

"Power to the People"

A socialist vision nourished by private contributions—it's Sydney's new Museum of Contemporary Art. Jeremy Eccles investigates.

The Museum of Contemporary Art opens in Sydney in November in the old Maritime Services Board building on Circular Quay. The MCA is a contemporary museum not just in the sense of what it will display, but also in how it is funded.

Originating with a bequest from the will of the widow of the artist John Power, the MCA covered the conversion costs of the MSB building with an interest-free loan from Sydney University (where the Power Foundation is based), while the NSW government agreed to let it at a peppercorn rent for 50 years. The third partner in the Museum, says its quietly dapper director, Leon Paroissien, is "the people of Australia. They come into it because John Power was a bit of a William Morris socialist who had no children of his own—so left his money for our improvement".

But 'the people of Australia' are going to have to pay for their improvement. For, apart from a tiny \$50,000 a year for the first three years, the MCA is unfunded by state or federal governments, and will have to rely on entrance charges, membership, sponsorship and other activities, such as the shops, cafe and bar which will stay open late at night in a major social and tourist area of Sydney.

According to the MCA's own brochure, "it will be the most entrepreneurial arts institution in Australia". As a former Director of the Australia Council's Visual Arts Board, one might have thought that Leon Paroissien would find this all rather distasteful. Far from it. "Even in the 70s, I realised that there would have to be a limit to government money for the arts, and that we would have to empower ourselves to gain authority in the community if we wanted to win

arguments for increases in public funding as the conservationists have done. For, though there are limits, we can't become infected by the rhetoric of Reaganomics, which tries to say that the arts can be funded entirely by the private sector". So far, the commitment of 'the people' has been reflected by memberships coming in at a rate of more than a thousand a week, and a steady flow of \$1000 donations.

The realisation of a vaguely socialist ideal through hefty private contributions is just one of the contradictions that are associated with this transformation of a public building. Another is the inappropriateness of the building itself—designed in the 1930s but not inhabited by bureaucracy until the 1950s—to be either an office block or an art museum. Architect Andrew Anderson has had a few problems with red and green scagliola marble pillars and finishes that are hardly the perfect accompaniment to contemporary art.

The original offer of a handover came from former NSW Labor Premier Neville Wran, but nothing had been formalised when the Liberals took over in 1988. So it took heroic restraint on the part of Premier Nick Greiner to accept his Arts Minister's recommendation that \$100 million in real estate be forgone in exchange for the warm glow of a Museum of Contemporary Art! Subsequently, the government has made a policy of encouraging the recycling of other historic buildings as a solution to the arts' need for appropriate accommodation.

A further problem is the very use of the word 'museum'—suggesting history rather than contemporaneity. Paroissien revels in these contradictions. "I want the art to dominate people's thinking, not the building. I want amazing things to happen inside and irreverent things to burst out of the

building. The word 'museum' turns up in John Power's will and I'm happy enough to use it to challenge the passivity with which the Anglo-Saxon world accepts the notion of a gallery. But I also want to challenge what a museum is expected to be."

Dr John Power, apart from being a medical man, was a serious artist, one of the rare writers about Cubism, an expatriate, and extremely rich. One can almost feel sympathy for all that wealth, inherited from his medical father, who used his scientific training to set up an insurance company that eventually became the MLC. Son John had to qualify as a doctor too, before being allowed to fulfil his real desire of heading off to Europe to paint in 1920. Even there, mixing and matching with Picasso, Gris and Braque, he was different in lacking the garret hunger of the others. He lived in Bournemouth, for God's sake (dying in equally genteel Jersey), and, not having to paint to live, rarely sold his works—despite having shows all over Europe and in New York. As a result, his widow ended up with a thousand Powers along with two million pounds in cash at the end of her life in 1962. Since then the curators appointed by the University of Sydney have diligently spent the money to accumulate 3,000 works of contemporary art. But until now it's never had anywhere to display this collection. Nor, for reasons that Paroissien finds odd, has it ever bought any Australian works.

Since 1984, he has worked to remedy that deficit. "We felt we had to shape the collection so that Australian artists of the middle generation were put up there beside their overseas counterparts. And we simply had to add Aboriginal art—which we've done with care, I think. One collection we have is jointly owned with the Maningrida Community in Arnhem Land, for instance. In the future, we'll try to build an archive that gives an insight into the working methods and ideas of certain contemporary artists so that future generations can study how we make art now".

