

Greg Manning

## TOO CONCERNED WITH SIGNIFICANCE

Jillian Watkinson, *The Architect*. University of Queensland Press. ISBN 0 7022 3184 3

*The Architect* is the first novel by Jillian Watkinson, a 43-year-old graduate of USQ in Communication Studies and Sociology. Its manuscript won the 1999 Queensland Premier's Literary Award for Best Emerging Author.

It begins at night, with a mysterious figure coming off his motorbike covered in flames. He survives, but the accident costs him all of his right arm, most of the use of his left, and most of the skin on his torso. While he burns we read, in italics, "*You are to die by the breath of the dragon*".

But as it turns out, he's not—not in this book anyway. He is saved, firstly by a lonely nurse, then by a bisexual design consultant and a cute blind potter, and finally by a blond paraplegic med student psychic and his equally psychic Carramundjarra half-brother, their academic psychologist mother and their Viet vet uncle. Despite the fact that he's as cold as last night's soup, everyone finds a way to fall in love with the burnt man.

The burnt man is Jules Van Erp, a Famous Architect who is also a Legendary Photographer, a Virtuoso

Guitarist, a Great Designer, a Fine Judge of a Wine, an Intrepid Saver of Suffering Children, an Inspiration to Others, a Brilliant Teacher, a Genius, Drop Dead Gorgeous in a Dinner Suit, Hung Like a Horse and ... well, add your own. "Unbelievably handsome, cultured and manly, and not what he seems"; "such a paragon of extreme maleness that he amounts to a talking penis", Kate Saunders recently wrote of a much earlier female erotic fantasy, E.M.Hull's *The Sheik*, but it's just as true of Van Erp. Now, however, he's a cinder of his former self. An architect who can't draw; a photographer who can't hold a camera; a guitarist who can't pluck.

What he really is is an Artist who believes he can no longer create Art. We know he's an Artist because we keep getting told so: "Christ, he's an artist." "I am an artist." "I see the truth as an artist sees it." Over and over again. His friends the potter and the designer are artists too. At one point the nurse opens the door to "a girl in jeans and a flannelette shirt, dark glasses and a crew cut. An artist, of course." Of course. You have to be to get in. There's nothing wrong with a book about artists—but a book which keeps insisting that its characters *are* "Artists," as if it is a category of Being, is mistaking signification for significance, grabbing too fast at Important Themes.

Van Erp's first post-trauma triumph is his Pavilion of Flight, "a pavilion to hold the wind" (a familiar Australian

construction, I'd have thought). Later he solves the problem of building "a glass palace that does not explode in the Australian summer." These "masterpieces" are familiar Romantic images of transcendence, but they are not transcendent images: they are, in fact, clichés. We have to believe in their power and importance if we are to feel that the artist-architect's eventual salvation matters, because if we don't, he is a cliché too, and for all its grasping at heights his story falls back to earth with an Icarian thud.

Technically, the novel is ambitious, but in the end technique may contribute to its problems. Almost all of the action is told in the present tense in the inner voice of one character or another. As scenes change, or as the author explores different perspectives, the narrative skips from one consciousness to the next.

Such a method imposes severe demands on a novelist. For one thing, the author needs to try and individualise the inner voices of her various characters, and there are times when this pushes Watkinson to desperate measures. Van Erp ("I am the international person") thinks in a kind of up-market *Franglais*. Peter Drayton, his business partner, has a voice that sometimes belongs in *Pseud's* Corner in *Private Eye*:

I step into myself—into my knowledge of the history of marble,

my understanding of the multiplicity of Oriental water gardens, and into my sense of security under the canopy of this sky, the inescapable, incidental emblem of my country. (17)

You can't help but feel sorry for someone who's got that inside his head. I was reminded of Simon, the "competent, sometimes inventive architect with a tragic sense of brick" in Donald Barthelme's *Paradise*, and the thought pointed directly at one thing lacking in this book: any leavening of humour, any sense of irony to lighten its desperate portentousness.

Another challenge for ensemble consciousness-based narration is to find ways to let the reader know about incidental details of action that a real person would not notice, or would take for granted. In *As I Lay Dying* or *The Sound and the Fury* Faulkner lets his readers work such things out for themselves, which is one reason he is so demanding. In *To the Lighthouse* Woolf includes them in third-person parentheses, like stage directions: "(She put down the brown stocking.)" Jillian Watkinson opts for a simpler solution, and has the characters' inner voices tell us what we need to know: "I take a mouthful of my coffee." "I go into the studio." "I'm sketching, struggling to commit emotion and the sense of the wind to hard copy." It is simple, but it doesn't work. She might get away with it with a single narrator, but with a large cast it renders all the voices completely artificial. Their discourse has no

audience *in* the text, no audience but the reader. Nor is it convincing as stream-of-consciousness because *nobody* actually thinks this way. It is, if anything, indirect third person, and it makes all of Watkinson's people seem chronically self-alienated, as if they run constant commentaries on their own lives. Ultimately, the technique—which seems at first to promise immediacy—acts to prevent the emotional involvement which is crucial to the story Watkinson wants to tell.

But this is a first novel. There is enough here to suggest promise; enough to justify the investment in publication. Next time, though, she might employ a less constricting technique, and concern herself less with the significance of representative figures and more with the textures of lived experience.