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**FOREWARNED IS
FOREARMED:
A CARNIVAL OF
MASCULINITIES**

Knox, Malcolm. *Jamaica*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2007. ISBN 978 1 74175 3400. RRP: \$29.95. pp.400.

Pen was familiar with men who toyed with single mothers. Those creeps Hut sucked up to, Justin Pongrass and Andrew Blackman, boasted about their forays into the "singles" scene (a misnomer — it was not a "scene," unless it was a taped-off accident scene, and it was much less peopled by singles than it advertised). Pongrass had bragged about the number of "yummy mummies" he had "bagged."

"Yeah," he'd regaled one of the Friday lunches to which Pen had been dragged along, "all you need to do on your posting is rave-on about how much you love kids and your ideal is a woman with a ready-made family, blahdy blah. They just melt into your arms. All they need to know is that you'd love their kids. I bagged seven hyenas on first dates with three simple words: 'I love kids'."

At least Pen was ready for the deception. Men would pretend to love her sons. Then they would fuck her and fuck off. She had this to thank Hut's friends for. Forewarned is forearmed. (230)

If you think you are going to get an exotic travelogue about the alluring

Caribbean isle in Malcolm Knox's award-winning novel *Jamaica*, you're sorely mistaken. If it wasn't enough that the whole rhetoric of exoticism has come under charge in the last decade to warn you otherwise, let this review forewarn you. In the true vein of the carnivalesque, *Jamaica* tells its readers much more about the grotesque (and — thank God — usually concealed) bloated underbelly of uppercrust but ordinary starched-suit-and-cufflinks blokey Australia than it does about the charms of a romantic, coconut-oil scented, captivating, alluring, picturesque, and [insert more exoticist synonyms here] Caribbean tourist-destination.

In fact, *Jamaica* is a brilliant example of Foucault's concept of the heterotopia — an idea which has been useful to postcolonial theorists — among others — who have explored it as a model to understand how the imperial-colonial imaginary often conceived of colonial sites as heterotopic mirror-spaces. According to this logic, colonial spaces enabled the imperium to maintain its sense of order and decorum and conceive of itself as civilised by projecting its defining anxieties onto other places and peoples: kind of like a Freudian *id* on a large psychosocial scale. In Knox's novel, the Jamaicans themselves are not the shadow-puppets acting out this heterotopic spectacle for the Australians. Rather, the Australians on "holiday" there — taken out of their shiny office-towers and first-world luxuries — "let it all hang out" and therein reveal themselves as nasty, brutish, and

rather short of civility, brains, and human kindness.

Knox's main character is Hut: a name appropriately evocative of such a brutish man, and — in its jocularity — of a former sports captain at Grammar School who still derives his identity from his schoolboy achievements, insecurities, and pecking-order despite his middle-age. Indeed, Hut ("Jeremy Hutchison") is still friends with the exclusive and wealthy in-crowd if his former elite Sydney grammar school with whom he makes this trip to Jamaica. Pongrass ("Pong") and Blackman ("Abo") represent the top echelon of that society: the richest of the rich. Riddled with insecurities, Hut is desperate to be accepted within this world which has never acknowledged him as good enough. And without the kind of out-of-his-league old-money capital of his so-called friends, Hut is literally drowning in debt just to keep up. Knox takes Hut out of his element on the cusp of his character's full-blown midlife breakdown, sets him in Jamaica on the eve of a (big-boys') swimming carnival, and watches this tightly-wound blockhead unravel. Hut and his friends arrive in Jamaica for an annual swimming race; he is the dead-weight who they believe (based on his daily track record as the never-good-enough social gaffer) will weigh them down.

The locals are appropriately horrified at the spectacle the Australian tourists make of themselves when

they holiday in Jamaica. *Jamaica* the novel, then, and the place where it is set become backdrops for the grotesque spectacle of competitive, misogynistic masculinity, excess, and privilege that Knox's characters enact there. There are two token female characters: Janey — the guy-girl, and Pen — the trophy-wife. They are types, but identifiable ones who are believable foils for the spectacle of Australian upper-class machismo that Knox lays bare.

I liked this book for several reasons. The writing is strikingly masterful in a way that hooks its reader like a tiger-shark it begins to reel-in on the very first-page; its crystalline prose, its brilliant psychological insights and portraiture, and Knox's ability to spin a suspenseful yarn certainly put this novel in the class that awards like the Colin Roderick prize have rightfully begun to acknowledge. For this reader, though, there was a personal angle that was appealing: I am a self-identified guy-girl, a Janey figure who has always found the spectacle of masculinity ridiculous and fascinating in equal measures, and who has always been let into the secret-handshake club just-that-far but not quite far enough to know its intimate secrets. I devoured this insider's who's-who and what's-what behind-the-scenes play-by-play.

But I was also aware throughout my reading that my guy-girl status is not the only marker that might make me a somewhat unusual reader; this book is clearly marketed as middlebrow,

but its storyline is perhaps a bit too spare to hold *all* its readers. Those readers who are enchanted by its remarkable character studies and by its revealing and insightful portrait of masculinity will stick out the long build-up to the swimming race and dénouement, and they will be rewarded. But I'm unconvinced that this book will not let some of its readers float out to sea.

Nonetheless, *Jamaica* is topical and well-written. Just as the recent film adaptations of *Atonement* and *Brideshead Revisited* do, it addresses two hot topics: masculinity and the upper classes. It seems the pendulum of cultural studies has begun to swing the other way. While five years ago the buzzwords were "oppression," "marginality," "minorities" and the "working classes," the more nuanced understanding of the internal conflict and stratification of group-identity that attention to these concepts has brought means that group affiliation within the upper echelons of society is equally complex and worthy of attention. As comedy TV shows like *Summer Heights High* (ABC) demonstrate, the self-righteous pieties involved in regarding minorities as human equivalents of endangered species that require benevolent protection by the majority is truly laughable. Knox's novel brings into focus heterogeneity within class-based and gender-based cultural groups, and its particular attention to a uniquely Australian group of privileged men is a welcome counterpoint to the

usual stock-in-trade matey working class folk-hero.



Erik Boman

DEATH AND LIFE ON PALM ISLAND

Chloe Hooper. *The Tall Man*. Maryborough: Penguin, 2008. ISBN 9780241015377. RRP: \$32.95 AUD. pp.276.

The custodial death of Palm Islander Cameron Doomadgee in 2004 resulted in a lengthy inquest, massive media attention and Australia's first trial of a police officer for a death in custody. Aboriginal activists soon became entrenched in a bitter war of words with the Queensland police union, with courtrooms and the media providing the battlegrounds. Officer Christopher Hurley was ultimately cleared, but not before the case had triggered riots, violence, and lingering suspicions.

Chloe's Hooper's *The Tall Man* traces in detail the events that led up to Doomadgee's death in custody and unpacks the bitter, confusing, and grief-stricken aftermath of the subsequent investigations. Drawing heavily on statements from witnesses, relatives, and other people linked to the case, Hooper's own investigation