Although the Power Collection has given them the building to house and display it, the real heart of the MCA's activities will not necessarily involve the collection at all. Parts of it will always be on display, such as Power's own works and mildly historical retrospectives of Op and Pop art. That icon of modernism, Joseph Beuys, gets a show of his own as the museum opens. But if the MCA is to keep the excitement alive week after week, year after year, it's going to have to innovate and import constantly.

The determination of the MCA to be genuinely popular is revealed by an opening exhibition called *TV Times*. 35 years of Australian television may not be everybody's idea of art, but for Paroissien it's a statement that the museum doesn't intend to be remote behind its marble portico—and that the moving image has to have a place as prominent as the still image in modern art. A cinematheque on the Parisian model is another firm project

for the future which will treat film as a serious art form.

Paroissien sees this process as "taking what used to be called the fine arts and pushing them outwards towards popular culture".

Caravan is another such push. In January, the Sydney harbourfront will be embellished by five radically new models of caravans—that ever-diminishing aspect of the summer holiday road crawl. Here the MCA is toying with sociology—as well as revealing something about the process of design, rather than simply hailing brilliance in design, as New York's Museum of Modern Art does. Less parochial concerns in the near future range from New Zealand's bicultural art to South America's post-colonial experience; from Eastern Europe after communism to China after Tiananmen. As part of this constantly changing and challenging vista, *Zones of Love: Contemporary Art from Japan* went

on tour around Australia and New Zealand even before the home base was open.

Such innovation and flexibility demands versatility in all aspects of the museum's management. "We refused to have a structure", says Paroissien, "where administrators raised money which they handed to curators to spend. We all have to be artistic and financial managers here.

"It's actually been a miracle," he concludes, "that in two and a half years, we've developed the building, the institutional infrastructure and the program—all from scratch. It's certainly helped having that rather serious self-portrait of John Power looking over our shoulders all that time, driving us on".

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BIMA Up

The Royal Commission into Black Deaths in Custody may have sunk from view (ALR 132, September). But it's the cause at least of one bright star—Murri radio. Michael Meadows reports.

Six months after the release of the report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, one of its recommendations relating to Aboriginal media may at last be reaching fruition—in Queensland, at least. The Australian Broadcasting Tribunal (ABT) has given the go-ahead for a special interest public radio licence for a Brisbane-based Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander media group, the Brisbane Indigenous Media Association (BIMA). It is only the second licence of its type to be offered in Australia

and the first in a capital city (the first was Alice Springs' Central Australian Media Association in the early 80s).

The decision had been much delayed. One of four original applicants for the licence, a Christian broadcasting group called Family Radio had appealed against the tribunal's decision last year that the licence be designated 'special purpose indigenous'. That appeal was dismissed by the Federal Court early this year, after which the ABT formally awarded the licence to the Murri group.

The Royal Commission urged "adequate funding support" for

Aboriginal-controlled media, based on a recognition of their importance in informing both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal audiences. The Royal Commission saw indigenous media playing "a very important role" in presenting detailed information to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities—about successes in other communities, for example. This is especially significant in the light of a widespread, extremely negative perception of the behaviour of Australia's mainstream media on the part of indigenous people. The Royal Commission report, among other studies acknowledged that Aborigines are largely presented in the media as 'problems'.

During the recent Tribunal hearing, chair of the BIMA Board, Charlie Watson, explained that Murri radio in south-east Queensland hoped to have some influence in educating mainstream Australia in the under-

standing of such ideas as Murris' association with land and other insights into indigenous society. Watson accused much of the mainstream media of being concerned with sensationalising issues like violence and alcohol abuse within the Aboriginal community. Murri radio, he said, intended to put forward positive aspects of Aboriginal culture, believing that this would educate a "good portion" of the mainstream audience.

BIMA plans a country music format using a large percentage of Aboriginal bands. Former Brisbane Labor Party-owned AM radio station 4KQ abandoned its country music format some years ago, leaving a convenient marketplace niche. Although the new station will be funded almost entirely by the federal government, BIMA is hoping for sponsorship from relevant local authorities as well as some public subscription support. BIMA, through the Murri Hour Collective, has been broadcasting regularly since 1984 on public radio station 4ZZZ-FM in Brisbane. The collective currently produces around 16 hours of Aboriginal radio each week, serving a diverse audience from Stradbroke Island, east of Brisbane, to inmates of Brisbane's Boggo Road jail. During the lead-up to the bicentennial, BIMA networked with a number of other east coast Aboriginal broadcasters, including Radio Redfern in Sydney, to stress the significance of that day from an Aboriginal perspective. It made broadcast history as the first time Aboriginal broadcasters had networked along the east coast, yet was ignored by the mainstream media.

