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*Below the Styx*. Michael Meehan. Allen & Unwin, 2010.

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers' Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded 8 May 2010.

Michael Meehan's literary career has certainly not followed a predictable path, since his first novel, *The Salt of Broken Tears*, a dark and powerful tale of death and desolation in the Mallee, won the 2000 NSW Premier's Award for fiction. His second, *Stormy Weather*, is also set in country Victoria but is a gothic melodrama peopled by Shakespearean grotesques – a company of touring players who descend on a country town. *Deception*, from 2008, takes his Australian protagonist to France to explore secrets in his family past. It is portentous and slightly overwritten, and staggers somewhat under the weight of its ambitions. But now, with *Below the Styx*, Meehan has hit his stride.

As I read a book for review, I usually make a note of a half a dozen quotable passages to be used for illustrative purposes. Reading *Below the Styx*, I ran out of paper. There are so many brilliant *bons mots*, outrageous one-liners, and preposterous paradoxes, that I had to restrain myself from copying out the whole book. I don't know when a novel has made me laugh out loud so often. But at the same time, the novel raises serious questions about the law, violence, social pretensions, human nature and all the rest. As the narrator points out, 'There is less danger, with comedy, of deep emotion edging between us and the raw truths of life. Tragedy just can't match the infernal niggling of comedy, its knowledge of the familiar, mixed and grubby, its frightening inner and neighbourly understanding of banality, subservience, routine.'

Martin Frobisher is on remand for the murder of a close relative. Is it his wife or her sister who has been killed? And although he admits he struck her, was it the blow he inflicted with an outlandishly ornate artefact – a silver epergne, lovingly described – that killed her? These questions may or may not be settled by the end of the novel – it's not exactly a whodunit but one still doesn't like to give too much away.

The explicit intertext for this novel is Marcus Clarke's *For the Term of his Natural Life*, and Meehan's unique background in literary criticism and the law is wittily brought to bear on this book and the whole subject of Clarke's life and work. A more shadowy ancestry which kept suggesting itself to me is Iris Murdoch's 1970 masterwork, *The Black Prince*, also written from prison, by a first-person narrator who has been

convicted of a murder he may not have committed. Murdoch's sense of the messiness which lurks just beneath the respectable veneer of middle-class life, and of the inherent comedy in the most appalling events and extreme situations, finds many echoes in Meehan's dark, philosophical, ferociously funny novel. *Below the Styx* doesn't have the compulsive plot of a Murdoch novel. Martin, who has made a very handsome living as a publisher, finds that he's 'less interested in wisdom than in intriguing forms of weakness' in fiction, and judges *His Natural Life* 'as one of the great-messes-that-happen-to-work ... an excellent example for all of us in how not to go about putting a novel together. And with luck, just a few of us might show ourselves capable of making the same mistakes.' After that, no critic is going to cavil at the structure of this novel, which is at least at first blush somewhat rambling. But anyway, why complain, when you're rambling in such devilishly entertaining company?