

‘Double line to the terminus’: Marriage, sex, romance and Joseph Furphy

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In Chapter II of *Such is Life*, Tom Collins sets off to visit Rory O’Halloran (known as Dan O’Connell) in his hut on Goolumbulla station in the Riverina. The other station hands tell Tom that the Catholic Rory is now married to a ‘red hot Protestant’: ‘Seems she didn’t want Dan, and Dan didn’t want her, but somehow they were married before they came to an understanding’ (56). This stimulates Tom’s reflections on Irish sectarianism and the limits of free will. He speculates that we have little opportunity for choice in our lives, which run along predestined courses, like train lines, confronting major or minor alternatives like the junctions in a rail network:

Here and there you find a curious complication of lines. From a junction in front, there stretches out into the mist a single line and a double line; and, meantime, along a track converging toward your own, there spins a bright little loco., in holiday trim, dazzling you with her power. Quick! Choose! Single line to the next junction, or double line to the terminus? A major-alternative, my boy! ‘Double line!’ you say. I thought so. Now you’ll soon have a long train of empty I’s to pull up the gradients: and while you snort and bark under a heavy draught, your disgusted consort will occasionally stimulate you with a ‘flying-kick’; and when this comes to pass, say Pompey told you so. To change the metaphor: Instead of remaining a self-sufficient lord of creation, whose house is thatched when his hat is on, you have become one of a Committee of Ways and Means—a committee of two, with power to add to your number. (71)

While this passage usually is interpreted as crucial to the structural revisions of *Such is Life* (see Croft in this *JASAL* issue), the choice of marriage as the exemplary major alternative also deserves our attention. From what we know of Furphy’s own marriage, it appears that he experienced this moment of speedy decision-making. He met sixteen-year-old Leonie Germain in 1867, when he was twenty two; three weeks later he married her (*OT* 89). Joe, the son of abstemious Protestant parents, was soon the proprietor of the Vineyard Hotel, Glenlyon, as Leonie’s mother left it in his hands while she moved on to her own further marital adventures in New Zealand.

Several critics have noted that, despite his reputation as the great writer of the Australian masculine tradition, Furphy’s novels show considerable interest in the lives of women, their place in the social order and their sexual attraction (including Croft, Lever, Martin,

Partington). Julian Croft's 'Who is She?' surveys the depiction of women and love in Furphy's novels and argues that the surface refusal of romance in his fiction is countered by the evidence of love beneath their surface. He cites the hidden love story of Molly Cooper and Alf Morris, and notes that, in the *Buln-buln and the Brolga*, Tom Collins's theory that 'women do not love their husbands' (BB 37ff) is challenged by the example of Mrs Falkland-Pritchard.

What we know about Furphy's unhappy marriage, confirmed in biographies by John Barnes and Miles Franklin, might sharpen our perspective on Furphy's presentation of marriage, sex and romance in his fiction. He asserted that he was interested in the real, rather than fanciful versions of life—and his interest in the failure of sexual relations offers us insight into how poor people in the past handled the breakdown of marriage, with no prospect of divorce. We know that Tom Collins is deceiving himself when he claims to be a mere chronicler of life, but this does not diminish the value of the novels as a record of sexual behaviour in the poorly documented lives of rural working class Australians. Frank Bongiorno's recent *The Sex Lives of Australians: A History* relies for the most part on legislation, court documents and the letters of relatively prominent people to trace the sexual behaviour of past Australians. But one of the roles of the novel, particularly at times of public silence about intimate life, is to provide insight into personal and sexual behaviours. Furphy was particularly aware that conventional novels did not address the lives of the people he knew, nor address the material difficulties, including physical relations, of married life. It seems valid, then, to read Furphy's fiction in the light of what we know about his own domestic and sexual life, and to give it some consideration as a record of actual behaviour in late-nineteenth-century Australia.

