



Australasian
Association
of Writing
Programs

TEXT

Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://www.textjournal.com.au/>

TEXT review

An air of intertextuality

review by Deb Stewart



Mary Pomfret

The Hard Seed

Ginninderra Press, Port Adelaide SA 2018

ISBN 9781760416072

Pb 247pp AUD32.50

The Hard Seed by Mary Pomfret is an intriguing novel – a blend of mystery and philosophy with a fair dose of literary allusion and floral metaphor stirred into the mix. It soon becomes obvious that one is reading multiple narratives containing casts of similar, yet different, characters with seemingly overlapping stories and generally dysfunctional relationships, particularly within their family circles. The theme of the outcast, or the ‘black sheep’, is apparent as family members gang up to ostracize one of their flock who dares to examine and write about life, and who they fear will expose family secrets.

The novel begins with a letter from a solicitor to an editor requesting their assistance with an unpublished manuscript, written by the late Iris Bloom, and left as part of her estate along with ‘an adequate sum for her writing to be put in order so that it might be forwarded to potential publishers’ (5). The manuscript contains a series of handwritten letters addressed to someone named Rose, along with a literary work dedicated to her. Investigations carried out by the solicitor have failed to find anyone of that name among Iris Bloom’s family, friends or associates. So begins the mystery. Who is Rose?

Whether intentional or not, several references in *The Hard Seed* evoke other literary works and a sense that the narrative is operating on many levels. There is an air of intertextuality about this novel. At times Iris’s letters remind me of Elizabeth Jolley’s novels. Thinking of the mysterious Rose and why the manuscript might be dedicated to her, this reader was reminded of *Citizen Kane* and the mysterious “Rosebud” – the final word of a dying newspaper magnate, played by Orson Welles.

...as it turns out, “Rosebud” is the trade name of a cheap little sled on which Kane was playing on the day he was taken away from his home and his mother. In his subconscious it represented the simplicity, the comfort, above all the lack of responsibility in his home, and also it stood for his mother’s love which Kane never lost. (Wellesnet 2007)

The name of the deceased author, Iris Bloom, and other character name permutations of the name Rose, suggest the unfurling of an overarching floral metaphor, blooming perhaps out of the hard seed of the title. Late in the novel, one of the characters becomes a florist, adding weight to the expectation that the sustained floral metaphor is a key to deciphering the meaning of the novel, of connecting the seemingly separate stories. The name Bloom suggests Leopold Bloom, the narrator of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* who, like Iris, is an outsider – a Jew in Dublin, while Iris is estranged from her family. In her first letter to Rose, Iris wonders about her first name:

Sometimes I wonder about my own name. I think I would have liked something more glamorous. But I console myself with the notion that Iris was the messenger of the Greek gods who guided souls to the Elysian Fields (14)

while Bloom, in *Ulysses* is compared to the Greek mythological hero Odysseus / Ulysses (Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica 2019).

There appear to be two main narrative sections in this novel. One is titled Roisin, in which the main character, Roisin, a writer, travels to visit her estranged family on the occasion of a garden party for her parents’ wedding anniversary. The other, titled *Rosa*, begins when the central character, Rosa, is twelve years old and returns home to find that her mother has gone and she is now expected to take care of her father and siblings. In later life, Rosa becomes a playwright and one of the characters in her dramatic work is Rosaleen. So, we have Roisin, Rosa, Rosaleen and Rose, to whom Iris’s letters are written. ‘What’s in a name? that which

we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet’ (as Shakespeare put it in *Romeo and Juliet*).

Reading *The Hard Seed* is compelling, rather than difficult. The multiple narratives create mystery and invite the reader to unpick the relationships, stay alert to the quasi-overlaps in story detail and attempt to join the dots, to seek connections. Whether or not these connections exist might remain elusive but the possibility of connections that could unravel the mystery and shed light on the hidden secrets alluded to will appeal to the ‘detective’ in the ideal reader.

The novel is beautifully written with often poetic prose. It has the feel of the Gothic and the suggestion of cleverness in its literary form, perhaps employing a range of literary devices to deliberately disrupt the reading experience and puzzle the reader? The novel includes letters, a review, stories, parts of a play, poems, recounted dreams, a section of crossed through text, and songs – notably, three ‘Rose songs’ featuring blossoms and blooms.

The writers in the novel have all experienced resistance to their writing, and strong objections from members of their families, including accusations that they will reveal family secrets. *The Hard Seed* incorporates several philosophical signposts, often in the form of headings such as ‘Not all legacies are an act of generosity’, ‘Truth is for Philosophers’, and musings on memory, facts, evidence, truth, and transforming experience into art.

The Hard Seed contains a reference to Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) and echoes of a madwoman in the attic, as well as a number of references to Shakespeare. For the reader equipped with a rich grounding in literature and some exposure to literary theory, the recurring motif of carpet, and whether or not it actually existed in the room, may remind one of Henry James’ novella *The Figure in the Carpet* (1916) and how it has come to symbolise the key to understanding the writers’ work while also, in a sense, resisting interpretation. In *The Figure in the Carpet*

An unnamed narrator reviews the latest novel by the author Hugh Vereker, and congratulates himself on having divined the true meaning of Vereker’s book. But at a party, he overhears Vereker telling the other guests that the narrator’s review was “the usual twaddle”. When Vereker discovers the narrator heard him badmouthing his review, he seeks to mollify him by telling him that *nobody* has managed to divine the true meaning of his work, but that there is an idea present in all of his novels, which he likens to the complex woven figure in a Persian carpet, which provides the “secret” or “key” to understanding all of his work. Spurred on by this, the narrator sets out to discover what ‘the figure in the carpet’ really is that will unlock the secrets of Vereker’s work. (Tearle 2020)

In *The Hard Seed*, these references to carpet could be a playful nod to the quest for meaning by the reader, the critic and the reviewer. Is the author having a quiet chuckle at those who

attempt textual analysis to determine what the story is about? The carpet is also a hiding place for the ‘truth’. In the section headed ‘A shadow play: Dark Rosaleen’, for example:

VOICE ONE: Well, it’s hard to know the truth of the matter but clearly something was swept under the carpet.

VOICE TWO: That’s if there was a carpet. (237)

There’s a brooding darkness in *The Hard Seed* and a sense of yearning, emanating from loss. The loss of a mother; the loss of a child, a husband, and the loss of family. In Iris’s words, ‘all writers do cruel things to the characters they love’ (15) but life itself can be cruel and ‘endings are never neat’ (243). The crux of the narrative and the ‘secret’ alluded to are discernible to the perceptive reader, but the text remains open to interpretation. Nothing is certain and it is unclear whether there ever was a carpet.

Works cited

Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica 2019 ‘Leopold Bloom’, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*:
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Leopold-Bloom> (accessed 2 March 2020)

Tearle, O (2020) ‘A Summary and Analysis of Henry James’s “The Figure in the Carpet”’, *Interesting Literature*: <https://interestingliterature.com/2017/06/27/a-summary-and-analysis-of-henry-james-the-figure-in-the-carpet/> (accessed 2 March 2020)

Wellesnet 2007 ‘Orson Welles explains the meaning of Rosebud in *Citizen Kane*’, 2007 Wellesnet: *The Orson Welles Web Resource* (August 5): <https://www.wellesnet.com/orson-welles-the-meaning-of-rosebud-in-citizen-kane/> (accessed 2 March 2020)

Deb Stewart is a South Australian poet, musician and songwriter. Her most recent collection of poetry The White Line of Language was published in 2019. She is also a retired librarian.