

Nam Le: The Boat. Camberwell, Vic.: Hamish Hamilton / Penguin Australia, 2008. 315 pp. ISBN 978-0241-01541-4. A\$ 29.95. Also published in the USA by Random House / Knopf 2008. **Reviewed by Peter O. Stummer**, University of Munich

The Vietnam-born and Melbourne-raised author cultivates an impressive online presence on www.namleonline.com. On his website, the viewer is confronted with an intimidating breaker which threatens to engulf the onlooker on the beach. The next thing that strikes the eye is a quote from novelist Mary Gaitskill praising *The Boat's* vision and power as "timeless." This introductory bow towards North American literary culture is then followed, on the next pages, by a long list of positive reviews published in American papers.

The bio provides a bunch of some 25 literary prizes. Laudatory comments are enlisted by, amongst many others, William Boyd and Peter Carey. The book has been translated into more than a dozen languages. Incidentally, the German version was taken care of by Sky Nonhoff with Claasen Verlag and characterised by one reviewer as "Erzählband des globalisierten Schreckens (Weidemann 2008).

The family had fled from Vietnam over the open sea in 1979. Luckily they made it to a refugee camp in Malaysia. There, baby Nam fell ill and the best chance of medical treatment was the hospitality offered by Australia. It was a hard life for the parents as they were unable to use their good qualifications in the new environment. The clever son turned out an achiever though and got many scholarships. He successfully read law and wrote an honours arts thesis in rhyming couplets, at Melbourne University, for Chris Wallace Crabbe. Through fellow-Australian-writer John Murray, he learnt about the Iowa Writers' Workshop, won a Truman Capote Fellowship and was accepted in 2004. There, the teaching of Marilynne Robinson and, in particular, of Frank Conroy served as an eye-opener with regard to the intricacies of the short story. Grappling with the principal unintelligibility of another person's psyche, he discovered what he calls the "ethical imperative." For, paradoxically in his opinion, the

only way of getting into somebody else's skin, then, was through fiction (Cohen 2008).

Nam Le therefore comes across as fully transnational and one hundred percent globalised. In truly post-Demidenko fashion, he plays the ethnic card, but is quick to transcend it. In almost all of the many interviews, he seeks to relativise the notion of authenticity. The Australians love it; they instantly elevate him to stardom. Among many others, fellow short story writer Cate Kennedy is impressed by Le's "dazzling virtuosity with narrative voice" (interview with bookseller Readings 29 May 2008.) The judges of the New South Wales Book of the Year 2009 award enthused about transnational literature going "wherever it wants" and appreciatively summed up the collection in the following manner:

So it is that, in *The Boat's* seven stories, we visit Tehran and the slums of Colombia; we inhabit the minds of aging American painters and Japanese schoolgirls; we hear the sound of ocker slang and formal Vietnamese address. Each created world is real, believable; each in turn makes the others seem strange and unfamiliar, almost dream-like (www.pla.nsw.gov.au/awards-shortlists/book-of-the-year)

It does not lack symbolic appeal that the collection hinges on the central story "Halflead Bay," the only one with a distinctly Australian perspective, which comprises almost eighty pages. The North and South American ones precede it and those with a Japanese or an Iranian reference follow. "Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice," as the first, and "The Boat," as the last, provide the Vietnamese frame.

"Halflead Bay" is vastly reminiscent of Tim Winton's *The Turning*. By its thematising adolescent anxiety, it reads vaguely like a pastiche. The port is doomed, the boy's mother suffers from MS, and her demise is imminent. The atmosphere is characterised by an undercurrent of male violence. The disappointed father does not see his expectations fulfilled, as his son does not score high on the masculinity scale. He is no good at soccer and certainly no match for the town bully who gives him a severe thrashing on the suggestion of his shallow girlfriend the son has a romantic crush on. The gloom

is intensified when the protagonist turns out to be averse to killing any living creature, be it fish or seagull, against a background community where the killing of several 'Asians', as the text has it, is silently passed over. In such an environment a highly sensitive boy is clearly a fish out of water.

It stands to reason that this is the story where "strine" words and ocker slang, such as bogans, are demonstratively sneaked in. The Vietnamese stories purport not to exploit the author's "ethnic background". They are, playfully, as postmodern and autobiographical as they are metafictional. They try to have the cake and eat it. However, the title story contradicts the self-reflexivity of the first, in its serious emphasis on tragedy, in the experience of Vietnamese boat people in their fight for survival.

What is really fascinating though in this collection is the role of the internet and to what extent Google is a partner in the writing. The notion of authenticity is thus intentionally undermined. "Cartagena," "Hiroshima" and "Tehran Calling" demonstrate, in particular, how 'assiduous research' boils down to sifting the World Wide Web.

In the first case, it is no big deal to provide all the local colour details by using the phrases "Medellin" and "streetkids in Colombia" in a digital search engine. The other two stories especially seem to have the American reader in mind. The predominantly positive response in the States proves that the strategy was successful. However, all the jingoistic rallying calls in Hiroshima before the blast are supposedly filtered through the mind of Little Turnip, the central figure, who is just a little girl. So it means stretching the readers' willingness to suspend their disbelief quite excessively. Moreover, the use of kami, with its Shinto background, to stand in for ancestors and community, together with all the garden details, can be easily gleaned from the internet; shukkei-en is the famous garden in Hiroshima and provides the information.

In the case of Tehran, the web is full of gruesome pictures to illustrate the self-flagellation practices under Ashura. And it is no problem to reconstruct the historical background with a few clicks. It is a different story though with regard to the Farsi term khafeghan

to signify a claustrophobic feeling. For here a precise source can be pinned down, since there exists an article on the net by Iranian journalist Ladane Nasser, entitled "Iran va Jahan / Iran: Religion and Love" of February 14, 2006. It not only explains at great length all the connotations of the Farsi term, but contains all the details of the events on Mohensi Square with the kids' cellphone enthusiasm for Valentine's Day in the face of the religious militia. Here the question of plagiarism begins to rear its ugly head. Moreover, the American protagonist's memory, and after all it is that of a lawyer in her mid-thirties, is definitely unreliable with regard to the fate of Canadian journalist Zahra Kazemi, who was tortured to death in 2003, as testified by witnesses. And what is more, in the midst of all the turmoil, her Iranian female feminist friend wants to stage a protest play against the hanging of a young girl for "unchaste behaviour." Both women come across as oddly incompetent and psychologically unconvincing.

Despite these inconsistencies, the collection was highly praised by hard-to-please US critic Michiko Kakutani and, what is more, named by up-and-coming Zimbabwean writer and lawyer Petina Gappah, on her blog, as a model for her own debut volume of short stories, *An Elegy for Easterly* (2009, Faber & Faber). All in all, Le's procedure is also proof of a generation gap. Socialized by the Internet, he thus demonstrates a creative use of the Web. His is a digitized view of reality. Eventually, the real is manipulated by the virtual, or, put more crudely, the authenticity created in this way is revealed to be fabricated. None the less, I would maintain that the impressive diversity of the collection makes for fascinating reading, especially for all those who see themselves in the grips of an all-pervasive Google system and in the throes of some irresistible globalisation.

Works Cited:

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