

'Must I write?'

David Musgrave

BARLEY PATCH
by Murnane

Giramondo

\$27.95 pb, 266 pp, 9781920882532



Eighteen years ago, Gerald Murnane gave up writing fiction. At least, that is what the unnamed narrator of *Barley Patch* says happened to him in this new work of fiction, the first to be published by Murnane in fourteen years. It is tempting to think that this book might offer some kind of insight into what led to this hiatus in Murnane's career. After all, if Murnane is Australia's most innovative writer of fiction, as the book's blurb tells us, this period of silence is an absence that should interest careful readers.

Barley Patch, however, is just that, a work of fiction, according to its unnamed narrator. The reader frequently encounters sentences in it which 'remind the reader that every sentence hereabouts is part of a work of fiction'. It also shares its themes with much of Murnane's oeuvre: a preoccupation with landscape and a fascination with aesthetic experience, and the various epistemological questions associated with fiction and representation; some characters (or personages, as the narrator would have it), appear to recur, or are at the very least similar to those from earlier works such as *Tamarisk Row* (1974) or *The Plains* (1982); the narrator's curiosity about sex as a child and as a young adult; and so on. In fact, the world of *Barley Patch* is unsettlingly familiar to any reader with

some knowledge of Murnane's work and life. I say 'unsettling' because it appears nearly congruent with much of what we think we know about Murnane from the books and from biographical details we have come across over the years, such as his reluctance to travel, his fascination with jockeys' colours and horse racing, and the hoarding of all his writings.

This near congruence may tempt what the narrator calls the 'hasty reader' into reading this book as a transparent example of the form it so closely resembles, which is that of a confession or a memoir, complicated by the kind of irony that underpins the Epimenean paradox, 'all Cretans are liars'. In fact, the narrator at one point offers two different versions of a series of events that happens to him, ostensibly for two kinds of readers of his pages. The first is for the kind of readers who are

able to think of the writer of the pages as being no more than the narrator of a work of fiction: a personage supposed by those readers to exist on the far side of their own minds for as long as they go on reading these pages

and whose prowess as readers of fiction the narrator admires unreservedly. This is contrasted with a slightly different version of events for those readers who

may well think of the writer of the pages not as a conjectured personage but as a mere human person hardly different from themselves. For the sake of those readers, whose prowess as readers of fiction I could never admire, I report the following.

Here we are in familiar Murnanean territory: possibly arch, certainly ironic, open to a degree of interpretation, and challenging. Murnane succeeds here in giving the reader a bit of a jolt, a reminder that complacency is not to be had when reading *his* pages. It is all the more effective since, despite the apparent complexities of irony piled on irony, this is ultimately a straightforward and elegant book concerned with what it is about reading and writing fiction that compels the narrator, or to which the narrator is compelled. As such, *Barley*

Patch is Murnane's most satisfying and wholly rounded work, even when it occasionally resists easy interpretation.

Perhaps this is why there also seems to be an austerity to this work. There is a clear renunciation of imagination by the narrator, as though the unsparing evocation of childhood of Murnane's first novel, *Tamarisk Row*, has been stripped back to its rudimentary fictional essentials. At one point, mentioning a book by a famous American writer (which sounds suspiciously like Norman Mailer's *Ancient Evenings*, 1983), the narrator confesses: 'I felt no more urged to read his book ... than I have felt urged to read any of the many books of fiction written by contemporaries of mine in this country and set in earlier times.'

This appears to be due to a deep uneasiness with the 'unconvincing personages' who are the omniscient narrators of such historical fictions, and whose unconvincing talents the narrator does not claim to possess: 'although unable myself to imagine, I am able, of course, to write about fictional personages as though they have this ability.' Elsewhere, the narrator tells us that 'fiction is the art of suggestion' and that 'a person without imagination might still succeed in writing fiction as long as his or her reader is able to imagine'. Murnane possesses a powerful literary imagination, and it is not clear that this is different in kind from the type of imagination which the narrator so roundly rejects and claims not to possess. Instead, it appears as though *Barley Patch* was conceived in a manner similar to Beckett's preference in his 'Three Dialogues':

The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express.

Yet expression there is; compellingly so.

