

Elizabeth Bryer, *From Here On, Monsters*. Australia: Picador, 2019. ISBN 9781760781132.

Reviewed by Merav Fima

Aesthetic theorist Theodor Adorno believed that authentic works of art recreate an experience of the individual suffering due to socially imposed mechanisms, as a way of expressing a universal historical truth. Elizabeth Bryer's debut novel, *From Here On, Monsters*, published in July 2019, captures a timely human experience as it renders the suffering of Illegal Maritime Arrivals (IMA) at the hands of Australian bureaucracy, a major source of contention in the months preceding last year's federal election.

Bryer's novel constitutes a moving fictional account of a group of Illegal Maritime Arrivals, who find refuge in the unoccupied top landing of a commercial building. Above their heads, on the rooftop, lurks a monster, whose size and appetite keep growing, raising questions about the relationship between reality and imagination.

As Jhon Dikuasa Mba makes his way to Alistair's Books, he begins assisting bookseller Cameron Raybould with an unusual commission to assess the value of a rare codex, written in ancient Spanish on palm leaf and kangaroo skin. As in *People of the Book*, a novel by another Australian writer Geraldine Brooks, the analysis of an ancient codex—which, in the case of Bryer's novel, turns out to be a modern imitation of an ancient work—reveals numerous secrets and allows the protagonist to learn more about herself and her contemporary reality. At the same time, it offers a commentary on Walter Benjamin's concept of the "aura" of original artworks, stating that "replicating the source's material conditions could create an aura around the work" (41).

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Meanwhile, Cameron is offered a part-time job at the studio of renowned artist Maddison Worthington, assisting with the *Excise Our Hearts* project, a government-commissioned artwork whose medium and form are never revealed: “I want you to be creative, Cameron,’ Maddison said. ‘Creative like a bureaucrat’” (78). As her work at the studio progresses, Cameron experiences lapses of memory, and people, words, and images start fading from sight.

Shrouded in a sense of unresolved mystery, the novel places the ethics and aesthetics of art making at odds, contemplating the notion of art as a deceit, as well as addressing the social responsibility of the artist—all issues that greatly preoccupied Adorno. Meditating on the power of art and its effect on the individual, the narrator asserts: “art can be a great way of reinforcing attitudes or prejudices, and of manipulating people into feeling a certain way about a given issue” (77); in this novel, Maddison’s artwork is intended to induce acquiescence, or at the very least complaisance, among the Australian population with regard to the government’s refugee policy.

The elegant simplicity of Bryer’s prose creates beauty from profoundly philosophical, even Kafkaesque, subject matters and moral dilemmas. While Bryer’s writing is accessible and absorbing, it is also ambitious in its engagement with weighty social issues, an admirable feat for such a young novelist. Bryer, who is pursuing a PhD in Translation Studies at Monash University and has previously published translations of three novels from Spanish, is well-versed in the politics of literary translation, also touched upon in this work.

While Bryer contends with political issues on a national scale, she does not penetrate the protagonist’s deepest emotional realms. Cameron remains somewhat underdeveloped throughout the novel, serving as an instrument for the communication of these ideas, rather than an autonomous, passionate individual. She often rationalises her terrifying experiences and never allows herself to enter into a romantic relationship with Jhon, a seemingly natural narrative development.

Echoing Cameron’s interest in “the book as a physical object,” (12) the novel is beautifully designed, with blank pages separating the chapters, each featuring Jen von Klitzing’s delicate illustrations of mythological creatures inspired by Aboriginal mythology, producing a potent visual and textual effect. Special formatting is also provided for Jhon’s translation of the codex, replicating its landscape orientation and leaving a blank space in the middle of the page where the binding would have been. Finally, words in newspaper columns and

entire pages of text are omitted when things start disappearing from Cameron's sight and memory, giving visual manifestation to her peculiar experiences.

Acclaimed African-American writer and Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison's recent death has left a vacuum for a woman writer demonstrating both supreme artistry and social conscience. The preoccupation with racism was at the core of her literary endeavour, blending magical realism with the poetry of her prose. As she wrote: "Art invites us to know beauty and to solicit it from even the most tragic of circumstances. Art reminds us that we belong here. And if we serve, we last" (330). Perhaps Elizabeth Bryer's future works will fill that void with her fresh voice and vivid imagination.

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