

Laurie Clancy as Novelist of the Secular City

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Laurie Clancy is very much a writer of the modern secular city. Although he was brought up in a Catholic household, he had left the Church well before he left school. The world he describes in his fiction is a post-modern world, where there is no God to offer comfort or authority to offer meaning. Clancy approaches this world from a realist perspective, but his realism breaks down as his characters find their efforts to make sense or to find fulfilment break down into fragmentary episodes of frustration or futility. Indeed he published many of these individual scenes as separate short stories. Even in the novels the narratives tend to collapse into series of fragments, rather than follow any kind of progression towards unity. These fragments record the frustrated attempts of his characters to create a unity in their experience, or to bend the outer world to their desires. Their constant failures produce an absurdity that ranges from the farcical to the tragic.

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The first of Clancy's novels shows a young man who abandons the Catholicism of his childhood as he tries to make a life for himself from the encounters in which the city involves him. The collapse of his endeavours produces broad farce. In the next, Clancy moves back a generation, to the parents who continued to find a place in the Church even after it failed them. In this novel the aspirations of the parents and their eldest daughter are taken seriously, leading to a novel that could be read as social realism with a suggestion of tragedy. In the next, Clancy moves back to the contemporary city, where the life of the intellect is crumbling under the pressures of self-serving managerialism. This is an academic novel, with the usual farce and futility that marks the genre, but it is also a satire of modern life in which the games of academia become a microcosm of a society which has lost its sense of purpose. Finally, he takes us to a city where all values have died and the highest ambition seems to be to escape from living into mere existence. In this bleak setting, humour is as rare as hope.

In *A Collapsible Man* (1975) the city is the background to lives centred on the domestic spaces of homes and lodgings, either in what had become the academic Bohemia of Carlton and Fitzroy or in the working class areas of Hawthorn or Elsternwick. This Melbourne is not so much a place as a series of sites where people gather to drink, eat and fuck. It provides the constant noise of traffic and the network of streets through which the characters drive to engage with each other. The writer's interest is in the social networks that bring them into contact, the constraints they feel or reject, and the fears, hopes and hypocrisies they bring to their activities.

The novel begins with the narrator, Paul O'Donahue, in the Warburton Sanatorium for the Mentally Disturbed, where he contemplates the brilliant future, as novelist and academic, he has been told he has ahead of him. But as he looks back on his career to date, he is more concerned with his failures as lover and lecher than with his precarious success as student. The driving force of his ambitions has been not so much the encouragement of his professor as the background of his family. 'In almost every respect,' he tells us, it followed 'the classic pattern of Irish Catholics in Australia.' Appropriately for this background, the novel takes the form of a confession which becomes farce as O'Donahue tells of his repeated failures to fit smoothly

WORKS CITED

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