

I'm sorry, what? That sounds more like a prescription for recreational drug use.

Perhaps this is more transparent:

The agenda for Labor beyond 2000 is clear: it has to spread the cultural and economic benefits of cyberspace. This is Labor's problem: to make itself the power that might broker the interests of the information proletariat. (255-256)

Here's a recommendation—if you are going to “do” this book, don't do it in analogue; go digital and apply the hyperlink approach: bounce around, pick and choose sections to taste and enjoy the few morsels that work for you.



Marie-France Mack

GIVING FORTH NEW SEED

Marion Campbell, *Prowler*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1999. ISBN 186368251-1

For those who are familiar with Marion Campbell's first two novels, *Lines of Flight*, 1985, and *Not being Miriam*, 1988, reading her latest, *Prowler*, is like a second visit to an archaeological dig. There, the visitor

might have appreciated the beauty of what had been uncovered then. With *Prowler* the visitor is confronted by many other shrines, excavated since the first visit, all displaying familiar features and a wealth of new signs to explore. For those who haven't had the chance to read any of Campbell's work, *Prowler* is a novel difficult to put away once you start reading, though it is not a novel that can be read quickly for it deals with the deepest questions of modern Australia and the malaise of global culture. Yet it opens the way to possible solutions and hope for a better world.

On the surface the story in the body of the text is simple: Lou Barb, a university academic, is given her friend Tom-Tom's notebooks by Maurice, Tom-Tom's second husband. Maurice is upset, not only because his wife has just died, but also because he does not recognize himself in her notes, making him feel that he is losing her a second time. The novel alternates between the narration of Lou Barb and excerpts from Tom-Tom's notebooks. Lou tries to understand Tom-Tom's story and her own. And Tom-Tom, now dead, seems to change her life more drastically than when alive. Lou Barb receives two letters from her school friend, Odette, which are also part of the text.

Prowler should appeal to those who enjoy an intellectual read and those who are touched by the poetry of the discourse, those who have suffered

the unbearable heat and the relief brought by the rain, those who believe in social justice.

A great deal of the challenge is to accept the overwhelming richness of *Prowler* in terms of its structure, its refusal of the limitations of a linear novel. *Prowler* begins with a text, separate from the body of the text which is written in the first person singular, as a note from a narrator: "a little girl" drawing pictures: "Sometimes I paint the prowler myself. The prowler looks like me in some of these pictures." The text before the body of the text is an immediate reminder that Campbell is a self-consciously post-structuralist novelist who presents characters not as two dimensional paper dolls (*Lines*, 25), but as people are usually perceived. That is, she presents the image produced in the minds of different people and in the mind of the self, as lived in different spaces and times, and the interferences of these multiple images and their superimposition, the ongoing construction of the self bouncing against the many selves and the many memories, and infinities of possibilities. It is also a reminder of the randomness of the human condition, for the prowler could be after the little girl and the little girl could be the prowler.

The definite advantage of breaking away from an easy linear plot with well-defined characters is that it allows the reader to move from a world of fiction to one close to "lived reality." (317)

The prowler is a thief and a hunter, he is a monster, the bad Banksia men of May Gibbs' *Gumnut Adventures*. And "the prowler says: Arrest that contour, fix that line... Sometimes the prowler is a God" and I can't help seeing in the prowler the "God of perspective" of *Lines of Flight* (67) or is it the character of Raymond, from the same novel, who "possesses the future and the secret of its vectors" (101), both perfect Cartesians whose gaze is so hard to resist? The note from the prowler, ironically left on his visiting card, "I'm trained to think with an alien brain" is that of a feminist trying to give a voice to the silenced women struggling to express themselves through a form of discourse that is indubitably phallogocentric. Campbell puts her poetic talent to the service of the many who live on the edge of the main culture, the Vincent van Gogh of this world, the Aborigines of Banksiafold, the Arabs of Marseille, the exiles, the women. The feminism of Marion Campbell encompasses all those who are silenced by the discourses of the powerful, of those who possess the means to dominate, to intimidate, to enslave, to assert what they like to perceive as their superiority. As the prowler succeeds in imposing his phallogocentric perspective on the narrator: "I write sometimes like a straight guy," he wants to keep his advantage: "He finds me out when I sneak into his baggy pants, iron shiny serge, low at the crotch, his twisted belt." Then the prowler dares the narrator to be a rebel "to be a real iconoclast" and he adds, to show his superiority, "that

means image-breaker sweetheart." The prowler hunts those who don't follow his rules, he steals the images he does not approve of and breaks them. But the discourse of the prowler, the dominant discourse imprinted in all of us after centuries of practice, that of the bad Banksia men, can be resisted, other forms of discourse are possible and the many voices of those who have been silenced can be heard.

