



Kathy Hunt | *August 23, 2008*

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The Sinkings

By Amanda Curtin

University of Western Australia Press, 375pp, \$24.95

BASED on actual events and the rarest of disorders, Amanda Curtin's debut novel is a story of multiple beginnings and endings with murder as the prologue.

We first meet Willa Samson in the State Records Office in Perth. Aged 44 and living alone with her charming cat, Lucifer, she has not been able to work as a copy editor since the loss of her daughter Imogen. Deserted by her husband and paralysed by grief, she has shorn her long hair and begun to see food as irrelevant. She has even thought about cutting herself.

But somehow, through the fog of despair, her mind has held on to one small mystery, a crime from the convict past. With nothing better to do, she begins some desultory research and is soon seduced by the thrill of the genealogical chase. Her subject is a man of many aliases called John (Jock) King.

Twelve years before Willa had come across his case in *Past Lives*, a local historical journal submitted for editing. Known as Little Jock, he had been brutally murdered and dismembered at a clearing near Albany called the Sinkings. The next year, 1883, a fellow ex-convict named John Collins was found guilty of the crime and sentenced in the Supreme Court. Among all the legal and historical information, however, is the evidence of the colonial surgeon who contradicts himself when it comes to gender identification. On first reading *Past Lives*, Willa had experienced a "shock of recognition". She could see in this tragedy things "that others could not", and they relate directly to Imogen.

In conducting the post-mortem examination, Albany doctor Cecil Rogers is confronted with "two inorganic substances". Willa believes that these were ovaries and that Little Jock was intersexed, an embarrassing situation for the authorities because the terms of convict transportation to Western Australia specified males only. Contemplating "the hard, shrivelled, useless ovaries of a man named Jock King", Rogers pushes for a second opinion but is forced to toe the line. The grisly matter is filed away until another child is born, a baby of indeterminate sex, the "unedited" daughter of Willa and Matthew Gates.

In tracing the life and difficult times of Little Jock, Curtin brings her love of history into play as she takes us back to a cabin in county Tyrone and the famine that surrounds it. There a young woman dies in childbirth, leaving an infant in rags and a troubled midwife.

A few years later, rumours of the changeling reach the ears of the Collector, a hunter and purveyor of freaks to sideshows and the department of anatomy in Glasgow. Captured and spirited across the Irish Sea, the child encounters the Lunney family on board ship. Through them

she will manage to escape the Collector and assume a new identity as Mary Lunney's dead son Patrick.

The Sinkings ranges in time between 1838, when Little Jock is born, and the present day. Stylistically, only writers who have dealt with the 19th century will know how hard it is to resist the insidious rhythms of its ornate language. They get into your head and your syntax and before you know it you're writing like Gladstone. Curtin makes only four mistakes here, with a tautology -- "a dialogue between two" -- thrown in.

A winner of several prestigious awards for short fiction, she demonstrates an otherwise effortless transition to the novel form as she moves between eras, alternating Willa's and Little Jock's stories.

An enormous amount of research supports her grim evocation of 19th-century Belfast, Glasgow and the Swan River colony, but in her hands this gives life and muscle to the prose without burdening it or, by extension, the reader.

A stimulating aspect of her style is the way she uses italics to express thoughts and underline ironies. After Imogen's birth, Willa and her husband take the baby to a specialist, a pediatric endocrinologist whose job it is to assign gender. On the page the consultation is slashed through with italics, their power hammered home in the clinical detail: Imogen has a testicle and an ovary. The doctor decrees that at 0.9cm the clitoris is not just oversized but "monstrously so". It is no use as a penis either: fully extended, "anything less than 2.5cm" is just as unacceptable.

With the meaning of his soubriquet now obvious, Little Jock is at least spared the technological arrogance of modern endocrinology and almost makes it in the New World. His killer, however, is very much a victim of his time, suffering, Willa suspects, from lead poisoning, a condition that precipitates his crazed and murderous attack.

But it is Willa's mystery that remains to be solved and about halfway through the book she asks an important question as she contemplates poor Mary Lunney and the fate of her adopted son Jock: "What was worse: to grieve the loss of a dead child or to know your child was alive but gone from you, never to return?"

I put a question mark in the margin here and I was right. Even as Jock dies with a comet reflected in his eyes, Curtin is sowing the seeds of a happy ending. Cool, musical and mysterious, The Sinkings is a fine achievement.

Kathy Hunt is a literary critic based in rural Victoria.