

Independent author

Carolyn van Langenberg

Body parts

Biographical note:

Carolyn van Langenberg's first book, *Sybil's stories* (Pascoe Publishing), was praised as a treasure of a book in which the stories blend content, form and language into a unity that is expected only of poetry (Alan Myers, *Flight deck*). In 2000, *fish lips*, the first novel in the *fish lips* trilogy (*fishlips*, *the teetotaller's wake*, *blue moon*) was short-listed for the David T K Wong Fellowship, East Anglia University, UK. Carolyn lives with her husband in the Blue Mountains, west of Sydney, where she is indulging her love of gardening.

Light angles through gaps where red curtains meet. Light angles up the ceiling to stars imitating heaven. A mirror mirrors the white walls and fails to catch the light of cerulean bliss within its flamboyant glassy frame.

The orange coverlet on the bed bunches over the drooping yellow blanket, all of this reflected in the tear drops of the chandelier. Dust furls in corners. Plaster cracks. The elaborately carved dresser creaks. A drawer in one of the bedside cupboards drops.

A vase decorated with a bird on lattice, a plaster prettiness balanced on a rickety stand, throws a shadow up the blank wall. The mirror fails to repeat the shadow above a drying rack draped with socks and underpants.

Vapour melts like breath on glass.

It was hot when they arrived in Bologna.

Ellie collapsed in the apartment they rented and peeled off the clammy clothes sticking to her flesh. She had packed for autumn. She wanted to wear her coat and scarf, thick socks and gloves. But she made do with jeans, a thin shirt and orange crocs.

Her crocs made her feet look like Daisy Duck paddles.

At the twin towers, a young woman stared in horror at Ellie's bright crocs. The embarrassed Ellie told Oliver that her orange feet were offensive to Italian sensibilities. He said that he must eat tripe before leaving Bologna. She said she thought crocs worked to keep feet comfy on cobbles. He said that tripe was a must. He added that Italians would be offended by the synthetic material and chunky design of her crocs, not by the orange.

Ellie's eyes searched for food.

Around them, exuberance, coiffed.

Ellie announced that at least her orange shirt matched her orange crocs, that she was properly colour-coded, not decked out in primitive gaudiness or functionally attired in beige.

Oliver said, 'What?'

Oliver and Ellie are slow tourists. They rented an apartment in the old ghetto where in the 16th century the city's professional middle-class Jews and tradesmen and craftsmen with their families were walled in. During the second inquisition, they clustered in the narrow streets, paying the city exorbitant prices for fresh water, sanitation services, food and the tools for their various trades. After 25 years of being fleeced, when they were penniless, the bishop evicted them. The survivors went to Turkey where the Ottoman tolerated them rather than persecute them.

If Islam had at the centre of its theology a dead body, would it equal Christianity for physical persecution?

Ellie thought it would, but for different reasons also associated with attitudes about the body.

Oliver opined that Christianity is all about body parts and the dead one at the centre of redeeming thought. 'Its history flings bits of disbelievers' viscera and gore here and there to ensure the dead body at the centre is honoured by more dead bits', he said.

At the Capella Santa Cecilia, they listen to music played by Davida Rebuffa, a specialist in medieval guitars and lutes. He is their first experience of Italian concerts. Neither was prepared for the disquisition between each bracket and neither knew enough Italian to really follow what was being said. But they got the idea that walking and listening to music predates walkmans and ipods.

David Rebuffa flips hair over his shoulder, his round face beaming like the full moon on a cloudless night.

Oliver comments that Rebuffa had studied the medieval lute players very closely, so closely he imitated their hair, mannerisms, even clothes, until their style became his own.

Ellie observes that Europeans were often like that, '... reminding tourists, even the slow ones, that the people in the old paintings have a lot of descendants who bear immediate resemblance to them'.

A young man wearing long curling hair looks over his shoulder at Ellie. His insolent mouth surprises her.

Oliver says he wants tripa, a plate of tripe served in a rich Italian sauce, a sauce from the north, not a Neopolitan sauce, but a la Bolognese or Ravenese. That kind of sauce.

In this city of religion, city of music, city of science and invention where there lies the body, many dead bodies, all their bones decorated in jewels, Oliver wants innards steeped in rich sauce, celebrated on a plate.

A woman holding a doll under her armpit bends too close to Ellie's elbow. Ellie jumps like a teevee cop, hands free, legs astride, back straight. The woman's fingertips kiss her lips, round eyes focussed on her as if her intention is to mesmerise her.

A zombie begging for food.

Ellie walks quickly to the corner of the street to ask the shop owner about the woman. Before she formulates her question in Italian, she is startled to see she has gone.

Vapour. Yes, vapour. A graveyard wisp evaporated.

In duomo after duomo, bodies recline, anorexic cadavers, ribs protruding, dead faces fixed in speechless agony. Fingers trail, toes curl. One dead body with holes in its hands and feet and chest rises above the adoration of others.

... hair flowing down a young man's back. Tresses of light auburn hair. Black wavy hair caught in a chignon on the crown of a man's head. Thick brown hair clasped by a tortoise shell and silver comb on the back of a man's head. Black auburn red brown hair buckled rolled gripped. 'Men celebrating hair,' she says to Oliver. 'That's different.' He hadn't noticed.

photograph
one breast
and the
memory
of a breast
fingers
where scars
shrink skin
opposite
the poised nipple

... down Castilglioni, to Queen Marguerita's Garden ... a bird swoops over Ellie's head.

