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Beneath the skin : (in)visible inscriptions Marele Day's The disappearances of Madelena Grimaldi

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Abstract

In *The Disappearances of Madalena Grimaldi*, the latest thriller by Shamus-award winner Marele Day, Sydney is a gothic landscape where nothing is as it seems. Hence this view of her living city:

The surface of the city is merely a skin. Beneath it are the veins carrying life blood, air vents that act as lungs, the sewers a lymphatic system draining away waste products, telephone lines the nervous system transmitting messages for the proper functioning of the body (p. 148).

All functions are not benign, but Day's wicked humour persists. Her chameleon Private Investigator, Claudia Valentine, is again severely tested, not least because she is personally and psychologically connected to her new investigations.

BENEATH THE SKIN: (IN)VISIBLE INSCRIPTIONS

MARELE DAY'S *THE DISAPPEARANCES OF MADELENA GRIMALDI*

Patricia Sant and James Brown

In *The Disappearances of Madalena Grimaldi*, the latest thriller by Shamus-award winner Marele Day, Sydney is a gothic landscape where nothing is as it seems. Hence this view of her living city:

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All functions are not benign, but Day's wicked humour persists. Her chameleon Private Investigator, Claudia Valentine, is again severely tested, not least because she is personally and psychologically connected to her new investigations.

Valentine's latest client wants to find her fifteen-year-old daughter, mysteriously missing from her 'modest millionaire' home. In an example of bad timing, Valentine's mother announces her imminent marriage together with the news of the death, some nine years earlier, of Valentine's long-lost father, an alcoholic derelict. Thus begins a double mystery — discovering how one-time journalist Guy Valentine had died and how he had lived becomes as important to Valentine as the search for Madalena — both puzzles given added dimension by Valentine's current, partnerless state and her task of mothering, (part time), her son and daughter. In this way, Day positions her readers in the space inhabited by deserted and deserting children as well as by those Australians seeking lost forbearers or offspring. In investigating her father's fate and Madalena's, Valentine embodies the alienation and desperation of too many dwellers in a metropolis.

Day is conscientious about the social responsibilities of the writer, refusing stereotypes and judgments based on received concepts of sexuality, race, gender, ethnicity or class. She takes her readers behind the facade of respectability to confront the inter-relatedness of the causes of crime, to recognise that all actions have consequences and that every citizen is complicitous in the maintenance of the maze in which we struggle to survive. Valentine's physical and psychological stamina are battered in her voyage through Sydney's underworld labyrinth, but she rebounds with her accustomed vigour. (Day's depiction of the subterranean world of Sydney shares something with American Sarah Paretsky's excellent *Tunnel Vision*, also published in 1994 and reviewed in *Law/Text/Culture*, I.)

More subtly and more powerfully than in previous Valentine novels, Day analyses the downside of creeping, free-market capitalism: Rarely have the consequences of abandoning government-funded, social safety nets been so clearly or ominously suggested. Valentine's dual quest takes her to dives and youth refuges at the Cross, Matthew Talbot centres in Darlinghurst and Surry Hills and, further, to those hidden, dangerous spaces known only to the most desperate of the homeless.

Day provides no facile answers, but she does suggest methods for survival. Valentine herself refuses victim status and sees the absurd in nearly every situation in which she finds herself. This survival mechanism of wry wit makes her an irresistible object of reader identification and a welcome counter to those ranks of British and American female PIs who do good in either desperately depressing or desperately earnest ways. Perhaps even more appealing is Valentine's ability to empathise with the subjects of her quests. As in *The Last Tango of Delores Delgado*, Valentine's own subjectivity is destabilised as she comes closer to the objects of her quests. In her search to discover the respective fates of Guy and Madalena, she merges with the inhabitants of the Dantesque underworld she explores.

Additionally, for our guidance or amusement, Day underpins Valentine's quest with symbol and myth, juxtaposing readings of surface and underworld, fire and water, and sending Freud and Jung into battle with French theorists. Madalena's brother was drowned in the creek behind his parent's home; the Sydney flood of Anzac Day 1985 was the law's opportunity to annihilate Guy Valentine; Claudia Valentine finds a walk on Bondi Beach or a swim in a nearby pool invigorating; and a deep pool of water in a tunnel, 'the refuge in the womb of the earth,' protects Madalena. Finally, the resolution of the two mysteries is set during the great Sydney fires of January 1994. Further, the patriarchal, Christian, Dantesque vision of the underworld, a series of 'downward rings that descend into hell,' is opposed by an explication of the earlier, matriarchal Persephone-Demeter myth (pp. 148-49) – in case we missed the point. All good stuff it is, but all

very tongue-in-cheek, hence Valentine's laconic 'Why was I thinking about myth and symbolism on a fine morning such as this? Well, you wouldn't want me dwelling on the lowlife night I just had, would you?' (p. 149). Would we not!

Day offers us no reunions to put the world to rights again, but she shows us caring individuals outside conventional Happy Families: Abused or struggling teenagers, an elusive pavement artist, a loquacious drunk and the youthful seekers of a gentler underground, the Tibetan Buddhist, utopian kingdom known to them as the Lost World of Agharti. Although the bureaucracy is moribund or concerned only with protecting its power by silence, Valentine has, like every good PI, her own unofficial contacts: a policewoman, a social worker, a man in Records, a woman forensic scientist, a homeless man. Day maps ways in which women may subvert society's constraints through stealth, networking and eluding patriarchal myths and structures.

By the end of this gripping narrative, we discover why young Madalena was compelled to disappear more than once, pursued by underworld criminal elements. We also learn more about the fate of the supposedly ne'er-do-well Guy Valentine, whose personal history is inscribed and re-inscribed by his daughter. In keeping with our times, however, *The Disappearances of Madalena Grimaldi* lacks closure. Madalena's future is uncertain, and Valentine is unable to satisfy us (however she might have, for the present, persuaded herself) about the reason for her father's disappearance and subsequent long silence.

There are also more esoteric issues for consideration. Has Valentine's mother shucked off her ostrich feathers and retired her dazzling dancer's legs forever? What will be the social repercussions of Valentine's expanding her living space above the Balmain pub and tarting it up in an atypical burst of gentrification? Most importantly, will that ancient Daimler, Valentine's Car With Attitude, continue to resist attempts to be bought up by its own mechanic? These and other questions urgently require answers and leave fans of Clàudia Valentine, PI, awaiting the coming of another Day.