

NOVEL by Vaughan Rapatahana

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It might surprise the general reader that insurgents are busy training in the Urewera high country for an uprising to bring down the government of Aotearoa/New Zealand, it being 'merely a cattle dog of a much more potent, belligerent and quite nasty superpower across the other side of the Pacific Ocean'. In the politically and personally shifty world of NOVEL, nothing is comfortable. Though it begins at the end with the most sympathetic character, Ruby, settling down on a beach in the Marianas with something resembling an uneasy peace of mind, the dastardly complications that lead her there, and others decidedly elsewhere, occupy the next 320 pages.

So what is novel about NOVEL ?

Not quite the structure. Though reluctant to follow 'the sequential English language formats, like the so-called novel iK a Pākehā or European/Western stamp of their linguistic and thus, cultural dominion', the story, in complex strands, is, apart from the end-opening, chronological and very neatly and effectively signposted with a chapter/strand number that keeps the reader well in line. This is not a William Burroughs stew or a do-it-yourself narrative.

Not quite the story itself. The strands/yarns are all rattling good ones, roaming Aotearoa/New Zealand, the Philippines, Laos, China and Hong Kong SAR, and the characters duly come to life, in the ordinary way, as their stories are told. The settings are realistic, as is the dialogue (it is even punctuated), and motivation, cause and effect are all perfectly believable within the machinery of the tales. There is humour and there is cynicism, authorial comment and galloping writing. Vaughan Rapatahana is a fine story-teller and the fabric of the book is carefully and entertainingly woven.

Not quite the politics. There is no shortage of 'conspiracy' novels and this, generally, is one. Western Europe, the USA and Britain are in control, and aim to keep things that way. The two Agents in NOVEL, Monaghan and Dr Cross are employed to do 'basically anything to ensure that the American regime remained transcendent and regnant and impervious to anything that supposedly threatened its worldwide valence.' Grisly deaths succeed on both 'sides' of the struggle. The poor and marginal cope as best they can when drawn into the machinations of political skulduggery and this is all as it surely is.

The novelty lies elsewhere, somewhere deeper and more unsettling to the general reader: this is clearly what Vaughan Rapatahana intends and it is this makes NOVEL novel.

First, it lies in the language. It is 99% English, but not as we know it. The happy Amis/Barnes/Smith/Mantel/McEwan reader will be disturbed. Vaughan Rapatahana unsettles and exasperates in the reading: intentionally, and naturally. Here are a couple of examples:

Trouble was, Philippines police were not so accommodating toward Interpol themselves. Their attitude roughly translated to something like, i\$shit New Zealand – we can't ever get there without sucking up for a visa and even then, there's been no direct flights from there until last year anyway.i"

Ruby's mother never wanted to go anywhere with him and Ruby. And at least – he justified – Ruby was only ten years younger than him. Sort of made him feel better, especially since he also knew the rudiments of the local language, Tagalog, these days.

And so it goes : slightly unusual punctuation, slightly tangential use of words-meanings, slightly jigsaw-puzzled tones, slightly alien usages, slightly literary turns of phrase followed by slightly casual ones. And what does this all add up to? It adds up to a subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) assault on what is thought of as 'good' or even 'effective' writing. The story works, the characters get on, the politics is clear, the murders, escapes, sexual escapades, deceptions and chases tear along, but all this is done without much kowtowing to conventional style, either conventional 'literary' or conventional 'popular', in a kind of realignment of How to Write. Like the women of *Ngā Wahine Toa*, these sentences are 'resolved to fight back an administration that continued to ignore them'.

Second, NOVEL gives a good slap to the reader's world view. It is not the politics, as observed above, but the presentation of settings wrongly alien to English-language novel-readers. Nowhere is nice : the underbellies of so-called slums, criminal gangs, prostitution, poverty and protest are ever-present. The Woo strand (2), set in Hong Kong, is typical : 'Times were always tough out in this City of Sorrow, as Hong Kong's portly politicians liked to paint it – and yet none of them had ever been sighted this far out from the dense throb of the central city, where they spent all day and half of each night playing plutocrats'. These places are nasty for a reason. This is no starry-eyed book. Vaughan Rapatahana does not have universal love and peace in his sights, but the disconcerting reminder that people and places can be ugly for reasons we might not want to think about, or, being Westerners, admit to, is, again, ever-present. It is a salutary lesson for the (for instance, English) reader's world to be ignored, a villain reaching its tentacles into the world from somewhere off the map. This is not simply a book set Somewhere Else, like 'The Kite Runner' or 'Wild Swans', but one that actively rejects the values of some Elsewheres that are actually a part of it.

NOVEL contains boxed statements, a glossary of Māori, Tagalog, Cantonese and Mandarin (containing useful words and phrases such as 'good afternoon mother', 'fat pig', 'I love you', and 'fuck you white man'), some picture pages ('Get out!! Americano' and honggi), an addendum on the English Novel, and some tables of Doubts and Thoughts: but it is not here that the novel's subversion lies, and this is not 'Tristram Shandy', nor is meant to be. It lies in a blazing tale of international politics and murder, and the people entangled in it, by design or accident, told in a style that detaches the reader from comfortable reading and a comfortable world, or even a comfortable reading of the world. Remember, 'This is a work of fiction' (Disclaimer), wherein 'places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner' : but after the last death, and Ruby's arrival at the beach, the reader can't help wondering about that 'cattle dog' description of God's Own Land, and other troubling rumbles.

John Gallas.