

David Myers

FLORID STATES

Rod Usher. *Florid States*. Simon Schuster, Australia, 1990.

Here's a cautionary novel for all you urbanites who dream of being hippies, greenies and self-sufficient, organic farmers in some god-forsaken hole in the Australian bush. This particular god-forsaken hole is, for a handful of initiates, actually a rather sparse shangri-la, a hidden valley on the Condamine River which is an unexpected contrast to the dreary, sun-baked plains west of the Darling Downs.

But this is only the background. In the foreground, Rod Usher relates an extraordinarily intense love story about Ned Quinn, a Melbourne school teacher who fights a bleak battle against recurrent bouts of schizophrenia paranoia, and Jennifer Jade Duncan, a woman who has run away from the world since her young daughter was killed in a car-accident. The dust-jacket cover displays an opulent picture of naked, red-haired Jennifer emerging from the Condamine to embrace Ned as a vertical spirit of the air.

So, *Florid States* is a story of passionate love. It begins with a joking self-advertisement in a lonely hearts column, blossoms through a poetic correspondence, achieves fruition in between skinny-dips in the Condamine River and ends with a harrowing and violent climax.

Love in *Florid States* is not only star-crossed by mental illness. It is also threatened by bigotry and xenophobia. There is a sad sub-plot about the disintegration of the close friendship between Jennifer and Lorna, who lives with husband Henry ten minutes down the track. The title *Florid States* refers to the hysteria and hatred which grip this isolated community as it unites in irrational fear of Ned's mental illness.

The most dramatically successful parts of this novel deal with Usher's evocation of schizophrenia paranoia and indeed the novel's rhythm is determined by our tense expectation of Ned's relapses. As for the love affair itself, I personally found that Usher's individualistic style sometimes acts as a barrier between the reader and the lovers. Both the love letters and the dialogue seem self-consciously written by a gifted lyric poet who is more interested in creating a poem than a persuasive exchange between two real people. For example:

“I have had to write this because my love for you has bowled me like knees against the surf: a great wave of moving excitement that lifts me off my feet and leaves me weakly spluttering, articulate as a fish. So happily.” (p.209)

Equally inappropriate for dialogue are lines like this:

“I still trust the totems about me, with my sort of wounded animist faith, only now I’ve got this great gush of feeling for you.” (p.197)

After language like this it’s a great relief to see that Usher really does have an ear for the dialogue of real people. My favourite character is the downtrodden, ignored and illiterate Hilda. Here is a sample of Hilda in full flight:

“Never said that. But yer want no more robberies, right? Well, if Henry knows ’is missus is off the rocker, he can have a good eye on ’er, even get some doctoring. Main thing is to be keepin’ ’er hands outa other people’s sheds ’n trucks.” (p.189)

Florid States is a novel which grows in depth and power as the two main characters reveal themselves with increasing intensity. The climax and the ending are harrowing. Usher achieves both horror and pathos by varying the point of view and by using flat understatement in the conclusion rather than striving for poetic effect. He also creates unexpected depths for two of his minor characters.

Florid States illustrates the insight which Sigmund Freud himself had when he studied the literary works of his compatriot, Arthur Schnitzler. That is, good literature is capable of achieving the same in-depth insights into human behaviour as the scientific discipline of psychology, and it can achieve them much more quickly than psychology through intuitive understanding, empathy and linguistic brilliance. Rod Usher gives some fascinating insights into schizophrenia, into compulsive, irrational behaviour and into the deep-seated need of every individual to love and to be loved. He is an extremely talented novelist and *Florid States* will have extraordinary impact on its readers.