While the Royal Commission has recommended "adequate" support for Aboriginal media, just how the federal government will interpret this remains to be seen. Both ATSIC and the Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) have committed funds to supporting BIMA, subject to the licence offer being made. But what is "adequate"? Perhaps the most pressing problem in Aboriginal broadcasting is the absence of a coherent and acceptable (to indigenous people) policy framework to provide guidance for bureaucratic decision-making—including funding.

Canada currently funds its native broadcasting sector to the tune of

around Can\$12 million a year. A further \$10 million has been earmarked over four years for a dedicated national native television channel—Television Northern Canada—to be launched next January. Compare that with an estimated \$6 million available to indigenous broadcasters on this side of the Pacific, about 40% of which is used to support the ailing Central Australian Remote Commercial Television Service, *Imparja*. Comparatively little finds its way to community radio broadcasters.

About 30 disparate Aboriginal broadcasting groups take to public radio around Australia to get their message across—most relying almost entirely on volunteer labour. They put out about 130 hours of Aboriginal programming each week. ATSIC and the Department of Transport and Communication (through the Public Broadcasting Foundation) are providing some funding support to around 25 public broadcasting groups this year, but the total available for the current year is less than \$300,000.

A system of small public television stations in 80 remote Aboriginal communities (the Broadcasting for Remote Aboriginal Communities Scheme—BRACS) is only now about to become

licensed, years after installation. But future funding support for training and maintenance of this potentially innovative system is still unresolved despite pleas from many of the target communities. Moves from within ATSIC to formulate an acceptable Aboriginal broadcasting policy with a politically secure base have been frustrated by the very bureaucracy the policy claims to circumvent.

Federal Aboriginal Affairs Minister Robert Tickner has urged nationwide support from state premiers for implementation of the recommendations of the Royal Commission. His much publicised differences with Queensland Premier Wayne Goss over inadequacies in that state's Aboriginal land rights legislation may overshadow the need for co-operation on this vital issue. Perhaps if an Aboriginal radio station *had* been on the air full time 12 months ago, it could have made a positive contribution to educating south-east Queensland audiences in a manner which has so far proved elusive for the mainstream media and both federal and state Labor governments.

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TROUBLED TIMES

ALR helped set the agenda with its influential set of articles on Labor's new age of anxiety. Now those articles, along with others commissioned especially, have been published as a booklet by ALR in conjunction with the Fabian Society and Pluto Press.

***Labor's Troubled Times* discusses the problems of Labor's diminishing membership base, the role of factions, the declining culture of Laborism and Labor's increasingly perilous social base. It features contributions by Bob Hogg, Sue McCreadle, Bob McMullan, Robert Ray, Marian Simms, Lindsay Tanner and others.**

ALR readers can purchase *Labor's Troubled Times* at the reduced rate of just \$4.50, post free (normal rrp is \$6.95). Just send remittance to ALR, PO Box A247, Sydney South NSW 2000.

From Hair to Maternity

Sinead—Her Life and Music, by Jimmy Guterman, Penguin 1991.

The World At My Feet, by Sandie Shaw, Harper Collins 1991. Reviewed by David Nichols.

When you're thinking 'pop star' always think 'angle'. A pop personality has to appeal to both a male and a female demographic. Jon Bon Jovi, for instance, developed twice the market by taking men on board with his rough, rugged image while making sure he still had nicely washed hair for the ladies. Madonna, by the same token, establishes herself as a role model for girls while pandering utterly to blokes, guys, men and males.

That's the way it is and the way it always has been. But occasionally someone comes along who only seems a part of the music industry because they have been *squished* into it. They are not going to fit easily into that big, stylistically-standardised family tree: they have brought something entirely new with them.

"The truth is that Sinead pulverised her hair for her own reasons, among them that she did not want to be another typical female rock star with big hair." So writes Jimmy Guterman in his 148-page study of the undoubtedly impressive Sinead O'Connor. Sinead's most famous feature must surely be her near-baldness which might just as easily be seen as a gimmick as an anti-gimmick. Her career—no matter how detailed Guterman's discography—can basically be summed up as two albums (neither of which, incidentally, Guterman seems to like very much) and a few singles.