By the time he was writing *Such is Life*, the Furphy marriage offered a version of the O'Halloran arrangement; Furphy and his wife spoke only when necessary, and Furphy lived mainly in the shed at the back of their house in Shepparton. The partition that divides the bedroom in the isolated O'Hallorans' hut reflects the more settled arrangements of the Furphy marriage in Shepparton and later Perth. The marriage had broken down by the time of their return to Shepparton from Hay in 1884, and Joe's youngest sister, Annie Stewart, speculated that Joe had broken off relations with his wife as a result of Leonie's flirtation with a distant pseudo-relative during the time when she was left alone with the children (OT 129-30). This version of events leaves us with the image of the author as a vengeful patriarch, so convinced of his husbandly rights that he would snub his wife for the rest of their days because of a sexual misdemeanour. It has also led to speculation that Furphy himself had faced Warrigal Alf's dilemma in *Such is Life* as a cuckolded husband. This is difficult to square with the tolerant and sexually curious creator of *Such is Life* or *Rigby's Romance*. His choice of the Rory O'Halloran mode of docility rather than Alf's solution of leaving his wife and family suggests a rather different moral geography.

We do know as fact that the couple faced serious financial troubles during their final year in Hay, and they also lost two babies in their time there. In 1880 their daughter, Ida, died aged sixteen months; she was buried in Hay cemetery by Leonie. In 1882 a son, Reuben, was born

while Furphy was away on the track. This baby survived for nine months before Leonie, once again, was forced to bury him on her own. We can speculate on the effects of these events on the marriage. One might be the desire to end sexual relations altogether for fear of another pregnancy, another might be postnatal depression and severe grief for the mother—accounts of Leonie as a silent member of the family may indicate this. Annie Stewart seems more plausible when she says:

[Leonie] flatly refused to live with him as his wife any more—whether she did not want to run the risk of more children I do not know. Joe accepted the situation she was his housekeeper & never spoke to him unless compelled to do so—they had not quarrelled, he had just been a financial failure that was all. She waited on the family at meals, never sat with them it was then that Joe took to writing—many a man would have taken to drink. (*OT* 143)

Most commentators accept that the regular working hours in his brother's Shepparton foundry was the godsend that left Joe with time to set down his yarns from the track, but his sister may have been right that he also 'took to writing' as a consolation for marital loneliness. The O'Halloran marriage, once again, offers a parodic version of this situation with Rory spending his nights writing his 'Plea for Woman', an essay on the increasing virtue of women, while his wife retires to the other room. This situation didn't change in that long chuff to the terminus: in 1904, Furphy wrote to Miles Franklin about their impending migration to Western Australia: 'my wife departs saloon on one boat, and I follow steerage in another—which gives you my domestic relations in a mussel shell' (Franklin 115).

Furphy remained susceptible to the attractions of young women, and a keen observer of their beauty. He jokingly admitted that his insistence on referring to the 'wearer of the silky mo' was a deliberate strategy to diminish her charms for him:

I carefully cultivate a hard and ungenerous opinion of her...I have trained myself to regard Baker as an opium fiend; Miss Drewitt as a person who has bolted from her hubby; and Miss Winterbottom as one who habitually chases people with an axe. (*Letters* 200-201)

When he met Kate Baker in 1886, his family, especially his mother, had no qualms about leaving the two of them alone to talk late into the night. His family accepted Joe's loquaciousness and must have known he was desperate for educated listeners. Later, when Baker, in the delirium of illness, wrote an apparently compromising letter to him, Leonie intercepted it and the whole family acted to prevent Furphy's planned visit to Melbourne for the Exhibition of 1888 (*OT* 180-81). Baker was one of his intellectual lifelines, however, and Furphy was not going to give her up because of the concerns of his wife and family. He persisted in the friendship, and she remained devoted for the rest of her life.

One may cringe a little when reading Furphy's various accounts of meeting Franklin in Melbourne in 1904 (Franklin 109-113). Franklin might have been justly aggrieved at finding her fellow novelist attended by three other women, whom he insisted were there to meet *her*.

Furphy's later letters to each of these women relish the female attention and go so far as to compare the attractiveness of his companions. His preference for Molly Winter over Franklin suggests a partiality for beauty. For her part, Molly Winter thought that she was just 'an old man's fancy' (*OT* 341). Miles Franklin, later the most scrupulous preserver of literary letters, destroyed many of Furphy's letters to her because she found his expectations of her talent embarrassing. He was clearly devoted to his daughter-in-law Matilda, as well, and her account of his death suggests a mutual close affection (Franklin 147-9).

