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Sex and Sad Spaces

Reviewed by Gaylene Perry.

On the surface, both of these novels are about sex, specifically, perhaps about women’s sex. But both novels are also about power dynamics and about illusions and disillusions. Each can be taken as a light, even ephemeral read, a novel to eat chocolate over or to read on a beach, and swap around with girlfriends. Yet both seem bound up with a sadness that demands even more attention than the sex.

*The Bride Stripped Bare* and *Geography* are both thematically concerned with intertwining sexual and romantic relationships, and also with friendships—between both men and women—that at times cross lines and become sexual or obsessive or in some ways abusive. However, both novels are focused strongly on the narrators’ selves. The stories are told by narrative voices that have the hint of damage in them. These novels seem to be about *others*, about *togetherness*, yet both narrative voices feel isolated and quite alone. It’s easy to write off such an approach as being part of a so-called culture of confession; the me-generation; an age of disclosure that verges on hysteria. Perhaps these novels are part of these moods in contemporary Western culture—many of us enjoy our reality tv, explicit, self-centred soaps, bestselling tell-all memoirs, magazines, racy internet journals or blogs. But, at the same time, the sadness of the young women characters in these two novels demands a deeper and more sympathetic analysis.

We could consider how identity and selfhood are bound up with these novels, within this age of disclosure and apparent exhibitionism. *The Bride* and *Geography* are both, on the surface, *confessional* novels, involving private painful or provocative issues spoken of by narrators who could almost be speaking aloud to their girlfriends. Strangely, though, they’re not speaking to girlfriends, or to partners and lovers. They’re whispering into thin air. The reader—who could be a voyeur or could be a listener who empathises so deeply that it hurts—is the one who gets to know what each of these narrators seems to need desperately to say. As with published memoirs or journals or letters, the confessions in these novels are private yet made very public. Confessing may be an act of exhibitionism, but in this kind of fiction the secrets that are being spoken remain secrets, somehow, because of the gentle (if insistent) voices; because of the fragile, tender nature of what’s being said. This may be the appeal of such a mode of fiction. The reader hears a secret, just between the narrator of the novel and that reader... right? But of course, it’s not, it’s published, it’s mass-marketed.

Nikki Gemmell published as ‘Anonymous’, but her cover was blown even before the book arrived in the stores, and then Gemmell was all over the world, giggling and blushing on chat shows, appearing in full colour in newspapers and magazines. She seemed like everyone’s best girlfriend, except that these days it can be hard to remember that the girlfriends of most of us aren’t to be found on TV or in a magazine.

In *The Bride Stripped Bare*, the narrator suddenly becomes aware of dissatisfaction in her marriage, and of a distrust of her husband, during their honeymoon. She explores her own sexuality, pushing her limits and that of her husband, becoming self-destructive as she explores her repressed—or created—selves. Gemmell’s narrator is not having a happy time. She’s angry, sad, damaged, at a time in her life when society tells her she should be feeling blissful. At times, oddly, *The Bride* verges on being a morality tale. The narrator moves from imagining fantasies to http://emsah.uq.edu.au/awsr/awbr/issues/140/spaces.htm

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acting out fantasies; the story grows more and more troubling until her expectations and hopes are twisted back on her one last time. Is that twist her punishment for not being satisfied with marriage: for acting like a slut? Perhaps.

But the earlier parts of the novel are powerful. A reader could almost be lying about with friends, champagne flute in hand, chocolates and Turkish delight strewn between, reading aloud parts of the novel and sharing their secrets. The book itself is strewn not with chocolate and Turkish delight, but with quotations from Sei Shonagon’s *The Pillow Book*. These quoted passages reinforce the sense of secrecy and hidden delight and detritus. The pillow books of Japanese noblewomen were ostensibly record books for housekeeping, gently subverted by enigmatic, sometimes coded messages.

There is little joy in the sex or the love in *The Bride*. The depictions of repressed anger, the passive cruelty within the marriage and friendships are, in places, awfully close to the bone. But the author seems to lose her nerve partway through the novel. Any real subversiveness to be found soon dissipates. The narrative creeps into more mundane space, predictable and less real, somehow, until the reader has little reason to care about what happens to characters that no longer feel close and true. A plainly ridiculous framing device—a letter and postscript from the narrator’s mother—that starts and ends the novel, exacerbates this breaking of the connection between writer and reader.

