

Gail Jones. *Sixty Lights*. London: The Harvill Press, 2004, £14.99. ISBN 1-843-43195-5.

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An unmistakable characteristic of this remarkable narrative is its postcoloniality. Set in the second half of the 19th century, it recounts, in *Bildungsroman* fashion, the journeys of Lucy and Thomas, orphaned siblings of eight and ten years respectively, not from the UK to Australia, but the other way around, from southern Australia to England, then to India and back to England. Enough colonial space to roam around in. The time frame on the other hand is more restricted: we meet the main characters after their mother's death in childbirth and their broken-hearted father's subsequent suicide in their childhoods, and only a dozen pages later we are casually told, in a flash-forward, that Lucy will die (of tuberculosis, that 19th century killer of so much talent) aged 22. The journeys of the in-between years which are also journeys of personal and cultural self-discovery are only made possible because of Queen Victoria's empire, which has spread Lucy's family out over three continents.

Lucy is born in Australia, but she is never consciously described as having an Australian identity, nor does she herself possess any emotional ties to any mythic landscape. Perhaps that is because her mother instilled a love of literature in her; Honoria Strange knows *Jane Eyre* virtually by heart. Or perhaps it is because of her maternal grandfather who married a Chinese lady. Ten years after leaving Australia, Lucy suddenly remembers her half-Chinese cousin Su-Lin, and the wonderful Chinese games she knew. Or perhaps it is the influence of their uncle Neville, a spice merchant based in Bombay, to whom their father entrusted them before killing himself, and who has to be got from India before they can be 'transported', in the reverse direction, to Victorian London. But their situation there is a precarious one. Neville is caught embezzling funds and loses his job, and so the children have to be apprenticed. Lucy's second job takes her to India; Neville's old friend, the curiously named Isaac Newton, is offering the job of housekeeper and companion to the 17-year old Lucy, although what he secretly hopes for is a young wife. In this plan he is thwarted by Lucy's inexperience as she is seduced by a dashing Captain during the long voyage out to Bombay. She conceives, her lover typically absconds, and Isaac Newton discovers the *gravitas* of an unwed pregnant mother's predicament. Unlike the physicist, this Isaac is unable to disentangle the prism of Lucy's source of inner light.

In London, Lucy is re-united with her former Australian carer Mrs Minchin and she finds another partner, the painter Jacob, who earns our immediate love when he responds to Lucy introducing herself as "Mrs Isaac Newton" by exclaiming

“Aah, prisms! Whiteness shattered! The spectrum revealed!” She also has a career of her own as a photographer, discovering the nuances of light and how to trap them on photographic paper. As Lucy (her very name suggests light) becomes first a photography trainee in Bombay and later a free-lance photo artist we observe her observing the world in light and images. Her first job is with an “albumen” manufactory; she and twenty other women produce photo-sensitive paper. In her diary and with reference to that work she records “that the sky was the colour of a sheet of photographic paper, drenched in wet egg-white, a bright screen, gleaming lightly as it hung to dry” (101). On her arrival in India she “knew at once that this world had a denser pigmentation: colours were brighter, more strident, and more adhesive to their objects” (121), and she concludes that the “delectable visibility of things was her aim and her vocation.” This only spells out what announced itself earlier: that like the albumen paper she produces as a 14-year old, she is photosensitive. She is also a master of the *mis-en-scene*: her diary is entitled “Special Things Seen” and will later be supplemented by a section titled “Photographs Not Taken.” Her brother Thomas shares this passion; when he is employed by the “Mr Martin Child’s Magic Lantern Establishment”, one that allows him to experiment with mirrors, lenses and other optical devices, he is so pleased that light seems to burst from his pores: his eyes are “fired up and aglow ... like twin gas flames at an 8 o’clock magic lantern show” (98). But light is not always positively connoted: on board the ship that takes her to India her seducer arouses Lucy’s interest with an explanation why the sea seems to glow in the dark; “it’s bioluminescence” as he explains. That is his only attractive feature, but innocent Lucy swoons and sees an opportunity to explore the magic of her own body. During the moments of intimacy she senses that William Crowley “cannot quite see her” while she records every detail of his body.

The first time we get a glimpse of Lucy’s mind we are told of a violent dream she has of a man carrying a mirror and falling off a high scaffold. The dead man lies on the ground amidst the shards of glass and is illuminated by fractured light. That’s what this narrative is too – fractured – as we learn of the context to this episode much later. A reviewer has described the layering of background stories in the first half of her novellas overdone, but is that feature not typical for all postmodern novels? As Richard Flanagan once wrote, “that a book should never digress is something I have never held ... The only people who believe in straight roads are generals and mail coach drivers” (*Gould’s Book of Fish*, 164). In any case, once Lucy discovers pain and betrayal, and learns that one must leave one’s mark on the world by becoming something special, the narrative meanderings of the novel’s first half are reined in. In the final three years of her life she touches everyone around her, and we wonder what she might not have achieved if she had only been allowed to live the average life-span of her time. Her diary records a

host of luminous images: a fire-work factory where most of the employed youngsters are missing one or several fingers; a bristle factory whose female workforce troops through the gates with sickly-red blistered hands; the curious reflection of her own face in a brass door knob. Interwoven with that feast of images are numerous references to Dickens (whose traumatic childhood shows a number of parallels with Lucy's), George Eliot, or William Thackeray as reminders that this is after all a Victorian setting, something that her postmodern stylistics does not always convey. When her dreaded death came, I shed a few private tears, just like her once-again bereaved brother Thomas, who feels "unmanned" and a boy again, "naked with a candle, fearing what might be screened unbidden on mirrors or in dreams" (249). The door is closed on the narrative with yet another remarkable image, that of the five-year old Ellen coming to her mother's death-bed, standing "in a dusty diagonal beam of light, her small hand on the door, her attitude curious, sensing, with an innate and precocious delicacy, that she had glimpsed something private, something she should not have seen." And then the child takes "a step backwards" ... "and pull[s] shut the door."

It is a sensuous feast to read this highly *literary* novel; the words skip and bounce, they glitter like morning light on a mountain river, or like a chandelier at the opera, and the unexpected multiple meanings they assume indeed resemble the rainbow prism which Isaac Newton discovered. If light and capturing it in images is the novel's main concern, then the second most important is the power of fiction, which Lucy aptly calls a "metaphysical meeting space" that is not meant to entertain or divert, but to provide knowledge. And if you were wondering why the novel has such a curious title, well, there are sixty chapters in it, each one a guiding light. At times I felt enchanted by Gail Jones' narrative art in a manner only effected by the elegantly intricate prose of Patrick White or Thomas Mann. Kerryn Goldsworthy has described Jones' style as "ornate and bejewelled", and the Sydney Morning Herald reviewer as "hypnotically poetic". I take comfort from such nourishing praise, knowing that I am not alone in my admiration.