Furphy's novels are about men living without the companionship of wives and children; indeed, his work has been regarded as exemplary of the national masculine resistance to the domestic (Martin 1998). But large sections of *Such is Life* and *Rigby's Romance* consist of men talking about family, love and marriage. *The Buln-buln and the Brolga* is partly a study of an unlikely happy marriage, despite its narrator's theory of marital contempt; Tom Collins cites, among others, Walter Scott's wife, who mocked Scott's novels as 'rubbishy' (*BB* 39), as evidence for his theory, and this evidence may have consoled the writer whose own life's work could not interest his wife. Furphy tested the theory about wifely credulity on several workmates at the foundry, reporting that each responded according to his own marital experience (*Letters* 41).

Some of his stories deal with marriage, including adultery and domestic violence (both wife-beating and child-flogging). 'Four Half-Crowns' (*BB* 219-225), not published in his lifetime, indicates the kind of writer Furphy might have been in a more open age (and if his comic urge had been subdued). In it a husband suspects his wife of an affair with his old partner and drives her to madness. This is not sexually explicit in ways familiar to us—but the woman stands before her husband naked, delivering a speech about chastity that recalls King Lear's or Ophelia's madness. The deceitful friend has little place in a story about a husband's obsession and a wife's mental collapse. In *Such is Life*, a naked man is a comic figure—in 'Four Half-Crowns' a naked woman has tragic dimensions.

Michael Wilding has commented that Furphy is more subversive than we often admit, and that one of his subversions is this interest in sex and its absence from respectable writing in his society. His joking practice of substituting 'adj.' or 'sheol' for swear words, reminds us of the restrictions on the printed word in Victorian times; by and large, they mark unprintable blasphemy though Julian Croft suggests that the rare dash indicates obscenity (*TC* 241). Usually, the context of his stories lets us know that there are sexual matters that cannot be openly stated. The case of Tom Collins's visit to Jack the Shellback in Chapter VII of *Such is Life* is exemplary: Collins tells us that Jack's 'discourse ran exclusively on a topic which, sad to say, furnishes, in all grades of masculine society, the motif of nearly every joke worth telling' (273). Furphy can assume that his men readers, at least, understand the sexual gist of this discourse, referring to 'a story which Chaucer or Boccaccio would have rejected with horror' (273) before allowing Jack to tell his chaste tale of the man-o'-war hawk and the penguin. We may sense that Furphy would like to be free to tell more sexually explicit stories—like Chaucer or Boccaccio, or even Laurence Sterne or Henry Fielding. Certainly, he

allows Tom Collins to praise Emile Zola, ‘Zola is honest; he never calls evil, good’ though his novels may be ‘blue as heaven’s own tinct’ (245).

The unifying narrative of *Such is Life* is the love story of Alf Morris and Molly Cooper. William Cooper tells their story as the unforgivable betrayal of his sister by her lover, and Alf himself calls it an ‘act of the blindest folly and heartlessness’ (145) even ‘fiendish’ (152). Alf’s behaviour is surely understandable if we think of a young man confronted with the disfigurement of his lover: could he have faced sexual relations with a woman who has lost her nose and the sight of one eye? Of course, the novel never puts it so obviously, yet we all understand that this is a sexual problem. Later we find Alf still dreaming of his lost Molly. In Chapter IV, he tells Collins how he married a woman who didn’t ‘inspire love, though she was certainly good-looking’ (148). In *Such is Life*, the beauty and desirability of women appear at odds with their worthiness of love. In Chapter VI, when Collins spends the night with Nosey Alf he drives home the platitude that it is the first duty of a woman to be beautiful (259). The cruelty of this epigram will be obvious to the alert reader, who knows Alf’s sex and understands her misery. When Nosey Alf asks ‘what quality do we love a woman for?’ she is presumably hoping for virtues and accomplishments to come into the answer, but Tom merely expounds on the various ideals of beauty. And we should note that Furphy quietly breaks another taboo here, as knowing readers will realise that, while prattling on about feminine beauty, Tom strips naked before spending the night in Nosey Alf’s hut (*SL* 260).

