

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Michelle de Kretser, *Questions of Travel* (Allen & Unwin, 2012)

What the *Questions of Travel* might be are apparently signposted in the novel's epithets: the more we travel the less we connect, indeed the more references we accumulate the more the world is transformed into a spectacle that ultimately will never reveal the meaning even of itself, let alone of life. This rather undercuts the orthodox hope that the more attentive travellers move about, the better they will be able to appreciate others' issues and remediate both their own and others' cultures. And so it is that the novel builds up the counterpointed narratives of Laura from Sydney and Ravi from the hinterlands of Colombo in Sri Lanka, only to deny near the end what had appeared to be an all-too-conventional confluence of lives brought about by increasing contact between peoples. More than that, it comes to seem after all that the novel is not so much asking questions about travel in a conventional sense, but rather about that journey that is all of our lives, that which carries us from past to present, in chronological time, and on to the futures that psychological time allows us.

The novel really begins in the 1970s, when jet travel began to be more of a possibility in the West for a much wider demographic, and ends in 2004 as the tsunami surges into Sri Lanka. The book proceeds by means of short sections cutting back and forth between Laura and Ravi's very different lives and options. Both of their lives, however, are conjugated in terms of the way in which travel may possess very different connotations: in Ravi's case, it means the serious displacement of going to Australia and applying for asylum, while for Laura travel is first a dream (inevitably the iconic visual intensities of Europe), then something she is able to do because she can afford it and is free to choose, and finally a career in guidebook publishing. The imbalance can clearly be seen between the economic ability of the Australian to travel out of desire, and the constraints of travel structured by politicised violence and whatever options appear available. Travel becomes, above all, psycho-social.

Stated so simply, the point is hardly startling. Nevertheless, de Kretser occupies 500 pages with the two stories, bringing the characters slowly closer together – eventually they work at the same travel guide publisher – while also keeping them apart. The sentimental belief that the physical encounter which travel allows leads to understanding and shared projects is denied. In a way the book's length is necessary in order for the narrative surprise at the end to be greater, brutal even. But it is also the result of what has been observed to be de Kretser's particular strength, her attention to the subtle interstices of communication and small group dynamics. In this, it may be that her eye for detail is somewhat more finely observant in the Sydney scenes than in the Sri Lankan ones, but that might depend on what the reader is familiar with.

Less charitably, and going against the grain of the widespread approbation the book has received, the observation of the minutiae of educated, well-off Sydney life is hardly something we are undersupplied with. The vignettes of office and personal life in Sydney are underwhelming either as representation, or as direct or indirect questions about relative values that the novel underwrites (so to speak). The lack of narrative risk-taking characterises the book from start to finish, its short sentences and short sections familiar from much other contemporary fiction in which readers are presumed to lack the attention span necessary for complex sentences or lengthy chapters. Given de Kretser's apparent tutelary guide of Henry James (on whom the protagonist of her well-known *The Lost Dog* is writing a thesis), this is somewhat ironic.

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Moreover, it is difficult to know what social observation teaches us about the meaning of a tsunami, unless such things as the unfairness of events, the absurdity of the universe, the illusoriness of planning, all of which are apparent in daily life in any case. The ending of the novel with the approach of the tsunami does end the lives of both of the protagonists, it is implied, so it is an appropriate place to end the book, but as the novel barely enters into the representation of the event, it also swerves from the question as to what it is about the size of a catastrophe that appears to alter something about the nature of the unfairness, the level of the absurdity, or the insubstantiality of the illusoriness of planning. The last character depicted is enjoying a fanciful fantasy of life with Laura, whom he has just met, when everything is about to be swept away. Is this as good a way to go as any, after all? Would his death have been 'better' if he had been seeing his situation more realistically?

The book's dust jacket, which shows a small central Sydney as an island, surrounded by a vast, threatening-coloured sea, comes thus to seem a very good metaphor for a narrative about the opaque resistance of time to human projects. Just as the water 'wins' at the end, so also are we engaged in a losing battle with time. We might as well enjoy fantasies about sex with unlikely partners, for what will happen in our lives will only fitfully follow a rational script anyway. From Laura's charity sex with her landlord and her love of a man who gives blandness a bad name, through Ravi's logic-defying (for Australians) refusal of asylum when it is finally granted, to the large gallery of odd or fractured interactions and connections of different types, *Questions of Travel* slowly overcomes its deceptive character as a chronicle of a period to become a bracing meditation on time in general. As Ravi prepares to return to the Sri Lanka in which political violence had destroyed his life, and in which will shortly occur something he could not possibly have planned for, he says goodbye to a woman he had been interested in, but whom he realises he had not really had a chance with. As de Kretser has it, this character 'belonged to that winner, the future' (508). Our status as time's possession is all too clear.

David Callahan