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From near and far, Pip Adam

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The Shark Party Janet Colson Escalator Press, \$30.00, ISBN 9780473295141

Run Thomas Run Kate Carty Escalator Press, \$30.00, ISBN 9780473295240

The Silver Gaucho Jackie Ballantyne The Doby Press, \$35.00, ISBN 9780473275259

In a lot of ways, these books represent work from distinctive places. All three are produced by publishers with interesting back stories. The copyright pages of *The Shark Party* and *Run Thomas Run* state that "This book was taken from manuscript to bookshelf by students of the Whitireia NZ publishing programme". Escalator Press is an exciting development in the already successful and highly praised course which offers students hands-on experience in all aspects of publishing. There's an article on the Whitireia website by Jd Nodder, a student on the project team for *The Shark Party*, which reflects on the process, offering a unique insight into the act of publishing. *The Silver Gaucho* is published by The Doby Press which is also the name of the publishing house where the protagonist of the book works. This creates all sorts of interesting echoes for the reader and plays with that wobbly line between narrator and author, "real" and real world. The acknowledgments include a thank you to Geoff Walker who "encouraged me to join the publishing revolution".

As well as the artefacts themselves being born in relatively new ways and unconventional places, these three books are set in locations other than Aotearoa: *The Shark Party* inhabits the heady world of New York art dealership and philanthropy; *Run Thomas Run* begins in Baghdad and moves to London; and, although many significant scenes of *The Silver Gaucho* take place in Aotearoa, the book takes its momentum from Argentina. It's heartening to see our writers taking on the world in this way, and I was struck, particularly in *Run Thomas Run*, by the degree to which a "New Zealand" perspective can add to a story about lives and experiences from other countries. I've always thought we have an interesting vantage point from down here, and these three books demonstrate the slant this far-flung observer status can put on stories which might otherwise be presented through a lens of close proximity and

familiarity. All three writers have spent time in the places they write about, and these books benefit from that uneasy play of distance and closeness.

The other kind of place these books conjure when taken as a group is the place of the narrator, the point of view in space and time that the story is told from. The books show a range of vantage points available to writers and how these different perspectives work to give the reader an experience of a story as well as an understanding of its events.

The third-person perspective of *The Shark Party*, which is limited to its main character, builds tension as we travel with her, seeing and knowing only what she does, as she moves through the events of the story in chronological order. *The Shark Party* is, perhaps, a thriller – there are missing people, crime and violence. It moves at a fast pace and relies heavily on the tension it builds through the mysteries the main character encounters as we travel through the plot with her, neither of us able to see what is happening in other rooms. While I can respect the pace and the satisfaction of discovery of this well-managed plot, my favourite aspect of the book was its investigation and exposé of the art world. Colson uses real art works in the book, which adds to this intrigue. I recently saw the documentary *Cutie and the Boxer*, which has a nausea-inducing scene involving a buyer from the Guggenheim, and Colson captures some of this darkness in her book. A horrifying side-story explores the extent to which the rehabilitation of the environment depends on the money of the privileged classes. Another unique aspect is the richness with which Colson describes the world of her characters. She has a deftness for tone and sound. There's a joy to be had in her choice of word and detail. Whether it's the claustrophobia of an abusive home or the openness of a beach or wood, Colson summons place in ways that made me, at times, crave a slower clip with slightly less emphasis on things happening, so I could stand for a moment, look around and feel the full extent of what I was being shown. This "other book" I'm summoning, of course, is not this book, and this book should be judged on what it is and by this measure it delivers well.

Run Thomas Run is told from multiple perspectives: those of a father, a mother, a daughter. The third-person narrator of this story moves from one character to another for chapters at a time. The central story is the complex and intergenerational repercussions of torture and rape. The book takes place in the shadow of Iraq's violent history and makes for difficult, but important, reading in parts. Unlike *The Shark Party*, which walks with a character who

encounters event after event, *Run Thomas Run* is set in motion by one single decision – everything that follows can be drawn back to that one event. In many ways, this is a heart-breaking book. To watch lives torn apart through unjust, undeserved acts is hard. However, the way this book deals with its subject matter makes it an extremely compelling read. The multiple perspectives add to the bitterness by showing the reader, through characters' private thoughts, that reconciliation, repair and love are so close yet infinitely distant. However, this access to characters' most personal reflections and beliefs also breathes hope into the book. At the point in the book where a character's body is at its most abused, we are given access to their mind, and there is a sense that here they are still in ownership of themselves. Carty manages this struggle between hope and despair with immense skill and craft to produce a powerful reading experience.

The Silver Gaucho is perhaps the least conventional of these books in terms of narration. One of the paths through this book happens in chronological order and from the first-person perspective of the book's main character, Lockie Steele. This path winds in and out of fragments of third-person observation, which can be read as a distinct book written by Lockie at a later time. Through this technique, the reader gets to "put the book back together" in a way that mimics both the search that is central to the plot and also the experience of making sense of a city or town one is not familiar with. This is a book concerned with travel and being lost. One of the most satisfying aspects of the book is the multiple ways Lockie returns, revealing all the complexity and uneasiness of this idea and the ways travelling complicates and at the same time clarifies the place/s we call home. To begin with, I found Lockie's narration intrusive: it isn't the type that disappears like *Jane Eyre's*. Instead, we are very aware of Lockie throughout. This, from the first page, is not atypical: "The lyrics filling the cabin brought back memories of my time up in Timaru living with Dad and Linda. Dad gave me the Wham! album *Make it Big* for my fifteenth birthday. I remember playing it to death." Lockie is not a reticent narrator. Yet this fits the work quite well, making her a valuable travelling companion. Even when she withdraws in difficult times from the community of the book, she is still generous and articulate in expressing her experience. This chatty tone also acts as an interesting counter to the poignancy of the fragmented story which, if read as Lockie's writing, adds a compelling complexity to her character.

Reading these books together gave me pause to reflect on place, especially the idea of leaving and returning and how weakly the permanence of "home" holds up if prodded ever so slightly. Whether it's the woman who leaves her abusive home in *The Shark*

Party, the family who leave their home forever in *Run Thomas Run* or the multiple homes Lockie finds in her travels, the vantage point seems always changing. All three of these books offer a new view on the worlds they describe through voices of fresh experience and perspective and make for a satisfying reading experience.

Pip Adam is a Wellington writer. Her last book was I'm Working on a Building.

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