We’ve had earlier encounters with Tom’s patronising attitude to women’s looks; he has accepted the ministrations of Ida, the ‘ugliest white girl I ever saw’ (211) and observed her confrontation with the imperious Mrs Beaudesart who was once ‘singularly handsome’ (209). Tom’s sympathies (and ours) are with Ida in this scene, but it is written as high farce with a detachment that draws out the comedy: the women are of ‘the same mammiferous division of vertebrata’ (211); their argument is best enjoyed from a masculine distance as the conflict of ‘fellow-mammals’. There can be no doubt of the injustice and cruelty of a world order that creates one woman ugly to suffer an ‘unromantic martyrdom’ as a poor selector’s daughter lucky to work as a domestic for a bully like Mrs Beaudesart, while the bully is born good-looking and selfish. Furphy is brutal in presenting this injustice and, perhaps, in finding some humour in it, yet the fun of the scene comes from Ida’s feisty response to Mrs Beaudesart’s contempt. Tom listens in embarrassment as Ida’s ‘tears rained hot and fast on the back of my neck, as she replaced my coffee-cup’ (213). The scene is funny, at the same time that it allows Mrs Beaudesart to spell out the importance of beauty. As Tom tells us; ‘Beauty in distress is a favourite theme of your shallow romancist; but, to the philosophic mind, its pathos is nothing to that of ugliness in distress’ (212).

There is no social reform that can make all women equally desirable to men—though Furphy makes it clear that social conditions can make matters worse when a woman must slave in dangerous conditions. His target here is the romance novels that refuse to understand the physical and, therefore, sexual advantages that accompany wealth. Mrs Beaudesart lives inside the mental world of such a novel, and she is the daughter of a character in Henry Kingsley’s novel *The Recollections of Geoffry Hamlyn*. She’s the exception among Furphy’s

women, distinguished as they are by the silky moustache, and bound to difficult lives as boundary riders' wives, or selectors' daughters.

Furphy mostly avoids the tragic mode, though he tells us many stories that have tragic implications. While he may find humour in injustice, he makes certain that we see it. The O'Hallorans, Alf Morris and Molly Cooper, even Ida the servant girl, suffer for their sexual desires or unattractiveness, but elsewhere sex is an object of fun. Before hearing Warrigal Alf's stories of the cuckolds' various sexual betrayals and revenges, Tom visits the hut of the Vivians and allows us to learn that their child is the son of the squatter Hungry McIntyre. Against the background of Alf's tragic adultery stories, Mrs Vivian cheerfully teases her husband and lustily presses Tom's bare 'flank' as he mounts his horse to ride away. The McIntyres and Vivians have a practical response to sexual waywardness, and, as it turns out Tom judges that the most ethical solution to a cuckold's situation is the unromantic one chosen by Alf—to hand over his property and hit the road. As in Furphy's own marriage, the workaday practical solution proves most ethical in contrast to the tragic or melodramatic options offered by literature (even by Shakespeare).

Perhaps the best example of Furphy's comic vision of sexuality is Chapter III which sends up the hypocrisy of Victorian sexual codes, by pushing the naked Tom into a settlement on the banks of the Murray in search of that unprintable garment, a pair of trousers. Tom's naked body is attacked by mosquitoes, mistaken for a pig and assumed to be lunatic. His nakedness is enough to render him an outcast in a sexually obsessed but prudish society. In this vulnerable condition, he observes the sexual antics of the young people returning from the Sunday School picnic, locked in amatory embrace on horseback, or trading kisses in a buggy. He is sufficiently caught up in the erotic atmosphere to fantasise about Jim Quarterman, the handsome young woman dressed in man's clothing and riding astride an unsaddled horse, 'the fine contour of her figure displayed with an amazonian audacity which seemed to make her nearly as horrid as myself' (115). Jim later appears in full Victorian dress as the 'modest-looking' Jemima (121-2), reinforcing the double lives of women as well as men.

