MILENA STEPHENS

REVIEW

A TREACHEROUS PASSAGE

Angelica Fremd. *Heartland.* St Lucia, University of Queensland Press (159 pp.)

Heartland, Angelika Fremd's first novel, traces Inge Heinrich's coming of age in a small Australian country town in the fifties and early sixties. The rites of passage, however, merely seem to be exacerbated by the fact that she is a migrant; the human condition depicted is unfortunately not limited to migrant families. Unhappy families may, as Tolstoy wrote, be unhappy in different ways, but unhappy daughters would seem to be unhappy in similar ways. While the aftermath of the war on the Heinrich family cannot be minimized, it seems that for Lisl, Inge's mother, and Karl, her stepfather, as for many, the war and the subsequent displacement have had the effect of aggravating basic human weaknesses and etching cultural influences more starkly. It is a bleakly honest book, very realistic and revealing in its depiction of Inge's struggles to maintain her integrity and idealism, to be true to her innermost feelings, her heartland.

The novel is written in the third person mainly limited to Inge's point of view and the structuring of the events and encounters in Inge's life from the age of about twelve to her last year of high school is initially reminiscent of Judah Waten's *Alien Son.* The first sad brushstrokes of the pregnant Lisl's despair on arrival at the miserable cottage in harsh surroundings, which is to be her home, evoke memories of Waten's mother. Fremd's novel, however, despite its cheerful, bright cover, is imbued with much less idealism than Waten's. The adult characters exhibit less integrity and genuine human compassion. The energies of the novel are concentrated much more keenly on the central character, but Inge's mother exerts a powerful brooding influence and the male figures Inge encounters complete the circle in which she is trapped.

Lisl's unrelenting despair, martyr-like sufferance of her fate and her sex, rule the family and often give rise to cruel taunts aimed at Inge. Her relationship with Karl offers no true affection or companionship. She protects herself from his insistent sexual demands firstly with the baby then with a lap dog. When she finds Karl has turned to a prostitute, she becomes almost deranged and stages a charade of whore-like behaviour. Only on two occasions does Lisl break the cycle of tyrannical child, remote myth-bearer

of female suffering and harsh critic of her daughter's physical development, and attempt some intimacy with Inge although never to reveal any details of Inge's illegitimacy. When, on the second occasion, Inge reveals that Karl had made sexual demands on her, Lisl rides to her death on her white mare.

There is a sad irony in the episode where Lisl shows rare spirit and fierce pride in contrast to her childish eruptions of temper, her measuring of an individual's worth by claims to nobility, appearance, and pseudo cultural pursuits. She sees Inge, in one of her many acts of fawning, lying in wait and rushing to give a bunch of flowers to Renate, the neighbour's child who does not return her affections. Lisl slaps Inge, admonishing her for her lack of pride. Lisl's own self-hatred and her unexamined partly inherited fears and notions of her own sexuality are projected onto Inge. This results in Inge's inability to accept herself on her own terms and in her doomed attempts to cope with the strangeness of her new environment. Inge's perception of her mother determines much of her actions. She saw her mother "as a hare hunted by hounds fighting for her flesh. Inge would make the hounds her lovers. She would give them her flesh before they tore it from her" (131).

Inge is an acutely sensitive and idealistic child. She empathises deeply with the tormented Jewish teacher, Mr Reich; she identifies with all suffering creatures. She aspires to as yet unnamed ideals and in the meantime creates fantasy worlds in fairy tales which are an escape from the oppressive reality of her family life and values, especially those exposed by Karl who confirms in his contempt for the weak (including Jews and Christ), a sinister, ruthless opportunism. Unlike Monika, her younger half-sister, who is determinedly clearsighted about her parents' shortcomings and painfully withdraws from family and society, Inge harbours vain hopes and plays the emotional games necessary to maintain relationships. Only by betraying the "inchoate principles of her young heart" (6), is she able to gain affection and approval from her mother. She echoes Lisl's criticisms of friends and neighbours, offering them as inducements to her mother for the withheld affection and approval; she clinically observes her own interactions—she likens them to playing emotional billiards.

