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The Lake Woman. Alan Gould (Arcadia, 2009)

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded 11 March 2010.

Alan Gould is a writer who seems quite untouched by literary fashions. Despite making writing a full-time career, he writes thoughtful, personal books of poetry and fiction which one suspects are unlikely ever to hit bestseller lists, though he has won a few awards both for poetry and fiction. Perhaps for this very reason his writing is intimate and appealing and unique.

His new novel, *The Lake Woman*, concerns an Australian officer in the British Army who parachutes from his plane over occupied France on the night before D-Day and lands, unexpectedly, in water. Providentially there is a French woman nearby who saves him from drowning, takes him in and restores his equanimity before he heads off to try and find his fellow invaders. This woman, mysterious and pragmatic, becomes henceforth the focus of his life-long adoration, though he spends only one night in her company, and barely even sees her in the darkness. Once she has warmed him (using unconventional but effective methods), she calms him by ‘doodling’ with him on the piano, at the same time impressing on him the dangers surrounding them, with the ‘boche’ still occupying her village. Alec Dearborn, the soldier, is a thoughtful chap, and when his deliverer sidles carefully to a window in the just the way he’s learnt in his training, he finds it ‘heartrending’: ‘During his training [he] had occasionally wondered about which parts of war would move the strong emotions in him. This one took him by surprise. Here was a person living among a population who could not take the innocent standing at a window for granted’ (48). Another surprise is the ‘outlandish ... way that his war did not conform to an expectation’ (156).

Alec is very much a creature of his time, and the narrative is couched in the language of the 1940s, the self-deprecating vernacular of the English upper echelons. He's constantly concerned about doing 'the fair thing', not letting down the side even if it meant that you were 'done for' by the 'other fellow'. He's used to self-examination: 'This need to be witnessed was a part of his character he shied from, sometimes tried to disguise with suavity or plain bluff, and he grew impatient with himself whenever it reasserted its pressure' (119). He meets his match in Viva, however, who deflates his bravado with her down-to-earth ways. As he remarks later in their association, after the war, it is characteristic of her to make a proposal which is 'practical, altruistic, fraught' (258).

There's an innocence in the way in which Gould wields language, not always deftly, and sometimes leading to almost comical ambiguity, as in: 'Surely his part in pursuing the good lay in taking this opportunity to fathom the mystery of her' (118). A more careful writer would have split the words 'good lay', especially in this context. The sentence makes perfect and innocuous sense as it is, but on first reading, the effect of coming upon that phrase is a surely unintended snigger. Nevertheless, *The Lake Woman*, unlike many literary novels, is easy to read and unpretentious, while still being pensive, philosophical and poetical. It's also unfashionably and rather sweetly romantic, with a pervasive melancholy which saves it from sentimentality.