Furphy's novels are determinedly comic, with the variously obtuse and knowing Tom Collins as narrator. The detachment in the comedy and attitude to sex is closer to the approach of the eighteenth-century novelists, Fielding and Sterne, than to Furphy's contemporaries, George Eliot or Thomas Hardy. Eliot is one of the novelists that he found wanting when it came to practical detail, referring in a letter to the impossibility of a boat being overwhelmed by a collision with wreckage floating in the same stream as in *The Mill on the Floss* (*Letters* 96). In *Rigby's Romance*, that novel is parodied gently in Thompson's story of drifting downstream with his beloved Agnes Cameron in a comedy of errors. After the loss of the oars and then the boat, the couple are forced to spend an uncomfortable night together on an island in the river, and Thompson has read enough literary novels to know this means that they must marry to preserve Agnes's reputation. Real life intervenes, though, with Agnes's father warning Thompson away from his daughter when he discovers the state of Thompson's finances. A woman's reputation is not so easily damaged in rural Australia. In a similar vein to Thompson's story, Dixon's romance with Miss Coone fails because he has been reading *Jane Eyre* and believes a bit of 'bully-ragging' in the manner of Rochester will

do the trick. After he kicks her, she never speaks to him again—Furphy suggests that the Brontë model is a form of abuse.

The other love stories in *Rigby's Romance* are variously tragic and bitter. Rigby himself tells the sordid story of Fritz and Mina conspiring to marry Mina off to a rich old man in the hope that her fortune will eventually come to them both; Rigby sees a moral about the evils of accepting social and economic poverty, particularly in old Europe. Furlong, the trapper, objects that 'secular remedies' cannot cure even 'secular evils' (134) and recounts his tragic story of poverty in Melbourne, and the death of his wife. After this, the kangaroo hunter, who calls himself Smith, declares that he's bound for hell because he intends to revenge the rape of his Nora. His story tips over romance entirely: the poor girl is raped by the local policeman, but the story is told in a mode of angry bitterness, culminating in his determination to kill, 'I mightn't git him for another month, but he's booked to go' (192). Despite the girl's suffering, the story is driven by masculine ego and aggression. It takes most Furphy readers by surprise because he usually places even the most tragic of stories (for example, the story of Mary O'Halloran's death in *Such is Life*) in a context of comedy or in the perspective of some greater principle. The kangaroo hunter resists all the consolations and advice of the clergyman on the riverbank; though readers might see it as a story about the abuse of a woman and the absence of justice and support for her.

Once again, Furphy tells us something about how sex was managed in rural Australia in the nineteenth century that we cannot know from other sources. The girl will not go to the law about her rape: 'what could she do without makin' the thing worse—advertisin' herself, as you might say?' (192) and he openly criticises the male concern with his own pride rather than the wellbeing of the girl. Rigby, riding roughshod over its sexual implications, turns this story into a disquisition on law and the way law is created by the privileged for their own support. Collins sees this as 'dishonestly' transferring 'our attention from the particular to the general' (197).

Rigby has his own views on the relationship between the literary and life:

"Romance everywhere, hardening into tragedy as the real supersedes the fanciful; for the real is always tragic," said he gravely. "Comedy is tragedy, plucked unripe. Farce is the grimmest of all tragedy; it is the blind jollity of an Irish wake, with the silent guest none the less present because unassertive. There are eight of us here tonight, and probably seven of the number are more or less abject and trashy heroes of romance—romance which has ended, or will yet end, in tragedy." (84)

