

Victorian Writers' Centre, Professional Assessment Service –October 2008

Title: - BrownJudy

Genre: Australian Indigenous Historical Fiction-

VWC39

Overview: At the heart of this story is a vast and troubling 'what if?' question about the combative and ultimately destructive approach taken by frontier settlers toward the local indigenous communities. But this is no regurgitated whitefella history of early settlement. *BrownJudy* is an extraordinary manuscript, it is a complex and layered story and the storyline, characterization and pacing are equally well developed. The characters are vividly drawn and memorable and the author applies a mix of idiom, dialogue and picaresque elements that bring even the least of the backdrop characters to life. The pacing in this story which relies on dialogue and scene shifts in a small space between the kitchen, the men's sleeping huts and the station, is in the reader's opinion quite exceptional.

This is a seriously refreshing sociological insight into the redefining of the first contact between white settlers and indigenous communities and the reinventing of the class strata in Australia in the first years of frontier settlement. The internal narrative focuses on how the characters in the story set about identifying and redefining their roles and their identities in the newly emerging class subsets of landowning and convict classes. The story is cohesive and interesting in its application of the power-play and personal relationships that unfold

between the main narrator Cabin-Boy and the Australian Aboriginal woman, Peachern who is referred to as BrownJudy.

The backdrop to *BrownJudy* is provided through a constant round of the daily affairs in running a frontier settlement in Portland. However the main story revolves around the knowledge and bush lore that are shared by Peachern, an indigenous woman who manages the station household. Peachern's stories prompt the slow recognition of the narrator who begins to reassess and see the flawed white settler's thinking. There is a strong sense of connection to the land and a respectful love that surfaces in the narrator's reflection on Peachern's wisdom. The narrator of the story is an ex convict referred to as 'Bogtrotter', who is employed as a shepherd at the station. Bogtrotter is the writer and keeper of a ledger that is used as authorial device to tell the deeper aspects of the story in first person.

The backdrop does far more than simply support the main storyline. It is used as a place where the reader can rest from the dialogue that paces the plot and it provides action and visual interest in the use of some well written scenes of descriptive prose. As an example the wrestling scenes that ensue between Bogtrotter and two indigenous lads working as hands on the property are notable for the sheer descriptive quality of the prose and for the insight and detail in the technical information that the author uses to add interest to the development of the men's relationships.

Dialogue: From the opening line the author establishes a skilled use of highly developed and idiosyncratic language in dialogue. The

dialogue between the characters, as they eat and work on the station is used to unfold the thesis line to this story. The idiom is also an indicator of the identity and the political and social affiliations of those who came as managers, those who were sent and released into the frontier colony as convict labour, and those who settled as servants and as acquisitions to the power-classes in Australia's settlement history.

The characters are up against the daily realities that affected the colonization of the country and are confined and often defined by the rules of interaction with the indigenous community. To this end the author has woven into the dialogue some regularly forgotten aspects of the first contact between indigenous and white settlers and these aspects appear to have been well researched. Through Peachern readers gain much insight into aspects of the Dreaming and moieties and totemic social stratification of Peachern's people. The author has also used aspects of bush lore, whitefella interpretations about Australian Aborigine's knowledge and the mixed and cross-pollinated customs and ideas that were forged in this mix.

The big picture aspect in *BrownJudy* also delivers an important message because it gains reader's interest in the personal; it frames the individual human element in play when people are brought together from a range of different religious, cultural and political backgrounds. The personal and the political are neatly drawn into the reader's understanding and every action and sharing of information, identity and nuance becomes implicit with a deeper meaning.

Metaphor: The metaphor of a multi-cultural Australia and the political and religious antagonisms that continue worldwide to form and shatter the notion of social cohesion, underpins the deeper message in this story. *BrownJudy* draws on the issues between the settlers and convict social strata. By seating the characters cheek-by-jowl as they would have been when herded onto convict ships, sealed into their class rigidity and huddled together in fear and arrogant misunderstanding of the indigenous communities whose lands they populated, the author has compressed all of this into an extraordinarily interesting story. As just one example of the author's melding of this from the text, in a scene that involves the raising of the British Flag by the land owner the author describes the owner – with all of the men and staff lined-up to salute the British flag; in this way:

He straightened his shoulders and arched his back like a kangaroo/ "To England and our new queen, Victoria" (P.27)

