fated to cross. The novel is framed by scenes from a murder trial nine months in the future, but we have to wait to find out who does what to whom.

Readers of Justin Cartwright's recent novels will be familiar with a mixture of knowing social comment, off-key sex and vague hankerings for transcendence. All these elements are present here again, but in somewhat muted form, refracted through Anthony's restless consciousness. Cartwright's rhythmic paragraphs of short punchy sentences are well suited to Anthony's state of mind, which veers from childhood recall and sexual reverie to one-line judgments about modern mores. ("This caring talk of dysfunctional families and recovered memory is the new Esperanto for the middle classes"; "Design is to art what air freshener is to lavatories".) In other sections, Cartwright tests his imaginative range by adopting the perspectives of the young prostitute and Anthony's wife. While these passages are not always entirely convincing, they add an extra dimension to the novel.

Anthony may have smoked dope in the 1970s, and still does Mick Jagger imitations at parties, but at heart he is a middle-aged buffer who cannot cope with the way the world has changed since he left school. This novel succeeds admirably in identifying this character and conveying his worth. But behind the character lies a bufferishness of a less sympathetic kind. The structure of this novel confesses to an essentially blokeish, Garrick Club view of the world. Modern businessmen and social workers hide their uselessness behind a smokescreen of jargon. Women are likely to be nymphomaniacs or whores, and in any case they will almost certainly betray you. The language of money has supplanted any attention to value. And at the centre of Cartwright's plot lies the thought that honest men today are hostage to the random depredations of unwed mothers and their crack-dealing black pimps.

Cartwright's last London novel was likened to Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities* as an exposé of 1980s yuppiedom. This new book contains the even more obvious parallel of a prosperous middle-class life disrupted by a collision with the black underclass. However, Cartwright has little of Wolfe's ability to range compassionately through the nooks and crannies of a city's social world. His strength lies rather in his ability to convey the unsettled attitudes of a certain kind of mid-life man. But he would be an even better writer if he could transcend those attitudes himself.

Stephen writing William

GABY WOOD

Jane Rogers

PROMISED LANDS
376pp. Faber. £14.
0 571 17571 6

At first sight, *Terra Australis* seemed to Lieutenant William Dawes to be "a figment which their collective desire for an end to their journey had willed into being". This was in 1788, and a land promised had been found. The life of the historical William Dawes is pieced together from recorded facts by the fictional Stephen. Stephen, in turn, reflects on his writing and on other aspects of his life, in a form something like a journal. His Polish wife, Olla, who is caring for their handicapped infant, describes her days as if speaking to us directly. These three narratives, of what is desired or thought to have been promised, intertwine to make up *Promised Lands*.

Dawes, an astronomer sent to set up an observatory, is "a good man" with a "precious conscience". Once in Australia, he is ordered by the governor to take on the duties of a drunken surveyor who is unfit for work. He is progressive, egalitarian. He works alongside convicts in order to teach and encourage them, and brings food to a convict woman so that she doesn't have to resort to bribes and prostitution. He is against the governor's violent and patronizing treatment of the Aborigines and would like to learn their language. But his idealism comes in part from naivety, wrecked when he finds himself lusting after the convict woman, and in part from a faith which is puritanical and stubborn. The governor's barbarisms and Dawes's urge to teach the Aborigines the Bible are both visions of empire. It is only at the end, after many conversations with a young Eora girl about the stories behind the stars, that he understands the Aborigines' language and beliefs to be self-sufficient.

Back in the late twentieth century, Stephen is struggling with his book: "I wrote 'motion' then bracketed it, and inserted 'action'." It is when the narratives are layered in this clumsy, over-reflective way that the combination of the historical and contemporary novel feels forced, as if it were an end in itself. But then Stephen is an *Angst*-ridden married man. He, like William, is stubborn and idealistic. He has been sacked from the deputy headship of a comprehensive where he tried to offer liberties which resulted in anarchy. He is educated, commendable and pitiably stupid. The times when the novel flows smoothly from William to Stephen are those where the shift is based on the loosest of associations. We move from William feeling "like a worm exposed to the light", after sleeping with the convict woman, to Stephen remembering his son's birth; from William's anxiety about the treatment of the Aborigines to Stephen's bitterness about the school. Here we begin to see how the sections might not be separate, but one emerging from the other, Stephen writing William as he needs to between the historical facts.

