

Book Reviews

Joseph C. Veramu

Moving Through the Streets

Suva, Fiji: Mana Publications, 1994. Pp. 182. NZ \$13.95

Reviewed by Stan Atherton

In an analysis of Somerset Maugham's working-class novel *Liza of Lambeth*, Robert Calder speaks about the novel's "subtle understanding of how slum life operates as a society to maintain its own particular taboos and customs" and of how the immediate setting (Vere Street) "is treated almost as a character, and it is a powerful force" (*W. Somerset Maugham and the Quest for Freedom* [London: Heinemann, 1972] 46). So it is with Joseph Veramu's first novel, in which the streets of Raiwaqa in Suva, "the largest housing estate in the South Pacific" (61) are both venue and antagonist as the central characters struggle to come to terms with the social and economic imperatives of life in the slums.

Veramu, who teaches at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji, has intimate knowledge of the urban milieu he recreates in fiction. Personal experience—he spent his adolescent years in Raiwaqa—and academic inquiry—he has published a social analysis entitled *Growing Up in Fiji*—give this writer a unique perspective on the dysfunctional society explored in the novel.

Moving Through the Streets is essentially the story of two young lovers, Sakaraia and Merenia, and the forces which condition and restrict their relationship and their lives. Sent from his village to live with relatives and attend high school in Suva, the teenaged Sakaraia soon falls under the influence of Onisi, the leader of a local gang of school dropouts and petty thieves. Inevitably he is drawn into a life of aimless hedonism focused on easy girls and alcohol, and supported by small-scale crime. Predictably he is caught and imprisoned. On his release he continues to drift until he meets Merenia, a young prostitute and fellow slum dweller. Though they move in together, little alters in their lives, and Sakaraia, depressed at his lack of prospects, continues his association with the gang. Eventually he is picked up on a charge of violent assault and burglary, but is acquitted for lack of evidence. Onisi is convicted, however, and with the removal of his influence and the patience and support of Merenia, Sakaraia manages a new beginning, finding employment in a local bakery.

Such a conventional, even hackneyed, story line, with its “things-may-look-tough-but-there’s-always-hope” thematic overlay, belies the strength of Veramu’s work. In an earlier publication, a collection of short stories and a novella entitled *Black Messiah* (1989), his most memorable characters were those who were manipulated by the forces of their immediate physical and social environments. In *Moving Through the Streets* it is these forces which dominate the consciousness of key characters and readers alike. Here, for example, is Veramu’s view of Raiwaqa’s slums: “a stinking place. . . the seemingly endless blocks of flats in this prideless area stood silent and morose, as if waiting for some enlightened person to brighten and repaint them and to transform the tenants into responsible people filled with some measure of pride. By each high rise block stood grey painted rubbish enclosures where garbage bins were supposed to be neatly placed for the collectors. But now they had become stinking dumps. . . . Years ago the Raiwaqa Housing Authority had made a plea to the tenants to be more hygienic. People had not listened. . . . Sakaraia walked up one of the dirty stairs littered with rubbish to the topmost fourth storey. . . . The faint smell of urine and excreta hung in the air. He felt like vomiting” (149). Caught in such a world and with no prospect of changing it, Sakaraia sees himself as “a failure: without a job, without a future. A nobody” (1). Even Onisi, the gang leader, “had a low opinion of himself, was often depressed and needed drinks and sniffers to face the trials and tribulations of daily life” (19). And Merenia, who had left school early and worked in a garment factory at slave wages and then as a housemaid for little more, becomes “disillusioned by life in the slums” (21) and becomes a whore. She knows that eventually, like thousands of other slum women, “she would be married to a labourer and would bear children in rapid succession. She would, of course, be beaten periodically” (21), because of her husband’s frustration at his own lot in life. With Sakaraia, things might be marginally better.

While there is little to temper Veramu’s bleak vision—the hopeful ending is tentative at best—this third-world novel underscores the ubiquity of social inequality and discontent, and reinforces the need for reform.

Thomas Strychacz

Modernism, Mass Culture, and Professionalism

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. Pp. 228. £35.00

Reviewed by Axel Knoenagel

Literary modernism coincided temporally with various other cultural and social modernizations of which mass culture and mass media are—from a cultural point of view—the most significant ones. In his study, Thomas Strychacz argues that modernist literature can only be properly assessed in conjunction with the practical consequences of these modernizations: “the kind of text we