



THE MOUNTAIN

Reviewed by Jilly Lippmann

Modjeska, Drusilla. *The Mountain*. Melbourne: Vintage Australia, 2013. ISBN 9781742758954. RRP \$19.95. pp.448.

Drusilla Modjeska's novel *The Mountain* seeks to dislodge preconceived ideas about Papua New Guinea and its people, and provides "a bridge" (425) into a culture that is close to Australia's shores, yet seems so inaccessible and misunderstood by many. *The Mountain* also highlights the complex postcolonial issues this nation faces, which is reflected in the characters' interactions and relationships.

Modjeska lived in Papua New Guinea during the country's struggle for independence, and while the novel suggests an autobiographical element, she clearly states in the acknowledgements that much came from her imagination. Yet, because of her intimate knowledge of Papua New Guinea, her novel authentically shows the complexity of relations between groups that inhabit the tropical landscape. Modjeska

also seeks to alert readers to the destruction caused by big corporations hungry for Papua New Guinea's abundant resources, to the detriment of the environment and the people. Further, she portrays the difficulties that Papua New Guinea experiences as a postcolonial nation, and emphasises the scars colonialism left on a land rich with tradition. The first Papuan academic on staff at the new university highlights this in a speech: "From birds circling the sun, marvellous creatures, we became wretched victims, acted upon, no will of our own, captive to Europe and Australia. How then, do we tell our history?" (62). Yet, the novel does not attempt to enter into an academic, historical conversation, and Modjeska emphasises this in the acknowledgements: "[this] is not a work of history, ethnography or anthropology" (427). Rather, through storytelling, which imitates the culture's traditional mode of passing down knowledge and history, Modjeska invites readers to trek the long and vertiginous path towards this "strange world where even air and trees had changed their nature" (11), in an attempt to bring awareness to the issues produced by the nation's struggle for independence, and the repercussions this has on the people.

The novel centres on a group of academics, artists, politicians and isolated tribal groups. Rika, a budding young photographer and wife of an anthropologist, Leonard, is the novel's main character, and through third person narrative, the reader enters the complex world of her passionate relationships. As a Dutch migrant to Papua New Guinea, she is situated on the margins of traditional groups and Europeans; thus Rika embodies the notion of a hybrid

identity. On the one hand, she feels at home and seduced by her new and exotic world, which is exemplified by her affair with Aaron, a Papuan national; on the other, her betrayal of her European husband, coupled with the rejection she encounters by Aaron's family, leaves her fragmented, and ultimately, silenced. Rika's painful experiences in this new place highlight the difficulties this nation faces in a hybrid environment where Western mores and values interface with traditional ones.

The novel is divided into two books; the first covers the years from 1968-73, and the second, from 2005-2006. This division reflects how the country has been divided into two distinct eras: colonisation and post colonisation. The first book centres on the tumultuous years leading up to Papua New Guinea's independence from Australian governance, and the main themes are betrayal and fragmentation. Book two has a more sombre tone, and the loose ends left from the previous book begin to come together through Jericho, Rika and Aaron's adopted son, who is the biological son of Rika's ex-husband Leonard, and Janape, a woman from a tribe on the Mountain. Jericho, having left Papua New Guinea thirty years previously, is desperate to feel a sense of synergy with his birthplace despite the fact that he has a European father and has spent much time in Europe. Therefore, the main theme in this section is identity formation.

The novel is a hefty read and a tad slow at the start, but do persist as the impression the novel leaves you with is well worth the initial effort, and the sense of place Modjeska portrays affects a ruminative response, and displays her skill as a novelist.



DAMNED

Reviewed by Molly Hoey

Palahniuk, Chuck. *Damned*. London: Vintage, 2012. ISBN 9780099552598. RRP \$19.95. pp.256.

Chuck Palahniuk has always had the ability to polarise critics. He is labeled by some as a cult leader and black humor messiah and by others as a hackneyed pulp author with a penchant for shock value.

Palahniuk's 2012 work *Damned*, the first installment in a series of three, centers around Madison Spencer, who is 13, and dead. The book follows her as she attempts to traverse a landscape of discarded bodily fluids and come to terms with her premature damnation. Each chapter is headed with an allusion to Judy Blume's *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*, except in *Damned* the opener exchanges God and Margaret for Madison and Satan himself. The rest of the chapters are Madison's direct addresses to the reader as she explores Hell. Her conclusion? Death, just like life, is what you make it. *Damned*