

Siddon Rock is a perfect example of how powerful magical realism can be in the hands of a talented and insightful author. The aboriginal guide Jack shows us the lay of the metaphysical land when his employer Henry, fresh off the boat from England, compares his first experiences of Australia with Alice's adventures in Wonderland:

This Gulliver, Jack said, he a friend of yours?

Not exactly, Henry replied. He's in a story. Not real.

Jack looked concerned and laid a friendly hand on Henry's arm. Pity that ... Our stories here. They real.

These days the label 'Magic Realism' is used to refer to any escapist novel that includes supernatural elements but does not easily fit into science fiction or fantasy and as a result the term has lost its potency. It originally referred specifically to the work a branch of literary authors such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Salman Rushdie. These writers were distinguished not only by their skill in showing us the world through the eyes of someone who experiences reality differently (a world inhabited by ghosts and miracles perhaps) but also by their ability to convince the reader that this worldview might actually be plausible. *Siddon Rock*, I am delighted to say, remains faithful to the original ambitions of magical realism. Furthermore, the seamless blending of various European stories and myths with the more ancient and raw power of the Australian landscape firmly places *Siddon Rock* in the company of Peter Carey's *Illywhacker* as one of the best local examples of the genre.

Like Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Glenda Guest possesses the wonderful trick of being able to make the ordinary seem miraculous and to fit the miraculous into ordinary life. Her beautiful use of the supernatural to illustrate the emotional landscape of *Siddon Rock* has allowed Glenda to bring to life an entire town of detailed and memorable characters. From the very first chapter (as Macha Connor returns home from the war, marching stoically into town, naked but for her army boots and rifle) we are allowed access to extraordinary inner lives of this outwardly nondescript bunch of farmers and immigrants.

Magic realism aside, the people of *Siddon Rock* gain most of their depth from their intuitive observations of each other, particularly the women. In this environment where internal fears and dreams are made real, it is the women who most often glimpse the truth of things. With the exception of the effeminate Alistair, the men of *Siddon Rock* are often reduced to support characters – driven by individual ambitions and obsessions they impose their thoughts and actions on a world they don't truly understand and in the end it is the women who regularly deal with the consequences.

The attention paid to language, and the etymology of names in particular, is very effective in adding extra layers of meaning. The various names for the Rock itself, as well as the allusions to various myths in the names of characters like Macha Connor and Josis Morgenstern suggest that if you listen closely enough (and perhaps do a little research) we can sometimes glimpse the true nature of things. Name changes are significant and deliberately explored throughout the novel. The evolution of 'Yad Yaddin' through 'Sit Down Rock' and ultimately 'Siddon Rock' tracks the cultural history of the site but also marks the town's gradual forgetting of the true meaning or nature of the place.

After all of this, the plot itself seems almost secondary to the everyday lives and relationships of characters, but Glenda does an excellent job keeping the tension and suspense high, with foreboding insights into the darker nature of some of the characters. There are a number of different interweaving narratives in the story, as you would expect in any town. I found two distinct threads lift to the surface but I suspect that other readers will place greater emphasis on other stories which may resonate more with them. There is certainly no one plot line that dominates and no tying up of loose ends in the last few pages. But this is far from unsatisfying as there are sufficient clues throughout the novel to make your own assumptions and the desire to go back and re-read the entire book is one many people won't be able to resist. For this reason I see it

being a great book for reading groups who will find themselves arguing with each other and quoting lines back at one another well after the cheese and biscuits have been exhausted.

Richard Bilkey, Random House