

# David Myers

## REVIEW

### TAKING SHELTER

Jessica Anderson. *Taking Shelter*. Viking/Penguin Books, \$24.99

The pages of *Taking Shelter* are filled, not with sex, but gossip about sex. The gossip is fluent enough and certainly topical in its informal sociology of contemporary sex, but often lacks penetration and bite. The daily trivia of realism ensure credibility of setting but seem to stand in the way of whatever mystery or depth that Jessica Anderson seems to want to give to her main characters. Oddly enough in a novel which is determined to make topical reference to gays, lesbians, group sex, promiscuity, AIDS and herpes, the main plot line is more than a little conventional. Inexperienced girl meets experienced boy; girl discovers joys of sex; girl forgets pill and gets pregnant; girl decides against abortion; girl sets up house with boy and is embarrassed to find herself headed for suburban motherhood; girl spends money saved up for exotic trip to India and London on screw-it-yourself furniture; girl has a Clayton's wedding party because she doesn't believe in bourgeois marriages. The end. Ho hum.

Jessica Anderson attempts to balance the trivial realism of the novel's gossip against an aura of background mystery. This mystery is provided by three elements. First, there is the mystery of Beth's childhood trauma in which her friend Debby Youdall was abducted, presumably molested and then murdered. This incident caused Beth to be referred to the psychiatrist Dr Gelthartz and caused her father to worry that the trauma might prevent Beth from forming a mature relationship with a male. This background is only lightly hinted at by Anderson but is essential to an understanding of the narrator's attitude of doleful concern for Beth which might otherwise be felt by the reader to be cloying.

The second mystery, of which I think Jessica Anderson attempts to make too much, is the coincidence that Beth had first met her lover Marcus when they were only seven years old in Rome. They were both comparatively neglected by their parents and the leitmotif of their neglect is the statue in Rome of the rhino with ivy growing out of its mouth in the dusty fountain (pp. 110, 138,212). Beth sees her union with Marcus now as a compensation for their neglect as children. Their attempt to form

a permanent relationship is meant to acquire its pathos against this background and also against the background of divorce, disloyalty and instability which fills most pages of Jessica Anderson's novel. Hence the title, *Taking Shelter*. Jessica Anderson implies with her novel that the price of sexual liberation has been the breakdown of marriage as a stable institution, the emotional traumas of desertion and the threat of the AIDS virus.

The third mystery in the novel is provided by the elderly Juliet McCracken's attempts to record and then dismiss her dreams as meaning nothing more than yesterday's debris, "old boots" as she terms them. The dreams are filled with the symbols, the fears and the ecstasies of a sexually repressed woman and Juliet's attempts to dismiss them as her mind's rehashing of yesterday's trivia are ironically undermined by the narrator. The dreams provide an aura of surrealism and symbolism which are a welcome counterbalance to the sometimes flat realism of the rest of the novel. The dreams culminate in a beatific vision of a statuesque angel serving three glasses of wine (p.213). This coincides mysteriously with Beth's quite independent decision to decorate her new suburban home with a mural featuring a "more than life-sized angel serving wine to a beat-up looking young couple" (p.232). The novel thus concludes with the ironic suggestion that Juliet's dreams are far more significant than a mulling over yesterday's old boots; they may even, against all reason, be harbingers of blessing and peace.

The dreams of Juliet, the sexual self-realisation of Beth, and the unhappy chaos into which many of the characters are plunged through sexual desire, all meet and mingle in the familiar ground of Sigmund Freud: repression, trauma, dream-analysis and liberation of the ego through self-knowledge. As Auntie Bob implies, the erotic "fixation" with people who aren't "presentable", the hidden libido with its scandals, the real life of each individual lurks like an eruption just below the tin surface crust of civilised seamliness.

In its reference to contemporary sexual habits, *Taking Shelter* is a thoroughly up-to-date novel. It features gays who are well out of the closet, a background of group sex (which unfortunately never becomes the foreground because allegedly it all stopped with the herpes- and AIDS-scares), emancipated young women allegedly seeking not eternal love but nightly lust, rubber contraceptives (which the males refuse to use), birth control pills (which the females forget to use), men who want to have babies but women who don't, abortions, separations and divorces on demand, and lots of conversations between people who are temporarily

without a sexual partner. In fact no one talks about anything else but relationships. As pseudo-frigid (but really sentimental) old Juliet says about sexual affairs (affairs of the heart!?) nowadays: "So many of the men are gay that there are never enough to go round" (p.151). Perhaps this explains everyone's confusion and lack of direction. I suppose it is an accurate enough rendition of our brave, new world, but certainly not an inspiring one. My favourite character is eighty-six year old Aunty Bob, who is a vitriolic gossip and a witty misanthropist. Aunty Bob delivers what could be seen as the novel's epigraph: "Not that it matters, any of it. To think I am reduced to this. Chattering about nobodies" (p.146). But this is only the opinion of Aunty Bob and myself, and I am undoubtedly, as Nita with the tossing curls says so well, "a real cold intellectual" (p.162).