

Review: Carmel Bird. *Cape Grimm*. Sydney: Flamingo (HarperCollins), 2004. xii + 305 pp. AU\$ 29.95.

Cape Grimm is Australian writer Carmel Bird's latest novel, the third in an ambitious project known as *The Mandala Trilogy*, which the author is planning to convert into a quartet with the novel she is currently working on (*Green Language*). Although freely bound up together, the pieces of this trilogy—*White Garden* (1995), *Red Shoes* (1998), and *Cape Grimm* (2004)—share some characters, and their principal connection is the concept of charisma that, when combined with evil, can cause extreme damage such as mass murder. Thus, in *White Garden* Ambrose Goddard, the psychiatrist founder of the Mandala Clinic for the Mentally Ill in Melbourne (hence the title of the trilogy) virtually imprisons his patients and lets them die under the treatment of the Deep Sleep Therapy; in *Red Shoes* Petra Penfold-Knight leads a religious cult that plans to develop a new race of pure people by drugging them and ruining their lives; and in *Cape Grimm* the youthful charismatic leader of a religious community in Tasmania, Caleb Mean, ends up incinerating his people.

Although set in Tasmania, *Cape Grimm* is the complex and riveting narrative of a dark chapter of humanity that is becoming more and more conspicuous, one in which personal and collective stories, past and present, intertwine. Fiction and fact are exquisitely mixed by the writer. Talking about her trilogy, Bird states that “Although the heart of these three novels is located in an imaginary Tasmania all three, as well as looking inward, look outward to the state of the world” (Walker, 2004b: 277). This imaginary Tasmania, portrayed in the novel at the time when it was called Van Diemen's Land (before 1856), is part of a careful selection of the setting to make it fit into the fairy tale resonances that underlie *Cape Grimm*: on the one hand, the southwestern wilderness of Tasmania is called “Transylvania”, its “the mythic qualities merging naturally with the landscape of Tasmania. For in this place are mysterious and impenetrable swarthy forests, woods of deep and black-green shadows where demons lurk and angels hover nervously” (*CG*, p. 2). On the other hand, the place where the religious community of Skye is founded is in real life called Cape Grim, to which Bird has added a final “m” to make explicit the connection with the Brothers Grimm's stories that haunt the novel.

The central image is that of *El Niño*, which dominates the novel in its two main facets. First, *El Niño* is the Spanish name for the holy child Jesus and his image as a pilgrim. The Prayer of *El Niño de Atocha* is offered to the reader, this being one of the Mean family's treasured possessions, which explains the identification of the charismatic leader Caleb with a boy prophet, even though he turns out to be an Anti-Christ figure. Second, *El Niño* refers to a global climactic effect first registered in Peru and named by Camilo Carrillo in 1898, like the storm that provokes the shipwreck that unleashes the narrative in *Cape Grimm*.

There are three main stories that take place at different historical times but cyclically intersect in the novel, constantly calling attention to the repetition of cycles and to the fact that, as Bird testifies herself, the rise of charismatic people and its effects is cyclical, like seasons and *El Niño* effect (Walker, 2004a: 274-5). The protagonists of these stories are the members of the Mean family through different generations: their origins, their development into a religious community, and their fall, with an eye to a future comeback through the girl Golden. *Cape Grimm* is set in motion by the first

story: the *Iris* shipwreck in Bass Strait due to an *El Niño* effect in 1841. This tragedy joins the lives of its only survivors, Minerva Carrillo and Magnus Mean, who manage to arrive at Puddingston Island where they find out that a child has also been saved. Minerva calls her Niña, the female counterpart to the pervasive image of the Baby Jesus. Minerva and Magnus get married in 1852, eventually forming a family of three children and the religious community at Skye, in Cape Grimm, where the evil and charismatic leader Caleb Mean will be born.

The second story starts more than a century later, when Caleb is born in 1959. This charismatic child becomes known as *El Niño*. On the 5th of February of 1992, the day of his thirty-third birthday (Christ's symbolism again), Caleb drugs and incinerates the community of Sky, while only three survivors (himself, his partner Virginia and their daughter Golden) have to jump over the cliff to commune with the air and the water of the ocean. However, this plan partially fails as they are caught by the police. Caleb is imprisoned in the *Black River Psychiatric Detention Facility*, while Virginia and Golden are taken to a hospital/prison. After changing their names for security reasons, a priest takes them to a secret house in the Tasmanian wilderness with a doctor and his wife. Speechless since the conflagration, Virginia starts to have visions of a dead girl, and here is where the third story takes up.

Beyond the personal accounts of the Mean family, this third story broadens its scope to narrate the silenced narrative of Van Diemen's Land's history. Captivated by the alleged invisibility but undeniable effect of marginal discourses, Bird combines her choice of the fairy tale with the silenced chronicle of abused Tasmanian aborigines. Through the ghost of a black dead girl, Mannaginna, Virginia witnesses the 1820s massacres of Tasmanian aborigines under the hands of white European whalers, sealers, soldiers and farmers. While there had been only one "white-official" record of this mass slaughter, Virginia becomes the "unofficial" key to understand the real exploitation of natives, even when her credibility remains doubtful for being the mute cover of a mass murderer and a ghost visionary. When she is asked "But how can you prove this to other people?", her answer seems to express Bird's concern with the strength of marginal discourses: "If nobody believes this, it makes no difference. It is true" (pp. 193-4). After all, this is what Bird does in her novels: she departs from facts, but the result is a self-sufficient microcosm that, like Virginia's "own phantom world of truth" remains "untroubled by the marketplace of history-making and media limelight" (p. 194). Hence, through Mannaginna's personal story, Bird offers an alternative view to Van Diemen's Land's history, a dark side which becomes thoroughly universal with the references in the first chapters to the dark condition of the whole world.

