

*Stormy Weather* has a later setting, the mid-1950s. Television is on its way and we are in the dying days of the Blind Concert, a touring troupe that plays in country halls around Victoria raising money for the Institute for the Blind. Events in the novel take place over one day in Towaninnie as the venerable Concert — now a sadly diminished affair — sets up one more time. There is strife between the pianist and his singer wife, the Barringtons; the compere who runs the show seems not to be in control; Freddie Barrington, fleeing his debts in Melbourne, might or might not turn up. Alcohol flows almost as freely as the torrents of rain (this book is rainier than *Rashomon* — and has more narrative perspectives).

Beyond the town lies the swamp and there, in a chaos of motor parts and other junk, lives a mysterious young man, the rabbit. He encourages visitors to come and see the swamp: 'Our swamps aren't like other swamps.' If this were an epic, he'd be a Grendel-figure. Instead, as some reviewers have already pointed out, he is closer to Caliban. I see him more as an example of what folklorists call the Trickster. His doings might be as simple as spraying drinkers on the pub verandah with mud as he drives past, or he might engage in more subtle acts of sabotage, some of which appear to have a malign edge.

It is quickly clear that the story will lead up to the concert, and its success or failure. This is a delightful yarn but one which plays on its darker elements to tease and threaten the reader with the prospect that the romance might yet turn out to have a savage ending. The story should be predictable but an exquisite tension is maintained. 'Be not afeard,' as Caliban almost said; 'the town is full of noises, / Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.' But can we trust him?

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Laurie Clancy

Serge Liberman  
*Voices from the Corner*  
Fine Lit \$19.95pb, 263pp  
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A FEW YEARS AGO I WAS teaching an anthology of Australian short stories to a group of very bright Spanish honours students at the University of Barcelona. As one would expect, some of the stories were written by Australia's most famous and highly regarded writers but at the end of the course the students voted unanimously for Serge Liberman's 'Envy's Fire' as the finest story they had read on the course.

This did not surprise me. Although he often locates his stories very specifically in local milieu, Liberman writes quite consciously in the tradition of universality that characterises the great nineteenth century writers of the Russia where he was born, the tradition of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Chekhov. His stories may be set locally — 'St Kilda Madonna', 'Messiah in Acland Street' — but they aim quite deliberately always towards the truths and dilemmas of the human condition.

*Voices from the Corner* is Liberman's fifth collection of short fiction — some eighty stories in all — and together they comprise a formidable and enduring achievement, one linked by recurring themes, locales, even characters, but above all by questions of the most fundamental and enduring kind.

Liberman can at times write with a kind of heartbreaking clumsiness. For instance, there is a sentence in 'St Kilda Madonna' that goes for seventeen lines and contains nine parentheses. His language is full of old-fashioned and formal words and sometimes tends to abstraction. All this is part of the intense moral earnestness that informs his imagination and finally it does not seem to matter or to affect the quality of his writing. As with Thomas Hardy, a comparison that would not otherwise come quickly to mind, it is the signature of his integrity. Even the titles of the books indicate the bitter solemnity of their concerns: *A Universe of Clowns*, *The Life That I Have Led* and, most Dostoevskian of all, *The Battered and the Redeemed*.

This is not an art that lends itself easily to either humour or irony. Nearly all the stories are written in the first person and sometimes there can be a certain uniformity of tone that flattens the individuality of the characters. Liberman's old men and young boys do not sound very different. His central figures are questers in search of life's meaning — artists, dreamers, prostitutes determined to reclaim their lives, the suffering and the dispossessed. Death is an ever-present factor in the stories, as is familial conflict. Even more pervasive is Liberman's Jewishness. The shadow of the Holocaust hangs heavily over each of his books, even though its presence is rarely overt.

To be fair, *Voices from the Corner* is unusual in one respect in that there are rare ventures into humour and whimsy. 'Messiah in Acland Street' is an uneven and uncertain story that offers a kind of parody of the apocalypse. It is unclear how far the intended purpose is comic. In 'Keinfreind's Golem' the eponymous Keinfreind is destroyed by the figure he has created and that guards over him zealously. 'The Luck of the Draw' drifts into a kind of apocalyptic fantasy. 'For the Good of All Mankind' moves towards almost a dystopian universe in which human emotions can be controlled and programmed.

It's admirable that Liberman can experiment and stretch his range in this way but he seems on surer ground when he returns to the troubling moral questions that inform all his fiction — death, the inherent meaninglessness of life, the problem of human suffering. More explicitly than any of his previous books, *Voices from the Corner* affirms the author's explicit denial of any possibility of ontological order in the universe. 'Pebbles for a Father' puts it as plainly and brutally as possible:

*Try, persuade me otherwise when, to me, after interment in the ground there is, neither in this world nor in any supposed beyond, any ongoing life, or pulse, or breath, or tremor of expectation, nor any mind, or memory, or soul.*



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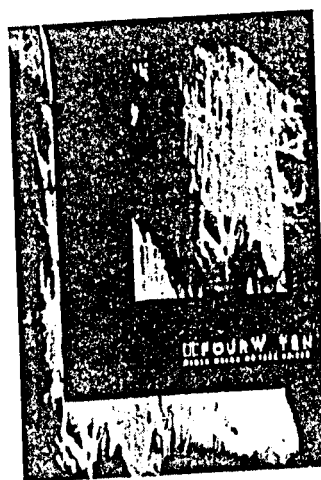
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Serge Liberman

The last two stories in this collection are the most nakedly autobiographical that Liberman has written so far and among the most disturbing. 'Pebbles for a Father' is a harrowing portrait of the life and death of Abram Jacob Liberman and his son's guilt at not being able to bridge the emotional gap between them. 'Voices from the Corner' shows the author gathering, in Yeatsian terms, his circus animals together, looking back on his career and debating with himself, also in Yeatsian terms, the artist's eternal dilemma of what sacrifices must be made to art and how finally satisfying they are — 'Perfection of the life or of the work.'

Laurie Clancy is a Melbourne freelance fiction writer and critic. His most recent novel is *Night Parking* (Bystander Press).



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