Given that Furphy is a comic writer, whose narrator champions the real over the romance, this appears curiously pessimistic. Yet 'the silent guest' is usually present in his writing. The love stories in *Rigby's Romance* are often read merely as narrative adornments to Rigby's argument for state socialism, but they sound the limits of Rigby's understanding and undermine his position as prophet. Rigby looks to the general lesson to be learnt from each story—the silliness of romantic novels as a guide to life (Thompson and Dixon), the need to resist the desire for money and the capitalist order (Mina and Fritz), the importance of a

redistribution of wealth (the trapper), the injustice of the legal system (the hunter)—we readers, like the listeners on the riverbank, understand more complex implications in each story, particularly the mysteries of sexual desire, the need for sexual love and the relative powerlessness of women. Rigby argues convincingly about socialism throughout his novel, but the title suggests that even Christian socialism is something of a romance. Meanwhile, the faithful Kate Vanderdecken waits in vain at Maginnis's hotel for her lost love Rigby to return from the river. While the other men in the novel suffer and long for romance, Rigby neglects it. As Collins tells us: 'the agitator is a man, who, for reasons satisfactory to himself, though inscrutable to people of self-bounded horizons, chooses the dinner of herbs and hatred therewith, rather than the stalled ox where love is' (227). Rigby fails to recognise Kate at first, and considers himself lucky to have avoided marriage to her ('the time I would lose if I lived in such an atmosphere' 239). This might be passed off as noble but to most readers it seems ridiculous, and it disappoints those who want some resolution to the reunion between Rigby and Kate. Croft (*TC* 242) notices the correspondences between Rigby's Kate and Kate Baker who remained so faithful to her impossible love, and suggests this may be one of the reasons that Baker disliked both her namesake and the oblivious Rigby. Furphy regarded *Rigby's Romance* as his greatest work, but its determined frustration of readers' desires reveals some of the limits to the refusal of fiction.

Each man (or woman) is, perhaps, his (or her) own 'more or less abject and trashy hero of romance' as Rigby suggests, and sexual love cannot be reduced to mere physical needs, even among the most practical of working people. Furphy's interest in sexual love necessarily leads him into areas usually considered the province of romance writing. As Croft argues, the romance emerges beneath the realistic surface of his fiction. At the same time, his commitment to observing the world he experienced means that he addresses a series of taboos about sexual behaviour: in his fiction marriages fail for unromantic reasons as well as because of adultery, men beat their wives, young women are raped or abandoned with the destruction of their looks. Despite their limited opportunities, his characters continue to live in the hope of sexual love—except, perhaps, for Rigby whose romance is purely political.

Furphy's realism insists that the consequences of sexual choices, foolish or otherwise, include children. The O'Hallorans are bound together by their love for Mary, and the chapter of *Such is Life* devoted to lost child stories may be read as Furphy's memorial to the three children he and Leonie lost through illness. When we read in *Rigby's Romance* about Rory O'Halloran crossing the Murrumbidgee to sit by the grave of his daughter, it is poignant to note that Ida and Reuben Furphy lie in unmarked graves in the same Hay cemetery. Despite their differences, Leonie and Joe remained devoted to their children.

At the end of *Such is Life*, the attentive reader learns that Nosey Alf has left Runnymede, riding north in pursuit of Alf Morris who has gone to Queensland. Spooner gives a comically detailed account of her horses, dog and gun, but he includes the information that she 'was carrying a box that he evidently wouldn't trust on his pack-horse, but whether it was a violin-case or a child's coffin, I wasn't rude enough to ask' (286). We know it was Nosey's violin-case, but the alternative of a 'child's coffin' reminds us that Molly's nose and her beauty and youth (and the possibility of children) have not been restored to her. We can only speculate

about how Alf might respond to her when she finally catches up with him. It is another example of Furphy's 'silent guest' at the wake of farce.

The failure of romantic love and the breakdown of marriage are among the most common miseries that humans suffer—they were no doubt as common a hundred and fifty years ago as today. Rigby tells us that all love stories end in tragedy, but Furphy manages to convey some of the irrationality, comicality, cruelty and pathos of sexual relations. He gives us a glimpse of what married/sexual life might have been like for ordinary people rather than the aristocrats of popular novels, or the Bohemians and lowlifes of European naturalism.

When Furphy collapsed in the morning of 13th September 1912, Leonie ran all the way from Servetus Street to Sam Furphy's house in Clement Street, Swanbourne only to find him already dead (*OT* 384). We can never know the mysteries of other people's marriages, but Furphy gives us some insight to their complexity.

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