

FICTION

By Brian Castro
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THE poet Christopher Brennan is one of the dreadful examples of Australian literary life. A brilliant linguist and scholar, he was the first Australian intellectual to take an interest in the revolution of the word happening on the other side of the world: Mallarme, Rimbaud and Baudelaire were his idols. Unlike the American and English modernists, however, his own poetry didn't manage to get out from under the influence of symbolism and stayed bound up in 19th-century poeticism.

He was also a well-known Sydney bohemian, a great talker and drinker: a man with a great future behind him. When his girlfriend Vie Singer was killed in an accident, he went completely to pieces. Not long afterwards his wife filed for divorce and the scandal lost him his job teaching French at Sydney University. He lived the remainder of his life close to destitution and dependent on his friends.



Brian Castro's novella cuts between a fictionalisation of this story and its rhymes in the life of a present-day scholar of Brennan, Brendan Costa (note the similarities between the three names). He has decided he is not going to write a life of Brennan, rather that he is going to absorb him: and he seems to be bringing this about.

He is a minor, even failed, poet, something of a drinker, and falling foul of new-style academic censoriousness. His more go-getting colleagues think (or pretend to think) he doesn't pull his weight, that he is a wannabe intellectual, a belle-lettrist who doesn't even know how to pronounce "Zizek". He teaches unpopular courses (Patrick White and other dead white yawns); and when a subject he teaches is a hit with students, one of his antagonists starts a jealous whispering campaign and ends up grabbing the course for himself.

Along with Michelle de Kretser and Michael Wilding, Castro is registering a protest against the new university, though he stops short of satirical exaggeration: it's all in the tone, which is one of disabused wryness: "At the university there are ways of smacking down and smacking up ... The Deputy Vice-Chancellor smacks the Dean for not delivering suitable reports on Student Experience. The Dean asks his Heads of Departments what SE is, and to supply a report on this. The Heads collect data and smack those who, like Costa, submit a student-satisfaction form which only lists five out of eight responses from his students. Rebekah Smith thinks Costa is mocking her, so she increases his workload."

Costa is one of the defenceless, non-alpha men who seem to have been making quite a few appearances in Australian fiction lately and, with Brennan's fate moulding his, it's as if he were part of some eternal secret society of misfits.

Triangulated between two real writers, one his subject, the other his creator, he is a rather more extreme example than usual of how literary foot soldiers have the great hovering over them. Or the not-so-great: to want to absorb someone whose life was as distraught as Brennan's, to try to emulate a man who set out to wreck himself: that's a double self-abnegation.

Even if you don't have unlimited tolerance for hand-wringing over ruined genius, even if you think Brennan may well have come undone anywhere, not just in bigoted, provincial Sydney, reading about his life is always a saddening experience.

The peculiar flavour of *Street to Street* comes from the way it suggests that such people are always with us, that the same stories play out over and over again, and while Castro's prose is as good as ever, which means very good, there is something ra-ther claustrophobic about the book's atmosphere.

Lately we've been hearing a lot about the short-story renaissance: it's about time the novella (the dear nouvelle, as Henry James called it) or short novel or the long short story was recovered as a resource for writers. From *The Aspern Papers* and *The Fox to Heart of Darkness*, it is a form in which some of the best writers have done some of their best work. Those short stories that seem cramped or unrealised, or those novels that seem thin or drawn out: they have as their shadows the proper scale they might have had if the novella had more prominence.

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