

# Alchemical wonder

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Matt Rubinstein

A LITTLE RAIN ON THURSDAY

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I realise it is a stretch, but imagine *The Da Vinci Code* with brains. No, that's not fair: it obviously takes brains of a kind to top best-seller lists for several years. So try thinking of how a serious intellect, as distinct from a facility for page-turning compulsiveness, might have gone to work on it. Such effort won't tell you all you need to know about Matt Rubinstein's new novel, but *A Little Rain on Thursday* is *inter alia* about old manuscripts, church history, subterranean chambers, Templars and libraries – and it *is* compulsive reading.

Jack and Beth live on the harbour outskirts of Sydney in a deconsecrated church inherited from Beth's late father, Frank, a former Protestant minister whose faith, during his last years, was seriously troubled. Jack is a subtitler of foreign-language films, and is currently involved with making sense of a Russian romance in which a couple mopes around in the eponymous rain. Beth works as a librarian and has contacts that will prove useful (and unsettling) to Jack when the church roof falls in, revealing a hitherto unobserved trapdoor. The trapdoor leads to a crypt in which Jack, who has a passion for languages, discovers a manuscript that, unlike, as he realises, the Book of Kells, 'looked like madness ... looked more like obsession'.

It becomes, very convincingly, Jack's obsession as he tries to establish its provenance and to trace the journey by which it has fetched up in Beth's father's church. Beth has a complementary obsession: poring over family photographs, she is persuaded that there is the recurring figure of a man in the background of seaside snaps of her as a child. She is already engaged in a metaphoric search for her father, a search made opaque by the suggestion that her mother, Judy, may not be telling the whole truth. Beth's worryingly incomplete sense of her father, who was not there to rescue her on a crucial childhood occasion, leads Jack to a strange and strained visit to Judy, where the heard but unseen click of a cigarette lighter clamps an idea to his mind.

These two 'searches' provide the spinal structural authority of the novel, but their possible links are worked out without constricting schematism. How things *might* fit together is glimpsed as one of the prospects that fiction offers us. Rubinstein floats potential connections between Jack's and Beth's searchings – and between these two and the interventions of several other characters who live around the periphery of their lives – only to find that some drift by without meaning, while others deepen mystery

rather than bringing clarification of the novel's overarching enigmas. For instance, will the findings of a forensic-lab acquaintance yield any reliable clue about the manuscript, or will the forensics guy prove untrustworthy?

There are hints here of A.S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990) with its academic exploration of long-lost documents and the effects of such excavations on the living; and there are echoes of Antonioni's famous 'London film', *Blow-Up* (1966), in Beth's efforts to find meaning from the blurred presence hovering in the photographs. In addition to whatever intertextual references the reader may bring to the novel, it is vital to our immersion in Jack's own backward trajectory that the author convinces us of his – and Jack's – wide-ranging cultural baggage: his awareness, for instance, of what the Babel myth represents (especially to a protagonist besotted by language), of the great library at Alexandria, of what a firsthand account of the Crusades might have been like, of a tradition of forgery among hangmen, of what became of Jack Ketch, and a good deal more.

This erudition is worn without ostentation. It belongs to almost the only thing we know about Jack: his passion for language, which will lead him and the novel to a visually evocative dénouement. At every turn, this book reveals its author's fascination with the power of language to create order out of chaos, and to create its own kinds of mystification. Translation becomes a species of alchemy 'which wasn't only about metals ... it was every kind of transformation'. What has happened to the manuscript on its way from its obscure origins to its turning up in the Sydney crypt is a matter of ongoing alchemical wonder to Jack.

The other aspect of Jack to which the novel makes us privy is his relationship with Beth; this is rendered in language of unprurient, sensuous precision. Part of the novel's narrative pattern moves towards defining this relationship; and its wisdom is in never expecting wholly to know anyone but to be grateful for small areas of spotlight understanding. Along the way, there are tantalising, lesser mysteries. What is the meaning of the small tattoo on Beth's body, and why does it seem to replicate a sign in the manuscript? How much does their Indian friend Sandy know? Was Beth's mother unfaithful to her husband? Are the roof-mender O'Rourke and his Russian offsideer linked to the mystery of the manuscript? Overall, is there a larger, more dangerous conspiracy at work than Jack has grasped?

Put baldly like that, these plot threads suggest elements in a conventional thriller, like, in fact, the best-seller I began by naming. What needs stressing, though, is that this is a work of some subtlety (sometimes bordering on the Carey-cryptic).

Aptly enough for a book in which languages loom large, *A Little Rain on Thursday* quietly surprises with its evocative clarity of diction ('Some door of his mind banged on its hinges'). This, along with so much else, suggests that Rubinstein's future novels will be worth waiting for. Utterly unparochial as it is, this novel nevertheless feels as if it couldn't be other than Australian.