

# Long Paddock

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Fiona McGregor, *Strange Museums*

As a novelist, Fiona McGregor is no stranger to critical praise – her first work of fiction, *Au Pair*, was short-listed for the Australian Vogel award, whilst her second, *Suck My Toes*, won the Steele Rudd award, and her third, *chemical palace*, was short listed for the New South Wales Premier’s literary award. Yet those familiar with the author’s name and literary reputation either embrace or avoid her work, and others simply don’t know it exists. And it’s not hard to see why: Fiona McGregor’s pet themes ride the grungy undercurrent of sex and drugs; her plots involve (in no particular order), lesbian S&M parties, the Mardi Gras, AIDS, underground dance parties and fringe cabarets. Not the kind of thing you bring home to your mother, or your wife, or your children. McGregor’s novels can usually be found in bookstores shelved under the somewhat parochial banner of *Queer Fiction*.

The problem (if it *is* a problem, since it all depends on who is perceiving it), is that here we have an accomplished, skillful writer, whose work and contributions are as vital as they are niche. Her works seem to flare and then vanish into the ether. Perhaps this sort of thing is to be expected, because of the position she occupies at the unfamiliar end of the spectrum.

*Strange Museums*, however, is the perfect middle ground. It is a beautiful, haunting book, and, like most of McGregor’s works, defies easy classification: it is at once a wry travelogue, a performance art diary, and a heartbreaking account of the history of Poland.

If *Strange Museums* is a “difficult” read, then it is so because of the heaviness of its subject matter, which McGregor juggles with lighter moods with consummate skill, and with none of the stylistic glitch that made *chemical palace* so hard to get through. Here, war and loss and blood are major, recurrent themes, as is oppression in its myriad forms – religious, racial, artistic, sexual. The first such confrontation arrives early on in the novel. McGregor and her travel companion, AñA Wojak, are dining with their Polish hosts, a married couple, when the topic of homosexuality arises and the husband comments casually, “I have gay friends, but I do not want it rubbed *in my face*. Not like the Mardi Gras you have in Sydney!” he says.

It is in situations like this that McGregor reminds us of one of her considerable strengths as a writer, an impeccable sense of timing, for here in her internal monologue the punchline is revealed, but never to the host himself, that McGregor is queer, and AñA is her ex-lover. It’s a perfect little moment, a litmus test passed with flying colours, in which McGregor makes a compromise between her fierce passion and intellect, her sense of identity, decorum and wit. She remains silent, but her dignity survives intact. It is this disarming balance between self-seriousness and self-deprecation that McGregor is able to strike throughout the book that earns the reader’s trust. Her internal response:

*But homosexuality has been brought into the conversation out of the blue, and vilified in a casual, complicit, even friendly way. What is one supposed to say in response to prejudice against one's own, in a foreign place, in the house of such gracious hosts? Nothing unless you feel there is a sympathetic opening. And the alacrity alone with which this old chestnut has plopped onto the table is a warning in itself. My queer radar advises me: keep quiet. Protect yourself. The writer takes advantage, as writers do. Listen up, she whispers. Bear witness.*

This is the edge to McGregor's essayistic style, a distinct flavour that is all her own.

The plot, (though the book is largely plotless, the structure emerging instead around themes) follows McGregor and Wojak as they wend their way through Poland, as part of *Interakcje* – a local performance art festival. The atmosphere in these sections of the book is breathtaking and electric – the acts are diverse, in everything from language and scope to quality – a woman paints herself red, a poet dances and throws feathers and ping pong balls, an artist shaves himself in the mirror until he bleeds, a babbling man strums a ukulele and rolls, naked, on the floor. There is a sense here of a chaotic, thrown-together vaudeville. *senVoodoo*, McGregor and Wojak's performance collective, is here to perform a piece entitled *Arterial*. The artist provides a summary:

*[Arterial]... is starkly red and white, using a white pathway, white robes, and blood. We are shrouded head to foot and walk slowly towards one another, our hands extended, bleeding from shunts in our wrists. The soundtrack is rhythmic, visceral and abstract, made entirely of body sounds – heartbeat, breathing, blood pulse. We walk so slowly that our movements are almost imperceptible. There is the drip of blood on paper, there is the smell. The trail created describes a sort of songline. The paper is photographic, with an emulsion that binds the blood so that when it dries it retains its colour and texture... the path always has a furled scroll at either end, implying the endlessness of this journey, the endlessness of loss and mourning.*

A quick search for *Arterial* led me to the *senVoodoo* website, where still photos (but no videos) are available. The images were haunting, mesmeric, and I can only imagine that *Arterial*, when viewed in a live setting, is a terrifying, transcendent work.

So the book proceeds. In spare pockets of time between performances, McGregor keeps a travel diary, her journey inscribing a trail through the scattered cities and towns, all with thoroughly unfamiliar and unpronounceable names – *Piotrków Trybunalski, Kazimierz Dolny, Gdynia Sopot...* although *Auschwitz-Birkenau* rings a chillingly familiar bell. McGregor visits historical sites and national memories, and begins the arduous process of denouncing the oppressors, one and all: Catholic oppressors, political oppressors, Nazi oppressors. She brings to light the oppression of homosexuals, the oppression of artists (from an unfriendly Howard government), the oppression of art, of self and so on, until the denouncing itself becomes an oppression of sorts.

And then there are the parts of the book concerning McGregor's day job – *Arterial, Interakcje*, those grand, chaotic affairs, which inevitably spill into the pubs and clubs, in boisterous, vodka-soaked drinking sessions. In this way, *Strange Museums* is divided

into work and play... only that, for the reader, the work often feels like play, and over time, the play begins to seem all too much like work.

The book is at its best when these two disparate elements – the passionate social commentary, the passionate performance art – exist synchronously. Each follows each, cleansing the palate, providing the reader with a truly soulful reading experience. But it's when the *Arterial* performances begin wrapping up, one-hundred-and-fifty pages in, where things begin to unravel. The traveling companions separate. The novel takes on a different, bleaker tone. It is filled with visits to concentration camps, statistics of those who died and how they met their deaths. There are no ukeleles in sight, no shaving men, no blood spattered paths, no other spectacle to save us from the full force of atrocity. But perhaps it is meant this way. Perhaps the persecutions and memories of the holocaust deserve the full and undivided attention...

The last few chapters are unable to sustain the energy so evident in the majority of the book, though there still exists that certain individualistic spark to the author's writing that makes this book a vital read. Moreso, for those unfamiliar with the history of Poland and the joys of performance art, who will learn something important from this novel.

This is a fierce, intelligent book from an author who deserves a wider audience. There is a moment in the penultimate chapter, *The Magic of Lublin* – when McGregor reflects on the works of the famed Jewish writer, Isaac Bashevis Singer – when I finally began to understand the unsettling effect reading *Strange Museums* had had on me:

*The world Singer depicted was always in turmoil, loss a constant refrain. Threats lurked around every corner. Licentious Gentile women, hostile Poles, corrupt Jews, everything chipped away at tradition. I find him too potent to read end to end.*

Indeed, *Strange Museums* is just such a book.