

Halligan, Marion. *Murder on the Apricot Coast*. Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2008. ISBN 978 174175 84 4. 249 pp, pb. **Reviewed by Peter Stummer**, University of Munich.

Halligan, author of some twenty novels and another one in the pipeline (*Valley of Grace*, publ. April 2009), was brought up in Hackett, and, as far as one knows, lives there today. Small wonder, then, that she seeks to put Canberra on the literary map, and be it only in the realm of the novel of suspense.

The armchair cosiness of the book cover, designed by Pauline Haas and illustrated by Maggie Fooke, signals the tongue-in-cheek tenor of this Jane Austen plus Agatha Christie project. So one great asset of this multi-layered, well-phrased novel consists of the manifold forms of irony. It is a fair guess what else, apart from their abode, writer and persona might share. Newly-wed Cassandra has just become M(r)s Marriot and works as a freelance editor of fiction. Somewhat reminiscent though of Sartre and Beauvoir, they live in three houses, with the most spectacular being one of Al Marriot's on the coast, where he grows the apricots of the title. The reader sees everything from her point-of-view, in a kind of stream-of-consciousness narrative mode. In this way, it does not make sense that reviewers of the predecessor *The Apricot Colonel* (2006) pedantically complained about the lack of precise punctuation. Although she is supposed to be in her late thirties, as it turns out, she often sounds somewhat more advanced in age.

As Halligan maintained in a recent interview (Heanue 2008) on Stateline (ABC TV). she writes "domestically." Consequently, the world is unravelled, Austen-like, through dinner parties of mainly three couples and their children. One meets at a book launch in the National Library, has tea at Tilley's, or discusses food at Moutarde. Fate takes its course, first with a friend confiding in her about a secret liaison with a married man and then with the sudden demise of the beautiful daughter of one of the friendly couples. When it becomes known that drug abuse was involved, the complementary detective work of Cass and Al are set in motion.

They both lament the present-day demoralisation and bemoan that “these middle-class people” tend to be so “unselfcritical.” The inclination to moralise as well as to digress mockingly recalls the ways of the eighteenth century. The learned play on names confirms this trend, from Cassandra to Pomona and Amabel. Fob watches are contrasted with their wristlet successors, and pin money is thrown in for good measure. Cass demonstrates a considerable mobility of register and repeatedly excels at explicit reflections on language and style. She happily introduces ‘hard words,’ such as meretrix and meretricious, consults the *Shorter Oxford* and the *Macquarie*, delightedly teaches her Mac new words, and effectually comments on the usage of such words as adore, alleged, cad, spiv, trope, adultery, and the meaning of “cutting the mustard.”

Numerous are her literary ruminations. She deplores that they teach ‘communication’ these days at English departments in the university instead of literature proper. She defends the history-truth relation in story-telling, “a good novel never lies.” She chides a youngster for wanting to become the next Matthew Reilly in terms of profit without the effort of reading. By implication, various types of thriller are ventilated or traditions alluded to, when, for instance Al poses jokingly as Hercule Poirot. More important still are her good-natured swipes at Australian literary prizes and more recent bestselling literary hoaxes. She mentions James Frey and the unmasking of his sensational autobiography by the smoking gun web site (Wyatt 2006).

Jibes at literary fashion comprise thoughts about genre and closure, and, demonstratively, she congratulates herself on being an “unreconstructed reader.”

No doubt, the model of the enterprise is the murder mystery. What eggs Cassandra on is her distinct feeling that there was something “murky” that “needed to come out,” in that superficially intact Canberra between Lyneham and Manuka. A motto from Horace stresses the satirical angle, and a kind of prologue plays on the notion of sequels. Instead of risking the misfortune of Austen or Bronte in our times, you had better sit down and write your own

sequel, before anybody else does it. It also ties in with a more classical tradition that Cassandra very sparingly comes up with truly poetic metaphors, and it is certainly not accidental that they all occur in an emotional context celebrating the Cass – Al relationship. Thus, when she is shocked, he cups her hands “which were sitting like scared mice on the table” (128) or, more detailed, at the beginning of chapter nineteen:

When the big cat moment [with reference to an American article, this notion had been introduced in chapter seven to denote sleeplessness] came in the middle of the night I didn't worry but snuggled up to Al and let my mind do a bit of ruminating. We were lying like spoons, him behind, and it was very comfortable. I like cuddles in the night. Sometimes he spoons behind, sometimes I do. Sometimes we entwine.

Her stylistic sensibility is put to good use when she analyses, in the core of the novel, the alleged memoir of a young prostitute. Echoes from *Moll Flanders* to *Fanny Hill*, on the one hand, and present-day kiss-and-tell pulp volumes, on the other, cannot be overlooked.

All of which leaves two important aspects of the book open for discussion. One is the oscillation between some feminism light and a distinct tendency toward romance. Cass and her mother are a case in point of the former. Moreover, men are far from being foregrounded and many are rather dubious specimens. But then there is also the ideal of beautiful prose explicitly extolled as necessarily “singing” and commanding a rhythm “which speaks to the heart.” And on the plot level, there exists a beloved husband who is allowed to remain totally enigmatic, who is not supposed to answer any question about his rather secretive activities and who nonetheless clearly dominates the relationship. It adds to the happy-end romance that Cass announces her pregnancy at the end of the novel. The other point of interest is clearly the combined agenda of debunking Ozzie provincialism and mateship masculinity at one and the same time, which incidentally could explain the lack of critical attention so far which Dorothy Jones (2008) remarks upon. Not only is there a great emphasis on education and learning, on French and French cooking, on travel, on the experience of asparagus time

in Hamburg for example, on the knowledge of great literature, but also on the deflation of violent machismo. Male pomposity is definitely diminished and devalued. Perhaps some (male) readers may find it a bit rich that the fascinating Al Marriot fought in the Gulf War, it is true, but is much more lauded in the novel for being an expert in preserving apricots, and for being a fantastic ironer, and for being able to pass himself off very convincingly as a woman by cross-dressing. For, after all, his big decorative Priapus statue was not overturned in his garden for nothing.

Nonetheless, to use the common thriller jargon, the novel might not be a stunner or a real page-turner, but it certainly represents an entertaining and a rewarding good read.

Works Cited:

Heanue, Sioban (2008). Interview on Stateline (ABC TV, Feb 22)

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