

*\*\*Please note: This Reader's Report was written for an Australian client; some of the grammar and word usage may be different to American styles and therefore may be unfamiliar to American readers.*

## **Reader's Report**

**Title: "Hollywood"**

**Author: T. Chapin [pseudonym]**

**Date: 25 April 2009**

**Critiqued by: Joan Oakland**

### General Review:

This is a story about a cultural and personal struggle set in a remote Australian town populated by Aboriginals and white Australians of European descent. The clash between the cultures is evident from the onset, with the protagonist, an aging, Caucasian male teacher presenting a grammar lesson to the Aboriginal pupils in the form of a single sentence: "*The British army positioned itself furtively behind a small rise.*" His focus is on the adverb "furtively", which the students don't understand. But thematically the phrase sets the tone of tension in the story: the cultural divide which establishes itself both physically and "secretively", in the lack of effective communication and relationship between the two races. Later, we see the Aboriginal children playing on the sandhill that separates the black and white communities, and in their imaginative games they are "wagging spears at the lighted houses below", a lost generation of warriors that might well have preferred to defend themselves against the European invaders of their ancestors.

Mr Robinson, who has taught generations of black children for forty years, stands in stark contrast to the earthy, organic, unadorned culture of the Aboriginals. His stiff formality -- three piece suits, expensive hats and impeccable cursive handwriting -- suggests British descent, but he wears Italian boots and drives a French car -- perhaps a hybrid symbol of the many European cultures that make up white Australia. One may well wonder why someone with such high regard for civilized values would remain so long in this harsh, unmanicured outback teaching post. But this too is indicative of a paradox in Australian culture: the unremitting allegiance to European (particularly British) culture despite the inhospitable landscape that refuses to be tamed by ideologies imposed upon it from alien lands.

As we learn more about Mr Robinson (we are never invited into a more intimate association with him my learning his first name), we discover a personal story in this world of opposing cultures. Despite a recurring anger management problem (presented in the disturbingly graphic opening scene when he vents his anger with physical assaults on a vulnerable student), Mr Robinson harbours a soft spot for these rough and reckless black kids. This 'softening' of his character is also fuelled by his deteriorating health, leading him grudgingly into reflecting on his mortality and the accompanying waves of regret, remorse and guilt. Despite his linear, left-brain management of his life (recorded in impeccably neat tablature in his pocket accounting book), he begins to recognize its emptiness and the portending terror that his life holds no meaning. The only smattering of

intimacy in his solitary existence is the few quid occasionally spent on gratifying his sexual needs with the local black women.

As Mr Robinson's health crisis deepens, we see him growing more empathic along with an increased willingness to take responsibility for his life and his actions. His congestive problems mimic those of Henry's grandmother, who also seems to be narrowing in on her last days. Eventually Mr Robinson crosses the divide between the two cultures and goes to visit Henry, who hasn't rocked up to class for several weeks, and his ailing grandmother in their ramshackle hut. It is a poignant scene where Mr R, uncomfortably aware of his privileged position, attempts to connect with the dying woman, lying cold, exposed and vulnerable on a hard earthen floor, by lowering himself onto a small fruit box, a gesture far outside his usual haughty reserve. This rare and tentative step into human intimacy opens him up to some long-hidden aspect in himself, ultimately leading him to take a deeper account of his life. By 'crossing the divide', he stands as a symbol of reconciliation, both within the clash of cultures and the conflict in his own inner world (the dominance of his intellect versus his under-developed emotional life, his arrogance versus his vulnerability). His final gesture of care towards the grandmother and Henry is apparently enough to expiate for the sins of his unconscious life, and ensure he is "no longer troubled about his place in this world".

But whether the author intends the matter to be resolved or to leave us hanging in skepticism is unclear. It's all a bit too neat and packaged – but then that's how we're meant to see Mr Robinson: a man who conducts his life in ruled columns and tidy equations. Yet I'm left feeling like there's something missing in our engagement with Mr R's character. By remaining so aloof, not allowing us to see deeper into the workings of his inner life, the reader struggles to connect with his character or his predicament, and ultimately to care about his altruistic gesture towards the disempowered and underprivileged characters in the story.

### **Strengths:**

Tone: There is a good use of authentic, colloquial Australian voice in this story. The language deftly toggles between the more formal, sophisticated descriptions of Mr Robinson, and the loose, flowing dialect of the Aboriginals. Also, the descriptions of landscape are in line with the informal and distinctive Australian vernacular.

Setting & Imagery: There is a strong sense of place in the story. The reader easily pictures the raw and untamed nature of the Australian outback, juxtaposed with the feeble attempt at civility exemplified in the "Grand Hotel" and Mr Robinson's somewhat quaint holding on to outmoded dress and mannerisms. Particularly in the opening sequence the metaphors invoke a strong sense of the wildness of the land and its traditional inhabitants: "like steam off road kill of a summer's morning"; "like a dying animal"; "a prey discarded"; "hunting ducks"; a "hangman's noose". Excellent!

