

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## David Foster, *Man Of Letters* (Puncher and Wattmann, 2012)

David Foster has been writing for years now. *The Pure Land*, which won The Age Book of the Year writing award, was published in 1974, and he has produced a significant amount of work since. *Man of Letters* is the third in a series that began in 1985, continued with a sequel in 1988 and here we are 20-odd years later with the final D'Arcy D'Olivere's adventure, a whodunit thriller that doesn't have many thrills, and a comedy that is a bit too short on laughs.

D'Arcy D'Olivere's is an aging former postie who worked the beat on Dog Rock (a town of Foster's own creation in outback NSW) in his youth, but is now an Australian Postal corporate security group operative working in the CBD. D'Arcy is investigating an incident of possible fraud within the corporation that led to local layabout and musician Ross Commoner finding his face on Australia Post's Australian Legends of Music series of postage stamps. It is up to D'Arcy to interview the locals, uncover several other seemingly bizarre mysteries in the town, and still deliver the mail, including all his Big W catalogues. *Man of Letters* is weird, convoluted and sometimes downright confusing. That Foster can spread such a banal premise over 142 pages without it crumbling completely is testament to his often inventive writing, and the curious but grating protagonist D'Arcy D'Olivere's. *Man of Letters* is probably fifty pages too long: instead of keeping it short and sweet, Foster decides to fill *Man of Letters* with innocuous mysteries, including the case of the missing Bunnings voucher, the secret of the comatose Indian national, and a drug bust. What *Man of Letters* is left with is a plot that has so many twists and turns you can barely keep up, none of which are satisfyingly resolved or addressed. In the end, *Man of Letters*, for all its lofty ambitions, is rather light and runs out of steam long before the final page.

Foster's writing is a sort of haphazard stream-of-consciousness, a reeling monologue that reflects D'Arcy's sometimes aggravated and skittish internalisation. D'Arcy is an interesting character, an old fella raging at the world, discontented with a loss of tradition, a staunch protector of postal law, and at times a bit of a bastard. So while sometimes hard to follow, it is D'Arcy's narration that offers the most pertinent point of interest. Foster has given his protagonist a consistent voice that is both idiosyncratic and contradictory. The reader is privy to every one of D'Arcy's preoccupied thoughts, which are often colourful and humorous. And while this is where the fun is had, Foster's focus on D'Arcy leaves the rest of the characters a little thin: they are mere functionary players in the unravelling mystery, peculiar for sure, but scarcely given room to exist beyond the backdrop. There is also something to be said in giving D'Arcy so much room to 'think', because although he *can* be a unique character, he is also full of largely unimportant information. Take this section for instance:

Australia Post's expansion plan – bearing in mind that small business *is* our single biggest customer – is increasingly directed towards using our trusted brand to compete with express delivery companies like Linfox, Toll and FedEx. Indeed, our future might be said to depend upon how well we can outdo our competitors here. And we cannot deliver wine from a Honda Ninety, which is another reason for putting contractors on all 7950 postal beats. (19)

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Moments like these exhibit Foster's exemplary and extensive knowledge of the subject matter, and they give D'Arcy strength in character, but they are not very interesting. I found myself skim-reading some of these sections simply because they did nothing more than help me with my trivial pursuit skills. There is too much stuffing in *Man of Letters*, and D'Arcy's erratic and attention-deficit-ridden monologues do not help the cause.

Yet for all the overstuffed exposition there are some clever and genuinely funny sections of prose. They are usually downright bizarre, but Foster injects the writing with enough silly humour that they are infectious. Add to the fact that they are being conjured by a disgruntled and cynical D'Arcy and you cannot help but smile:

In September, we watch for duckling here as this is where they cross the road. Like Wonga pigeon, the wood duck have moved into town of late. If you saw 12 ducklings Monday, you'd see 10 Tuesday, 8 Wednesday, 7 Thursday, till eventually you'd be down to a workable 3 or 4. (77)

Foster's prose is sometimes morbidly hilarious, dark without being too serious, and often simply crass. *Man of Letters* is not filled with enough sections like the one above, but I could still appreciate them when they came around. However, Foster's running gag of using acronyms in his prose, an apparent play on the way people talk to one another in text messages and how it crosses over into real life, is a bit clumsy and jarring. D'Arcy's use of the term 'LOL' more than once is near unforgivable. Similarly, Foster fills *Man of Letters* with so many pop-culture references, trying to make every one of them funny, that none of the satire bites particularly hard at all.

*Man of Letters* comes deep into David Foster's career as a writer, a profession that has yielded several awards over a large number of books. I say this because Foster is obviously a talented writer who knows what he is doing. Yet if you are looking to begin an engagement with this writer *Man of Letters* would not be the place to start. The initial premise is bizarre, but proves not to have enough steam to make it to the finish line. That Foster has had to shoehorn a series of other similarly ridiculous mysteries into the mix attests to this, and left me confused and ultimately disappointed. Too many twists do not add up, fall flat or lack any sort of tension. By the end, the initial interest in D'Arcy's monologue wanes significantly, and none of the other characters offer respite. While D'Arcy is a rich, if not increasingly annoying character, the rest of the players in this thrill-less whodunit are flatter than a postcard. David Foster is an inventive writer, and is probably worth further study, but *Man of Letters* should not be your first port of call.

## **Piri Eddy**