

*Last Summer* by Craig Higginson (Picador Africa)  
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*Last Summer* violates several fictional conventions. In the first place, the title is a puzzler: the events described in the book seem to have taken place a good few summers ago. Then, Picador Africa's brief is presumably to publish fiction that is in some sense African; well, this novel is set in Stratford Upon Avon around a production of *The Tempest*. Admittedly, an important secondary character was born in South Africa, as was the author, but African fiction it's not. Thirdly, the novel is nominally told in the first person, but blithely avails itself of the third-person privilege of omniscience, hopping in and out its characters' heads and eavesdropping on conversations the narrator is not present at.

Does all this matter? No, not really, except to the kind of pedant who writes reviews. Since first-person narration is no more than a convention, there's no reason not to bend the convention to one's purposes. As for the African obligation, it is surely to be welcomed that African fiction casts its web wider than the local. And the title? Well, it's a catchy title, with a suitably elegiac note to it.

The summer in question, then, is recalled by one Thomas, a young assistant director at Stratford. His mentor is Harry, an ageing ex-South African director, at present directing a production of *The Tempest*, in which the role of Miranda is taken by Lucy Orchard, a self-engrossed young woman with whom Tom is hopelessly in love.

Enter Kim, a charismatic and beautiful young man who operates the local chain ferry. Lucy develops a fixation on Kim, and he reciprocates by falling in love with her. Lucy's histrionic boyfriend shows up for a showdown, then goes off and electrocutes himself. Harry is diagnosed with heart disease, has an operation, but dies soon after.

That's about it, as far as plot is concerned: in other words, this is not a plot-driven novel. The interest is altogether in the telling, in the delicacy and precision of the writing, and in the subtle fluctuations between people that determine the outcomes of relationships and the courses of lives. Central to the novel's exploration of relationships is, naturally, the concept of acting, in particular the fluidity of personality that acting lends itself to. Lucy is the prime exponent of this theme, as she tries out various roles for herself. We are told repeatedly that she adjusts her personality to the occasion, in effect has no stable self. Contrasting Kim in this respect with Lucy, Thomas says: "He presented facts about himself irrespective of how they might look from the outside. Lucy, I am sorry to say, was accustomed to mediating everything about herself, so that others would perceive her in a particular light."

The author's problem is to make us care enough for this creature to believe that she matters, and that Tom's infatuation deserves our respect or even sympathy. But Thomas is, in spite of his role as narrator, a somewhat tenuous presence, always on the outside looking in, wistfully aware of other lives more vivid than his. Of course, the peripheral narrator is a time-honoured convention, from Lockwood in *Wuthering Heights* through Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* to Nick in *The Great Gatsby*; the point often is exactly in the limitedness of the narrator's perceptions. But Higginson, having granted his narrator omniscience, has caught him in a technical dilemma: as a character Thomas is beguiled by Lucy, but as narrator he is ruthlessly clear-sighted about her. The best Thomas can do

to resolve this quandary is to tell the reader: "For now you simply need to accept that I loved that girl from the second I saw her."

In Lucy's falling in love with Kim we are given, at last, something less predictably self-serving. Once again, Thomas analyses the case for us: "Kim had brought that part of her that was deeper than her ego back to life. Well, this is how it felt to her."

The laconic last sentence is the clincher: even Lucy's self-discovery is just another role. For the time being, she is acting All for Love, a role that soon modulates into Noble Self-Sacrifice, as she terminates the relationship with Kim because of the fear that "she would one day disappoint him": "She cared for him too much and trusted herself too little to take the chance." That the hitherto totally self-absorbed Lucy should give up something she prizes because she feels herself unworthy of it, is entirely out of character – except in so far as the "I am unworthy" stance is another one of her acts.

"Any story can look redemptive if you begin and end in the appropriate place," Thomas says. "We need such fictions in order to carry on." In this instance, we are denied this fiction: in a devastatingly perfunctory Postscript, our every hope that Lucy might after all have something to her is dashed. But the Postscript also rescues the novel, in that to have been asked to believe in a happy-ever-after for Lucy and Kim would have strained the reader's credulity beyond snapping point. As it is, the Postscript deftly finishes off a novel that has turned out to be, not about young love triumphant, but about self-love masquerading as passion. Life, it seems, does not imitate art: it is a far more messy business altogether.