

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Marie Munkara, *A Most Peculiar Act* (Magabala Books, 2014)

Discussing the importance of Indigenous languages at the 2011 Melbourne Writers Festival, Marie Munkara, the award-winning author of *Tiwi* and *Rembarranga* descent, said that ‘the spoken word is one of the most powerful weapons that we have on this planet. Words can be used as weapons of mass destruction and they can be used to heal the human heart’.¹ The words in Munkara’s new novel, *A Most Peculiar Act*, are imbedded in this duality of language and the result is an uneasy double-edged humour of spoofing oneself and joking back. The deadliness of Munkara’s humour is reinforced with the deadliness of the topic: the novel is about a life on a mission somewhere near Darwin which is subject to the protection policies of the Aboriginal Ordinances Act of 1918, and it climaxes with the Japanese bombing of the town in 1942. The narrator, as sardonic as the one in Munkara’s first novel, *Every Secret Thing* (2009), takes the reader on an off-the-beaten-track journey, and as the novel progresses, the bumps multiply.

The novel consists of twenty-three chapters, each referring to a different character or event. The key for decoding each story lies in a clause quoted from ‘The Northern Territory of Australia. No. [9] of 1918. An Ordinance,’ which precedes each chapter. In this way, the ‘most peculiar act’ from the title does not just denote the NT Ordinance but also the act of implementing the ordinance on the grass-root level, or how the act becomes *enacted* on the body. Munkara achieves this effect by constructing a whole plethora of quirky characters, some of whom implement the act, some of whom are being acted upon and some of whom work around the act, which explains why the author, in the Foreword, says that the novel is about ‘bloody-minded bureaucracy, blackfellas and bumptious egos’ (8).

The novel opens with the arrival of a new Chief Protector of Aboriginals, Horatio Humphris, aka Horrid Hump, the man whose utter incompetence is still not ‘good’ enough to ‘bugger up a situation that was already bugged’ (10). As new characters are introduced, classifying them into stock categories becomes increasingly problematic, because the capricious Lady Fortuna randomly spins the wheel of fortune. Thus, while camp patrol officers start off as flat characters, one of them, Ralphie, soon finds himself in a position usually preserved for Aboriginal characters: that of being ‘tolerated by few and wanted by none’ (68), when he loses his job in the Aborigines Protection Unit, and joins Aborigines living in the camp. The new patrol officer, Drew, starts off as a white woman who needs to pretend to be a man to get a job at a time when ‘women in the workforce would only ever rise as high as men would allow them’ (48). Aided by her ‘gender confusing’ name, she lies in her application for the patrol officer’s job. She knows that the authorities do not want the unwarranted expense of interviewing applicants in person, and her deep voice over a crackly telephone line does the trick. However, the fact that Drew is initially constructed as a hardworking woman in a markedly patriarchal world does not mean that she will maintain her marginal status based on prescribed gender roles. As the narrative reveals, there is always room for ‘improvement’ and Drew can and will develop into a demagogue and eventually become a tyrant. Munkara’s colonial hierarchy is anything but simple and the development of her characters anything but predictable.

The mastery of voice becomes most vivid in the construction of Aboriginal characters. This is where mimicry and mockery fill a dark void caused by protection and assimilation policies. To

¹ Zable, Arnold, John Bradley, Kim Scott and Marie Munkara, ‘Language and Politics in Indigenous Writing,’ *Overland* 205 (2011), 59.

achieve this effect, Munkara uses the same technique as in her previous award-winning novel, *Every Secret Thing*. Peripeteia occurs when ‘the considered dumb-arse knows the unsuspecting smart-arse isn’t as smart as he thinks he is because somewhere along the way the roles have quietly been reversed’ (EST, 67). The reader is introduced to numerous Aboriginal characters living in the camp, whose ‘jaw-breaking’ Aboriginal names have been changed, in the context of assimilation policy, into more ‘practical’ ones reflecting their appearance. What can we expect from Aboriginal characters such as Pickhandle, Fuel Drum, Old Nag, Donkey Face, Brumby, Horseshoe, or Mattock? In spite of the simple names, there is nothing obtuse in the way they work around the (camp) system, even when it means getting hold of grog and tobacco by giving the ‘whitefella’ or ‘yellowfella’ what they want.

The most distinctive character is sixteen-year-old Sugar, a fringe-dwelling Aboriginal girl. From the onset ‘Sugar’, yet another misnomer, is constructed as ominous, though it is not of her own making. She gives birth to twins, which signifies bad luck for Aboriginals; she escapes from the hospital and arrives in the camp with the surviving newborn and joins Aboriginals who interpret her baby’s cries as the working of an evil spirit. So she must move again, from the camp to the Pound destined for ‘coloured’ Aboriginal girls. There she learns to become a domestic, has her baby girl taken away, and gets a job as a maid in the house run by an odd couple, Penelope and her Chinese lover Chou Chou. Penelope’s home is the setting for one of the final scenes of the novel: a Christmas party at which Penelope introduces a game of revenge. And what a revenge this turns out to be when the unexpected Japanese bombing of Darwin repositions the power relations among the characters. In this mayhem, Sugar is not going to be taken prisoner again.

A Most Peculiar Act is not a humorous work in the same manner as, for instance, Vivienne Cleven’s playful *Bitin’ Back* (2001). It is far more confronting because the phenomenology of Munkara’s humour is marked by ‘elastic polarity’, which makes the reader laugh and think, and the thoughts that impress themselves are not necessarily funny. The novel debunks stereotypes without falling into the trap of constructing new ones. This is a serious novel then, and not necessarily for ‘young adults,’ as it has been labelled.

As for the reader, there is nothing better than to be taken for a textual ride by Munkara’s witty narrator who has a keen eye for detail, especially when it concerns ‘a sliding scale of injustice’ (16) because ‘[s]hit is still shit no matter how big or small the turd is’ (16).

Iva Polak