

THE CONVERSATION

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The Life to Come - this year's Miles Franklin winner - is a brilliant character study

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Author Michelle de Kretser with her Miles Franklin prize-winning novel, *The Life To Come*. Courtesy Perpetual/Copyright Agency/Martin Ollman.

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Michelle de Kretser's *The Life To Come*, which has won the 2018 Miles Franklin Award, begins with an epigraph from Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*:

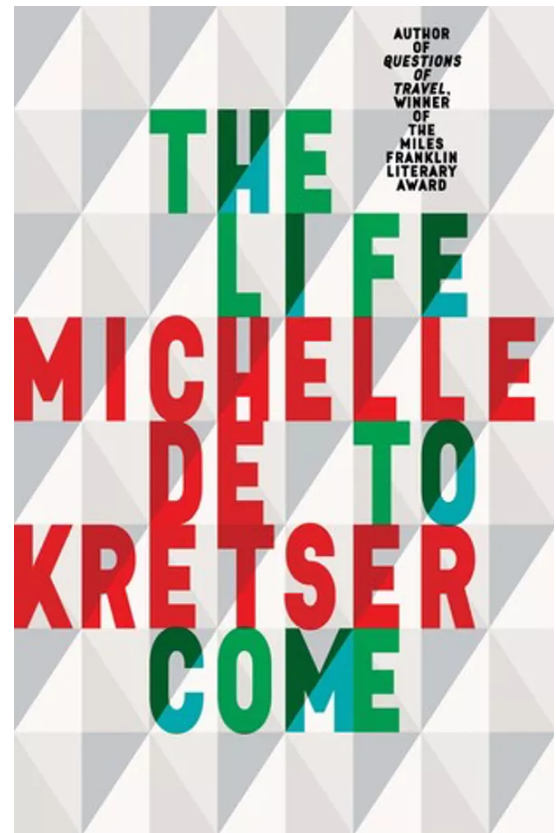
CLOV: Do you believe in the life to come?

HAMM: Mine was always that.

This tragicomic exchange sets up, brilliantly, the novel that follows. When I asked de Kretser about her selection of this quote, she replied that she is interested in the hollowness behind the lives of her characters. Each falls short of the life they might have lived; each hears the echo of a life that could have been; and that echo hollows out the life they are in fact living.

The focus on characters is important here; it relies not so much on the plot as on a study of individuals, who in this work are entirely “rounded”, realised in their fullness and their complexity. Characterisation, says de Kretser, is important to her; she is interested in crafting individuals who are perplexing – who at one moment are likeable, even admirable, and who then frustrate us with their shortcomings.

Certainly I was absorbed by the characters who populate the book. In the summary of the Miles Franklin shortlisted novels earlier this week, I mentioned the two novelists, Pippa and George: interesting but deeply flawed individuals.



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Other characters include Cassie and Ash, the mismatched couple of the second section, where Ash, a highly intelligent Anglo-Sri Lankan man, presents a clear-eyed perspective on Australia, but is also thoughtless, and treats women poorly; while Cassie, his temporary love, patronises the “Ashfield Tamil” (who this section is titled after), in whose grocery story she performs her own idea of multiculturalism, drawing on her upbringing as a child “whose emptiest make-believe had been labelled “creativity” by her parents”.

Next we meet Céleste, French-Australian translator, whose life has not delivered what she might have hoped, and who hovers on the edges of the lives of others: her cashed-up Australian family; her happily-enough married lover Sabine; and Pippa, who drifts through the whole novel, disrupting and exploiting others, and being herself crushed by all she is not able to achieve.

Then in the final section we follow Christabel and Bunty from their childhood days in what was still called Ceylon, through to Bunty’s dementia and death. Christabel has the final words for this section and for the book. Her perpetual frail optimism allows her to move through small opportunities and large disappointments: from childhood, when she “sat on a step and waited for her life”, to the final scene where, alone in the park, she sits, surrounded by the ghosts of the past, and watches what she perceives as Bunty’s dog come toward her, while she waits, “joyful and triumphant”.

Every character in this novel is complex, frustratingly unfulfilled, marked by kindness, selfishness, or dumb selflessness. But they are always, entirely, convincing.

De Kretser reminded me of a line from Shirley Hazzard's *Bay of Noon*: that fiction has a commitment to veracity, while life need not be lifelike – indeed, it can be preposterous. The lives in this novel are not-quite preposterous; rather, they are marked by great veracity. At times they annoyed me: I wanted them to smarten up their acts, be kinder to themselves and to each other, be more reflexive.

But I did not, at any point, want to lose touch with them. De Kretser says that she aims to provide readers with the kinds of characters and stories that will interest them, that will urge them to go on reading, to immerse themselves in the world of this book. The characters in this novel are complex, three-dimensional, absorbing. They might irritate you, break your heart; but they will be worth your attention.

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