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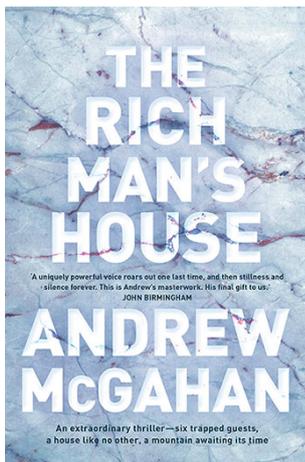
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TEXT review

The rich man and the mountain: Andrew McGahan's eco-epic

review by Nataša Kampmark



Andrew McGahan

The Rich Man's House

Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest NSW 2019

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'Death is the great invigorator' (21) writes the late Andrew McGahan in the first chapter of his last book, *The Rich Man's House*. Racing against death in the final stages of pancreatic cancer, McGahan was composing a deathless tract which is not only 'twice as long as most of [his] books' (Steger 2019) but amplifies to epic proportions major motifs and interests from his earlier works, notably the opposition between man-made constructions and the forces of nature. Thus, the titular house he depicts is 'the most expensive private residence in recent world history' (77), built within a solid rock of Theodolite Isle and facing the Wheel, the

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highest mountain on Earth which rises 25 kilometres into the sky, ‘defying comprehension’ (87), piercing the stratosphere and generating its own extreme weather. Only one man has ever stood on top of the Wheel – Walter Richman, the owner of the extravagant house.

The world of *The Rich Man's House* is recognisably our own, but not quite. It features well-known mountaineers from history such as Edmund Hillary, the first to conquer Everest, only to have him die in an attempt to reach a mark half-way up the Wheel whereas the Sherpa Tenzing Norgay is there only to refuse to climb the mountain which ‘is not a mountain as we know other mountains. It is something else’ (148). Pioneering lunar explorers Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin make appearances which serve as points of comparison to emphasise that mankind stepped on the Moon before any human being set foot on the Hand of God, which is how the pinnacle of the Wheel is known. Just like in the world we know, ‘billionaires make their own rules’ (72) and ‘the intrusion of humanity’ destroys the natural landscape which ‘bow[s] to the inevitable, and die[s]’ (389). The difference is that in McGahan’s novel that world is augmented and infused with the supernatural in order to house a conflict of universal significance, albeit framed as a tale of crime and punishment of one man.

Although the novel is categorised by the publisher as ‘crime and mystery’ (‘The Rich Man’s House’ nd) thereby placing it neatly into genre fiction, identifying the victim, the criminal and even the crime is not straightforward. The death of Richard Gause, a world-renowned architect who designed Richman’s lavish home, acts as an incentive moment, sending his estranged daughter Rita as an exclusive guest in her father’s stead to celebrate the completion of the Observatory, as Richman’s house is called. It takes an elevator ride up a 2.5 kilometre shaft to reach the lofty destination, but once Rita, a Melbourne vet with a past of substance abuse she would rather forget together with the book she wrote at the time, emerges from the super-sized rabbit hole, she steps into ‘a fantasy palace’ (152) where only imagination is the limit. There she is joined by four of Richman’s closest associates and the host himself. It is not long before, one by one, they start meeting their horrible and mysterious deaths. ‘A body frozen in a pool ... a body flayed to death by the wind ... one fallen and lost in an underground labyrinth ... one blasted apart by lightning’ (505), Rita remembers as she plots her own escape from the house which is haunted by a mysterious force. The four elements seem to have combined to destroy the people who have gathered to marvel at the triumph of man over the mountain. For Observatory is a place of ‘secular worship’ (86) and the monument commemorating Richman’s ‘defeat’ (483, 350) of the Wheel. As an earthquake strikes, and an avalanche ‘strip[s] [the mountain] for battle’ (302), causing a tsunami, Rita uncovers the real reason behind the invitation to Richman’s house – her unique ability to detect and communicate with non-human forms of consciousness found in ‘stone and earth and water’ or ‘presences’ (391) as she calls them in her book. It is through Rita that the majestic mountain is given a voice to tell its side of the story:

The Wheel sought no understanding or atonement or placation from humanity; it sought only destruction. And who better to inflict that destruction upon than the man

who had defiled the mountain's undefiled peak, the man who stood as symbol of all humankind's contempt for any awareness other than its own. (474)

For his last book McGahan chose an epic theme and gave it a contemporary twist. In traditional Western literature, it takes a hero of superior social and moral standing to stand up to gods or superhuman forces and most likely perish in the battle, thereby saving his people and earning an undying fame (Cuddon 2013: 239-241). McGahan's novel seems to suggest that in the 21st century, 'Westerners seem so determined to destroy [their gods]' (395) and the hero turns out to be an unscrupulous ruthless individual with a 'towering ego' (483) and little respect for the life of other people. The style of the novel also follows the epic formula, including episodes, digressions and repetitions. Inserted episodes – newspaper clippings, excerpts from journals and magazines, chapters from history books, transcripts of lectures – serve to provide the characters' background or offer interpretative frameworks. Digressions provide detailed descriptions of all objects of interest, such as mountaineering equipment – reminiscent of armour descriptions in an epic poem – or main rooms in the house which are described in every glowing detail like the precious spoils of war. Repetitions punctuate the narrative, reminding the reader of the major conflict between man and the mountain, referring to Richman's extravagance and wastefulness symbolised in his house which is 'the monstrous work of beauty and arrogance' (515), 'a crime against nature' (112) and the Wheel's wondrous uniqueness that 'stood eternally apart from humanity' (50).

Like that of an epic, the story of *The Rich Man's House* unfolds slowly, allowing the reader to appreciate its style and narrative technique, explore allusions and references, trace influences and contemplate the workings of history. On the other hand, it could also be described as a page turner, but not because the reader only wants to know what happens. It is how it unfolds that equally captures and sustains the reader's interest. In other words, alongside an extraordinary tale, it is McGahan's formidable imagination and the language he uses to dress it that offer a rich reading experience.

Works cited

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