

# LANDFALL 231

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a narrative of national self-assertion, a narrative that Lawrence would have utterly rejected. The author was the ‘first in our little country to win the greatest prize of all’, Orr writes, and ‘each of us remembers and remembers and remembers’ that time of ‘overwhelming excitement’.

The point at which it is all brought down with a crashing thump, though, is when, in the later pages of the novel, the trustees begin to discover that the Master has plagiarised much of his great work. Orr burns the piles of manuscripts and books, all the evidence that the Master may have been nothing but a master thief, in his attempt to leave in abeyance the question of whether the sadism, abuse and torture might have been for nothing after all. And in this last moment Lawrence is truly forgotten, made into something else, as Orr ignores the only lesson his uncle was capable of teaching him: burn the whole lot, published and unpublished, Lawrence would have said. Forget me entirely and maybe then you will finally become yourself.

The last words are given over to the critics who have failed to make sense of Lawrence, words that themselves haunt attempts to begin the process of domestication (of which this review is one of the first acts). Trott’s urge to smooth the Lawrence story into one that asks nothing of us shares much with the job of the critic, resounding darkly of the biographical readings that have long been undertaken in Janet Frame’s work, both by Evans and others. It is a kind of

entrapment—the very entrapment that Evans himself has written of—as he invites his readers, especially those who would be hostile to him, to search for phantasms of ourselves, and to be as banal as we can be.

More than that, though, it is the working out of the problems of writing from within the house of someone else’s fiction and being a person made up out of other people’s writing. It is a novel that in significant ways is about what it means to be the author of *Gifted*, and what it means to have encountered literature across a lifetime. Evans, after all, was correct when he wrote on *The Spinoff* that *The Back of His Head* ‘reads like a parable of reading’: the novel is a parable, or perhaps a cautionary tale, of what all that reading has wrought.

## Something Rich and Strange

by Kirstine Moffat

*The Chimes*, by Anna Smaill (Sceptre, 2015), 291pp, \$28

To plunge into the world of Anna Smaill’s *The Chimes* is to be disoriented and unsettled. This sense of what Darko Suvin terms ‘cognitive estrangement’ is a core feature of dystopian writing; witness Ray Bradbury’s inversion of the firefighter in *Fahrenheit 451*, the douser of flames becoming the igniter of fires, or George Orwell’s opening to *Nineteen Eighty Four*: ‘It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen.’ In *The Chimes* music has become a terrifying, omnipresent weapon. The novel is set in an alternate England, where written words and memory are banned. Everything is controlled by an immense Carillon whose majestic Chimes create acoustic vibrations that result in ‘memoryloss’ for the populace.

In a parody or echo of church ritual, the Chimes ring out morning and night. At Matins ‘OneStory’ is told, the official version of ‘Allbreaking’, the ‘dischord’ that shattered time past and created time present. At evening Vespers the Chimes pour forth music at such an unbearable pitch that listeners are overwhelmed to the point of losing their memories. ‘There is no space for any other thought’ than

the music, which ‘is like a fist’. The result is a collective amnesia, a world in which people rely on the ingrained habits of ‘bodymemory’. Without the lifeline of a regular routine and familiar places, minds disintegrate and people drift, lost and alone. The terrible Chimes can also result in physical degeneration, triggering shaking and eventually collapse and death.

The Carillon and the Chimes it produces are controlled by the mysterious ‘Order’. Based in Oxford they have managed to insulate themselves from the effect of the chimes they use to control others through the rare silvery metal palladium. In a microcosm removed from dystopian reality they live in a seemingly perfect musical utopia, creating ever more intricate harmonies for the great Carillon.

But this utopian microcosm exists at an unbearable cost for others. The past is a foggy mystery, the time before Allbreaking characterised as ‘blasphemy’. All that is left is today, and each day is the same as the last. This terrible evocation of a continuous ‘now’ acts as a subtle critique of contemporary Western society, so preoccupied with the desires of the moment that past, present and future blur. Smaill’s novel is a reminder of the necessity of history, both the small, poignant histories of individual lives and the weaving together of a collective narrative of origin and belonging. Without this awareness of the past, of before, there can be no future. The wonderful Shakespearean word ‘hereafter’ resonates through the text, the

protagonist Simon daring to dream of a world that is different, a world of possibility.

