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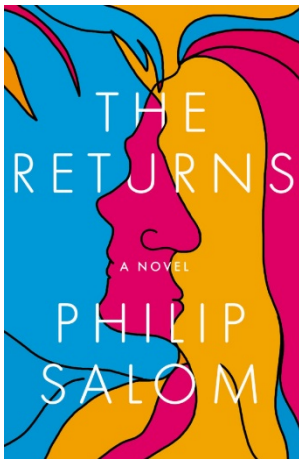
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TEXT review

Unseen shapes of ourselves

review by HC Gildfind



Philip Salom

The Returns

Transit Lounge, Yarraville VIC 2020

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The Returns is something of a sequel to Salom's *Waiting* (2017): both novels are set in a vividly evoked North Melbourne and both chart the evolving relationship of eccentric – if very differently classed – characters. *The Returns* cheekily acknowledges this connection when book-seller, Trevor, stares out of his shop and sees *Waiting*'s unforgettable Big and Little gazing straight back at him: Salom's readers know who Big and Little are, and Trevor would too if he'd bother to read the copy of *Waiting* that resides on his shop's shelves. Trevor is, of course, oblivious to the authorial joke he is sitting in. Overweight, about-to-be-divorced, limpy, and prone to gloom, this 'mordant humourist' (39) is too busy worrying about his post-marriage future. Then, Elizabeth appears. She is skinny, orthorexic, divorced,

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and a sufferer of prosopagnosia: she cannot recognise faces. She works-from-home as an editor and is looking for a lodger. Trevor soon moves in, befriends her equally limpy dog, takes over the cooking, and turns her shed into a studio: he wants to ‘fetch back’ his abandoned youth as a ‘wayward’ bachelor artist (59).

With her new housemate, Elizabeth feels ‘half coerced ... half trapped’ and concludes she is at ‘*a point halfway*’ (144) in her life. Trevor feels the same. When living with his ex-wife he was in a transitory place of ‘hoping and knowing it’s hopeless’ (53), of ‘half loving’ and ‘half leaving’ (91). It was a ‘friendly, dead place where nothing matters. Until something hurts’ (39). While trying to cope with his anger – ‘The two clenched fists of his brain’ (37) – he enters the equally transitory space of Elizabeth’s home, knowing that he is doing something more than moving houses: ‘he is moving the unseen shapes of himself’ (93).

The sudden togetherness of these half-way, half-stuck people creates a new perspective from which they can contemplate the aloneness – and increasing loneliness – of the ‘the big space’ that gapes between ‘Love and Death’ (234). They tentatively become friends and their lives begin to change. Elizabeth relaxes her orthorexic eating rules, ceases to be a dog who aspires to invisibility, learns to deal with her hoarding, narcissistic, ex-sex-cult-member mother and finally contemplates the eye operation she’s been avoiding. Trevor loses weight, builds his strength, confronts Elizabeth’s creepy neighbour – and a number of other aggressive, contemptuous men – resumes his painting, and faces up to the recent fact of his dead marriage and the perennial fact of his missing father.

Elizabeth’s and Trevor’s professions give Salom an opportunity to poke fun at the culture industry and the ageist market(ing)-driven capitalist system it increasingly submits to. Trevor sees how, in a literary world of climbers, egotists and narcissists, Elizabeth does a key yet entirely undervalued job: ‘*She’s a professional unseen. Editing, the job that disappears itself*’ (164). At least Elizabeth knows her worth: ‘The raw text is unwell and she is its doctor’ (204). Elizabeth decries the ‘lack of challenge’ in modern fiction and ‘aches for some radical disturbance.’ (8). One of her nutty writers agrees, ranting: ‘The book publishing scene looks like property management sometimes. Safe books in safe suburbs’ (204). At a literary award, Elizabeth notes how new authors are generally, ‘*Very topical, very young, very likely*’ (166). In this world, writers are ‘ghosted’ (166) the second there’s a new ‘starofthemoment’ (204): ‘in the real world of fiction the author must *win*’ (166). This comment surely critiques the unnecessary and destructive ‘winner takes all’ nature of major prizes in Australia. (*Waiting* was short listed for numerous major awards.) Meanwhile, Trevor pines for authors like ‘curmudgeonly’ Patrick White who dared to be ‘old-fashioned enough to want truth’ (59) and whose writing, Trevor believes, could actually change lives. Trevor laments the disappearance of readers and writers who understand that ‘good books are drugs ... controlled hallucinations’ (222).

While the excesses and vanities of Trevor and Elizabeth may well grate on some readers, *The Returns* neither reifies nor condemns their middle-classedness. Instead, the nature of their

lives is simply observed and often revealed via the contrasts and tensions created between them and the people they interact with. Perhaps the most striking contrast lies between Trevor – with his relentless, pretentious food fetishism – and the homeless woman who begs outside the supermarket where he buys his ingredients:

Her face is mottled with dust or sun or something he cannot explain. Perhaps she thinks people don't see her when they walk past without stopping, or they see her too well and she haunts them. She is, perhaps they are, ghosts of the divide, where having/not having makes everyone defensive. He's no different. Except she is no one's neighbour... He shuffles his bags as he speaks to her, though what to say? She knows more about the weather than anyone... (111-112)

This empathetic, compassionate, observational perspective is typical of Salom's writing: he is not one to bully readers into agreeing with him about how the world 'should' be. Trevor explicitly values this sort of perspective too, saying of his own art:

If he wrote a novel he'd want to keep posing the same doubts in different masks, turn over and over recurring terms and phrases, alternate appearances with disappearances then ending on questions never answered. The notes. His paintings are notes. They answer nothing... (310)

Salom approaches characters as the unique and mysterious particularities that all humans are – irrespective of situation or identity. If people have anything in common it is, as Trevor says, that we are all the product of an interaction between the accidental, the deliberate and the coincidental (59), that we all experience our lives as endless 'inconsequential *ands*' (187), and that we are all, in the end, nothing other than those very strange things called minds: 'fragmented, changing, returning, repeating' (209).

Salom is a poet. His prose is rich, playful, funny, clever, and humming with energy. His linguistic virtuoso gives verisimilitude to the voices that constitute his characters' mindscapes as they struggle to survive, connect and thrive in the very real landscape of North Melbourne.

Works cited

Salom, P 2017 *Waiting*, Puncher & Wattman, Glebe NSW

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