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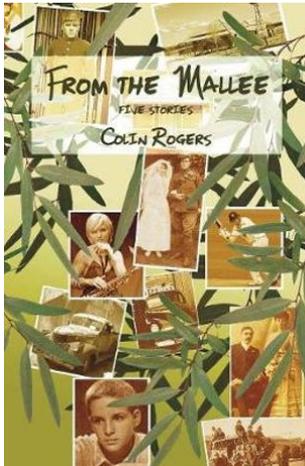
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TEXT review

Memories next door

review by Christopher Gist



Colin Rogers

From the Mallee: Five Stories

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This is an old picture come to life. Colin Rogers' *From the Mallee* is a snapshot of 1900s Australia bush life in five short stories, a loving evocation of a style of community life lost to contemporary culture flows, mass transport, and digital democratisation.

One of the great joys of Rogers' stories is the revivifying of that world, and he gifts readers with a vivid 'remember when' for those familiar with touchstones such as the Bedford van, the pressed-tin money box, and the Coles Emporium.

Rogers signals early the reason we're here: 'There was a good yarn going around...' one of the characters recalls (8), and these five stories are certainly yarns. The use of argot, simple

speech, folksy humour, and a knowing author/narrator are all there. True to the tradition, these are men and women, heterosexual, married or not. We never visit ‘base-camp’, as Larkin would have it; it is a world largely absent of identity politics beyond the historical racisms of the era.

Yet these remain yarns with a difference. There is very often a twist in the tale that recalls Roald Dahl’s *Tales of the Unexpected*, and Rogers clearly side-steps a number of the conventions of the bush ethos. The threat comes not from an inescapably isolating landscape of a barely habitable or wholly hostile nature. Yes, there are thunderstorms and dangers to the crops from the weather but Rogers’ characters are, by and large, people living with nature, eating with the seasons, little interested in imposing their will on wilderness. There are no folkloric lost children, few wombat holes to fracture horses’ legs, and scant writerly interest in the transactional migrant of the 19th century bush balladeers – those *émigrés* who would make their fortune in the colonies and return to their real home of England in elevated status.

Rogers’ characters are, instead, people rooted in Australia – publicans, cops, real estate agents – characters more recognizable to the contemporary eye than the drover, the squatter or the overlander. They are people for whom threat comes from revelation and social exposure, jealousies and prejudices, damaged status, or domestic abuse. The village is the strength and the danger.

Of course, readers of pre-Federation and Federation Australian writing will note Rogers’ antecedents. Banjo Paterson is name-checked, and the first of the stories, ‘The Ute’, suggests the abandoned wife of Henry Lawson’s ‘The Drover’s Wife’. ‘She’ is a woman who remains nameless in both stories, positioned instead as wife and mother. Rogers opens with the wife alone with her children at night when something in or around the house wakes her.

Now she lies stock-still, her pulse amplified inside her head by a damp pillow, her breathing far too loud. She concentrates her senses within the room.

Nothing ... no presence. None of that sense of a space filled by something unknown.
(7)

Focused and thoughtful writing of this sort defines the set-up to this tale and Rogers, here, navigates the psychic distance between omniscience and character with aplomb.

Unlike Lawson, however, the peril in this story comes from the husband, a man who is revealed in marriage as the opposite of the open-faced, wide-smiling man who courted her, a man who was ‘good with cars and most things mechanical’ but now is a ‘bullshit artist and a liar’ for whom there is ‘no place at the RSL bar of a Friday night’ after the truth of his war service is revealed (13).

The reasons for the husband’s change or, perhaps, the wife’s misreading of him, remain unexamined. The husband is there for the trouble he causes, pushing the wife to the brink of

pariahdom and forcing her, heart-sick, to cling to her reputation through cheery industriousness and familiarity with the respectable citizenry. The wife's occasional romantic thoughts about the policeman or the teacher serve only to underline her entrapment. As in 'The Drover's Wife' it comes to a head one night and the wife ultimately acts to protect her family but, in so doing, she becomes the mistress of her own guilty sleeplessness.

'Pictures in the Window' is the longest of the stories and introduces us to the small town of Stillwell that is grateful to sell one of its empty shops, even if to an anonymous buyer. Completely unaware of the forthcoming catastrophe, the townsfolk make sport of the anonymity of the new owner, spinning yarns at the pub about all the things that could evolve from the sale of the tobacconist's.

The story cycles around the quotidian (veranda sweeping, the pub's darts comp, work rituals) as it moves deeper into morality play. We quickly do the mental maths on who of the many characters deserves censure as the new shop owner reveals the darkest truths of Stillwell while somehow remaining utterly anonymous.

Where the community is torn apart in 'Pictures in the Window', in 'The Popular Copper' the community comes together to save itself. Structurally, this story departs further from the conventional bush yarn, more complex in its intercuts between time and place and its nested counterpointing of personal histories to reveal deeper truths or to disorder expectations. We are privy to a range of points of view as the local police potentate is brought low by the victims of his bullying. And it is 'The Popular Copper' that offers one of the most sympathetic renderings of character in Reverend Douglas Trembarth's wartime courage during the blitz. Here, in Trembarth, as in Paterson, action is virtue, and he is a simple heroic character, loved for his decency.

The tone is very different in 'Ronnie Smalls', the name a play on Great Train robber Ronnie Biggs,¹ and one of the shortest and lightest stories in the collection. Again, there is a twist: the young boy who decides to follow his father's footsteps into petty crime by ineptly casing the local corner store later becomes a different kind of 'thief' in adulthood as a fashion designer. The humour here builds into farce as the shame-faced child slinks home and past his mother who informed on him to the police. She does all she can to avoid his eye, 'sewing fifty yards of random zigzag' on the Singer until 'he'd got to his bedroom' (144) and, later when baking, turning the beater to maximum and adding a dozen eggs until 'the beater had circulated a horizontal line of batter across her midriff and around the kitchen' (145).

The last of the stories, 'The Turk', turns on the irrevocable damage done to a small-town volunteer in the Great War, wherein the twist amplifies the tragedy.

Points of view shift fast in Rogers' stories. A change in voice between the unidentified narrator and the character happens from sentence to sentence (rather than via paragraph break, new chapter separation, or gentler slide into character shift through double voicing

often used when ‘head hopping’) and can risk leaving the reader uncertain of whose voice or point of view we are in. The authorial voice can shift from the uninflected to one indiscernible from character voice, sometimes challenging us with the permissions we have into the fictional world. In ‘Ronnie Smalls’ the policeman scares the boy straight, and, in the falling action, we risk tripping over the steps in psychic distance. We are told that ‘No one will ever know what the policeman said to the would-be thief’ (143), yet there ‘Might be a future for the boy as a contortionist,’ the policeman thought as he ‘strolled off with another victory for country justice under his belt’ (144). When we are sitting side by side with an idiomatic author/narrator it is a jolt to be excluded in this way.

These considerations aside, it is likely that the reader who seeks out this collection will very much enjoy being in the company of these yarns. Rogers’ appreciation of this period is laudable. He has reminded us uncynically of the ‘new world’ of post-wars Australia, long-lived enough to distinguish itself from the old but, we see now, fleeting.

Notes

¹ For information about Ronnie Biggs and the London-Glasgow Great Train Heist of 1963, see <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ronnie-Biggs>

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