

Long Paddock

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End of the Night Girl by Amy T Matthews
Wakefield Press, 277pp 2011.

Amy T Matthews' *End of the Night Girl* is an ambitious and intelligent novel that raises complex questions about the ethical limits of fiction. Published through Wakefield Press under the auspices of the Adelaide Festival Award for Best Unpublished Manuscript for a South Australian emerging writer (2010), and currently shortlisted for the Dobbie Award (2012), *End of the Night Girl* overlays contemporary Australian realism with a Holocaust narrative.

End of the Night Girl moves between the parallel narratives of Adelaide waitress Molly and the Polish Jew, Gienia who journeys deep into the horror of Second World War Europe. Molly's first person story is acute, gritty and often funny. She is mouthy and brassy, as well as restless, unsatisfied, insecure. Molly takes us through the exhaustion, profanity, banality and absurdity of hospitality work; "bone deep exhaustion" followed by "surrender to the round of pubs and clubs and drinks and pipes and powders and pills" (132). Around the chaos of her shifts, Molly tries to navigate the chaos of her relationships - her pregnant step-sister shows up on her doorstep, and she begins an affair with the married Chef. With Molly we move through the nights, days, streets, pubs and bars of Adelaide. Through this character the novel gives us the city as a fully imagined fictional space.

Molly's narrative is intertwined with and interrupted by the story of Gienia's horrific journey to Auschwitz. Unlike Molly's easy and sassy first person voice, Gienia's story is a more formal third person narration, with a sense of traditional story that is magnified by the fact that we have been told so many stories like this one before. The two narratives abruptly interrupt one other throughout the novel; a jarring effect that is magnified by the use of different fonts for each

narrative. The stories converge as Molly's creation - Molly is writing Gienia's story - but this encounter and their relation becomes more complex as the novel unfolds. Writing Gienia's story is not a redeeming project for Molly, nor is it for the reader. Guilt, shame and voyeurism are the specters that haunt both levels of this novel, which does well to open these questions on a meta level.

End of the Night Girl shares some similarities with Christos Tsiolkas' 2005 novel *Dead Europe*: in both we see the doubling or haunting of contemporary urban Australia with the European past as well as the first person realism of Australia present spliced with the almost fairy-tale third person story of Europe past.

Both are journeys into nightmares, and deal with the consequences of anti-semitism,

Both also invoke the work of Louis-Ferdinand Celine, Matthews' novel references Celine's 1932 novel, *Journey to the End of the Night* explicitly, both in the title and in the parallel narratives - Molly and Gienia's relationship echoes that of Ferdinand Bardamu and Léon Robinson. The title is explained as "end of the night girls" are "the ones you take home when it's the end of the night and no one else will have you" (219). The reference to Celine here underlines the ambivalence of Molly's project as well as that of the novel itself.

End of the Night Girl keenly evokes the uneasiness around Holocaust representation, particularly un-justified or ungrounded appropriation. At one point Molly goes through the excuses that might explain her fascination with Gienia, but has none "it doesn't belong to me" (212). As Molly sees it, her life is not mythic, not historical not heroic, her suffering not of significance. Gienia's story is all these things; as Molly puts it, "It's a Big Thing" (212).

This question of whose story matters is at the heart of the book. Ironically, these assumptions that the book interrogates have been performed in some of its critical reception. In his review for *The Australian*, Christopher Bantick says "Gienia's story matters; Molly's does not." Matthews and Molly are both aware of the assumed lack of meaning in the menial and trivial aspects of Molly's life, and

humorous and rich portrayal of her world very much counters this perception. One achievement of this novel is the way it poses the question of why is a Holocaust narrative is more worthy fictional subject for an Adelaide writer than the experience of life in contemporary Adelaide. The question also arises about the worthiness of Australia, and here, in particular, Adelaide as not only a fictional place, but a space with the capacity to be historical, mythic. I think this question is gendered too; it is very clear that commentators such as Bantick imply and assume women's stories only "matter" when they are properly Historical. Molly's story gives us a compelling protagonist as well as a new imagining of Adelaide, and this ambitious and intelligent novel is a welcome addition to contemporary Australian fiction.

Works Cited

Bantick, Christopher "On alienation and murder, accidental and otherwise" *The Weekend Australian*, August 27-28 2011, Review p 22.