

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Rod Jones, *Julia Paradise* (Text Classics, 2013)

Rod Jones's first novel, *Julia Paradise*, debuted in 1986 to critical acclaim. It promptly won the fiction award at the Adelaide Festival in 1988 and was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Literary Award, as well as being runner-up for the Prix Femina Étranger in France. In short, Jones's first novel was a roaring success. Twenty-seven years on, and *Julia Paradise* is as confronting and evocative as it was in 1986.

Set in Shanghai in the 1920s, the narrative follows Kenneth 'Honeydew' Ayres, a Scottish physician and disciple of Freud, who psychoanalyses the homesick wives of British expatriates. The exoticism of China, among other things, appears to have a maddening effect on these colonial women, and Ayres is never short of patients. To Ayres, the string of wives suffering nervous disorders and various drug addictions has become 'common to the point of banality' (13), and when first presented with the drooling and barely lucid Julia Paradise, Ayres does not immediately see anything special or interesting about her case.

Julia Paradise, the Australian wife of a Christian missionary, suffers from Zoopsia, a condition which causes her to have vivid and terrifying hallucinations. Her visions typically take the form of snakes, toads and vermin, the 'classically loathsome creatures' (11), and can throw her into a fit of violent terror or paralyse her with fear. She has also taken to wandering the streets at night, taking photos of Shanghai's decrepitude under the belief that she is a 'serious photographer' (13), while falling into sleep-like states during the day and occasionally speaking in snatches of German. Concerned for her health, her husband, the reverend Willie Paradise, takes her to Ayres for psychoanalysis.

Ayres, an obese and self-indulgent hedonist, has little interest in Julia Paradise until she tells him tales of her childhood, during which she was a victim of rape and incest at the hands of her father. Johannes Kohl, Julia's father, is fascinated by images of birds mating. He lured the young Julia into a sexual relationship by introducing it as a game he called 'playing birds' (53). There is a theme running through this novel of strong, large men using small, frail women and girls to satisfy their urges, beginning with Julia. Aroused by the alleged origin of Julia's trauma, Ayres begins to use her to satisfy his own deviant desires.

Julia is not the only woman to suffer in this manner. Rather, down a particular street in Shanghai, one Ayres is familiar with, child prostitutes lift their skirts and expose themselves to potential clients. Once the reader is aware of this it becomes clear why so many Western women in this story succumb to nervous disorders and drug addictions, and are only miraculously cured of their conditions once they are sent home; perhaps these Western women are not suffering from a simple culture shock, but are instead maddened by the violence and immorality they are forced to witness, and ignore, every day. Even Ayres is forced to confront the sadness of his own depravity when he visits a painter friend to 'make use' of one of his young models. Ayres views the painting of Lucy, a young prostitute, which the artist has been working on. In the painting the girl is nude and has a pained expression on her face:

Morgan has captured there the sadness of a man's receding desire, a desire not entirely satisfied, and on the girl's face, the despair of repeated rape ... the suddenness and force of his movement makes her cry out as he bends her forward against the wall. As he fumbles with his trouser buttons the sadness and the pity of it sticks in his throat. (108)

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The entirety of *Julia Paradise* reads like the vague recollection of a detailed dream. In parts it is lucid and the plot is easy to follow, but then it flows into a new narrative that feels unreal and in that moment it is not possible to determine if what you are reading is real thought or action, or a perverse fantasy. Jones's prose is fractured, and the reader is forced to chase the tail of the last of Julia's recollections, while not being sure of exactly what it is they are chasing. Perhaps the intention of this is to give the reader a better understanding of Julia's condition; you may see the colourful snake of the narrative in the periphery of your vision, but as soon as you move to focus on it, it will disappear. *Julia Paradise* is mesmerising, and some paragraphs require immediate re-reading just so you can indulge in Jones's eloquence.

However, no amount or manner of reflection can stop this book from being an unsettling read. The vivid images so adroitly conjured by Jones, along with the fractured narrative, have the effect of a bad dream that fogs the mind and refuses to clear. Maybe the reader can recognise the unreality of a nightmare, but there is no denying that the horrors in this book exist. Jones offers no salvation and little comfort, and this could leave a reader with the sensation of unfinished business.

Nevertheless, a frustrating lack of resolution and redemption take little away from what is an intense and confronting novel. Equal parts beautiful and repugnant, *Julia Paradise* is worthy, and desirable, of a second reading.

Lauren Dougherty