Early on in *The Bride*, it seems Gemmell has the glint of an unspoken yearning, something important, something rarely spoken even amongst close friends—concerning the damaging secrets that couples and friends sometimes keep from each other and from themselves. A jagged kind of grief exists in those early pages, a focus on a sadness that can be hard to talk about in these days when pornography and erotica are sometimes mistaken for one another, and when mentioning sadness, tragedy, oppression and exploitation in relation to sex is considered conservative and not much fun. The sex scenes in both of these novels do not equate to pornography, but it’s weirdly hard to call them erotic, either. They feel like masquerades. They feel like someone is going through motions, and it’s uncertain who the someone is: the characters, the authors, and/or the readers.

Sometimes, Gemmell writes delicately around such concepts. When she does, her work is raw and sharp. And then the moment is gone. The nerve seems lost. The work loses its sense of the edge of something important that needs to be talked about.

Cunningham’s novel is less dangerous. It too suffers from a perfunctory framing device, although Cunningham’s device works far better than Gemmell’s. Cunningham’s framing story of a blissful new relationship—in the honeymoon stage, maybe—set by the sea in Sri Lanka, is soft and mellifluous and also sketchily written when compared to what seems the larger story of the novel—that of the narrator’s past experience of an exhilarating relationship spanning years, cities, and countries.

But in *Geography*, too, we find hints of something discomforting that is prevalent in contemporary life: the something that nobody seems quite able to find the pulse of or quite willing to speak about lest they are shushed with accusations of conservatism. Cunningham’s narrator, too, is almost talking to herself, saying what could have been said to her lovers and friends, instead of in whispered, prettily nuanced asides to an unknown reader. Is what needs to be said really too terrible to say to those we trust? Or is the point of these two novels that many of us


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actually don't know who we can trust now, and it's safer to tell a stranger than a friend. It's safer to confess than confide? It's safer to vent than discuss?

Geography, like The Bride, concerns itself with the pain that can result when one tries to act out the sex of fantasies. The narrator, Catherine, has finally—it seems—left behind her exciting but destructive relationship: a hot, sexy liaison with Michael. He's an obsession, as is the dirtiness of the sex. This relationship makes her do things she would not have imagined before—sexually, but also in the form of stalker-like acts that even a 'normal' person can be driven to do if the obsession is intense enough. A reader may find herself in turns furious with Catherine's foolishness and wanting to hug her and tell her we've all been there, we understand. As the relationship drags on and gets darker and nastier, we follow Catherine back and forth through her desire to distance herself from Michael, and the fact of her still being close enough to her obsession to hunger for the taste.

Strangely enough, the charm of Geography may to be found in that not-quite-baked part of the story set in Sri Lanka. Unlike The Bride, Geography has a glimmer of love in it, a touch of glitter smeared on the shoulders, tinkling music heard through warm night air. We can't know if this new relationship with Ruby will last. But for now it's romantic and fragrant and it hurts less to read about than it does to read about Catherine and Michael.

Like Gemmell, Cunningham seems to be questioning what women are willing to take, what we sometimes keep secret even from ourselves, in our desires to be modern, to be like what we think other women are like, what the media tells us we should be like. And if that makes us sad, can we find the voice to say so?

This is a lighter novel than The Bride. It has a warmer heart and ultimately a greater sincerity. The story is not remarkable, but the ways dichotomies of sadness and happiness, bliss and despair, sex and love, are explored here, touch nerves.

The Bride Stripped Bare is something of a misnomer for Gemmell's novel, just as the 'Anonymous' tag is now slightly nonsensical. The narrator almost strips bare. She thinks about stripping bare. For a number of pages, the reader can almost look in and see her most fragile secrets and her deepest bruises. But then the novel wraps itself up tightly, and nothing surprising or daring is laid bare from then on. Geography, though, is an apt title for Sophie Cunningham's novel. This narrator—and this write—is tracing through space, somewhat innocently and girlishly trying to find a way into issues that seem urgent but are too elusive or just too scary to contemplate. We leave Catherine and Ruby in gentle images; it is an ending to be enjoyed, a perfect ending to a novel packed for a summer holiday. But the heavier weight of the rest of the novel is palpable. A honeymoon is ephemeral, but the issues trying their hardest to burst out of these novels, and not quite succeeding, seem set to linger.

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[1] In the recently published anthology Not For Sale: Feminists Resisting Prostitution and Pornography, eds. Christine Stark and Rebecca Whisannt, Spinifex, North Melbourne, 2004, for instance, Whisannt writes:

Sniggering jokes about porn in mainstream sitcoms and other TV shows are as common as dirt. Girls of ten and twelve know how to mimic the poses and conventions of the industry, having watched shows like Can You Be a Porn Star? on cable TV. Pornography has become the ultimate cool—quotidian and yet thrillingly audacious. Constant pop cultural references teach us that men’s pornography use is both inevitable and completely legitimate, and that the way to be a cool, modern, liberated woman is to not only tolerate it but join in (p. 16).