Opening: The reader is immediately drawn into the story with a bang! Though there's some confusion about what's going on, it's made clear by the end of the opening sequence – and the reader is left wanting to know more; why this man is so violent and

what's he going to do next? What drives him and what ultimately will be his ruin? Or his salvation!

Plot: the main plot is clear and believable, with a main character whose problem is made known early on (his ailing health, his problem managing his anger, his 'change of life' as he faces his mortality). There is little confusion about the sequence of events and the addition of a "sounding board", i.e. the other teachers and itinerant workers living at the Grand Hotel, in the centre of the plot helps to magnify the protagonist's growing sense of conflict between himself and his culture and profession, and the marginalized and disadvantaged people they have 'preyed' upon (again, excellently shown by the hunting and killing imagery in the opening sequence).

Language: in general used sparingly, indicative of the vernacular Australian and also the reticence of the main character. The use of colloquial Aboriginal English (and native language) is commendable and has an ear of authenticity – but I wouldn't be qualified to assess this accurately and would recommend running it past an Aboriginal reader.

Characterisation: Descriptions of the protagonist are complex and intriguing, including his clothing, his living situation, his habits and hobbies (e.g. accounting, vintage foreign cars). There is both a sense of paradox within the character (his anger and his empathy), and in his relationship to the "world out there". He is both angered by it and attracted to it. These paradoxes are compellingly captured at various points in the plot: e.g. his cough which sounds so similar to the dying grandmother; a wonderful description of his ailing body, "burdened like a hat-stand under the weight of scarves and coats" followed by a description of the landscape in which a "sole gum emerged like a stick from the stony dirt" – such provocatively similar images!

The descriptions of the Aboriginals are also accurate and believable: Henry's cousins (and classmates) moving in one indiscriminate mass, like a herd or flock of ducks; Henry's impish, boyish mannerisms, his carelessness (tending the fire) and his concern/love/fear for his dying grandmother; the grandmother in her simplicity and traditional ways, but also a product of the imperialism of white Australia (being raised in a mission to do servant's work).

Dialogue: authentic and purposeful. It flows naturally and conveys something about the characters while propelling the plot. There perhaps could have been more "inner dialogue" from within the protagonist.

### **Areas for improvement:**

Plot & Structure: Generally, the story needs more conflict. While it starts with a bang, the plot immediately begins to lag after the powerful opening sequence. There should be gradual building up to a point of climax – at least as powerful, if not more so – than what we are presented with in the beginning. This doesn't happen and the climax of the story (Mr R's visit to Henry and his grandmother and his resolve to help them) seems an anti-climax by comparison.

Characterisation: The tension is there in Mr Robinson's character, but after our powerful introduction to him, seen at his worst and most explosive, he becomes somewhat wishy-washy – while at the same time the plot slows and starts to feel sluggish. We want something more from him. An inner tension that equals his capacity for anger. Perhaps an 'explosive' emotional breakdown or inner realization that finally outdoes his propensity towards anger and leads him to an 'aha!', a realization of his fractured self, his guilty participation in the hegemonic culture and their abuse of the oppressed, his yearning for something more than account books and a well-ordered life. Even though he is a dispassionate character, the reader needs something to engage more with his inner-struggle than their getting – otherwise, he just appears bland and uninspiring – and difficult to feel sympathetic towards.

Imagery and language use: To facilitate more engagement with the plot and characters there could be a greater use of "show, don't tell" strategies. This could be accomplished by revealing the feelings of the character in greater depth/complexity; by greater use of "sensory" descriptions (what are the characters hearing, tasting, feeling, touching, seeing); by more descriptive use of words (e.g. "huge" and "enormous" are used to describe setting – how can the 'largeness' of things be shown without saying it?); and by re-wording clichéd phrases, such as "ebbed and flowed", "waxed and waned" (page 4). [See manuscript for more specific suggestions.]

Title: "Hollywood" is an intriguing title as it conjures up images of artificiality, American culture and movie-making. And most people don't know that there's a Hollywood in Australia (I'm assuming there is and it's not an invention of the author!). But what does this have to do with the story, its plot or theme? Could something more unique or descriptive or enticing be used in its place to invoke the essence of this uniquely Australian story? (Unless I'm missing something, which could well be!)

Grammar and Editorial: The paragraphing is a bit confusing. Without indentation it is often hard to tell where one graf ends and another starts. Also there are some graf's that seem too long. Punctuation, particularly of dialogue, needs to conform to standard use (e.g. "I'm sick of the sight of you," Mr Robinson ordered. "Just get home." Rather than "I'm sick of the sight of you" Mr Robinson order, "just get home.") Overall there are places where there are too few or too many commas. See manuscript for details.