The book is divided into two parts, each ostensibly structured as answers to questions the narrator asks himself. The first of these questions is the most direct

and to the point: 'Must I write?', and the answer that follows concludes with the revelation that fiction had been given up at the time mentioned in my first paragraph. The rest of the book goes on to explore the central tension of *Barley Patch*: the fact that we are reading, in a work of fiction, about the renunciation of the writing of fiction. In so doing, it is perhaps Murnane's greatest achievement, for the philosophising irony that underpinned works such as *Landscape with Landscape* (1985) and *The Plains* is no longer abstractly speculative, possibly arid or at times puzzling. The difficulty is still there, but it has a narrative charge, something that post-structural theorists of narrative might call desire – think of Peter Brooks's *Reading for the Plot* (1992) – or seduction, as in Ross Chambers's *Story and Situation* (1984). Partly this is the achievement of the narrator's personality, which has elements of a melancholy obsessive nature; partly it is also the skill with which the apparently unimaginative narrative unfolds. I found myself reading *Barley Patch* rapidly and with enjoyment. Along the way, there are many fascinating images drawn from a large range of experience. Take, for instance, the passage that is reproduced on the first page from a letter Rilke sent to the aspiring poet Franz Xaver Kappus:

Nobody can counsel and help you, nobody. There is only one single way. Search for the reason that bids you write ... acknowledge to yourself whether you would have to die if it were denied you to write. This above all – ask yourself in the stillest hour of your night: must I write?

What follows is a demonstration of how this question may be answered. Above all, though, this book is about the experience of reading, and it does not shy away from making clear what it expects of its reader. About two thirds of the way through, the narrator writes, 'a hasty reader of the previous pages may still be waiting to learn why I gave up writing fiction more than fifteen years ago. A more careful reader may be already on the way to learning why I gave up.' If you know which kind

of reader you are, you'll know whether or not you want to read this book. ■

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Nameless wonders

Kerryn Goldsworthy

WONDERS OF A GODLESS WORLD

by Andrew McGahan

Allen & Unwin

\$32.99 pb, 336 pp, 9781741758092

Every book implicitly asks its reader a question: What am I? Sometimes this is an easy question to answer, but at other times, as with Andrew McGahan's new novel, one must reply, 'I have no idea; I've never seen anything like you before.'

The setting of *Wonders of a Godless World* is an old hospital housing the mad. Somehow the old-fashioned notion of 'madness' suits this story; it's the word McGahan uses most often to describe the patients, and there is more than a whiff about this isolated hospital of the medieval *Narrenschiff* – the Ship of Fools. The hospital is under a volcano on a tropical island with a harbour city. We are not told the names of any of these places, and, like everything and everyone else in this book, its heroine also has no name; rather, she is identified, as are all the other characters, by her defining characteristic, and is thus exclusively referred to as 'the orphan'. Other key characters are identified by their roles in a mundanely realistic way: the police captain, the old doctor, the night nurse. Still others have labels more redolent of fairytale and myth: the duke, the witch, the archangel, the virgin. And then there is the mastermind and perhaps the villain of the piece: the foreigner. As far as archetypal characters and symbolic settings are concerned, this book con-

tains an embarrassment of riches, and the fact that none of them is individually identified or named means that all kinds of significance can be projected onto them.

The orphan herself cannot take in or remember names, including her own, and cannot speak or understand anything that is said to her, though as a hefty and harmless young woman she is considered a competent housekeeper. In writing an entire novel in which not a single character, place or event is called by its proper name, McGahan seems to have set himself the same kind of task as those who try to write whole short stories without using the letter 'e', and the occasionally effortful circumlocutions involved can intrude on the reader's consciousness at the expense of the story itself.

So we do not know where we are, though we can make a guess. As the foreigner tells the orphan the incredible story of his life – or, rather, his lives – we tentatively recognise the story's ties to various real places and events: two world wars, a revolution that is probably Russian, a moon landing, a country that sounds a bit like Pakistan and another that is almost certainly somewhere in Africa. As the story progresses, we can put together a chronology of events and are given more and more precise information: the foreigner has lived through the entire twentieth century and beyond, and has been killed and reborn on a number of occasions. The first of these is a landslide in the wake of one of the many earthquakes that took place around the world in 1911 (probably, if the book's description of the terrain is anything to go by, the one in Tajikistan that created the Usoi Landslide Dam on the Murgab River), and the most recent is easily identifiable as the Columbia Space Shuttle disaster of 2003.

This information is conveyed to the orphan telepathically, for the foreigner has been brought into the hospital in a coma, completely covered in burns, presumably from this most recent space-shuttle death and rebirth. Both he and, increasingly, the orphan have powers that might be regarded as supernatural, or perhaps even as godly: telepathic communication and mind-