

Louis Nowra. *Abaza*. Pan Macmillan, 2001.

Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers' Radio, Radio Adelaide

Broadcast on 11 May 2002 (Recorded 3 May 2002)

Louis Nowra's novel *Abaza* is, I suspect, quite brilliant, but it's not for the squeamish. The subject is an appalling history of despotism and violence in a fictional Pacific island nation, told using the unusual format of an encyclopedia.

I'm not sure if the idea of writing a novel in encyclopedia form is entirely original, but I haven't come across it before, and it may be something quite new. The plot is surprisingly easy to follow, which is quite an achievement when you consider the constraints Nowra has placed on himself by using a series of alphabetical entries as his determining structure.

Of course, this is no ordinary encyclopedia. Most of the entries are written by 4 people who are in jail in Abaza, each of them expecting soon to be executed by the coup leader General Dugi and his brutal children's army. Each character provides a different angle on the country's history. Of the four, the only serious scholar and presumably the instigator of the encyclopedia is a Professor of History who has lost both arms to the rebel children because of their particular hatred of intellectuals and contempt for history. Their murderous activities are, however, by no means as selective as this might imply: these children have been trained to enjoy the pain and humiliation of others, and kill or maim purely as a form of recreation.

Professor Eba shares his cell with Lomu Gona, a cynical journalist, and in the adjoining cell are the effete Joni Velo, who has been jailed because of

his intimate connections to the deposed president and the old regime, and Arnie Baubau, a member of the children's army who is wrongly suspected of killing one of the few people the General wanted to keep alive. Some additional entries are provided by an exiled Abazian poet, Umaba, who lives in Queensland, and the editor of the whole is an Australian historian.

The encyclopedia format turns out to be surprisingly suitable for narrating this history of Abaza over the past century or so. A technical difficulty authors of this type of novel have always faced is how to provide background information without impeding the narrative flow. Nowra's solution is simple: anything the reader needs to know about the country in order to understand the story can be made the subject of an encyclopedia entry.

Entries cover the Abazian language, the religions, superstitions, food, and cultural life of Abaza; and biographies of the main historical figures and the characters in the novel. The longer entries tell the story, which is well-paced and more coherent than that of many modern novels written in a more standard format. Nowra can place his climaxes wherever he chooses, by making up names or Abazian words that fit into the alphabetical sequence to suit his narrative structure. The whole book fits together very cleverly.

The novel, as I have said, contains a range of voices. There is the professor - erudite, humourless and naively shockable; the journalist - a caricature of worldly cynicism; the poorly educated, brutalised child soldier; the languid, self-pitying catamite, and the pompous, self-absorbed poet. Ultimately, no character is worthwhile. The toy boy Joni Velo at first seems sensitive and gentle, but in the course of the action he proves weak, knowing he is being corrupted but continually finding excuses, and in the end proves

capable of acts of appalling violence, and is no better than the rebels who have imprisoned him.

This book is shocking and gruesome, and I could only continue to read about the mindless mutilations carried out by the Children's Army by shutting off all empathetic impulses, and even then I had the odd nightmare. It is no comfort that, although Abaza is a fictional country, Nowra has based his story on facts garnered from reading books and articles on Africa and Pacific countries.

The history of Abaza is not a colonial one, however. It is the abuses of the ruling elite that have ruined the country, not the imperial ambitions of the great powers. The worst thing that other countries have done is to collude with the corrupt leaders in ruinous money-making schemes. So this is not a post-colonial novel but a story of the human race's boundless capacity for cruelty and corruption.

It is also a very masculine novel. The female characters are, as I suppose is predictable in such a violent and unliberated society, marginalised to the position of sex objects. *Abaza* reminds me most strongly of the Latin American magical realists, especially Garcia Marquez. If you enjoy that kind of grotesque, horrific fable, you will probably like *Abaza*, but if you are content to believe that people are capable of horrors without needing to go into details, you may prefer to keep your dreams undisturbed and give this one a miss.