She took America by storm with her second LP *I Do Not Want What I Haven't Got*, and then rubbed their noses in it by firstly refusing to allow

"The Star Spangled Banner" a hearing before a concert in New Jersey and then refusing to appear on the same *Saturday Night Live* as 'comedian'

Andrew "Dice" Clay. Both admirable stances, maybe, but that's it. This leaves one to wonder why the book was written now and not in 1997, and



Sinead: Undoubtedly impressive.



Sandie: Barefoot and pregnant.

why Guterman—a strange biographer indeed, who refuses to probe his subject's private life, childhood or motivation—was assigned to write it. And despite Guterman's attempts to escape such frippery, the hair is always lurking in the background. The book even prints as the first of 16 fairly uninteresting photographs an odd, unexplained shot of a haired Sinead in a French maid's outfit. The hair eventually starts to take on a life of its own, overtaking whatever was important about Sinead O'Connor in the first place.

"What really caused the bad feeling between her and U2? What are her views on Northern Ireland? Why do her folk-tinged ballads top the charts in these dance heavy times?" ponders the back cover blurb. The three-quarters of an hour it takes to read *Sinead—Her Life and Music* will not reveal the answers to the first two, though it does show the third to be nonsensical (after all, Sinead's biggest hit was written by Prince, a man with almost every musical leaning *except* folk).

Where Sinead is known for her naked head, Sandie Shaw is best remembered for her naked feet. But the two have more in common than that. Both

write and co-produce their music; both make striking fashion statements; and both have been content with an image of devil-may-care risk-taking, when in reality they have been dominated—for large periods of their careers—by overbearing and sagacious managers.

One might better differentiate between their respective attitudes by noting that, whereas Sinead wears a badge between her breasts demanding that the viewer "stop staring at my tits", Sandie, conciliatory, appears on the cover of her autobiography *The World At My Feet* dressed in a cloak covered in peace signs.

Sinead has yet to write her own book (or even record twenty different songs), but it seems not unlikely that her confident face hides the kind of frightened interior Sandie admits to in her "Personal Adventure". On the other hand, Sinead has never allowed herself to be conned into recording a song like "Puppet on a String" the way Sandie was, despite the fact she "hated it from the very first oompah to the final bang on the big bass drum...I was instinctively repelled by its sexist drivel and cuckoo-clock tune..." She credits herself with originating this feminist revelation: "Was this how

they wanted women to behave—like stupid puppets?" (Of course it was!)

The World At My Feet is a far better book than *Sinead*, though of course it has a lot more terrain to cover. (Sandie's been performing, on and off, for 25 of her 41 years; Sinead for three of her 23.) Shaw has come through an impressive career that has seen her happily leap from million-seller to cult figure with her principles and brain totally intact. Her book isn't even ghosted.

Skipping back and forth between various points in her life (but starting and ending in the late 80s) Shaw spins a good anecdote, shares an intimate moment (though never too intimate) and makes sure we remember her current togetherness is mainly to do with her Buddhist beliefs (it is the only non-sexist religion, she claims).

The only disappointing parts are when Sandie's fears bring her down to earth with a bump—and yet 'disappointing' is the wrong word; it's refreshing to see someone so untainted by rock lies and still unashamedly 'of her time' despite her enlightenment. "My pregnancy instantly solved the problem of whether or not I should...start recording again", she says at one stage. "The energy and self-absorbed single-mindedness required to launch a new career in the precarious music business is totally at odds with the hormones rushing around a pregnant woman's body telling her to calm down and build a secure nest for her fledgling."

Sinead would have something to say about *that*; she started recording her debut album when she was seven months pregnant. "Sung by a twenty-year-old bald, unmarried, pregnant woman..." says Guterman of a track from this LP, "these lines are penetrating and persuasive."

Those lines are fatuous and insignificant. Ignore the *Sinead* tome, but read the Sandie Shaw book—even though she doesn't say if she slept with Jimi Hendrix or not.

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Unchecked Mates

Mates—Five Champions of the Labor Right, by Fia Cumming, Allen and Unwin 1991. Reviewed by Suzanne Jamieson.

This book is a series of interviews with the key members of Australia's most powerful political society—the right wing of the New South Wales Labor Party.

Fia Cumming's book is strikingly seductive because it gives the reader the impression that she or he is sitting together with the Mates (Paul Keating, Graham Richardson, Leo McLeay, Laurie Brereton and Bob Carr) at a rather lengthy, drunken dinner party. Over several hours the Mates reveal how they made it to the top and, while one may be repelled by many of the details, the story is compelling because it comes directly from the horses' mouths. As history, the book may be embarrassing, but as gossip it is superb.