The best parts of the novel are the ones told by a woman. They are neither historical fact nor analytical judgment. But even Olla takes time to find a voice. Her degree of foreignness is inconsistent and, at a few extreme moments, jumps starkly into stereotype "The language . . . . He does not need." Usually though, her being outside and set apart (from Stephen's life and his book which we are reading, from her own country, from this one) offers her a language and a slant on the world which is at once intelligent, insightful and crazy. She tells us at one point, remembering running away from home: "my toes are so cold I have lost their feelings". She has a matter-of-fact way of expressing what is most complicated. Having freed herself from real oppression in Poland, she is being urged by Stephen to go to "a group of consciousness raising". "I tell him I am not oppressed. I am happy, I am free. I have a beautiful house, good food, I can cook or sew or shop or clean, I do not even have to work. But this is oppression, he tells me." When she finally goes to the group, she finds women who "are like self-indulgent children", complaining that doctors treat them "like women have no feelings", but Olla realizes these women "do not know how to have no feelings". This is no predictable backlash, it comes from somewhere else altogether. She is a proud mother to her handicapped child, but she treads a fanatic's tightrope. She not only believes there is nothing wrong with Daniel, she thinks he has "powers", messianic qualities. When he is ill, " He knows what he is doing. He will not die."

Jane Rogers's novel is ambitious, brave and beautifully crafted. It is plainly anxious to avoid being reduced to such ready-made categories as the historical novel, self-referential fiction or women's writing. But, at moments, a certain strain arises when it seems to want to be all three.

William Bedford

THE LOST MARINER
305pp. Little, Brown. £15.99.
0 316 87615 1

In the summer of 1877, a young Yarmouth fisherman, Samuel Vempley, whose protector and former skipper has just died, joins the crew of the smack Rechabite, a fishing-boat with a sinister reputation. The ketch's skipper, Charles Oliver Everitt, is a stern, self-righteous religious fanatic; Jack Walmsley, the third hand, a sadistic bully. Vempley, who narrates his own story, soon finds himself in conflict with both over their cruelty to the ship's boys. On their first inshore fishing trip, one boy is harassed so unmercifully by Everitt and Walmsley that he drowns himself; another absconds as soon as the boat reaches port. As the Rechabite works her way north, calling at Grimsby, Whitby and Wick, Vempley scours the squalid pot-houses and stews of their slums in search of his missing love, Miriam, a herring girl, finally learning that she has died after a botched abortion. On the fishing grounds off Iceland, events come to a head. Everitt's religious mania overcomes him; Vempley intervenes to prevent him thrashing a boy to death; in the ensuing struggle the skipper is lost overboard, his jackal, Walmsley, is confined below, and the Rechabite turns her head for the Shetlands.

The Lost Mariner is no *Captains Courageous*. We do, it is true, learn much about the East Coast fishing industry in the 1870s: the construction of a fishing smack, and how sails are dyed with a mixture of oak bark, tallow, red ochre and Stockholm tar; the methods employed to catch, keep or gut the fish; the conditions under which the fishermen live and work; how to bait and cast lines for cod; the iniquitous arrangements by which young boys are recruited for the industry; the manners, dress and working practices of the herring girls, and much more. But William Bedford does not have Kipling's ability to make the information an organic part of the novel's narrative; it is, rather, usually conveyed to us in the form of a number of short lectures, delivered by Vempley either to another character, or directly to the reader. The author's seamanship, too, is not up to Kipling's; some details are implausible, some improbable, and a few plainly impossible. Among the last must be numbered the moment when the head of a ship's boy striking the boat's untended tiller sets the smack suddenly into catastrophic motion. We fare better on land: the descriptions of the Yarmouth Rows, or of the squalor and sordidness of Satan's Hole in Grimsby with its inhabitants, are effective and persuasive.

Though there are some striking episodes in the novel, there is little or no connection between them, and the whole is not bound together by much in the way of plot. The author is not concerned, as he might be, to trace Everitt's gradual descent into madness, nor to explore the development of Vempley's character, which seems little changed by the experiences he has undergone. At times, indeed, it seems as if the author's chief aim is to imitate *The Water Babies* and compose a tract calling on the public to join a movement for the reform of the conditions of the fishing trade.

The most difficult task facing the historical novelist is that of re-creating – or rather, since that would be impossible , of giving the illusion of re-creating – the consciousness of the time. Bedford circumvents this requirement by boldly ignoring it. He has given Vempley, who is prone to poetic musings and abstracted thought and wraps his sandwiches in greaseproof paper, a recognizably modern sensibility; the character is obviously not addressing his contemporaries of the 1870s, but a modern audience. This dissociation between Vempley and his surroundings, emphasized by his tendency to behave as a passive observer, undermines the narrative side of the novel. On the other hand, it perhaps enhances the depiction of the brutality and inhumanity of the fisherman's life.

T.J.BINYON

Papineau, David. "A bloke's view." The Times Literary Supplement, no. 4824, 15 Sept. 1995, p. 22. The Times Literary Supplement Historical Archive, link.gale.com/apps/doc/EX1200479873/TLSH?u=tlsacc&sid=bookmark-TLSH. Accessed 23 Sept. 2023.