

TALES OF KATHARINE

Ian Reid – a presentation at the KSP Writers' Centre, 8.12.13

I should begin with a disclaimer. If the title of this session has led you to expect revealing anecdotes about Katharine from the lips of someone who had a close personal relationship with her, you'll be disappointed. I never met KSP. She died when I was still a young fellow, long before I came to Perth. But not long before her death we did write to each other, and although our correspondence was brief and limited it may have some interest for you today as part of a commemorative occasion. Here's how that exchange of letters came about.

I was a new arrival in Australia at the time, a student at Adelaide University, a voracious reader of Australian fiction; and Katharine's writings had a strong appeal for me. Having grown up in New Zealand, I'd read only a few works of Australian literature before moving to this country to embark on postgraduate research. But one book I did know well was Katharine's *Coonardoo* – a lyrical and tragic story of station life and racial exploitation set in the north-west of Western Australia, the first novel to make an Indigenous character central and to evoke with empathy the imagined experiences of such a person. On its appearance 85 years ago it had shocked the reading public. Encountering it decades later, I found it a deeply moving introduction to certain aspects of this country, its landscape and its conflicted relations of race, gender and class. I then read Katharine's autobiography, *Child of the Hurricane*, discovering that, like me, she was born on a South Pacific Island. Perhaps her early years in Fiji had something to do with her later openness to different cultures.

At the time when I wrote to KSP, immersed in the study of Australian literary culture, I had taken a keen interest in fiction of the 1930s and 1940s, particularly in how it was influenced by that profound social trauma known as the Great Depression. Most of the writers who came to prominence in those years were still alive, but elderly. In those days little information was readily available about most of them. Not only were there, of course, no electronic resources at all but even the material in print was quite limited. I decided, brashly, to write to several of the fiction-writers who had been active in the

period between 1930 and 1950 with questions about their work and its social context. Some of them took a bit of tracking down but they all generously replied. Among them were Christina Stead, Kylie Tennant, Patrick White, Frank Dalby Davison, Alan Marshall, John Morrison, Judah Waten, Leonard Mann, Marjorie Barnard, Dal Stivens – and Katherine Susannah Prichard. Subsequently in my book on *Fiction and the Great Depression* I quoted from their letters, which I later donated to a university library.

Katharine responded to me by agreeing that her experiences during the Depression years had “certainly...reinforced her political convictions” – which, as you all know, were strongly socialist – in fact she had already become an active campaigner for the Communist Party. But the main point of my enquiry was the novel she had written in the early 1930s, *Intimate Strangers*, and on the subject of its structure she disagreed with me, resisting the view that the narrative focus changes half way through. I’m not alone in thinking that the story’s components are not fully integrated, but my specific suggestion was that the structural and tonal change in the middle of it results from the Depression’s powerful emotional impact not just on the characters but also on the author. The early chapters lack any broad social dimension; they revolve around the interrelations of a few people. Then these characters suddenly become windows opening on to society at large as Australia is devastated by the collapse of its economy. The main characters, a middle-class couple called Greg and Elodie Blackwood, have their complacency upended and eventually put their faith in Communism as the answer to all personal and social problems. With this second half of *Intimate Strangers*, KSP’s fiction begins to be dominated, as several critics remark, by a propagandist impulse that would later engender her not wholly convincing goldfields trilogy.

This point about the novel’s change of mood takes on a poignant significance in relation to her own personal circumstances while *Intimate Strangers* was being composed. She began the novel in 1929 and wrote its early part before the worst phase of the Depression really set in. But the writing of the second half, which seems to belong mainly to the period after 1933 when the economic crisis had passed its peak, can be seen as an attempt to resolve her own disturbing experiences at that time. As many of you know, acute financial

anxieties drove her husband Hugo Throssell (known as Jim) to suicide in 1933, when she was visiting Russia. In her novel *Greg Blackwood* almost kills himself for the same reason but tragedy is averted. In her letter to me Katharine acknowledged that her own personal distress did affect the ending of the novel. This is entirely understandable, but I think it is a contrived ending, culminating as it does with the main characters finding a new sense of purpose in their commitment to work towards the overthrow of capitalism.

However, elements of *Intimate Strangers*, and of Katharine's own life, stayed with me during the decades that followed my brief correspondence with her. Tales of Katharine make an appearance in one of my own novels, *That Untravelled World*, which appeared last year. It's set here in Western Australia, much of it during the Depression period, and several passages refer directly to KSP, her husband, and her writing. For example in one episode my main character, Harry, rents a room in the home of a young couple, Ruth and Patrick, and as they talk together Ruth expresses frustration at having been unable to get any worthwhile employment as a reporter...

[At this point I read a passage from That Untravelled World in which these characters of mine talk about KSP, her husband and her novel Intimate Strangers.]

Soon after this Harry moves up to Northam, where a neighbor turns out to be obsessed with the death of Jim Throssell, who had grown up in that town and whose transformation from heroic soldier to radical socialist aroused conflicting emotions there. And then Harry also finds himself in a troubled domestic relationship that brings back to his mind the sad phrase "intimate strangers."

In having incorporated something of the tale of Katharine's novel and her husband's suicide into my own fiction, I'm not alone. Another local writer who has done so, rather differently, is Amanda Curtin, in her short story "The Prospect of Grace." So Katharine's tales and tales about Katharine still continue, 100 years after her first book was published, to come back among us – sometimes in ways that she herself might perhaps not have regarded as entirely happy returns, but always circulating, nevertheless, in an implied spirit of grateful homage.