At the outset, something must be said of Cumming's method. The dust jacket describes her as a senior Canberra political journalist "specialising in probing behind the daily headlines". This book certainly doesn't provide any evidence of that—in fact her method appears to be to transcribe directly from tape whatever the Mates tell her. As a result, the text is replete with errors in transcription. For instance: who is the Holden mentioned by Paul Keating in the same breath as Billy Hughes (p.15)? Surely he meant W A Holman, onetime Labor Premier of NSW and central figure in the split in the party during World War One.

Errors of fact rather than transcription also abound. On p. 2 Cumming has Bob Carr elected as a Shadow Minister in the NSW parliament in 1984; I thought we had an ALP government in NSW in 1984. (Again, the names under the lower photograph opposite p. 89 are *all* wrong. Were any editors employed by the publisher?) I can only imagine Bob Carr, who is at least



accurately depicted as the intellectual among the Mates, cringing in embarrassment as the howlers come thick and fast. Analysis of the Mates' musings is almost non-existent, and in keeping with the tradition established by Keating's first biographer, Edna Carew, Cumming appears not to have sought alternative views on the historical account presented by them.

That brings me to the main criticism of her method. These three hundred odd pages of magazine style verbal meanderings, put together by someone who is either an acolyte or who simply doesn't know the right questions to ask, have simply provided the Mates with an opportunity to indulge in a massive exercise in *pentimento*. Readers may remember the borrowing of this artistic term by Lillian Hellman in the collection of stories which eventually gave rise to the successful Hollywood film *Julia*. The term denotes having second thoughts and going back over one's painting to paint over some unwanted details. We all do it in our recollections of our own pasts. We all replace "remembrance of things past" with a pastiche created by our own memories.

This does not necessarily imply bad faith or a deliberate attempt to

reconstruct the past (though remember those grainy black and white photos of V I Lenin addressing the crowd in Petrograd in late 1917—one version with Leon Trotsky hovering near and another version where Trotsky has disappeared into the ether.) But the past is reconstructed nevertheless and recorders of oral history tend to be aware of this. Not, however, Fia Cumming. While on the subject of Italian terms we might also recall *braggadaccio* and its role in oral history. I was interested and amazed to learn from Cumming's book that the elevation of Neville Wran to the leadership of the NSW Parliamentary Labor Party was entirely the work of the Mates. Jack Ferguson and Arthur Gietzelt seem to have disappeared into the ether along with Trotsky.

The title of the book summarises its main theme—the rise to power of a small coterie of working class, Catholic (except for Bob Carr) men. Women hardly figure in this history in a political sense. Mothers, wives and sisters are presented as possessing significant political skills (for instance: Brereton's sister Deirdre Grusovin, Dorothy Isaksen MLC—whose name is misspelled throughout, Brereton's wife Trish Kavanagh) but they never seem to be at the centre of things. They are never players in the main game.

This is no doubt an accurate depiction of the state of affairs in the period under Cumming's scrutiny—and to be scrupulously fair, things were only marginally better in the NSW Labor Left (known as the Combined Unions and Branches Steering Committee for most of the period). Both factions operated like private clubs. Women were, in effect, associate rather than full members. The picture painted by Cumming of endless meetings, ceaseless marshalling of numbers (see especially the descriptions of Keating's virtually full-time efforts to win a seat in parliament) and endless strategy discussions—all confined to the Mates—makes it clear that anyone with family responsibilities would simply not be able to compete. All of

these men (as likewise men on the Left) were able to devote themselves so fully to their pursuit of power because someone kept up the hot dinners and provided a steady stream of clean shirts.

The other startling aspect of the rise and rise of the Mates is the critical role the Youth Council (NSW Young Labor) played in their political training. For both factions in NSW Labor it played the roles of meeting ground, laboratory and nursery for those who, along with the Mates, later came to prominence in the wider party, many

finding seats in parliament. The Youth Council/Young Labor described by Cumming and the Mates is the same rather rough and brutal place I remember from later years. I imagine I was not the only teenage girl who felt both horrified and bewildered by the experience. I suspect some of us joined factions as much out of a desire for friendship as out of conviction. Much of the time the experience resembled nothing so much as the Battle of the Somme; life was much safer in one trench or the other than in the No Man's Land outside the factions. We

all learned these lessons (and other machine skills) well.

Perhaps this last point deserves greater attention from a better writer than Cumming. I wonder to what extent the views and methods of many young people who have passed through NSW Young Labor in the past 30 years or so have been permanently skewed (or warped) by the things we saw and did.