At school she meets with the ignorance and lack of compassion from peers and adults which many migrant children suffer, but, significantly, as her intellectual life begins to flourish so her emotional and social life stagnates. Her desperation to be approved and favoured leads her to form defiant relationships, always with outsiders or "lame ducks" like Brian, who had spent three years in grade three and whose "monosyllabic remarks indicated to Inge a wealth of sensitivity" (46).

The male figures who appear in the novel seem to confirm Lisl's unfortunate and limited vision of the female fate. Inge's flight from the

widower Koch's sexual demands begins a turbulent period of conflicting emotions regarding her own sexuality. Her escape from Koch leads her to the peaceful, idyllic setting of a farmyard and a young farmhand. She idealises Dan and fabricates romantic futures aided by a diet of romantic literature much prized by her mother. After he is humiliated by her disdainful mother she offers him her sexual favours as an act of rejection of her mother's values but also in reparation. Thus the pattern of future relationships emerges. Inge's motivations and the events which follow reveal an idealistic if naive selflessness and a belief in her power to redeem which is linked to her sexuality. When, later, Karl too makes demands on her, "You were born to please men, Inge. It is your duty as a woman" (144), the text articulates this misapprehension and vulnerability: "Perhaps with her great love of humanity she was being called upon to give herself. To give her body to alleviate another human being's suffering" (146).

Inge is sadly without any real support from friends and neighbours. She cannot communicate with her mother; her grandmother's submissive acceptance of suffering and pain is harmful. Mrs Schmidt, understanding, elderly and empathic, promises to be an ideal source of comfort but only appears briefly. Her advice is confusing to the reader, if not acknowledged to be so by the omniscient narrator.

The novel points to Inge's natural ambivalence during her emerging sexuality. Inge defiantly wants to rejoice in her growing womanhood and from Karl Inge receives acknowledgment and even appreciation of the signs of physical maturity: "Karl allowed her to practise her womanhood" (75). She does not, however, expect the consequent exploitation of her sexuality. When his admiration turns to more insistent demands they arouse "terror and disgust too close to excitement" and her body becomes hateful, a "lewd female form" (148).

Ironically, it is Karl who recounts the only two humorous incidents in the novel. He is commissioned to build a public toilet block the door frames of which, he realises as Mrs Jones is wedged in, out, will be too small. His artistic efforts in decorating it with the heroes of the Greek classics lead to the coining of the phrase "pissing on Apollo". The chapter headings of the section where Dan's attempted suicide drama unfolds show a surprising gently mocking humour not evident in the chapters themselves. Three chapters follow in quick succession: "Dan Loses and Wins", "Inge TV Star" (the suicide attempt is dramatically followed by the cameras). The beginning of a period where she falls victim to, but also encourages, the reputation as a femme fatale amongst her school companions is titled "Turandot"! The humour is for the most part, however, born of pain and misunderstanding, as on the occasion when a school doctor diagnoses school sores (believing migrants were especially prone to this ailment) to be treated

with gentian violet, and Inge begins her menstrual cycle at the same time. Significantly it is Monika who declares, "if being a grown-up makes you bleed and being a migrant makes your hands go purple, then I don't want to be a woman or a migrant!" (34).

Although Inge manages to resist the increasingly intolerable demands of her stepfather, she realises that she has not the strength to continue in such a situation. Karl, she reveals in her school essay, had come into the lives of the bereft women just as the spring arrived in her real and symbolic garden and he had been a caring father figure. He has besides, the added weight of experience and an insidious persuasiveness. Just at the right moment she is rescued by the smug and self-righteous David, a veritable knight on a shining motorbike; but in her lucid analysis of her true motivations and in her voiced ambition to write of her experiences, the reader finds a not insubstantial hope for her future.

Angelika Fremd's dedication to her first novel, *Heartland*, is to her children, "for whom knowing the past will free them from repeating it." It is a determined declaration rather than tentative hope, and while the metaphorical central place of the psyche is shifting elusive terrain, much affected by elements beyond its control, exposure of some of these elements can lead to helpful awareness.