

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Susan Errington, *Ice Letters* (Vintage Books Australia, 2016)

Ice Letters might be described as a love story, but to limit it thus is to do the author a great disservice. It is much more. Errington explores the relationship between Dora and Daniel during a period of conflict and change in Adelaide. In retrospect World War I may be seen as a call to fight for King and Empire, but at the time, and especially as the war dragged on, there was a significant anti-war movement, which, in its turn, flirted with the feminist movement and socialism. In the summer of 1916, when the story begins, the heat both enervates and arouses strong emotions in those who meet clandestinely to plan their opposition to the conflict. While the women meet in genteel groups with endless agendas, Dora, devastated by the loss of her brother Edgar at the front, feels alienated by women's continual talk and lack of action: 'I am weary and too sad for all this talk. Too fed up with talk' (20).

Her rejection of this group with its china cups and ineffectual activity is accentuated by the sudden change of tense at the beginning of Chapter Four: 'She left so hurriedly that her hat was forgotten, left on the table near her seat, a lost fragment of her presence ... She plunges into the street, drawing in a gulp of arm evening air, and walks bareheaded along Ebenezer Street in the moonlight' (22-23).

We feel her anguish and her need to rebel, to do something that would move along the cause of pacifism. Her first idea is to take off her shoes and walk bare-stockinged, but she rejects this idea and instead lets down her hair, literally and symbolically.

Daniel acts out his pacifist principles by printing anti-war publicity, an activity that he conducts in secret. He and Dora work together in this as well as on a collection of poetry by Rudyard Kipling to be eventually published. He is a poet who was tremendously popular at the time and who also represented some resistance to the idea of white supremacy, thus suiting those who rebelled against British domination. Yet in spite of forward-looking ideas, the acceptance of socialism and the need for a new order, there is no equality of the sexes; it is the men who dominate: 'Daniel and Malachy talked politics and then Daniel talked philosophy and Malachy disagreed with him. Dora felt like a spectator at a duel' (31).

Daniel, needing breathing space from the pressure of war hysteria, applies to join an expedition to the Antarctic and is accepted. Rather than escaping the war, he finds himself in a situation that mirrors that of the soldiers in the trenches; a group of men isolated in a confined space. He writes to Dora and signs himself, 'your forlorn and faithful lover, Daniel' (164). Letters were an important part of life in that time, so, in using this device to move the narrative, Errington recreates that sense of families waiting for letters from the front, soldiers at the front waiting for letters from home, as well as the normal communication between friends and family. And what of the letters? These letters are not sent. In the case of Dora, they are in her journal; in the case of Daniel, they are letters written in the Antarctic, where there is no postal service. The letters succeed in revealing the experiences and thoughts of the two lovers from a more personal perspective; lovers who now have to face a decision without the support of the other, a supreme test of their beliefs. The novel moves inexorably towards the point of decision for both of them, and Errington shows an unerring sense of pace as the story develops. By slowly building the sense of place, the force of the characters and their interaction, Errington takes the reader to a point of high tension, which is ultimately resolved.

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The character of Malachy, socialist and activist, moves through the narrative like a threatening Svengali. Totally self-absorbed and manipulative, he adds a further point of conflict and doubt, both for Dora and the reader. At one stage he moves into Dora's house, as a boarder not a lover, even as he plays on her vulnerability.

Edgar, her dead brother, becomes as real to us as if he were still alive, as he is still in Dora's thoughts.

Much can be made of the sense of place in literature. In *Ice Letters*, Adelaide in the war years comes alive. We feel the heat, the dust, the shadows, the streets, the uncomfortable clothes, the social restrictions. In the Antarctic, we are faced with an icebound wilderness, where men battle with the elements, where survival is a victory: 'No-one had warned him [Daniel] about the blizzard. He had expected Antarctica to be a land whose supreme quality would be whiteness and silence, but where he had expected stillness, he found flux' (188-189). The reader experiences the Antarctic more through the perceptions and actions of the group than through descriptions of the landscape, although the sense of isolation, cold, dark and the noise of the wind evoke the sense of 'otherness'.

Ice Letters is a book that provokes thought and engages the reader, a fitting addition to the group of fine novels that have been produced by South Australian women writers.

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