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Hearts and Craft

The Passion by Jeanette Winter-son, Bloomsbury 1991. Reviewed by Virginia Ross.

Winterson's second novel seems an appropriate choice for reprinting in the Bloomsbury Classics series—a series which features a compact, hand-sized format and an aesthetic, stylised jacket design. The look of the book says 'precious', and the reader's expectation is that the contents will be equally so.

And the story is somewhat jewel-like. The perspective moves between the two protagonists, Henri and Villanelle, and the story is woven, with vivid magic, around the crossing of these two lives. It is languidly historical—Winterson starts by creating convincingly, and with wit ("No one over five foot two ever waited on the Emperor"), the nuances of the life of Henri, a member of Napoleon's army during his period of supremacy in Europe. Winterson then transforms that voice into that of the daughter of a fisherman, a woman who survives by working as a casino croupier in

war-dissipated, water-engulfed Venice.

The Emperor has a passion for chicken and eats one at most meals—it is Henri's task to prepare these. Henri idolises Napoleon, in the way that innocence adores greatness. The creative history in the first section of the book ('The Emperor') is smooth and seductive—Winterson skilfully captures Henri's faith, his innocence, his pleasure at existing so close to the Emperor, his bonding with his two particular army buddies—the whole patriarchal culture of war, with all its glorified privations. By contrast, Villanelle, in 'The Queen of Spades'—is painted as a worldly and independent loner, who has experienced and lost great love (with a woman), and who looks pragmatically at the world, seeking only survival. Henri is real, Villanelle ethereal. He is material, she magic.

It is only with the doomed winter invasion of Russia, as the troops freeze around him that Henri realises Bonaparte's megalomania. He deserts, and it is here, in the icy fields outside Moscow, that he discovers Villanelle. Circumstances have led her to the army as a *vivandiere*—a provider

of sex to the troops. During 'The Zero Winter' these two trek together across countries to "the city surrounded by water with watery alleys that do for streets", to continue their fates.

This is a richly woven and ambitious work which is, at first, captivating and unusual. Winterson's style is spiritual and romantic, fatalistic and cyclical (there are just four chapters), and it is a poetic and well-wrought piece of craft. Perhaps it was this, for me, which created the distance which prevented me from falling wholeheartedly for this novel. I could appreciate its craft, but at the end I remained somewhat untouched. On 'The Rock' (the book's fourth section) the story founders, dissipating into a treatment of an ubiquitous and traditional theme—one of spirituality, denial, exile and escape into the other-world of madness. Winterson, perhaps in an attempt to avoid conventionality, disappointingly shirks a satisfying resolution to their, and our, journey.

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Goethe's Joust

Immortality by Milan Kundera, translated by Peter Kussi. Faber and Faber, 1991. Reviewed by Jane Sutton.

Immortality is a large novel dealing with large themes. Readers of Kundera's earlier novels such as *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* will know that what is so special about Kundera's writing is the way he interrelates theories about the way the world works with the emotional fabric of his characters' lives, escaping the brittle world of academic game playing of so much recent fiction writing.

In *Immortality* he explores notions of fiction and authorship. As the ob-

server/narrator Kundera speaks about the creation of his characters. He introduces the character Rubens by noting that, in Part Six "a completely new character will enter the novel. And at the end of that part he will disappear without a trace." Likewise, Kundera summons up the creation of the character Agnes, which occurs while he watches a woman at his health club; "...Her arm rose with bewitching ease...The essence of her charm, independent of time, revealed itself...And then the word Agnes entered my mind."

Immortality explores the way people construct their own identities and the way in which they will be remembered. Agnes observes that people make passionate statements about their likes and dislikes: "Because only in this way can we regard ourselves not merely as a variant of the human prototype but as a being with its own

irreplaceable essence." A large section of the novel delves into the historical relationship between Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Bettina, his admirer, who use their friendship as a way of constructing their respective identities. Goethe tries to prevent Bettina from playing a causal role in his life "assiduously keeping her outside his biography" while Bettina collects and publishes their correspondence, determined to make their friendship part of human history and myth.

Immortality is engrossing in its interpretation of the way that people's lives slip in and out of each other's stories, suggesting by its depiction of these characters that each individual's life is a profound and seething piece of writing inscribed on the human world of myth and representation.

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Judy Horacek

At Home with the Tomatoes

Don't you bloody try & deny it - you've been at one of those damned demonstrations again

