

The Apricot Colonel

Reviewed by Janet Mackenzie

Marion Halligan, *The Apricot Colonel*

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A reviewer must take care in tackling this book, given its narrator's complaint that many reviews are cavalier and vapidly dismissive, 'shockers' written by 'patronising ignorant nobodies'. 'I just wish they'd remember it's someone's heart's blood they're dealing with here.'

Heart's blood or not, this is a luscious book, replete with loving descriptions of food and clothes, bodies and landscapes. It is an entertaining read, a lighthearted blend of whodunnit and romance, but it has some serious things to say about life, literature and Australian politics. The plot romps along at a good pace and has sufficient twists to keep you guessing. The characters, with the exception of the eponymous colonel, are believable—particularly Cleo, fulfilling her immigrant parents' dreams by being perfect at everything she does.

Cassandra Travers, the narrator-heroine, is an editor. The only other novel I have encountered that features an editor as heroine is Penelope Lively's *Heat Wave*, but there the character's profession seems almost arbitrary. Halligan has infused *The Apricot Colonel* with an editor's habits of mind, from the pun of the title to the novel's overriding concern with words and books. There are many literary references, along with learned reflections on words such as 'idyll' and 'gibbous'. Cassandra discourses entertainingly on storytelling, on the editor's role and relationship with the author, on the differences between novels and memoirs, on Greek myths and postmodern truths. She relates horror stories and cautionary tales, many well known in the book trade, about authors' foolishness, editors' misjudgements, proofreading slips, production disasters—all the shadows that may fall between idea and reality.

Even non-editors will find nuggets of delight. Cassandra's difficult relationship with her glamorous, self-centred mother is deftly sketched. A modern woman's dismay at encountering a man who seems to want commitment is depressingly plausible. There is an unpleasant but unforgettable description of a character relishing the grisly details of a murder, masticating the words like rare, bloody meat. The launch of a book of poems at the National Library provides a wonderful comic scene: the minister's speech is insincere and out of touch, the author's best friend and rival torpedoed the book rather than launches it, a food fight turns into fisticuffs and the poetry wars are almost explained.

Inevitably the novel has some blemishes. It seems gratuitous to give four of the male characters blue eyes, described variously as ice blue, sea blue, porcelain blue and 'blue so pale it looks grey'. The bemused reader

is relieved to find that the inhabitants of the novel are also misled by this proliferation, and in fact the plot is advanced by an incident in which one blue-eyed man is mistaken for another, but four is too many. The novel's denouement is sufficiently exciting, but the practical details of it seem unlikely—just how long can one hold a struggling infant at arm's length with one hand? Readers accept that the mystery genre requires a scene in which all is revealed, so it's not really necessary to drag in Agatha Christie as an excuse for the set-piece explanation. And of course it's always a risk to write about proofreading errors: sure enough, 'breath' is twice used for 'breathe', and 'trollop' acquires an extra letter that misleadingly evokes the famous family of writers.

But the major problem for me in this book is the colonel. I know he's a romantic hero but he's way too good to be true. He seems to be a compound of Mr Darcy and Simon Templar reborn as a sensitive new age guy. Equally handy with screwdriver and picklock, frying pan and gun, he is masterful but respectful, protective but never stifling, extraordinarily well informed but willing to take instruction. Not only that, but he admires tough-minded women and his feminine side is thoroughly developed. Like all the best heroes, he is unattached and owns desirable real estate.

For editors, starved for portrayals of themselves, the main interest in the novel is the description of the heroine's professional life. Cassandra's glamorous, trouble-free work is almost unrecognisable as freelance editing: the jobs are plentiful and interesting, the authors are uniformly grateful and admiring, and the publishers grovel, flatter and plead. Her varied projects include a personal account of the first Gulf War; a philosophy book on the difference between appearance and reality; the autobiography of a teenager who has sailed solo round the world; a salacious memoir of an abused childhood; and a flawed masterpiece by a great novelist. Not an accounting textbook or annual report in sight.

These jobs are all done on hard copy; they appear at convenient intervals with achievable deadlines; and not one is ever delayed or withdrawn. Best of all, they come with fat fees. To complete her readers' inadequacy and despair, Cassandra is courted by two, count them, extremely eligible men, and also has a glamorous female lover who obligingly removes herself when not required. But editors will dream of identifying with Cassandra's description of their role: 'An editor is a person of power. Of grandeur. I look at a manuscript and see the scope, the structure. Grand things. This takes vision. Very few people have it.'