ANZ LitLovers LitBlog

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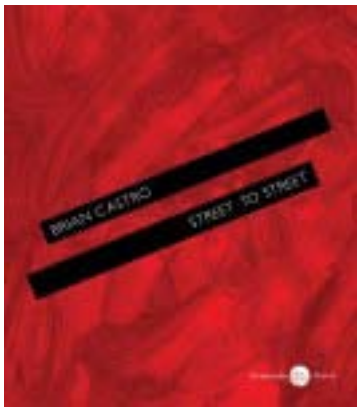
Street to Street, by Brian Castro



I enjoy two kinds of holiday reading. Long lazy days call for undemanding books that can be easily devoured, but they also allow for challenging books, the kind of books that require concentration and time to reflect i.e. time that I don't always have during term time.

Street To Street by Brian Castro, is one of such books. It's only 149 pages long but it would do this thought-provoking novella a disservice to imply that it's a quick and easy book to read. The blurb says that it's a '*comic-tragic enactment of the anxieties of the writing life'* ostensibly using the life of Sydney poet Christopher Brennan (1870-1932) as its focus.

Australian poetry is not my forte and if I've ever read any of Brennan's poems, it would have been at school or university and I don't remember them. So the interest for me lay in why Castro has chosen to create a fictional mirror-image of Brennan in the form of his would-be biographer called Brendan Costa. (CB and BC, see?)

What do they have in common? Well, they're both failures, who fail because Australian mediocrity and anti-intellectualism makes it so. I'll quote from the press release so as not to misrepresent the author:

To survive as a literary writer is difficult enough anywhere, but in Australia is well-nigh impossible. A lack of appreciation for style, the failure to elevate language, the absence of reverence for eloquence, have all combined to a realist vernacular struggling in parochial fashion to make a mark in the vast Anglophonic sphere.

I wanted to write about failure. In particular, about the way literature had been, and is viewed in Australia as encompassing both failure and redemption. Yet redemption is hardly ever forthcoming in the face of a widespread and pragmatic belief in progress.

If you are reluctantly nodding in agreement, then *Street To Street* is your kind of book.

I'm amused by Castro's portrayal of Costa's travails at work. To his own surprise he picks up a job as an academic.

Students attending his course, [Patrick] White and Australia: Neglect and Nation Building*, dwindled to eight loyal youngsters. They sat in the back row of the huge lecture theatre and fiddled with their mobile phones. They were not the brightest, he noted when he counted them, but they took copious notes on their iPads. Maybe they were porn surfing or dealing with their thousand friends on Facebook. Lost worlds circled his words; they formed a micro-halo behind his brow and the inevitable falsity of thought without feeling generated an odour of disinfectant from the lectern and the microphone. He was teaching, but the university thrived not on that, but on the Meeting. The Meeting was the seat of power.* (p. 63)

Oh dear, poor Costa. He is no good at relationships, he drinks too much, and (unforgiveable sin!) he doesn't read his email. The university doesn't think much of the work he would like to do in a cabin in the Blue Mountains with only a bottle for company.

'It was not productive, was neither teaching nor learning, and writing poetry which few would read was terribly selfish, indulgent, promiscuous and downright destructive of higher education'. (p. 62)

So they schedule the Meeting for lecture times when he can't get there, where others in the department try to ditch White from the curriculum and offload their workloads. ('*I don't suppose he could teach* Extimacy and Post-Colonial Desire? p. 64*'*)

I didn't think anyone could rival David Lodge's *Small World* for taking the mickey out of university life, but Castro has a wicked pen:

The Deputy Vice-Chancellor believes in 'student experience'. Just what that was, Costa didn't know. University was where students had most of their

experiences, outside the curriculum, like having sex, discovering languages, taking drugs, getting drunk. Only now they probably did things like vomiting while having group sex, speaking in tongues while shooting up. Multi-tasking. (p. 66)

This sequence about how the trendy babble of student empowerment is used for power plays involving grants and workload distribution is hilarious. His colleague 'the Labrador' knows how to play the game: '*Literature', he said, 'is about what is popular. Popular is getting through adversity'.* (p. 66).

Adversity aplenty waits for Costa. On the night he learns he has to teach Old Norse (to whom, I wonder?) he drowns his sorrows at the pub with an hilarious game of intellectual ping-pong where he and 'the Labrador' gang up on a humorless colleague who takes all discussion in deadly earnest. He is guided home afterwards by his senile dog Dante, where one woman's email tells him it's all over and another woman's answer-phone message spells change of a different kind. His invention of a relationship '*made not only in heaven but by literature*' (p. 89) is about to be tested.

But Castro (one of my nominees for Australia's next Nobel Prize) is not just taking droll pot-shots about the vacuity of universities that have never recovered their gravitas since the so-called Dawkins Revolution*. Costa is both out-of-his-depth and well above it because for all his self-inflicted flaws he represents the lost world of scholarship that values style, elevated language and pure eloquence that Castro mourns. His mirror-image Brennan is the same, floundering around trying to do life when really he should have been an Oxford Don back in the days of eccentrics like Tolkien and C.S. Lewis. Except, of course, that Castro's whole point is that there is no place *in Australia*, then or now, for minds like that. We value cultural diversity but not intellectual diversity.

We're also not very good at detecting irony, not when it comes to the sanctified First World War. Brennan, having left home to get some peace and quiet, finds himself in 1914 disbarred from sleeping in his sanctuary i.e. his room at the university. This is for 'security reasons', he is told. (The war, of course, is *thousands* of kilometres away in Europe). He is, however, able to break into his own house in Mosman, undetected by anyone, where his *German* mother-in-law rules the roost and (to get rid of him again) is able with impunity to sell and buy much further away in

Newport. From there it takes hours for Brennan to get to the university so he has to take a hotel in the city during the week…

Castro's fiction (or what I've read of it) is playful, and here he plays with the narration too. The third person narration segues between Costa's messy life and Brennan's, and an occasional intrusive first person narration commenting on the mirroring between the two. This narrator is someone who 'knows' Costa, someone who is also a fictional creation. He takes a back seat for much of the novella, so that when he turned up again at the end of the book I had lost the thread of who this narrator was. It was the '*mean and lonely backyards, choko vines and the infinitude of dank lives*' ('*street to street*' in Balmain but 80 years apart on p. 20 and p. 131) that made me smack my forehead with the belated realisation that dogs are man's best and most loyal friends.

Sam van Sweden, at *Little Girl with a Big Pen*, found resonances with the fiction of Jorge Luis Borges but it is so long since I read any Borges that I didn't pick that up. With Castro, re-reading is always rewarding because there are always more discoveries to make. (Here, like Costa, a-hem, I am *forming thoughts in the subjunctive mood*). The dog is called Dante for a reason and the cover is a fiery red so I suspect there is more than the quotation from Canto xxxiv to think about – but *blush* I *still* haven't read *The Inferno* so that is for another day…

*Would you believe that one of our universities which shall remain nameless, is settingJasper Jones (!) as required reading for all its undergraduates in 2013? Yes, not just students of literature (is JJ *literature*? really?) but medicine and engineering and history too. My heart aches for them…

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