

Catherine Noske, *The Salt Madonna*, Picador, Sydney, 2020; pp. 356; RRP \$32.99 AUD paperback.

A teenage girl is paraded 'on a wicker chair' as part of an Easter pageant. She seems, to a woman in the crowd, by turns 'strange', 'very powerful', 'serene', 'very beautiful', a 'sight of awe' (149). The girl is a source of seemingly endless symbolic potential for the onlooking community, yet her own thoughts are inscrutable as she 'stares straight ahead, looking at no one and nothing' (150). We don't have to look all that closely to catch, in the stream of epithets forced upon the girl, the strain in the attention focused upon her. If we are left here with a sense of the desperation which underlies the crowd's need for the girl to signify, we also can't help but note the inevitability of harm being done to her in the process.

The narrator of Catherine Noske's fine debut novel, *The Salt Madonna* (2020), attributes these epithets to the thoughts of a character named Mrs Keillor. But they also belong to that narrator, Hannah Mulvey, who in scenes such as this inhabits an apparently omniscient, third-person, present-tense, narrative point of view. Hannah is upfront in confessing to us that the omniscience of her narrative is a straight fiction. She tells us, in one of the short sections of first-person narrative which frame the longer third-person sections, there are events she narrates she did not witness, 'things I can only imagine' (6). And we know, of course, that she can't witness the thoughts of somebody else.

Hannah's disclaimer puts us on notice to expect a porous barrier between 'fact' and fiction in the novel, or what happened and what might have happened. At one point, she informs us she has been baldly lying: 'I am making it up, now...writing a revisionist history and calling it the truth...' (280). At another, she seems to deny there is any meaningful distinction between fact and fiction at all: 'I said I would imagine, but I don't know now. Is there any difference between imagining and living, really?' (100). Her voice in these first-person sections is fussy, second-guessing. The word 'perhaps' recurs again and again: 'Perhaps there is a reality in imagining' (6); 'Perhaps it was the weight of everything unsaid' (26); 'Perhaps there is no point to this' (100); 'Perhaps I am wrong. Perhaps I am simply caught...' (124); 'I did try to help her. More perhaps than is obvious' (126). There is a sense here of alternatives being hedged; events looked at from different angles, not all of them strictly factual; a preference for the provisional over the final. While the novel values thinking of this kind up to a point – how could it not, as a piece of fiction? – it is also deeply uneasy with some of its potential implications.

This sort of thing makes it difficult for us to get a fix on Hannah, pin down her character. We will have to strain to make sense of her. And, like Mrs Keillor and the girl in the parade, our need as readers to understand Hannah means we are always at risk of dangerously misreading her for our own purposes. We know, or we think we know, that Hannah was present at the scene of the Easter parade because she reports she was there in third-person narrative mode. But how are we supposed to take those epithets she gives to Mrs Keillor? Are they an honest attempt to imagine what Mrs

Keillor, or someone like her, would have thought of the spectacle? Or is Hannah performing a slight of hand, filtering her own feelings through the medium of Mrs Keillor? The novel isn't really interested in having us choose between options like these. It just wants to prompt these sorts of questions – have us consider alternatives, shift our perspective, keep explanations in play, and thus involve us in similar patterns of thinking to Hannah as she tells her story.

Hannah in fact promises us 'two stories, really. Once upon a time, a girl called Mary lived in a village on an island called Chesil. Once upon a time, I went home' (6). The 'girl called Mary' – not her real name, as Hannah later relates – is the girl on that wicker chair. Hannah, recently returned home, is her school teacher. Mary falls pregnant and, in the novel's riskiest plot point, some in the local community maintain that the cause of the pregnancy is an immaculate conception. Events spiral, and the novel probes issues of male violence, colonial dispossession and white guilt, trauma, and religious belief. The novel's form asks serious questions about how these issues may be approached through the medium of narrative fiction.

The book, which is lyrical, gothic, suffused in religious (Catholic) symbolism, and mostly solemn, has some fun with the ambiguities of Hannah's promise. The fairy tale 'once upon a time' is clearly demarcated in the novel's section or chapter breaks: December 1991 to October 1992. But Noske's (or Hannah's) depiction of Chesil, a fictional island somewhere off the Australian coast, mocks the precision with which her section breaks tether the narrative to a specific time period. Chesil is on the edge of economic ruin, propped up by a failing grape industry and the tenuous sense of belonging offered by the religious rituals and more mundane day-to-day operations of the local Church. It is a place which seems frozen in time, caught in a stasis such that Hannah's 'two stories' could just as well have happened in the 1960s as the 1990s.

Readers of *Limina* may be encouraged to note that *The Salt Madonna*, published by Picador, began its life as a PhD thesis at Monash University. Its combination of hard-thinking and exquisite lyricism is a powerful reminder of the value of creative writing programs in postgraduate studies in Australia.

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