Pescherie Vecchie, past Archiginassio Hall, a shopping mall to surprise New World people. Not that many know Giosue Carducci often shopped at the bookstore Zanichelli.

Carducci: Ellie struggles to find out who he is. A poet, a politician, d'Anunzio was his student, Nobel Prize 1906, anti-cleric and Professor of Italian at the University of Bologna. She writes notes about him, imagining the period he walked the streets of Bologna when Italy was in the process of becoming a nation-state.

At a concert, the woman sitting next to Ellie fusses with her handbag, until she retrieves her lipstick and small mirror. Her hand is a prosthetic. She balances the mirror between her senseless thumb and forefinger, manipulates the lid off the tube of lipstick, then carefully applies it. Replacing the lid onto the tube is a time-consuming fumbling of the senseless with the sensate. After she succeeds, she props the mirror again between her fixed thumb and forefinger and neatens her smeared lips with a tissue.

In Bologna one wet night, chocolate coats the inside of a white cup. Ellie, happy in her coat and scarf, boots and thick socks, hugs chocolaty warmth.

Laundry flags from chimney pot to chimney pot on the top of a four storey building near the two towers.

Oliver repeats that he wants to eat tripe. Ellie conjures up images of white muscle, '... striated and rough surfaced tissue resembling a cunjevoi and designed to suck in nutrients and spurt out toxins bathed on a white plate in white sauce'. 'No!' says Oliver. 'Tripe cooked in tomato sauce with fists full of basil. And garlic.'

'Like a blood-soaked stomach. A bloodied stomach arranged on a white plate for your cannibalistic apprehension.'

... long dark porticos. They close over a history of romance and intrigue. There is a story of a bomb falling into rising dough, of Italian fascists who carefully removed it and took it to a field on the outskirts of the city to explode, of Nazis at the war's end who hauled one out of the dough and blew it up on the street outside the bakery. The moral of the story? Some fascists love a good bakery and others love a big bang.

'Tripa,' says Oliver. 'I want to eat tripe.'

Ellie laughs that there was plenty shrivelled under a gold leaf or two back there under the altar.

Being ex-Catholic, Oliver winces.

Ellie crawls into pages of print with pictures, her sensitivity challenged. She hears the teevee talk about President Obama. Oliver flicks to a jazz channel from the Netherlands and opens his laptop. She nods off over a page of long legged girls with hair extensions. They all wear purple see-through dresses with extremely high-heeled shoes. Oliver says, 'Found it. Where to go for tripe in Bologna'. He turns to tell her that the sauce isn't as tomato-based as the one he remembered from years ago, but before he could begin to say anything, she snores very loudly.

Ellie writes: What I like is the food. I like the bread and the cheeses. I like the shoes. I like the university students who wear strange boots and thongs with contraptions around the ankles as if the thong is a boot. I like the jackets. I like the age of the city.

... lips pout, she speaks to the priest at San Dominica. She tells him that she respects the way the Catholic church involves itself in International Jurisprudence through Amnesty International, representing the interests of people who fall foul of their regimes. She respects those Catholics who believe in social justice and the muscularity of the church that endures many changes to meet the needs of the people in the 21st century, people displaced by political and economic and environmental havoc. But she continues in this dream in which she talks without drawing breath. She

says when she walks through these Bolognese churches, peering at the wracked body of Christ and the remnants of St Sebastian, at the bones, gold and lace behind altars and in crypts, she is proud her ancestry leans towards the Reformation. 'My ancestors probably lopped off a Catholic head or two', she tells the white-robed priest who may be a monk. 'And when I see all this domination of the people, these high ceilings, this wealth displayed to intimidate, my blood boils for the lack of justice in historic time. It had to be. The Reformation had to be.'

Ellie, alarmed by her dream, wakes in a sweat.

A doorknocker in the shape of an old woman's screaming mouth. The keyhole is the devil, the knocker an incubus.

Oliver searches for a small trattoria in a very ordinary street and he orders tripe.

Ellie chooses tortella with sage sauce.

She falls asleep in the golden light the room effuses. Periodically laughing students and music disturb her sleep. The students party all night, their loud laughter and talk echoing down the cobblestoned streets, up the long dark porticos and she turns in her sleep, finds herself in a candlelit room, the smell awful. Men with coarse skin, the pores on their noses large and black, their hair hidden under greasy caps, seem to be at some kind of work. Their hands manipulate knives. A wooden wrack is at an angle, a priest intones when intestines fall on the floor. A man screams as the expressionless men disembowel him.

Horrified, Ellie floats to the outer edges of her dream, but not so far that she avoids the deep sad voice of a man calling out, 'What is that foul smell that will deny me the company of women forever?'

Ellie wakes, the smell of viscera and gore somehow clinging to the walls of the room. She sits up in bed, wondering what history has taken place between these walls. After all, the flat is in the old ghetto. Heavy boots would have pounded the steps, heavy fists would have bashed the heavy doors where Oliver stands. 'Wow!' he says. 'I don't know what was in that tripe dish, but it went through like an avalanche!'

And the stench of medieval nightmares dissolves, overpowered by the smells of deodorants and perfume, scented detergents and toilet paper, aromas of concealment preferred in the 21st century, no corpses to be seen.