

Michelle de Kretser, *The Life to Come* (Allen & Unwin, 2017)

The Life to Come is the product of a ferociously intelligent, formidably ambitious, and prodigiously gifted author. It is the fifth novel by Sri-Lankan born Michelle de Kretser, although in its format of five loosely linked stories that share only a few characters in common, it strains our conventional notion of the genre. It is a work that also challenges the ability of its readers to pay proper attention. *The Life to Come* straddles space and time, consisting of recollections of the past interspersed with present experiences, and with the action playing out in one country and then another. The first and second sections of the novel take place in Sydney, the third in Paris, the fourth in Sydney, and the fifth in pre-independence Ceylon, in post-independence Sri Lanka, and back in Sydney. Much of the novel is set in Australia's boom years of the early twenty-first century, when mining money funded the privileged lives led by the upper middle-class progressives who feature largely in its vast and varied cast of characters.

The first section, entitled 'The Fictive Self,' set in the late 1990s, introduces us to two individuals who will make intermittent appearances in the remaining four and provide a thread of continuity. By a stroke of luck, family connections and wealth have led to George Mayhew's being able to inhabit a spacious house in a desirable neighbourhood of Sydney where he can fulfil his dream of writing a novel while teaching a few university classes. A young, enthusiastic girl named Pippa, one of George's former students, is now his lodger; she will reappear in the remaining four stories. Pippa is also a would-be novelist, although George thinks his breezy, frothy and noisy housemate too childish ever to produce anything of value. He, meanwhile, labours on severe, uncomfortable works intended to reveal and dissect the world's brutality.

The second section is devoted to an academic couple: Cassie, a white middle-class Australian, and her Sinhalese boyfriend, Ash. Their affair is strained by the opposing worldviews imparted by their different backgrounds. Cassie, raised by freethinking bohemian parents, is a credulous soul who cherishes an untested faith in kindness while Ash, the immigrant scarred by the horrors of the civil war that ravaged Sri Lanka for two and a half decades, longs to impress on his girlfriend the reality of cruelty and despair, to wipe the innocent smile from her face. Pippa appears as Cassie's childhood friend; Cassie is one of the few people aware the aspiring novelist had changed her name when she was eighteen because nobody called Narelle could ever win the Booker Prize. We learn from Pippa about George; he is gaining fame as a novelist and his wealthy mother has bought him an expensive flat in Melbourne.

In the third section, Pippa is in Paris, researching material for a novel she will eventually publish, to mediocre reviews, as *French Lessons*, but the main character is Celeste, a Frenchwoman who spent much of her childhood in Australia and, as an adult, fled what she perceived as its historical naivety and cultural vapidness to return to France. She works as a professional translator and is a private, self-possessed individual involved in a lesbian love affair. Celeste is a complex and complicated being. She conceals her sexual predilection from others; she hides the intensity of her passion from her lover. Celeste despairs at the wilful ignorance Pippa and other Australian friends exhibit as tourists in Paris, content to skate over the surface of the intricacies of French culture, confident their ignorance will inspire compassionate kindness in the French. She compares them to fortunate children who expect only to be loved.

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While she has been a peripheral if important linking figure in the other sections of the novel, Pippa features as the subject of the fourth, which sees her marrying into a wealthy Australian family and achieving a measure of fame if not notoriety for a novel that features domestic violence. In this novel, her first real success, Pippa has drawn a crude caricature of a neighbour, a Sri Lankan woman named Christabel. The fifth section of the novel includes Christabel's reminiscences of her childhood in Ceylon, her removal to Australia to share a home with a fellow exile and childhood friend named Bunty, her love for Pippa, and the agonized sense of betrayal Christabel feels when she realizes how Pippa has not only misunderstood her but also exploited their friendship by producing a distorted fictionalization of her relationship with Bunty in her novel.

The characters in *The Life to Come* are largely as ignorant of their own motives and beliefs as they are of those of others. In that sense, we are all 'fictive selves', unable or unwilling to probe human complexity. Well intentioned Cassie and Pippa are given to virtue signalling while equally fond of expressing their dislike of those they consider less enlightened. Their privileged lives, unchallenged by adversity, allow them this luxury. They are self-absorbed and vain, unaware they are lying to themselves and others.

But the main target of the exuberant satire that informs and enlivens the novel seems to be Australia itself. Michelle de Kretser spent her own childhood on Sri Lanka and emigrated to Australia as a teenager. She dissects the complacency of her adopted country with a kind of glee but also with the subtlety and awareness perhaps only an outsider can muster. The 'true' Australians like Cassie and Pippa, cocooned in innocence, preoccupied with their literary festivals and dinner parties, seem unaware of the dark events in the past which have profoundly influenced Christabel, Ash and Celeste: Sri Lanka's complex and bloody history and the murder of Algerians in Paris in the 1960s.

Michelle de Kretser is too skilled – and compassionate – a novelist to rely on the simplification of stereotypes. Even shallow, self-serving characters like Pippa are redeemed, shown to have their own complicated backstories that inspire our pity and understanding. One theme of *The Life to Come* is the misunderstandings that arise in interactions between different cultures. Another is the human urge to tell stories that make sense of the bewildering complexity of everyday life and possibly provide reassurance when we are confronted by its mystery and terror. But it is a measure of de Kretser's complexity, her refusal to accept easy answers that, after all, the idea of literature as consolation is rejected. *The Life to Come* concludes with Christabel discarding novels by Pippa and George Mayhew, finding they reinforce her sense of life's awfulness rather than relieving it.

Wendy Jones Nakanishi