

premiers (Wran, Unsworth and Carr). All, of course, were Labor leaders, and Freudenberg makes no secret of his Labor sympathies and especially his admiration for Prime Minister Curtin during the war years. Nonetheless, he is generally even-handed in his judgements of political figures of whatever party allegiance. The only exceptions are the Labor “rats,” in particular the foremost “rat” of all, Billy Hughes. Even at this distance in time, it seems that the party faithful cannot remain neutral on — let alone forgive — Hughes for splitting the Labor Party in 1916.

Freudenberg characterises himself as a member of “the last Australian generation that, in adolescence, took being British for granted” (vii). Perhaps it is partly this generational perspective that allows him some measure of appreciation of the ambivalences in Churchill’s attitudes toward Australia. Though critical of Churchill’s imperious and high-handed manner in his dealings with Australian leaders, Freudenberg concludes that Churchill genuinely believed that he had “a solemn responsibility to the Australian people” (537). It was a patrician sense of responsibility, suffused with the assumption that his British Empire vision trumped the parochial and self-interested outlook of Australia. It is a sense of responsibility not readily appreciated in Australia today. Yet it is a measure of Freudenberg’s literary skill that he able to convey

something of that old-fashioned sense of duty in Churchill’s character alongside his arrogance, deviousness, and petulance.



*Jean-François Vernay*

## THE SECRET LIVES OF THEM

Christos Tsiolkas. *The Slap*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2008. ISBN: 978 1 74175 359 2. 488 RRP: \$32.95 pp.488 Paperback.

*The Slap*, Christos Tsiolkas’s fourth novel, is clearly at odds with the offbeat rebellious voice, the narrative stamina, the hyperactiveness of his previous flamboyant characters and the confronting subject matters standing for the hallmark of his fiction. However, as most obsessions die hard, *The Slap* is yet again an indictment of contemporary society delving into the secret lives of sex-obsessed characters looking for cop-outs in a drug-infested Australian culture. Plotwise, the content and structure of *The Slap* smacks of soap opera culture which informs the narrative from cover to cover. The expository first chapter sets the scene for a family and friends get-together in a suburban Melbournian

backyard. Coincidentally, the crowd of merrymakers hosted by Hector and Aisha showcases a carefully well-balanced sampling of Australia's multicultural society. The party turns sour because a seemingly domestic incident — a non-family related adult has slapped Hugo, a spoiled brat raised by an overprotective mother — triggers a nonsensical psychodrama which is blown out of all proportion and climaxes in a far-fetched lawsuit.

In a nutshell, the kids were having a game of iconic Aussie cricket and Hugo did not accept defeat. His father Gary stepped in to reason the child but “the boy looked as if he was going to hit his father with the bat” (40). Harry, another grown up witnessing the scene, had a more energetic response as “he lifted the boy up in the air, and in shock the boy dropped the bat.” (40). It is noteworthy that, to this point, no violence has marred the situation. Then “Harry set him on the ground. The boy's face had gone dark with fury. He raised his foot and kicked wildly in Harry's shin” (40). Exasperated Harry, who was not in a mood to turn the other cheek (nor shin for that matter), slaps the obnoxious child. End of story. Well not quite for Tsiolkas who exploits this domestic episode to imagine a narrative which ties neatly together the various viewpoints of seven guests present at the barbeque: Hector, Anouk, Connie, Rosie, Manolis, Aisha, and Richie.

The lack of clear judgement mingled with some kind of crass generalisation and amalgamation expose the characters' arguments as an exercise in blowing hot air. Anouk reckons that “maybe he shouldn't have slapped Hugo but what he did was not a crime. We all wanted to slap him at that moment” (77). Connie goes one step further by saying: “I don't think an adult has any right to physically abuse a child, that's what I think” (173). Rosie, unmistakably besotted with her child, consoles Hugo: “That awful man who hit you has been punished. He got into such big trouble. He's never going to do such a thing again. He's going to jail” (281). Manolis feels not without reason that “Harry had been a fool to hit a child, but the little brat had deserved it and it had not been anything, just a slap” (331). In a crescendo of hysteric opinions, the eponymous incident is exaggeratedly turned into child abuse and even into assault (385) but everybody loses sight of the fact that the only lesson one can draw from this mundane incident is that violence begets violence. In point of fact, the slap was an emotional response to a physical attack and one might understand why Harry being physically assaulted by Hugo did not decide on ridiculing himself by suing Hugo for abuse or assault — a decision which would be deemed out of place and disproportionate by common assent. Conversely, Tsiolkas's turning of tables, which presents Harry as the victimiser and Hugo as the victim, is at once ludicrous and nauseous. And one fails to understand

how a writer can, no matter how good he is, expect to entertain and stimulate his readers over 480-odd pages on such triviality.

And perhaps this is why the slap and tickle scenes are there for — to spice up an otherwise tedious plot. *The Slap* is Tsiolkas's first attempt to give pre-eminence to warts-and-all depictions of straight sex when most of his previous novels were an exploration of gay sexuality. But it does not sound right. One jarring note among others is that Tsiolkas has projected the pervasive male cannibalistic fantasies in *Dead Europe* onto a female character in *The Slap* and imagines straight sex to be animalistic. When Anouk and Rhys engage in sexual intercourse, Tsiolkas writes: "She wanted to bite him, scratch him, devour him. Fuck me, she ordered him sharply now, and she wondered, is this how a man understands sex? This ravenous animal desire?" (60).

Christos Tsiolkas has so far lived up to his reputation of being the *enfant terrible* of Australian fiction — an *enfant terrible* who probably got a slap on the wrist when he realised his heretical subject matter prevented him from winning any major prize such as the Miles Franklin Award. To be able to write *The Slap* — a novel expunged from same-sex depictions, exposed anti-Semitic ideas, sexual deviances such as zoophilia or coprophilia, nihilism, and so many other confronting and repelling subjects — Tsiolkas has

bleached his dirty realism through a process I would call "ethical cleansing." And, amazingly, it has paid off since this Melbourne-based author has won the first major prize in his literary career: i.e. the 2009 Commonwealth Writers' Prize. However, this achievement might be seen as a Pyrrhic victory because this toned down novel has alas neither the freshness and sprightliness of *Loaded* nor the complexity and ambitiousness of *Dead Europe*. To all intents and purposes, *The Slap* ends up robbing readers to pay Christos, but if it takes this sacrifice to acknowledge — even belatedly — the novelist's writing skills, readers can always slap the book on the table and eagerly wait for the next one.



*Marie Ramsland*

## A PANORAMIC SURVEY OF THE AUSTRALIAN NOVEL

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This concise volume of 250 pages provides a wealth of valuable