The catalyst figure who links the three stories is Paul Van Loon, a central character as well as the narrator, who fits into the second story but is like a god-figure joining the narratives. Born the same year as Caleb, Paul was always fascinated by the boy prophet, until fate rewards him with a post as a psychiatrist in *Black River*, where he studies Caleb's case. Like the romantic bard who writes from his ivory tower, Paul is the visionary Rapunzel-like artist who writes from the white turret in *Black River* with a privileged view to the secrets of the mind. An outsider descended from Dutch immigrants, he becomes the perfect vehicle to narrate and participate in a story of supernatural and covert meanings. His obsession with Caleb will almost turn him into his alter ego, so that Paul ends up having access to Virginia's secret chronicles and ultimately marrying her. It is quite interesting to discover that, as Bird stated in an

interview, Paul did not exist in the initial plan of the novel, although he gained ground progressively until he dominated the narrative completely (Walker, 2004b: 284). Even when Paul reproduces Virginia's chronicles, the reader knows that he has manipulated them, and we cannot know what he has altered or left out. However, as Bird explains, "Paul thinks he can control the narrative, can tell the reader how to read, and yet there is a real pull away from him, signified at the end of the narrative proper by the eerie nature of Golden Mean. The story, if you like, has galloped away from the storyteller" (Walker, 2004b: 284). While Paul reassures himself in the control of his own narrative, at the end of the novel Golden is chosen as her father's successor. With a smile on her face, she foreshadows "the end of the world", and Paul echoes her words, as if under this charismatic girl's spell, losing the control he had had before.

Talking about the common factor to the novels of the *Mandala Trilogy*, Bird makes reference to a special type of alchemy, similar to her well-known statement that the "grub of fact" becomes the "butterfly of fiction" (1996: 159):

Within the three there is an exploration of the notion of alchemy. One of the basic ideas of alchemy—the notion of gold being made from dross—is a most interesting one. It reflects, I think, one of the ways in which fiction is constructed, in that the writer takes the muddy fertile material of history and life, of the everyday and science, and transforms those elements into the flowers of the narrative [...]. Alchemy sets that up in a formal and chemical and mystical framework with the crucible and the ultimate creation, gold (Walker, 2004b: 278).

This alchemical metaphor is most conspicuous in *Cape Grimm*, where the titles of the chapters make reference to essential elements in the creation of life ("Air, Fire, Water, Earth, or Dust"), and the final result is "Gold" (chapter ten's title and Caleb's daughter, who ultimately grasps the key of the narrative). Besides, the novel is divided into twenty-four chapters, like the twenty-four hours of a day, making reference to Bird's constant preoccupation with the dichotomy "historical time"/"cyclical time". While the twenty-four hours and chapters indicate the different historical stages of the Mean family, the end of the novel and of the metaphorical day its chapters represent anticipates the beginning of another day, very similar to the one we have experienced, if only lived by another charismatic leader, Golden. The cyclical structure of the novel is undeniable, as the first chapter ("Dust"), with apocalyptic undertones, displays the meteorological and moral decay of humanity, while the last chapter finishes with a reference to "the end of the world", a combination of universal, biblical and local references that is reminiscent of works like Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*.

This double notion of time is further developed in an appendix entitled "Time and Tide". The section on "Time" comprises a chronology starting in BC 1500 and ending in the present time. It is a chronological listing of previous and simultaneous events, "a tuning fork that", as Paul Van Loon declares, "hums and ripples back into the narrative" (p. 247). The compiled events are a mixture of factual and fictional episodes from which the novel has been nourished. Many of these references are amplified in the section of "Tide", which elaborates on the fairy tales, characters, and events that dominate the narrative, organized in alphabetical order. Although the section on "Time" is fundamental, the emphasis is on "Tide", since these tales echo back randomly into the narrative, as cyclically and repetitively as the connection of the stories narrated in *Cape*

Grimm. Actually, the author uses the image of the moonbird, which, in a figure eight, follows the path of the whole Pacific Ocean, from north to south and back again. This movement is as cyclical as the connection of the stories, and the figure eight in a horizontal form means *ad infinitum*, a cyclical and eternal return of charismatic and evil characters.

Cape Grimm leaves us with much food for thought on art, atrocity, memory, and the fragile line that can separate madness and marginality from an alternative and probably more acceptable truth than the one we are forced to believe. In a true postmodern vein, it presents all narratives as equally worthy of attention. Although Paul initially aligns with the objective point of view of Tasmanian history, he gradually gives in to Virginia's supernatural visions and the unavoidable and unexplainable impact of fairy tales in his life. Bird sets the question of the origin and end of narratives: "Where in the world do stories begin? They begin, I believe, in the air, and in the waters of the ocean, in the rocks" (*Cape Grimm*, pp. 183-4). These origins are vague, as vague as the elements that combine in the alchemical process to produce the gold or the butterfly of fiction. For the end, however, she provides no answer (p. 174). Probably it is because they never end. Like the moonbird, they cyclically feed on one another, coming up with familiar patterns that shine as if brand-new, like Golden and like *The Green Language* that we are eagerly waiting to read.

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