

REVIEW

Common People by Tony Birch: characters drawn with empathy



Author Tony Birch reminds us that class does exist in Australia. Picture: Josie Hayden.

- Louise Swinn
- The Australian
- 9 September 2017

On *Different Class*, the seminal 1995 album by English rock band Pulp, frontman Jarvis Cocker sang about “common people”. Comparable issues of class underpin the stories in Tony Birch’s new collection of the same name.

Melbourne-based Birch throws us straight into the action. There is always urgency and vitality in his stories; there is always a wide terrain. Characters are immediately and completely drawn with just a few words, and do not fit into easily defined moulds.

Two women drive into the night to join a long line of people hoping for the chance to do exhausting and illegal meat-packing work in an outer suburban abattoir. A homeless man who helps a girl give birth is never seen again. A boy sets a scrap yard on fire after the death of his brother. An inner-city indigenous girl is selected to go on holiday with a wealthy white family in 1960s Melbourne. A genealogist is employed by a funeral parlour to locate family for cremains that have been unclaimed for decades. Complete worlds pile up, Birch skilfully steering the furious energy of his writing so as not to make it exhausting for the reader.

“We tell stories in order to live,” Joan Didion wrote, and this is true of Birch and his characters, who use storytelling to cope, invention as a key to survival.

Joe Roberts, living alone with no next of kin, has been in pain for a while. At the hospital, nurses and doctors are kinder than they are required to be. Juts small words, the touch of a hand, but it makes a difference to Joe. When the boy in the neighbouring flat is locked out, Joe brings him dinner and waits with him until his mother comes home. Birch writes with great insight about this boy and man, both of whom have no extended connections to turn to. Without laying on the empathy too thick, their reality is laid bare: escaping their situation is almost impossible.

Party Lights reads like a Gus Van Sant short film. A couple of friends, high on a drug concoction named Party Lights, see a man digging a huge hole. He says he’s demolishing a house and then burying it in the hole. Fascinated, they watch him do exactly that. The little they have is a result of their companionship.

In *Painted Glass*, Birch explores the value of art. When a journalist is laid off, and then is in a car accident he doesn’t remember, a psychologist suggests he return to his childhood hobby of art. Birch slows down the narrative in the National Gallery of Victoria, where the man’s encounter with art and then with a delighted child is precisely what he needs. His day is made better by the people he watches and meets. Descriptions are precise and evocative: walking away from the NGV, the journalist looks at “the tea-stained water of the wide river”.

In *Worship*, Lola walks past a homeless man and his mother, who asks for a smoke. Lola doesn’t have one but at the supermarket she buys a pack. When she stops to give it to the woman, they chat. Lola, a recovering alcoholic, is about to look after her granddaughter for the first time. Later, taking her granddaughter for a walk, she sees the mattresses of the homeless pair being cleaned off the street by council workers. Birch evokes place and time with small details dropped in unceremoniously, and the stories are rife with social commentary. “Men with beards, neck tattoos and pedigree dogs frequented the cafe and felt better about themselves after dropping a few coins in the bowl of someone sleeping rough for the night.”

We are left to make what we will of each situation, each story a generous course in this degustation.

His language never calls attention to itself but the occasional humour is perfectly deployed. “One quality I’ve always admired in the Micks; they never give up on a wayward soul. They’d have persevered with Hitler,” says Viola in *Frank Slim*. Characters sit on both sides of the law. They are indigenous and they are white, old and young, city dwellers and country battlers, women and men. Dialogue is impeccably employed; Birch is a ventriloquist.

Where there are people, there is always hope, although you’re never quite sure if characters make the right decisions. In *Paper Moon*, is the girl right to take her father home or does he have a better chance of recovery in hospital? Well, who are we to judge? Perhaps that is the point — Birch shows empathy so that we might find it. Characters demonstrate willingness to be kind, and underlying many of the stories is a hardy optimism.

These stories are diverse. Birch flies his story drone around, landing in different situations, inside houses, on the street, through a window, providing a 360-degree

view of the action. He encourages us to see things through the eyes of someone different to us. What these characters have in common is more than their differences. They are not heroic, but just getting through each day requires toughness and resilience.

The news gives us stories about the homeless people's "tent city" in Sydney's Martin Place; Birch gives a voice to people like these. We pretend that class doesn't exist in Australia, but Birch is here to remind us that it does.

As his writing matures, Birch's stories are most reminiscent of Junot Diaz and Raymond Carver. *Common People* is broad of subject matter and tone, and proves him a master of the short story. Fortunately for us, chances are this prolific writer is working on the next collection already.

Louise Swinn is a writer and critic.

Common People

By Tony Birch

UQP, 218pp, \$29.95