

David Myers

REVIEW

“The beautiful, the beautiful the river”: Mysticism in Tim Winton’s *Cloudstreet* (McPhee Gribble, 1991).

The mysticism of *Cloudstreet* is underlined by its circular plot structure. It begins and ends with the intentional and yet unknowing suicide of a retarded boy called Fish. Fish’s death is celebrated in visionary prose as an escape from a world of misery into another world of perfect forms which is potentially within but also beyond time and space. This mysticism is also expressed by the perspective of the narrator who explains his quasi-omniscience by fusing his identity with that of Fish who is both retarded and yet also a spiritual seer. The narrator sees the human *mêlée sub specie aeternitatis* and it is this perspective that makes the novel breathe alternately with universal compassion and with farce. The more remote the narrative perspective, the more farcical become our human conflicts, passions and tragedies. At the same time this remote narrative perspective enables the expression of universal understanding and compassion. It is this religious paradox which explains why Tim Winton often appears to be perversely relating human miseries in the comic mode.

Cloudstreet is a family saga but one that is very different from Thomas Mann’s *Buddenbrooks* or Goldsworthy’s *Forsyte Saga*. These sagas are both from the turn of the century and are both resolutely middle class and European. Tim Winton’s novel, however, is rambunctiously proletarian and unmistakably Australian. The middle classes are banished to the irrelevant periphery of the novel and are seen as pretentious property-owners, as Menzies-clones from the fifties, and as snobs trying to be more pommified than the Poms.

Tim Winton celebrates the working classes with more gusto than Emile Zola or Upton Sinclair. The central image of their squabbling, loving, over-active, close-knit family life is the rambling, dilapidated, haunted, two-storey house on Cloudstreet. Their loyalty to this house and their united front against the commercial developers is a loyalty to a family life that is vulgar and earthy and full of surprises and conflicts. There is no such thing as privacy or secretiveness or introspection in the non-stop,

proletarian interaction: the eccentricities and oddities of one's inner being are all acted out in full view of the rest of the chaotic family. Winton actually throws two very different families into this house, stirs well, and creates a sequence of dramatic contrasts, stubborn conflicts and spiritual interaction related through the farcical mode.

There is a great deal of spookiness and things that go bump in the night in *Cloudstreet*. In fact this spookiness really lies at the heart of the matter. There is a pig that talks in tongues, a surreal Aborigine who acts as a kind of moral policeman from the great beyond, and a haunted house in which malevolent ghosts come down off the wallpaper at nights to perform macabre dances. This spookiness is used to remind us again and again of the perspective of mysticism, the tension of the fight of good against evil within us all, and the underlying supposition that the purpose of life is to battle to rediscover religious faith. The Lamb family are living out a twenty year crisis in lost religious faith caused by a tragic accident in which their beloved son Fish is resuscitated after apparent death by drowning, but only at the cost of brain damage and a retarded existence.

Fish is the mystic centre of the novel. Rather like Patrick White's retarded figure Arthur in *The Solid Mandala*, he is an involuntary mystic seer and he has special powers. He can converse with the pig in the backyard and with the ghosts in the newspaper pictures of misery stuck up on the walls, but this ability brings him anguish rather than joy. His only wish is to return to the bliss of the world beyond physical death which he has already experienced once.

Cloudstreet lives as a saga, partly because of Tim Winton's amazing ability with the Australian vernacular, partly because his characters are bursting with emotions which make them bigger than life and partly because of the insistent spiritual framework. Although Winton allows his real protagonist, Quick Lamb, to come to a realisation that there is no such thing as good people and bad people, there is nevertheless in *Cloudstreet* always a choice in every action between good and evil. There is therefore much sinning, anguish and remorse followed, after suitable confession, though not at church and certainly not in the Catholic tradition, by a rebirth of joy and a tenacious new élan.

As Tim Winton sees it: to wrestle for a renewal of faith, if not always in God then at least in the joy of living, is good; to lapse into sloth, cynicism and brooding apathy is bad. To stay together as an extended family in spite of hassles and hatreds is good; to run away and to deny family is bad. To stay resolutely property-less, working-class, boisterous,

vulgar, poor, hard-working and hard-loving is good; to become class-climbers or yield to greedy commercial development is bad.

From this dichotomy Winton is able to wrest some unpredictable moments of great sadness and beauty. There are no cheap miracles, no easy way out of the various agonies, miseries, hatreds, fears and boredoms. But acting all the dramas out with Rabelaisian zest in family interaction makes it all somehow bearable. If nothing else, the novel insists that prodigal strays must learn to have insights into their erring ways and return full of penitence and joy to the fold.

The one possible weakness in this chaos is that once each character has been allocated a characteristic, then he or she retains and expresses this characteristic unwaveringly throughout. Sam Pickles remains a bad-luck gambler addicted to following the "shifty shadow of God" or Lady Luck; Quick Lamb remains obsessed with his guilt about his beloved brother's drowning accident; Dolly Pickles remains an unrepentant nymphomaniac and a lush; Oriel Lamb remains an embittered quester for a renewal of faith and the family bossy-boots. And so on. The conflicts are in a sense predictable within these simplified dimensions and no character really changes or develops out of this colourful but static delineation.

Nevertheless there are no punches pulled by the tough narrator of *Cloudstreet*, no bowdlerisation of human stupidity, obstinacy and sinfulness, no treacly smooth pseudo-mysticism. On the contrary. Winton's colourful style, with the most amazing array of verbs ever seen in an Australian novel, draws attention to the lechery, the lunacy, the drunkenness, the eccentricities, the passionate hatreds, the strange obsessions and oddly enough, the pathetic loneliness of all of the characters within this gargantuan mêlée. These characters may be proletarian but they have sensibilities and brooding obsessions which make eventually for rich emotional revelations.

Most of all, Tim Winton is a story-teller. He relishes the relating of each story and the evocation of authentic milieux. From prawn-fishing at night in the Swan River to professional kangaroo-culling in the wheatfields, from constables on bicycles to the prowlings of a perverted serial-murderer, from childbirth in a proletarian home to wine and cheese parties with the poetasters of Nedlands, from boozing and lechery in cheap pubs to stiff weddings in middle class churches, from working at the Mint to inventing new ice cream recipes in a Perth heatwave, Tim Winton loves his world and the people in it. Their yearning for religious release is expressed through the image of the river as a mirror reflection of the stars.

Nevertheless, the final impact of *Cloudstreet* is harmonious with the epigraph to *The Solid Mandala*: "There is another world, but it is this one."