The antidote to the phallogocentric monster is found in another powerful metaphor, that of the Banksia woman. The banksia cobs appear in a spontaneous ceremony held by the Banksiafold kids, not yet deafened and silenced by the practice of the prowler: "we can hear the old banksia cobs mumble words without saliva, catching, tearing them on their horny lips" (19) writes Tom-Tom in her first notebook. This image comes back to Tom-Tom at the time when she is asked by her drama teacher in Marseille to give an image of herself reflecting the theme of exile: "I am a banksia tree ... covered in great golden cones." (95) Each cone might look dead but appearance is misleading: "A speaking thing held mute. I'm covered in lips, and when the fires come, each mouth can pop a seed, a syllable more potent for being long held back." (95) It can take a long time for the banksia to germinate, it needs fire, and the death of the cob allows the seed to be released. The etching reproduced on the cover of the novel makes the image quite

clear, it is a feminine monster with many vaginal lips surrounded by coarse hair: women's lips. Perhaps the Banksia men are just another neat Cartesian concept: "a hairy menace given to cradle-snatching. That's how I was first written into their children's books. They reckon we kidnap the pale skinned Gumnut babies. This is their own lie that terrifies them. We haunt them because we operate together and speak in many tongues." (101) The feminine monsters might have been silenced but "let the bodies of our dead sisters speak too" (101), the voice of the Banksia woman will be heard, not a single language, imposed on all, but the many tongues which will allow diversity, differences.

Prowler stands out for me in providing an insight into the theme of exile and the consequences of having to use a language other than the misnamed 'mother tongue'. Tom-Tom is exiled wherever she goes, for Maeve, her grandmother who brought her up, feels closer to her friends the Nyoongar than mainstream West Australian society and Tom-Tom can never be one of the Nyoongar and can only live on the fringe of Australian or French society. Campbell breaks away from the usual theories and beliefs that are associated with our great multicultural society: that people pick up a new language when they live in a new country if they want to, and it is only those who don't bother who don't; that Australia is such a great

country that foreigners are very lucky to be allowed to live here. In *Lines of Flight*, Campbell had already tried to show some of the frustrations of Rita, reduced to a little exotic foreigner by some of the French characters. In *Not being Miriam*, she shows how the lack of understanding of Italian results in Miriam losing her child. Miriam thought, as her mother did, that with her talent as an actress she would pick up Italian in no time. But "did she tread carefully enough in a language that became a minefield for her once things went bad with Fabio. Fighting for her motherhood in his father's tongue?" (84) And in *Prowler* Campbell makes it plain that learning a language never ends and one can never say exactly the same thing in two separate languages: "My stuff doesn't ... translate" (128) Tom-Tom tells Choiseul, her drama teacher. When Asif, Tom-Tom's first husband, sends his nephew for a visit, she writes in her notebook about the effect speaking with him has on their son Karim: "my speaking in French with you exiled him in his own home, making him live out his father's absence like the wake of signification." (311) The double exile of Asif is the most tragic story: his country colonised by the French, he went to France to find work, then to Australia to be with Tom-Tom and his child—or was it to escape France? Campbell is very careful not to frame her characters, yet the violence he showed towards Tom-Tom and their

baby seems out of character with the other stories told of Asif. Long after Asif returned to France Tom-Tom asked herself: "When I called the cops to the house and they said of Asif: Ah fuck, not another wog; why did I choose not to believe my ears? When I told Karim to walk straight, to ignore them when they told him to go back to his own country, whose side was I on?" (350)

Campbell is never judgemental: it is up to the reader to draw conclusions, but her poetic language should move any reader who is interested in the pressing questions of modern society: land rights, racism, unemployment, poverty. It is essentially an Australian novel, yet it is clear that the questions raised are those of western society as a whole. But perhaps its main quality is that it provides hope and solutions in the metaphor of the banksia which through its own destruction gives forth new seed.

Works Cited

- Campbell Marion. 1985. *Lines of Flight*. Fremantle Arts Centre Press.
- Campbell Marion. 1988. *Not being Miriam*. Fremantle Arts Centre Press.
- Gibbs May. 1985. *Gumnut Classics* Angus and Robertson. Australia.