

University of the Sunshine Coast

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The architecture of song

Biographical note:

Dr Gary Crew is Associate Professor and Head of Creative Writing at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland. Originally trained as a Civil and Architectural Draughtsman, Crew was first published in 1986. His award winning children's fiction and illustrated books are published internationally. Crew's first adult novel *The Children's Writer* (Harper Collins, Sydney) was published in 2009.

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The piano

On the evening of his twenty-first birthday Rosa hoisted Augustus onto a stool beside the piano so that he might be seen to better advantage while he sang. Being just thirty-seven inches tall, as he was swept upward he caught a glance (somewhat askew, since he was so unceremoniously whooshed) of that shadowy space between the keyboard and the yellow pine of the floor. This space had formed the architecture of his childhood; the underside of the keyboard his ceiling, the piano legs pillars, the whole a secluded vault where he might crouch unseen (as had D.H. Lawrence before him), ‘in the boom of the tingling strings’, observing the miracle of his mother’s feet as she crushed the papery soles of her black velvet slippers (winking with *diamantes*) against the pedals.

But unlike the wretched Lawrence who deplored his maternal loss in both prose and poem, Augustus did not mourn for long. His mother did not mourn at all. Not since the day (Augustus believed he was four years old) when Mrs Trump, having learnt from her physician that her son was indeed a dwarf (*A midget?* she gagged, incredulous, into her hankie. *A damned midget?*), handed him over to the circus mob passing through town. Which allowed her to return to her piano, striking the ivories with even greater *appassionato*, as Lawrence would have liked.

The tent

Augustus now entered another space, striped with tigerish light, scented with the *potpourri* of elephant dung and saw dust, beneath the slatted benches of the big top. Here it was that upon hearing his peculiar song, Rosa first discovered him, squatting on his grubby heels warbling like a nightingale (so alien was his angelic voice in that foetid place), and being wise to the opportunity of freaks, the girl stooped to haul him out.

‘Ooo-err,’ she gasped goggle-eyed. ‘What are you?’

‘I am not a *What*,’ he declared (being a precocious talker), ‘I am a *He*. And I can sing.’

‘Really?’ Rosa snickered. ‘So can the fat lady when she’s on the sherry.’

Dumbfounded by her logic, Augustus shut his mouth. In that moment Rosa reached down and, gripping his elbows, hoisted him onto the bench that he had been lurking under (thus establishing a lifetime precedent), to take a really good look.

‘Holy hell!’ she declared, seeing him in his entirety.

The creature before her was a sideshow in himself, guaranteed to draw a crowd whether he could sing, dance or walk the wire.

‘Ooo-er!’ Rosa spluttered. ‘You’re a queer one you are. Look at your arms! Look at your legs! Like straws they are. Like drinking straws sticking out of a pumpkin.’

Augustus looked down at himself, wondering.

‘What?’ he said. ‘I had these arms and legs nearly five years and they haven’t broken off yet. And you can’t blame me for this romper suit. The pants might look like pumpkins being orange and round and puffy but that’s what I was wearing when she handed me over. And the moustache lady hasn’t changed me.’

‘Ooo-er,’ Rosa said, spinning him about to check for any tell-tale brown running down his leg. ‘And you haven’t cacked yourself?’

‘Eh?’

‘Filled your pants?’

‘No,’ he said, wide-eyed. ‘I already told you that. I am four, going on five.’

‘What?’

‘You heard me. How old are you?’

‘I am thirteen,’ Rosa grunted and span him around again, suddenly conscious of the size of his waist, how her finger tips touched encircling him. ‘All right,’ she said, ‘so who gave you to Moira?’

‘Eh?’

‘Moira. The bearded lady. The moustache lady. Who gave you to her? And why?’

‘My mother,’ he said bold and clear. ‘She teaches the *pianoforte*. She says my voice is liquid silver. My pitch perfect. She says only Melba could compete.’