Language: The characters carry a densely colloquial dialogue to tell their story. This takes the reader deeper into each character's personal 'take' and it is a multilayered expression of the relationships that they are forced to become a part of. In this story language is the key to the political and social stressors at play. For example, the narrator who is of Irish descent, with an overlay of London talk added to his Irish brogue and blarney, refers to the family he works for in the way of the servant classes; which is both an elevation of the master's position and an undercutting of that role. – As the saying goes, no one knows a gentleman as his servants do. In *BrownJudy* 'his and hernabs' is likely derived from the mid 18th century and Irish

derogatory term for a person of wealth. In the thirties the term was also used as 'his or hernibs', this was popular amongst servant classes from Kent to the London cockneys, who were both by virtue of the docking of convict ships in close proximity to these terms. Many of these along with the card game of euchre were brought back and forth between convicts and seamen in and outbound from Britain on the Australian convict ships. It became a sort of in- reference to fops, soft people, those in positions of power and so on. In the 17th century this too was a term for an unpleasant person –such layering of the language in the novel is at once fascinating and vexing. Those who are interested in language and its application in reifying class will love it, those who are not aware of this aspect may need to use a good dictionary of slang and also follow the text closely to gather the implications. This application of terms and colloquialisms is challenging but it is integral to the story because it provides the reader with a layered understanding of an intensely socio-political and highly unstable process of absorption, rejection and acquisition of the range of incoming and extant cultures at play in the story. To be fair the author generally applies enough back story to the narrative to explain what terms mean – so woolly-birds are quickly recognized as sheep, but Peachern who is identified as learning her 'Kings' – as in Kings English as a London 'Flash', carries several implications that stretch the evolving meaning of this term from its 17th to late 18th century meanings. However even without this, the reader will get the picture soon enough. Other terms such as whiddled and boned require some kind of a glossary.

Point of view: The novel is written from an unbiased, sympathetic but not an adulatory or jingoistic standpoint which gives the reader a solid introduction to key aspects of the settler years. Through the main narrator the reader gains access to the hidden and changed identities of house staff and station men attached to the settlement. From the outset the point of view of the story is held squarely by the ex con narrator. His aspect is defined by the speech patterns of the ex convict, out of Ireland and himself skewed by time spent in London. His voice is steady and it is his word-play and interactions that conveys the story. However it is the power of Peachern, her kindness and her influence on the station's daily life and the mystery of her background that carries the story. The author employs a distinctive vocabulary and a Gothic approach to the pressures that are applied to the characters. Fear and identity, servitude and the changing ideals and values of Australia in settlement years are a complex mix of subject matter and by telescoping this in the microcosm of the shepherd and the house men; the threat of the Aborigine groups outside and the pressures of the household within the author has successfully juggled an extraordinary set of ideas. The application of terms and nuance of the language is one of the strengths of this remarkable story. Yet, from the outset it is the political and social conforming that provides the drama. The convicts are, just like their masters and the house servants, hard up against the rigid class structures of the ruling class. They are all searching for some kind of a new identity and their personal stories bring into the settlement all of the prejudices, survival techniques and knowledge

that is contained in a community thrust together from a range of different backgrounds.

Thesis: The story is about the need for identity and acceptance in great change. It is an important story which provides fully rounded characters who are more than the sum of where they find themselves. Their complexity leads us to question the general notion that the settlers and convicts came fully reinvented into Australia and the story totally undoes the general notion that the blacks were unable to meld or connect with the settlers. *BrownJudy* delves into personal philosophies, ideals, beliefs and attitudes in a way that makes the characters unique and vivid and as interesting and memorable as the events that unfold around them. By introducing the quirky and explosive characters in all their mismatched glory the author has told through intercut voices of the station members – and the steady influence of Peachern, a story that is simultaneously funny, and tragic. – These often feature in grotesque scenes, there is gratuitous violence and horror, there are characters distorted by illness and frustration and there is a steady unpacking of a range of differing levels of hidden knowledge and senseless acts of stupidity and cunning. *BrownJudy* is almost Chaucerian in its attention to the small tics of humanity and how these create melodrama, and are used to pique interest. The story is as much about observation as it is about identity – the settlers watch for the Blacks and are in turn watched, observed, followed and in a heartbreaking scene; copy and wait for whitefella to assist them and interact. The delivery of language and dialogue provide an immediacy that takes readers right

into the room and places them between the faces of the characters as they argue and up the anti on each other in the power-play. The author has applied historical fact to a depth of fictional characterization which is totally captivating.

Weaknesses: There are tracts where the reader cannot quite follow where one character has stopped speaking and another commences. Speech indicators and indentation will sort this out easily. A glossary will assist readers with terms that they do not understand. It would be useful to check when OK came into the language as it appears in speech at the end of the story. In the reader's opinion this will bring the story up to manuscript standard and it should then be introduced along with the author, to Peter Bishop at Varuna for development.