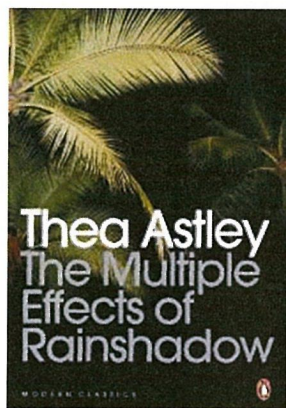


mother – and you surrender to its dreamy, excitational, trance-like state; ecstatic with the free flow, the sense of the story of your past, the wonderful form and drama of it, of having lived, completely, no matter how stressfully, your own plot.

The wonderful Australian short story writer Christina Stead once famously described narrative as an “ocean of story.” Lohrey’s collection zeroes in on a number of isolated individuals, and her detailed narrative attention magnifies them like glistening islands. For this, the short story form is appropriate, and used to its best. Contemplative, poetic, resonant fragments, just like the individuals in the stories, are sometimes remade as piece of the whole, a part of the main, reconnected again to the fabric of humanity through the salvific power of story.

Reading Madame Bovary (Amanda Lohrey) is published by Black Inc (2010). RRP \$32.95 AUD ISBN 9781863954907. 304pp.



LOCAL FOCUS. WIDESPREAD APPEAL

Review of Thea Astley’s *The Multiple Effects of Rainshadow*. Reprinted by Penguin Classics 2010.
by Jacqueline Connelly

“Nothing changed, he decided...even though hemispheres might.” (146)

So muses one of eight narrators in Thea Astley’s *The Multiple Effects of Rainshadow*. Unexpectedly, such sentiment for universalism can be applied to the novel itself.

Rainshadow received widespread well-deserved praise and a Miles Franklin Award nomination with its original publication in 1996. After going out of print, it was re-released in 2010—a decision that might be attributed to Chloe Hooper’s investigation of the custodial death of Palm Islander Cameron Doomadgee in *The Tall*

Man (2008) and her review of *Rainshadow* in *The Monthly* ("Under the Rainshadow" September, 2008). *Rainshadow's* nature as allegory for race relations in Australia certainly makes it a timely read—as does its contemplation of the complex aftermath of traumatic events in the perennial tragic community of Palm Island in the 1930s—but Astley's ability to weave together underlying currents of feminism, religion, regret and change makes the novel significant for reasons unrelated to its focus on racial tension in Queensland.

Rainshadow is loosely based on actual Palm Island events from the 1930s: the superintendent of the Aboriginal reserve—crazy with grief after the death of his wife, a death he attributes to the standard shoddy medical treatment that passes for "good enough" on the remote fringe of North Queensland—has had enough: he snaps and goes on a killing spree, drugging his children and torching homes before being shot by an Aboriginal man under his supposed protective custody. Astley relates this tragedy's elements and aftermath through the voices of several fictional narrators, including staff members, the superintendent himself and the Aboriginal man responsible for his death. The fractured narrative jolts through time between a 1918 cyclone and a 1957 workers' strike and is recounted by a mostly white cast, with its progression hinging upon one powerful Indigenous voice.

As an American student spending a semester at James Cook University, I probably recognised fewer of *Rainshadow's* regional references than the average Astley reader. My knowledge of Australian Indigenous studies is limited to an introductory-level class I had only half-finished when reading the novel, and before picking it up—despite the two or so months I've been living in Townsville, just kilometers away in a different world on the mainland—I had never heard of Palm Island. This lack of proximity to some of the issues raised by Astley had the potential to alienate me—as well as other non-local readers—from any emotional investment in the story. Add dense language, a sometimes incoherent plotline and often-unlikable characters and it might come as no surprise that *Rainshadow* has lacked the public recognition it might have needed to remain consistently on the shelves (until the 2010 reprint under the Penguin Classics banner, it had lapsed out of print, even during the tragic events that had brought Palm Island back into the spotlight in the immediate aftermath of Doomadgee's death).

But although the subject matter is ugly, it's not as unfamiliar as I expected it to be: America's history of Indigenous relations is equally as buried and sordid as Australia's. The racist attitudes exhibited by even some of *Rainshadow's* most sympathetic characters serve as a grim reminder that politically "good" intentions often create

more problems than they solve. And the language is, for me, one of *Rainshadow's* most shining assets—I drooled over Astley's gorgeous metaphoric imagery as much as her ironic tone and dry sense of humor.

True, the narrative is disjointed, but such exposure to multiple perspectives is refreshingly satisfying. *Rainshadow's* blend of voices—including Leonie Quigley, a dissatisfied society wife who manages likeability despite self-absorption, and Father Donellan, a priest whose compassion cannot disguise the white supremacy involved with missionary work—reveals undertones of sexism and religious hypocrisy that still exist in today's international landscape. This skillful injection of broader relevant themes is what makes *Rainshadow* more than a preachy attempt to tackle a politically-charged local issue.

The Multiple Effects of Rainshadow does not relate an open-and-shut story. By embracing its complexities, Astley creates an artistically thoughtful critique that addresses—without claiming to resolve—some of society's most controversial sore spots.

The Multiple Effects of Rainshadow (Thea Astley, 1996) is published in the Penguin Classic Books Series (2010). ISBN 9780143180265. RRP: \$24.95 AUD. pp. 296.