

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Tobias Jones, *The Salati Case* (Faber and Faber, 2009)

Scholar and novelist Umberto Eco characterizes Michael Curtiz's 1942 classic *Casablanca* as a cult film 'because all the archetypes are there, because each actor repeats a part played on other occasions, and human beings live not "real" life but life as stereotypically portrayed in previous films.'¹ According to Eco, everything done in *Casablanca* has been done before. Given that there is only a finite number of codes, conventions, and character types in fiction, and only a handful of archetypal stories to tell, the appeal of individual books and films would appear to reside in their telling of those tales, the variations they spin, and the chemistry of those elements.

The Salati Case is a new work of crime fiction by novelist, columnist, and television writer Tobias Jones. In the summer of 1995, Riccardo Salati goes missing, leaving his family in debt and disarray. In 2009, Salati's mother dies, and the law firm handling her will hires private investigator Castagnetti to investigate this cold case, in order to determine if Salati is still alive somewhere (and so determine the distribution of his inheritance). Castagnetti tells us early on that 'I offer my clients clarification' (4), and this is what the Salatis seek.

Fans of crime fiction looking for a quick, engaging read should find much to like about the book as Salati works his way through the thick fog that shrouds Padania towards the heart of the mystery. However, readers expecting anything more might be disappointed. The major shortcoming of the novel is that the first person narrator Castagnetti – and by extension author Jones – lacks a distinctive voice. This is not to say that the characterisation is poor. Castagnetti has enough amusing (if superficial and rather stock) character traits to make him a likeable protagonist. He dresses down, has a dodgy ankle that suffers in the winter chill, had a tragic childhood, derives great satisfaction from his pet bees – 'There are no names and no emotions' (68) – and has a modicum of moral fibre (while he willingly takes on the 'dirtiest' of cases – 'fraud, missing persons, anti-mafia, *omicidio*' (9) – he draws the line at investigating infidelities). Furthermore, he is clearly designed as the lead for a series of future potboilers, and so Jones can be forgiven for opting not to thoroughly explore and potentially exhaust the character here. However, Castagnetti's voice as a character is neither idiosyncratic nor interesting. Had the story been told in the third person, with us merely looking over Castagnetti's shoulder as he delves deeper into the case, this would not have mattered so much. However, because the story unfolds in the first person, it is Castagnetti's voice that guides us through the narrative, and that voice is not particularly strong and does not have anything especially compelling to say.

Jones's writing style throughout is accessible and digestible, but also forgettable and lacking in texture. The book is also jammed with the sort of gumshoe soundbites that readers, depending on their generosity, will either appreciate or find more half-baked than hard-boiled. The following lines are emblematic: 'The case was as cold as the Salati woman' (7); 'He was as tight as a clothes line' (27); 'I felt guilt like an ice-cube in the heart' (124); and 'He took more convincing than a nun in a nightclub' (223). Some lines are corkers, some are clunkers, and some sound like they could have been lifted from *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid* or *The Naked Gun*.

¹ Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays* (London: Pan Books, 1986) 208.

Elsewhere, Jones remembers stereotypes for you wholesale, and his phrasing is thick with clichés: ‘I’m an investigator, not a shit-stirrer. This was all shit and someone’s been using me as a spoon’ (180); ‘There’s something about retired cops I find melancholic. It’s as if once they leave the service their whole life is meaningless’ (23); and ‘There was something about him that made him look slick. Maybe it was just his shiny tie and his polished shoes, but I figured he liked a fast buck and fast women’ (49).

Of course, these shortcomings in voice and writing style would not be so important were the plot itself more compelling. As the success of *The Da Vinci Code* and other Dan Brown novels attests, readers will happily follow bland characters with bland voices through bland writing if the story itself builds in an exciting way. Unfortunately, Jones’s narrative is not sufficiently compelling, and there is no sense of momentum or danger as the story builds. As suggested at the outset of this review, the magic of storytelling lies not so much in originality as it does in the creative rearrangement of all the elements we have witnessed in stories time and time again, and the new chemistries that those rearrangements can generate. Jones does not rearrange, reinvigorate, or do anything too refreshing with the codes, conventions, character types and archetypes indigenous to the crime genre. Castagnetti moves from point A to point B to point C with little flourish. He visits and talks to one character, telephones and talks to another, reads through a file or document, and then repeats the process again. Of course, readers of certain genres – be it romance, fantasy, horror, or crime – return to those genres time and time again because their generic staples and familiar beats are a sort of comfort food, and crime fiction fans looking for a quick, engaging read will no doubt appreciate Jones’s work. But even as comfort food for fans, *The Salati Case* is not a very nourishing dish, and given the volume of crime fiction available to readers, I do not think it is too much to expect an author to raise the stakes.

Ben Kooyman