

Michael Meehan, *Deception* (Allen & Unwin, 2008)

Michael Meehan's fiction is distinguished by the quality of his writing, and by his ability to tell a story that winds the reader in from the beginning. His latest novel, *Deception*, again begins with a mystifying appearance and disappearance that raises questions about what has precipitated the dramatic events, and about what it may all signify. The tension between these two levels of meaning is contained by the writing, and becomes the central theme of the book.

The opening page sets the tone, the place and the problem, and introduces a character who is central to the mystery.

He wrote of stones. Sebastien Rouvel. In one fragment after another ...

From the earth they drew a harvest. There being once a presence in that place and a voice that told of order. All those stones they now discovered just fragments of that image, shattered wreckage from the fall ...

It was in the dust of Mount Deception and those scattered stones that the children played for that last time, the dust coursing in the confused winds ...

At one level the scene is a familiar Australian site of hope lost in the barren earth that bears only stones. But there are signs of a further dimension of significance. The stones have fallen from some attempt at order, and the winds that blow the order away also bring the voices that seem to promise meaning. The fall may be Biblical, but any hope of understanding is countered by the name of the mountain. The novel will show us that the hopes invested in the homestead in its shadow have proved a deception. We eventually find out why this occasion was the last time the children played, and why the order promised by play was also a deception. By the end of the book, we are brought to wonder whether all human hopes for order or meaning are merely deception.

After its opening, the novel shifts to Paris in the times of the 1871 Commune and the 1968 rising, and to the attempts of two descendants of the Communards to make sense of the role their forebears played in Paris and at Mount Deception. Nicholas and Julie, the grandchildren, piece together explanations from French archives, from histories, from a manuscript left by Rouvel, from memories of one of the children, now grown very old, and her associates, and from the information of a former scholar turned filthy Parisian *clochard*. Each source is unreliable. The archives, and the histories drawn from them, are incomplete. The old woman tells only what she feels appropriate. Rouvel's papers constitute a vast, elliptical and confused poem. Lucien, the *clochard*, is perhaps the most honest of the informants, but his knowledge is limited.

Eventually, the novel offers three different accounts to explain the events of its opening scene. One is given in the successive stories Agnes, the sister left behind in the opening scene, tells Nicholas, and those told him by her half-sister Clémentine. These are all, like the fallen stones, mere fragments from which we may guess the nature of the original structure. A second account is in the sworn statement put together by the old woman and their lawyer. This gives the facts, but leaves out motives and feelings. A third is the narrative put together by Rouvel's niece Julia from all the sources. She does this by

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entering imaginatively into the original accounts, but produces only a cheap romance that Clémentine rejects as a betrayal of the trust she and her sisters have invested in Nicholas.

A fourth account is given by the novel itself. Its structure emulates the elusive nature of the story it tells. It throws into doubt the nature of history, wondering whether truth is recoverable from the past, or whether as we enter into past events told in the words of others we merely reconstruct ourselves through them. As one character suggests, we start with shadows, which produce actions, which produce lies. Meehan questions the nature of both truth and of its relationship to language. He suggests that we must choose between words and actions, between a past we cannot know and a present we can inhabit. Eventually, among the characters in this novel, only Nicholas escapes the prison of the past in order to live in the present. But this comes at the cost of his relationship to Julia, and to the hopes of his aunts.

The dangers of the past are made vivid in the poignant scene where Nicolas confronts his aunt with Julia's account of the truths she has discovered. Clémentine has made her house for the first time warm and welcoming, and is joyfully looking forward to a meeting where she will at last her family will be restored. The story he gives her is not only a betrayal of her trust, but discloses a reality that robs her of the happiness she has designed for her last years. She has, she says, she offered him a visitable past, but by going further than she was prepared to he has taken the future, however brief, that she had designed for herself and her sisters.

The history Julia and Nicholas uncover raises many further issues. The background to the attempt to settle at Mount Deception is another disappointment, like the failure of the Paris Commune. Meehan's account of the terror imposed by the Communard leaders, and the bloody revenge exacted by the Republic, raises the questions of human responsibility and the nature of terror. These questions are made more pertinent by the subdued noise of the 1968 uprising going on in the streets while the researchers pursue their studies. Although the novel is about the past, its past folds easily into the present lives of its characters, and of the reader.

Only at the end does the novel falter in holding together its two experiences of reality, as both a form of words and a sequence of events. By settling most of the 'factual' questions of the plot, it threatens to make its existential question of reality irrelevant. Yet its journey to this point is richly rewarding in its insight into the predicament of humans left with only words to guide them through a world of uncertainty, terror, and possibility.

John McLaren