

Luke Horton, *The Fogging*, Melbourne: Scribe, 2020. ISBN 9781925849592.

Reviewed by Giulia Mastrantoni

Luke Horton's debut novel *The Fogging* deconstructs the ways in which mental illness can impact a relationship, while shedding light on how a lack of clear financial prospects can slowly consume a couple. The inability to look at a potentially shared future with hope is a key element in the novel, which highlights how a growing number of academics struggle to maintain their sanity and make ends meet. Through the character of Tom, Luke Horton draws the reader's attention to issues that have long affected academics and that are becoming a major concern for early career researchers. In particular, *The Fogging* focuses on the almost inevitable childlessness that academics are forced to accept due to a lack of job security and appropriate financial remuneration.

Tom, the protagonist and narrator of *The Fogging*, is an academic in his thirties suffering from anxiety. When he finally resolves to book a holiday with his partner, Clara, his biggest hope is to find peace and to relax. However, in Bali, Clara strikes up a friendship with Madeleine, a French academic who is on holiday with her husband, Jeremy, and their child, Ollie. While Tom acknowledges the upsides of this friendship, as it allows him some alone-time, he is also deeply concerned. Madeleine speaks of her life in France with pride and she shares with Clara the wonders of motherhood. Witnessing the exchange between the two women leads Tom to reconsider his life with Clara, from the inadequacy of their housing to the impossibility of having a child.

Of key relevance is the description that Tom offers of the "unsound Californian bungalow" (56) he shares with Clara in Melbourne. Not only is the

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place “grotty”, but the grot also “seemed to infect the atmosphere” (56). While admitting to the oldness of the place, Tom emphasises that neither he nor Clara are actually making any effort to keep it clean. This is partly due to the numerous work commitments they both have and partly linked to having grown “disenchanted by the grot” (57). This passage sheds light on the precarious living conditions that Tom and Clara have to endure due to being underpaid academics who have grown as disenchanted by their house as they have by academia. Furthermore, it symbolises their progressive unwillingness to rebel and their growing acceptance of the status quo.

Clara’s reluctance to let go of the hope that someday she will become a mother is just as problematic. Her desire to have a child is first expressed when she tells Tom that Ollie used to be a very bad sleeper when he was little. She then goes on to voice her curiosity as to whether she and Tom would have “an anxious, bad sleeper” (36). When she half-jokingly says that she hopes that “we don’t produce another academic” (36) it becomes clear that her mind is set on the idea of having a baby. In a later passage, however, Tom admits to only having thought about parenthood abstractly, “as if he was still in his twenties and it was a long way off” (58). While having always assumed that someday he would be a father, he knows that both his and Clara’s lives are “too precarious, their incomes too low, their lives too disorganised” (58). This passage clearly outlines that the relationship’s future (or lack thereof) is inextricably linked to their working conditions.

Lastly, the issue of mental health is discussed through the character of Tom and through his career choices. He is indeed an uncontracted sessional, yet “he had found his place in it” (113). While the job is a “nightmare in many ways”, it is “his nightmare” (113). The anxiety he felt during his first semesters of teaching slowly went away and now Tom is satisfied with the quality of his teaching and the position. Indeed, when Madeleine sends Tom the link to a permanent position he might want to apply for, he does not even open the link. He is not willing to challenge himself nor to put himself in a position of responsibility. The anxiety he suffers from manifests in other areas of Tom’s life as well, impacting his social skills. When, on the second-last day of his holiday with Clara in Bali, Tom finally experiences the absence of anxiety, he feels a “kind of emptiness, a void” (165f). This shows that Tom is trapped in his illness, unable to fight it.

The Fogging is more of a political novel than one might think. While the relationship between Clara and Tom is the focus of the plot, the two characters’

living conditions are discussed from many perspectives. This ultimately sheds light on the lack of prospects that early career researchers have to put up with and on how this impacts their private lives. In this sense, Luke Horton's work is relevant because it speaks for the increasing number of uncontracted academics, raising awareness about issues that are becoming more and more urgent

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