

GROWING UP DOWN UNDER

Review by Eddie Woods

Salt Pan by Rowan Hewison
Melbourne House, London
196 pages, ISBN 0 86161 020 2

Good books, I reckon, deserve tight reviews. So I'll get to the point quickly. *Salt Pan*, Rowan Hewison's first novel—itself a tight piece of writing, as crisp and rugged as I imagine the air in the Australian bush must be—is one of the best books I have read in years. What is more, it took me by complete surprise. I was expecting a disaster. Something adequately crafted, full of smart lines and deftly turned phrases, but a disaster nonetheless. Instead I discovered a real book. And behind it, a real writer. It was enough to make me jump for joy. They don't grow many writers like Rowan. They never did.

So what is a good writer anyway? For one thing, it is someone who can breathe so much life into a story, any story, that for the time it takes to cover its pages the reader knows there is nowhere else he ought to be but there, inside that book. The characters and the settings in which these characters find themselves (placed there by an act of God the Writer), the effects on their lives, thoughts, relationships of the various events which, taken together, create the book's dominant mood and are at once the whole of the story: in the hands of a good writer not only do all these things become interesting to a reader, they actually force the reader to *become them*. A good writer, therefore, also makes serious inroads into the reader's hold on their own free will.

This is exactly what Rowan did to me with *Salt Pan*. And especially given the circumstances, I can only congratulate him for it. It was no mean trick, to be sure. Although I wanted to like the book (I want to like, on some level or another, every book I read), the odds against that happening were at least as strong as those confronting the happy survival of young Sean Slocum each time he trekked off into the bush carrying nothing more deadly than a simple snake stick or when he crossed Pittwater "in that canoe of his in even the blackest of weather," something he did as regularly and with as much ease as eating or taking a shit.

But the main difference between me and Sean, the book's central character (and Rowan Hewison's semi-autobiographical alter ego), is that 'Snow' Slocum never once doubted the survival prospects attached to these or any of the commonplace experiences that went with growing up in and around Salt Pan Cove. Most rural Aussies wouldn't. As for me, I fully anticipated a slow death resulting from boredom. The typical New York stance, of course. But then, just look at the setting.

As a longtime traveler, forty-odd countries and all, there are few places on earth I am less interested in than Australia. I've been close, mind you, at a time when it was still possible to get in there with little or no money and a minimum of hassle. But after spending six months in Bali, and meeting

enough Barry MacKenzies to last me a lifetime, I shrugged off the occasional fantasy of perverse nights haunting the brothels and drag bars of Sydney's King's Cross and headed west, back into Java and eventually the jungles of Ceylon. For it is not the bush that turns my thoughts off visiting Oz, with all its snakes, desolation and murderous funnelweb spiders; no, it has more to do with all those empty Foster's beer tins!

So there was that weighing against the likelihood of my finding *Salt Pan* a worthwhile book, the sense of a vast prodigality that always makes the convict continent down under seem too similar to the American Wild West to suit my sophisticated, even decadent tastes. Yet, by virtue of a unique prose style that has no precise antecedents known to me (the comparison with Hemingway, made by one commentator on Rowan's work, shouldn't be pushed too far), the author of this exquisite little narrative of a youth growing up naturally, the way a gum tree grows or a kookaburra, has successfully bridged that particular gap in my consciousness. He has made the potentially dull appear as lively and vital as it intrinsically is, and done this without once being untrue, either to the solitary emptiness of his native land or the undeniable triviality of everyday life. And that, as far as I'm concerned, is one of the unmistakable hallmarks of good writing.

There are others, and the reader who cares about such things will find most of them indelibly stamped all through the rapidly negotiated pages of *Salt Pan*. An attention to detail so fraught with storytelling significance that it makes the minutest trifle seem like no detail at all; impeccable storyline, as tightly woven as a top class Persian carpet, say an Ardebil or a century-old Qashqa'i, and aided by such an adroit flashback technique that the time sequences never flow except along their most natural and necessary courses; things like that.

Plus, and this is a real find for language voyeurs such as myself who can wax almost lustful watching certain sentences strut their seductive charms: a strange, yet disarmingly beautiful brand of syntax that I can only describe as exotic. In the beginning I kept looking for flaws in it, expecting that—if Rowan goes on in this way—sooner or later he will have to break down, get swamped, same as the nineteen or so surfboats got swamped by the big waves at Newport Beach, the day Sean and his childhood girlfriend Gill hiked down to the coast to see them race. But like Sean, and like Sean's remarkable parents Bill and Colleen, Rowan the writer (the young wizard from Oz) never so much as stumbled.

Oh—or rather "Orhh," as these outback Aussies tend to pronounce it—right at the end (just where Sean, too, finally fudges it a bit, in that unexpectedly harrowing scene in Vietnam) I did find one sentence that proved awkward beyond redemption. As a dyed-in-the-wool believer in kinky karma, I can only assume Rowan put it there specially for me, a sort of stoned sop for my nasty side. Thanks, kid.

But now I see that my own promise, to write a tight review, is starting to stretch at the seams. That's what happens when you fall in love, with a person, a book, or just about anything, I guess. You can't talk about it enough. Yet this much more about *Salt Pan* I must say, promises be damned.

Sex. For chrissake let's not forget sex. Thing is, up until well past the book's middle point I pretty much supposed that Rowan had. Moreover, I didn't really care. I was actually getting off on canoe building, scavenging for copper "from Salt Pan all the way past Horseshoe Cove and Crystal Bay," even on packing four hundred dozen beer bottles into a yard full of banana crates, and for only ten quid at that. "Three rows of six, pinion, two, five, five times two. One box, three dozen, one shilling and sixpence." Easy, once you get the hang of it. And Sean's canoe, every last inch of it handmade by a master artisan, was halfway to bought.

Then, with the suddenness of a bushfire, but delicate, and ever so subtly portrayed, come those rapturous love scenes over on Scotland Island. Envidable, isn't it? To be an overripe teenaged boy, and find yourself seduced by an attractive older woman. It happened to me, as well. And as one who shall also never forget the experience, perhaps not a minute of it, I can assure you that Rowan's pen has juiced this idyllic episode with all the sensuality it so richly deserves. Without once being nakedly explicit (and how I love writers to be explicit, aficionado of hardcore porn that I forever am), the author nonetheless satisfies the foremost criteria for unveiling, with words, the magic intensity of a sexual act. He will, unless you are more jaded even than I, or a stone cold puritan, surely arouse you.

A final note. I had heard it said of Rowan, on the literary grapevine, that he was "another one of those who knows how to write but, unfortunately, has nothing to write about." Well, take it from me, there is no such thing. And this book proves it. One learns how to write in order to express oneself. And no one who has developed their craft as immaculately as Rowan Hewison has could ever be devoid of something worthy to say; or, when the primary bent is fiction, of some interesting story to tell. The impetus needed to travel that far along the path of perfection would spend itself long before the goal were even imperfectly reached. Ultimately, then, a good writer is simply someone who knows how to write. Someone like Rowan.

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