

Review of *NOVEL* by Vaughan Rapatahana

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The expatriate award winning New Zealand poet Vaughan Rapatahana has recently extended his writing to the novel. His first work in this domain, *Toa*, was published in 2013 by Atuanui Press in New Zealand. The latest, *Novel* was published in August 2018 by Rangitawa Publishing, also in New Zealand.

The title indicates that it is a “new” novel, although all novels can be seen as “new”, since the word comes from the Latin *novum* (“new thing”). The cover illustration shows a young child observing an “new” emerging plant.

Novel can clearly be classified as a multiple narrative, a novel where the events experienced by diverse characters are described by a reliable narrator. This results in a challenging but captivating read. There is often a multiplicity of perspectives and the reader has to figure out connections between the various narrative threads. David Michell’s *Cloud Ghostwritten* (1999) and *Cloud Atlas* (2004) are examples of this genre. However, the events in Rapatahana’s *Novel* are more tautly woven than in other multiple narratives. Several of the characters in *Novel* are close relations.

The developing action in *Novel* takes us to a variety of settings, from Aotearoa/New Zealand to Hong Kong SAR (“Special Administrative Region”), the Peoples’ Republic of China, the Philippines, Saipan (Northern Mariana Islands) and Laos. The tone of *Novel* is sardonic, dark and the action is often violent. The diverse characters struggle to survive, either because of poverty, accusations of murder, or oppression from local or foreign powers.

The chapters (referred to as “parts”) in this 320- page switchback account are relatively short, from 2 to 6 or 7 pages. Each setting is indicated by numbers: 1. Aotearoa/New Zealand; 2. Hong Kong; 3. Philippines; 4. Philippines Sea; 5. Mainland People’s Republic of China and, towards the end of the novel, 6. Marianas, 7. Okinawa and 8. Laos. The characters tend to move from one setting to another (if they are not dead). For example, the Māori Norton, the main protagonist, turns up in the Philippines after being suspected of two murders in Aotearoa.

The sequence of the chapters/sections is original, unlike most novels. *Novel* begins with an “Afterword” set on a beach in the Marianas, where the major female character Ruby reflects on her experiences with men, Filipinos, Chinese, American and her last lover, the Māori Norton. “Peace at last”, she thinks. Then, in the first “part” or chapter, the action starts in an Aotearoa slaughter-house. Murder or slaughter? We are not sure. The novel ends with a “Prologue” set in Laos, revealing that Norton had served with a New Zealand undercover infantry platoon supporting the Americans just after the end of the Vietnam War.

Given the diverse cultures in which the action develops, there are many local expressions, both in dialogues and the narration, including Māori, Tagalog, Cantonese and Mandarin. These snippets of local languages open the reader’s understanding of these cultural settings, e.g. “hindi kona problema iyan” = “not our problem”. A glossary of these expressions is provided at the end of the book.

The main characters include Norton and his lover Ruby, her two previous lovers (her ex-husband Godfrey Woo and the American agent/assassin Dr. Cross), her cousins Canlas and Ivy, Norton's erstwhile friend, now enemy, Monaghan, the triad leader Ho Fat Kit, the Chinese PLA officer Da Zi, the American agent Walter Wyshnowski and the young Hong Kong militants Lok Yi Yi and Lok Mai Chun.

The style of *Novel* follows the tradition of the thriller although with aspects typical of Rapatahana's other work: short paragraphs, truncated sentences, colloquial expressions, embedded questions from the protagonists and irony. This creates the impression of an oral recount shared by the writer and the characters.

The tension is skillfully presented. In part 14/1, Norton is suspected of two murders, including that of his wife. He lies down in the long grass near the *urupā* (cemetery) and mulls over the issues, ruminating on what to do next, with these thoughts:

"It was just that no one could quite work out how and when he had managed to do it, eh."

"And where was the knife?"

"Bound to be a punch-up. With him involved somewhere."

"So Norton just sprawled there and waited."

Short or truncated expressions are used to advance the narrative with urgency, at times with echoes of hard-boiled detective novels such as Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*. In this extract, the deadbeat Godfrey Woo, having abandoned two families and squandered all his money through gambling, is followed by triad hit-men:

"[Godfrey] knew he had to keep on moving.
Right now."

This writing style creates a taut, clear and fast-paced narration. Characters chase down others at the behest of nefarious organizations seeking to eliminate undesirables: these powers that be include Chinese triads, American secret services, the Chinese People's Liberation Army, the Aotearoa/New Zealand police, Interpol and the Filipino police. Not to mention those seeking vengeance.

There are several cases where the reader is challenged to determine what is true and what is false. In the "Afterword" section, Ruby thinks she sees Dr Cross, the American hit man she once lived with. But isn't he dead? Later, we are told that Ruby's niece Euris has disappeared. Then it appears that she is dead. But how and why? Other characters make false assumptions. While driving an old van in Hong Kong, Godfrey Woo thinks he sees a gunman about to shoot Ruby, the wife he abandoned. He drives the van into the gunman and kills him. However, the gunman was trying to kill her companion Norton and not Ruby. Why? Because Norton has killed Trevor King? Or his wife, Makere? Or someone else?

These true/false conundrums pepper the novel. Many readers will be galvanized by the sophisticated and many-sided narrative in order to extract the truth.

Overall, *Novel* presents a dark vision of the world as it is now, a world where truth is hard to find, where despair promotes violence and where power is imposed through electronic surveillance and the spreading of falsehoods. In Hong Kong, after finding out that he is wanted by Interpol in the Philippines with a huge price on his head, Norton buys a copy of

the *South China Morning Post*. He reads that “Arabs [are] killing Arabs”, “Syrians [are] skewering Syrians”; trained marksmen in the USA are killing their fellow countrymen with guns bought at Walmart. “And Russia [has] invaded Ukraine – once again.”

Norton’s thoughts on this:

“The World had – somehow – gotten even nuttier than yesterday. Way crazier than any of those clever dick scriptwriters in Hollywood and Bollywood could ever conjure up, eh?”

Not all the violence and upheavals described in *Novel* are real current events – for the moment. In New Zealand/Aotearoa (“the skinny country”) the Māori population has started an uprising against the government, itself having become a police state controlled by foreign interests. America has sent troops to put down the uprising and the Māori dissenters’ forces have been strengthened by Pacific islanders, Māori who have settled in Australia. And of course, the Māori women warriors.

Novel is an innovative and complex creation, both a thriller with fast-moving pace and a meditation on today’s and tomorrow’s world. It is an absorbing read, a journey to diverse cultures where the reader encounters a disparate group of characters from the desperate struggling to survive, the militants striving to overthrow injustice, the agents of evil trying to destroy them and the many ordinary people caught in the maelstrom. The story weaves back and forth through a multiplicity of unfolding situations both gripping and thought provoking.

Be afraid. Or not.