

Where Truth Lies

by Stephen Romei

MARK Henshaw's enigmatic and intriguing novel *Out of the Line of Fire*, published in 1988, the nation's bicentenary year, sparked a debate about Australian writers' place in the world and the relationship of their work to exciting developments elsewhere. It was the same year that *Love in the Time of Cholera* was first published in English—Gabriel García Márquez being the novelist who Peter Carey says 'threw open the door I had been so feebly scratching on'. Eminent Australian critics such as Don Anderson, Peter Pierce and Helen Daniel lauded this debut novel by a thirty-seven-year-old Canberra-born writer, both for its European sensibility and postmodern inclinations, making comparisons with authors such as Italo Calvino and Peter Handke (who are among those with cameos in

the book). Others complained on the same grounds, with David Parker arguing that Henshaw's sophisticated European setting and high-literary references, and readers' appreciation of same, were merely a new manifestation of the old cultural cringe. ('Burying the hick, speaking as the chic' was a clever line.)

It's not every novel that arouses such passions, not by a long shot. *Out of the Line of Fire* was shortlisted for the 1989 Miles Franklin Literary Award, though the laurel went to Carey for *Oscar and Lucinda* which, due to a shift in the Miles Franklin timetable, had already won the Booker. As an aside, it is to the credit of the judges that Henshaw's novel, with its ambiguous connection to 'Australian life', was recognised, when in more recent times important works such as David Malouf's *Ransom* and J. M. Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus* have not been.

So what is *Out of the Line of Fire* about? Well, that's a good question, one I suspect the author—most authors?—would prefer go unanswered. As there will be readers who are encountering the book for the first time, I will not give away too much of the plot—the novel is on one level a thriller, after all—and I most certainly will not reveal the radical ending, which readers tend to take as a slap in the face or a pat on the back, depending on what they believe a novel is supposed to do. But here is a synopsis, just so you know the book you hold in your hands is not about, say, a child befriending a pelican.

Out of the Line of Fire is in three parts. In the opening section we meet a narrator, an unnamed Australian writer living in an apartment building in 'romantic Heidelberg, Germany's oldest university town' at the start of the 1980s. He is befriended by Wolfi Schönborn, a brilliant Austrian student of philosophy. He becomes fascinated with Wolfi's early life and fractured family. But this narrator is an outsider. We are reminded, via Kafka, that Australia was a penal colony. In Europe in the early 1980s, Australia signifies only distance, physical and cultural. 'For a long time now,' the narrator tells us, 'I have had the impression that I observe life but don't participate in it, that somehow life flows straight through me as if I were transparent.'

He makes a study trip to Rome and when he returns Wolfi is gone, to Berlin it is said. 'It was as though he had never existed, and a couple of weeks later I returned to Australia without having seen or heard from him again.' So, in the space of twenty-odd pages, we have cause to wonder about the very existence of our narrator and our protagonist.

At the end of part one, the narrator, back home in Australia in September 1982, receives in the post a 'carefully wrapped cardboard carton' which contains Wolfi's writings, along with photographs, news clippings, letters, postcards and other miscellany. This is accompanied by an 'infuriatingly brief' note: 'Perhaps *you* can make something of this.'

In part two of the novel, the narrator retreats behind a curtain, becoming the unseen editor parsing Wolfi's papers to try to reconstruct his life: his intense relationship with his mother and sister, Elena; his deflowering by Andrea, a prostitute hired by his grandmother; his involvement, in Berlin, with the members of an experimental theatre group, most importantly the charismatic, criminal Karl. This long section contains the explicit sex and violence that confronted some readers when the novel was published.

The scene with the prostitute is pivotal. It also has one of the funniest lines I've read in fiction: 'For the first time in my life, with Andrea bent tenderly over me, I became conscious of the *real* implications of the Hegelian dialectic...' The experience is transformative in other ways, too. 'I am a man,' Wolfi announces to his family. Elena is impressed. She kisses him on the mouth, and 'After that night things were never to be the same.'

In the short and powerful final section of the novel the narrator, on an academic trip to Berlin in June 1986, stumbles across information that leads him to find out what happened to Wolfi, the role Karl played in his fate, and the true nature of Wolfi's relationships with his father, mother and sister. Or maybe not. As I have said, the reader has a surprise in store that puts phrases such as 'what happened to' and 'true nature' on shifting ground.

Henshaw makes no secret of his metafictional intention to interrogate the lines between fiction and

reality, between writer, character and reader. Four pages in, the narrator muses:

So there appear to be at least two problems confronting the writer writing about real events. Firstly, the words he or she uses seem to add some sort of fictionalizing distortion to the events they purport to describe and, secondly, even when a writer thinks they have got it right there still appears to be infinite room for ambiguity and imprecision. You begin to wonder where truth actually lies.

‘Where truth lies’ would be a good alternative title for this novel. The actual title words appear once, when we read of the late-teen Wolfi being awoken one morning by a shaft of sunlight reaching through the shutters of a hotel bedroom he shares with his sister, who is sixteen. He moves his head ‘out of the line of fire’ and looks at his sleeping sibling. Her left breast has come free of her nightdress. This ‘sudden confrontation with Elena’s emerging beauty’ is overwhelming, agonising, a rending of the soul. ‘It was as though, unable to raise my hands quickly enough, I had suddenly been blinded by the glare from some accidentally perceived truth.’ Another sort of fire, it suggests the start of something dangerous.

Later, when Wolfi is being persuaded by Karl to mug an older, ‘dignified-looking’ man cruising for gay sex in a public toilet—a sequence that in its irrational yet unavoidable violence evokes the climactic scene of

Camus's *The Outsider*—he thinks (or so we are told): 'I felt like a character in a novel written by himself who runs into a character in a novel written by himself.' Indeed, Henshaw starts this winking at the reader before the novel even begins. It makes me chuckle, still, to read in my 1988 Penguin edition the standard disclaimer that 'All characters are fictional. Any similarity between persons living or dead is purely coincidental' and then, on the facing page, the dedication 'For Wolfi'. I know some people don't like being winked at, but in this case I think it is a compliment: the author is inviting us to take part in his creation.

When I read *Out of the Line of Fire* a quarter of a century ago I was about the same age as its pointedly unreliable narrator. I was thrilled to find an Australian novelist writing about European authors I was only just getting to know: Calvino and Handke, Kafka and Camus, Robert Musil. Rereading the book I better appreciate the nuances of Henshaw's conversation with these writers.

There is a scene in part three where the narrator, seeking information on Wolfi, is granted an audience with a Berlin policeman. The Inspector (that capital I makes me think of Gogol) listens to Wolfi's story impassively. 'When I finished he remained silent for some minutes. "You like Handke?" he said finally.' These are the same words Wolfi puts to the narrator early in part one, at the start of their friendship, yet

in the intervening pages the question has evolved from something innocent and happy to something uncertain and unnerving.

So why, in the years after his exhilarating debut, didn't we hear more from Mark Henshaw, who is now sixty-three? The simple answer is that he stopped speaking, in a literary sense. Aside from a couple of crime novels (written, as J. M. Calder, in collaboration with his fellow Canberran John Clanchy), Henshaw did not publish, excepting the catalogues and other pieces produced in the course of his day job as a curator at the National Gallery of Australia.

That long silence was broken in late 2014 with the publication of a new novel, *The Snow Kimono*. Its existence resolves a question its author might appreciate: is Mark Henshaw, author of the remarkable Australian novel *Out of the Line of Fire*, real? Yes, he is.

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