There are lots of Shakespearean echoes in *The Chimes*, references to *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, and other fragments, such as 'Patience on a monument' from *Twelfth Night*. These work both as a powerful reminder of the importance of words as a means of spoken and written communication, and as part of the pattern of overlapping time periods that add to the disorientation of the reader. This temporal dislocation is produced by an interweaving of hints and allusions. The vast Carillon and the London landscape completely devoid of technology have a medieval flavour. Yet references to Shakespeare, Buxtehude and Brahms locate the reader in a world of evolving literary and musical taste.

The orphan Simon finds a home with the Five Rover 'pact', a group of outlaws who eke out a living from the tunnels under the Thames by collecting fragments of palladium. These riverscapes and the community of orphans evoke Dickens and are also reminiscent of Joan Aiken's *Midnight is a Place*. Simon finds warmth and comfort in a worn 'burberry' but also wears jeans, placing the reader in a world that is partly familiar but mostly strange. The way forward for Simon emerges through a network of allusions to Norse mythology, in particular the ravens Huginn and Muninn, adding a timeless, mythic dimension.

The parallel with Aiken points to another key aspect of the novel: a focus on

young adults as the potential source of salvation. This is not a young-adult novel, but it does share some of the tropes of that genre. The teenage protagonist Simon is (like Katniss Everdeen or Harry Potter) exceptional, for he has inherited the gift of being able to see his memories by holding an 'objectmemory' in which his most precious remembrances are stored. During the course of the novel he discovers that he also has the capacity to see other people's memories by touching their objectmemories. He is encouraged in his role as a memory keeper by the blind musician Lucien, who has escaped from the Order and yearns to bring about change.

Dystopian narratives are frequently shot through with utopian possibility, the traveller becoming gradually aware of the evils of the society they inhabit and, on occasion, actively striving to effect change. In some texts, such as *Nineteen Eighty Four* or Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, this utopian yearning is cruelly snuffed out. In others, such as *Fahrenheit 451* or Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, there is some hope for change. What links *The Chimes* most closely to young adult dystopias like *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* is its use of the young heroes as forces of optimism and rebellion, capable of dreaming the really big dream of destroying the Carillon. As the novel progresses, the slow pace escalates and the narrative rushes to its climax.

*The Chimes* is also a love story, tender and understated. The growing sense of the emotional bond and physical intimacy

between Simon and Lucien adds to the feeling of hope and also the profound awareness of the fragility of life and the enormous capacity there is for hurt when we let others get close. Simon muses of love: 'What else opens up your veins like that, pulls the sky in, fish hooks the stars into such brightness.'

Smaill is a poet as well as a novelist and *The Chimes* is written in a mesmerising poetic prose. It's a challenge to give a sense of a world in which sound is everything when constrained by the medium of words on a page. Smaill, herself a violinist, evokes the aural through the use of musical terms to describe speed and movement. Characters 'turn presto' and 'move lento'. The solfege—doh ray me fah soh lah te—has become a sign language through which people communicate. Throughout, the poetic words conjure the power of music to stir and to overwhelm:

The chords wash over. They clean and centre me. The weight of the tonic goes down my spine and into the ground.

Follow the melody through its variations, through its opening and flowering. It tells of harmony and beauty. It tells of a beauty wider than any of us.

Dystopia is one of the genres of the moment. What is so remarkable about *The Chimes* is the way in which familiar themes and tropes are handled with originality and inventiveness. To return to Shakespeare, who is a lingering trace in the narrative, Smaill creates a novel that is beautifully 'rich and strange'.

## Bright Glimpses

by Thom Conroy

*Trifecta*, by Ian Wedde (Victoria University Press, 2015), 175pp, \$30

A single narrative told across three linked novellas, *Trifecta* is the latest offering from Ian Wedde, author of over 20 books of poetry, fiction and, more recently, a non-fiction memoir, *The Grass Catcher: A digression about home*. *Trifecta* is narrated by the three later-middle-aged children of the fictional Nazi-refugee architect Martin Klepka. The three sections—each is named after one of the Klepka children, Mick, Veronica and Sandy—intersect and overlap to tell the fractured but single story of the fallout from an eccentric, consequential and seriously damaged childhood.

Each novella of *Trifecta* is its own experiment in voice, its own dense tangle of interiority filtered through the perspective, by turns insightful and myopic, of a uniquely ravaged character. Told in the well-torqued and finely tuned patois of an ageing streetwise Wellington bachelor, Mick's story comes first in the book. This placing is both necessary and unfortunate. It is necessary for a reason that is spoiler-related (and therefore, for this reviewer, *verboten*), but it is also necessary because it is Mick who functions as the book's unlikely narrative centre. Mick was his father's favourite, and is the only sibling to remain in the