

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Margaret Merrilees, *The First Week* (Wakefield Press, 2013)

How would you feel if you received a phone call telling you that one of your children, or someone very close to you, had been arrested for murder and there was no doubt that the person was guilty? It's not a situation you expect to find yourself in, but given that murders feature prominently in our daily news, and that many of the accused are ordinary people, why should it not happen to someone you know? If the murder seemed to be without motive that would make the situation even more traumatic.

This is the position facing Marian Anditon and the first week referred to in the title is the first week of her life after the shattering news. A morning begins like any other, as Marian goes about her chores on the farm, but by the evening she is on the road to Perth, uncertain of what she will discover when she arrives.

Merrilees takes us into the mind of Marian as she drives along the road, trying to come to terms with what she has learned:

Normally, driving at night, she would sing to keep herself awake.... The words came out as a grotesque croak, sending shockwaves through the quiet hum inside the car. Heat flooded up into her face. How could she think of singing at a time like this?' (19)

Marian goes through the expected states of denial, confusion, searching for an explanation, examining her memories to see if she was to blame for her son's actions. Along with her thoughts her physical reactions are taut and stretched like fencing wire. In that first week Marian learns more about her son, and much about herself. She is forced to confront the way in which the indigenous people have been forced from their land, and the way in which European settlers have degraded that land. At the end of the week she returns home, to a world that had changed for her forever, but one in which she knows that she will survive.

The narrative is told with deceptive simplicity, through the thoughts and reactions of Marian, a woman who is in no way exceptional, yet who is unique. As she searches back through her own life, her marriage, her two sons and the struggle to keep the farm going after her husband died, we can recognise that Marian's was a life of struggle and compromise. Does that make her culpable?

In Perth she goes through the experience of the preliminary court hearing, seeing her son in the dock, but not being able to talk to him, conferring with his solicitor to whom Charlie is just one client. She finds the solicitor's card reassuring because there seem to be three phone numbers, which suggest that he is important and successful. Then, 'She put on her glasses and looked more closely. *Phone Fax Mobile*. Oh well. One secretary. But it did sound business like' (42).

At the same time she meets the friends with whom Charlie shared a house, and a young indigenous woman who had introduced him to social activism. These encounters challenge Marian's views on sexuality and racism. Prejudices have to be reexamined and abandoned. This part of her first week is one of the incidental consequences of Charlie's action. There may have been pressure on Merrilees to explain more fully why Charlie shot two people he did not know, but the senselessness of these murders serve to highlight Marian's distress and bewilderment and allows the focus of the book to remain with her.

The scene where Marian first visits Charlie in prison reveal the gulf between them, his self-absorption and her sense of helplessness.

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‘Why didn’t you come yesterday?’
‘I’m sorry,’ she said stricken. He needed her. How could she have stayed away?
‘I waited.’
A seven year old Charlie, waiting at the school gate.
But this Charlie was not seven, and she wasn’t the one who had done something wrong, she had to hang on to that. (121)

The visit does not improve.

‘I would like to know what happened, what went wrong.’
But he wouldn’t look at her.
‘You can’t tell me, I can see that.’
‘You don’t have to stay,’ he said
‘Yeah. Perhaps I’d better go. Evie’s waiting.’ Marian got up, feelings in a jumble. Guilt, anger, despair. (124)

Marian wonders if she can just walk away, if she has the courage for this. But even as she thinks that, ‘the cobweb strings of motherhood were tugging at her gut’ (125).

The First Week was written as the creative component of a Ph.D. The manuscript won the prize for the best Unpublished Manuscript at the Adelaide Festival 2012, and was deemed by the judges to be a clear winner. What is presented is a reflective and deep exploration of one person’s personality and inner thoughts. What might seem, at first glance, a slight story, is rich in detail and understanding of how a woman, faces a horrifying situation, one over which she has little control, yet might come to accept and learn from the experience. Nothing could bring her life back to what it has been, but in the end she accepts that Charlie must take responsibility for what he has done, and she must take responsibility for her own future. It is almost stream of consciousness writing and we are privy to Marian’s innermost musings and reactions, many of which are refreshingly ordinary, but which convey the depth of her distress.

The First Week is thought provoking and absorbing. The writing draws you in and leaves you shaken, somewhat battered but strangely exhilarated.

Emily Sutherland