

Joan London, *The Good Parents*, Vintage Books, 2008. ISBN: 978 1 74166 793 6

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The Good Parents (2008) is Joan London's second novel. Her published works include two collections of short stories, *Sister Ship* (1986) awarded with the Age Book of the Year, and *Letter to Constantine* (1993), winner of the Steele Rudd Award and Western Australian Premier's Book Award for Fiction. Her first novel, *Gilgamesh* (2001), also won the Age Book of the Year for Fiction in 2002. With these credentials, one expects to find in *The Good Parents* a fine novel, and London does not disappoint us.

In the first pages the author leads us to believe that the story is about a runaway eighteen-year-old country girl from the Australian wheat-belt, Maya, who has moved from her hometown to Melbourne, and then leaves the city with her middle-aged boss and lover, just before her parents' arrival on a visit. However, as the story unfolds, we see that the themes dealt with by London have more to do with our need to break with primordial ties and to establish other bonds [apparently] of our own choice in order to achieve self-knowledge, and acknowledge and accept part of our parents' presence in ourselves. In fact, for the most part of the novel Maya remains a ghostly figure; we hardly know anything about her until the final chapters, except that she is alive because she occasionally phones her younger brother Marcus, who has stayed behind at home in Western Australia.

Maya's absence haunts her parents, Toni and Jacob, while they are staying in Melbourne with their daughter's housemate, Cecile, trying to find her as they wait for her return. They seem to be the good parents the title of the novel refers to: a liberal middle-aged couple, who still have an air of the 1960s utopia hanging about them, especially in the case of Jacob. The unexpected absence of their daughter makes them ponder about their role as parents, wondering up to what extent they can actually foresee and prevent the trouble and pain of growing for their children. In London's words, there comes a point when with older children '[t]here's not much to do, except wait and be there' when the moment arrives (Sullivan 2008).

Maya's disappearance, in turn, makes them wonder and look back from the perspective of time and middle age about their own relationships with their parents, and how these have affected their own attitudes towards their children. Toni, for example, comes from a typical middle-class background, and her mother, Beryl, is obsessed with keeping up appearances and good reputation. Her father, Nig, is typically aloof with Toni and her

older sister Karen, 'never seemed to really look at his daughters, as if that was taboo. He treated them both with a distant, courteous affection'. Expected to marry after obtaining her university degree, Maya feels constrained and, inevitably, feels attracted to Cy Fisher, a mysterious, self-made man, involved in obscure business enterprises:

There was something compelling about him. And that was the truth about Cy Fisher. He always did exactly what he wanted to. In him the channel between will and action ran unusually fast, unusually pure. He didn't allow himself doubts or guilt. Above all else he despised fear. Fear was the only quality in others that he didn't tolerate.

Although after marrying Cy Tony feels once again constrained due to the surveillance she is subjected to, his lessons teach her to take control of her life, escaping from him with Jacob's help. The issue is, obviously, if her daughter will have the same luck. As it turns out, it is Cy who finds and brings Maya back home after a chance encounter with Toni many years after their last meeting.

By contrast, Jacob's upbringing is haunted by an absent father, a sailor who is reported to have drowned and who only left behind as evidence of his existence an old photograph. Jacob and his younger sister, Kitty, are provided for by their mother Arlene, who seems to be only interested in her clothes shop:

Arlene was a successful businesswoman who, as she said, always paid her bills. She'd never let her children prevent her from doing anything she wanted, and didn't bother to conceal the fact that she couldn't wait for them to leave.

Despite the fiasco of putting into practice his hippy ideals by living in a commune with Toni right after their elopement, he nonetheless tries to live up to them at Warton in Western Australia, blending in and finding out that the values he and Toni had come to cherish so much, 'sharing, hospitality, community, turned out to be country values, not radical at all'. And, '[a]part from his sporadic little trips to Perth, he stuck around. His kids were going to know what it was to have a father'.

But the issue of being a good parent is not only limited to Jacob, Toni and their children, and to Jacob, Toni and their parents. The concept of parent as a carer and nurturing figure is especially dealt with in relation to secondary characters, all depicted with psychological depth. For example, Jacob's sister, Kitty, moves to Warton to look after Magnus. She not only feeds him with dishes from all over the world, but is also capable of recognising his restlessness and his talent through his ideas about music:

Kitty felt a prickle of professional excitement. She recognised talent when she saw it. A Gifted Child. Her mind raced in the old way, with challenges, strategies, possibilities.

He was one of the ones who were dying to leave, like his sister. Where would be the best place for him to go? He had to consider the options. She took care to leave *The Guardian Weekly* on the kitchen table where Magnus could read it. The shyness, the slovenliness of speech, would drop away by itself, as hers had. It was important to give him the right sort of support

now. So that he didn't make some self-destructive decision like Maya probably had'.

It is also worth noting London's dexterity in depicting atmospheres, particularly in Melbourne and contrasting them with the sense of isolation, bareness and space in a town from the wheat-belt of Western Australia: the 'silver-white expanse, edged with dead black stick-like trees. It stretched as far as the eye could see, like a Russian snowfield', near a town in which even in 'mid-morning the main street looked uninhabited. The shops were vast barns half-lit by fluoro strips, the sparsely stocked shelves reminded her [Kitty] of Prague in ninety-one' (192; 191). Similarly, Jacob, while moving about Melbourne, also suffers a kind of culture shock like the one Kitty experiences when she arrives at Warton:

'Everything was thrown into the mix here. A broken-down worker's cottage next to an up-to-the-minute converted warehouse, all weatherboard and corrugated iron. Glimpses of old-time suburbia, front fences, roses, birdsong, then an apartment block with an Asian look, tiled white balconies, wrought-iron screens. Two shops side by side, one selling newspapers, ice creams and shampoo, like a shot at a beach, the other transformed into a hip little wine bar. A Buddhist nun with a vivid homely face walked past, her burgundy robe not out of place here. In the distance were old brick factory chimneys, a spire, a civic clock, a fluttering Australian flag.
So this is what had happened to the rest of the country!

Overall, a highly recommended reading about the im/possibilities of living up to ideals, about choices and their consequences, and also about contemporary fin-de-siècle Australia.