What is this thing? Rosa wondered. Having lived all her life beneath the big top and seen so much that was freakish and queer, she could not comprehend what stood before her: dressed as he was in pumpkin pants, a sweet little blouse, and those tiny black shoes (were they off a doll?), with limbs as frail as straws (as she had been quick to inform him), he was, nevertheless, perfectly proportioned, unlike the other little people that she knew. Big Atlas in the red and black wagon (who she loathed), had a head the size of a melon and a body the size of a toad. No. This little thing was a proper manikin: his face pleasant (even pretty); his eyes pale grey (the colour of the trapeze artiste’s silky pants); his yellow hair slicked back (with Hairy Moira’s spit?); his ears flat; his little teeth white and even; his mouth a rose-bud (as people sometimes said).

‘*Nellie Melba?*’ she demanded. ‘That’s stupid.’

‘Why?’ he asked, caring little. And he dreamily turned his eyes up to take in the enormity of the marquee, that mighty pyramid of space yawning above him. No longer the dim and secret ceiling of the piano key board, but an architecture of light.

‘Because I seen her,’ Rosa informed him. ‘And I heard her too. She came here to sing for a war rally.’

‘A *war* rally?’

‘There *has* been a war, you know.’

Augustus did not know, being ignorant of the ways of the world.

‘Out there she stood,’ Rosa said, indicating the vast expanse of centre ring. ‘In her black dress with her big bosoms and her guts pulled in with a corset. Whale bone, Moira reckoned. Pearls she was wearing, wrapped round her neck but hanging down her back, not over her front. Down her back and over her big bum ...’ and the girl turned and stuck out her own backside to demonstrate.

So Augustus gave his attention to her. Not because at four years (going on five) he had any particular interest in a girl’s anatomy, but because in his own childish way he had already judged her bum to be pretty big (especially in that uncharitably shrunken red dress), and because her bulk (which was considerable, particularly her mass of frizzed and carrotty hair) blocked his view of the sawdusty shaft of sunlight striking down from the hole where a pole pierced the canvas. And since his view was interrupted, he thought he might as well sing to prove his point.

‘So what did she sing?’ he asked.

‘Some silly muck,’ the girl sneered. ‘*Home Sweet Bloody Home*, or something.’

‘Hmm,’ he sighed. ‘Then I will show you what she might have sung ...’

And throwing back his pretty throat, and casting his eyes upon that hole in the air, he opened his mouth (revealing yet again his perfect little teeth), and sang Puccini:

*One fine day you’ll find me
A thread of smoke arising on the sea
In the far horizon
And then the ship appearing
Then the trim white vessel glides into the harbour...*

As a circus girl with no knowledge of poetics, nor any previously perceived need for such knowledge, Rosa stood agog.

‘What?’ he demanded. ‘You can’t say that was no good.’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ she grunted, suddenly taken with the muck on her tired boots. ‘Yeah, yeah. You can sing. Not as good as that Melba, but. She could out roar the lions. The elephants even. But yeah, you can sing,’ and looking up, she wiped her grubby cheeks, her eyes brimming.

Research statement

Research background

Several iconic novels utilise an architectural construction to personify a character. Bronte (1987), Naipaul (1961), Stow (1981), Kafka (1971), Coetzee (1983) and the phenomenological works of Bachelard (1994) and Heidegger (2000) extend the personification of 'the house as a character' to the concept of 'the dwelling' as a 'matter of beauty, creativity, fertility and nature'; a creative link, using poetic language as its building blocks, to Heidegger's 'His (man's) dwelling, however, rests in the poetic' (Meljac 2008).

Research contribution

An architectural draughtsman, I have sustained an interest in the influence of architecture upon fiction in essays (Crew, 1992, 2001, 2009), short stories (Crew 2004), and novels (Crew 1999, 2001, 2009). The creative extract attached is from an unpublished novel entitled *The Architecture of Song* in which the protagonist, Augustus, a dwarf, emerges from the womb-like space beneath his mother's Laurentian piano to re-construct a variety of architectural sites using the poetics of song. Extending Heidegger's concept of the 'poetically constructed man', the extract suggests that such a character has the poetic means to 'reconstruct' persons, even as Augustus alters the character of Rosa, and ultimately, as the entire novel reveals, through the employment of the poetics of his sublime voice, to reconstruct 'the temple' of his own dwarfish body in a celebration of self.

Research significance

The Architecture of Song demonstrates creative writing research in practice through the fusion of poetry and knowledge of architectural constructions (house, tent, cathedral) to create a work of fiction. The novel is under contract to Harper Collins.

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