

THE MULTIPLE EFFECTS OF RAINSHADOW BY THEA ASTLEY

Thea Astley, renowned Australian author, was born in Brisbane in 1925. She attended All Hallows Catholic school, trained as a teacher and became a prolific author. She won 4 Miles Franklins and many other awards. She died in 2004.

The Multiple Effects of Rainshadow was Astley's second last novel. It was published in 1996 and is based on an actual event that occurred on Palm Island in 1930. Palm Island from 1918, was a dumping ground for Indigenous Australians deemed to be "problems". The event in question concerned the white superintendent Mr Curry, mad with grief at the recent death of his wife, running amok and setting fire to buildings (including his own home in which his children were sleeping), and shooting the doctor and his wife. He was eventually shot (and killed) by an Indigenous man Peter Pryor, under the order of the white deputy superintendent. Curry had lived on PI during the 20's after the Great War, building roads, infrastructure etc. Captain Brodie is the novel's Mr Curry and Manny Cooktown is Peter Pryor. Palm Island is Doebin.

The novel explores, through multiple points of view and over a period of around 30 years, the impact of this event on six white people who were present on the island at the time – but interspersed between these voices is the voice of Manny, the man who shot the superintendent.

The voices are, in chapter order:

Manny Cooktown the indigenous "shooter" and main narrator who commences the story and appears between each voice, but does not conclude the novel. From his narrative we learn about Aboriginal people being rounded up and taken to Doebin; men and women segregated in dormitories, engage in unpaid work, chained. The part-whites are hated by the blacks. At age 19 Manny, is charged with murder after shooting Uncle Boss as directed by Leggart, deputy Super. He is acquitted. Racism is rife, 'could only be bright if had the white gene'. Children born from rape. Normie Cooktown, Manny's brother obtains further education in Taws boarding school. Twenty years later he calls a strike on Doebin, then is rounded up to be deported to another reserve.

Mrs Curthoys, landlady on Doebin at the time of the incident.

Gerald Morrow, third person, writer/editor who had gone to the Island to work as a foreman, for which he had no skill or experience, and who was in fact escaping the Island in a boat at the time of the incident.

Captain Brodie, the superintendent who ran amok and was shot by Manny.

Mr Vine, a school teacher on the Island at the time of the incident.

Father Donellan, priest who visits regularly from the mainland and is responsible for the Island's religious "needs".

Leonie née Curthoys, daughter of Mrs Curthoys and now married to Doebin's Doctor Quigley, shot by Brodie and so on the Island at the time of the incident.

Omniscient author who carries the last chapter when Normie calls the strike and Vine's son Matthew now a lawyer/public servant working on Doebin to make a difference.

According to Chloe Hooper, who introduces the 2018 edition, Astley's characters all display 'the multiple effects' of being in places they don't necessarily want to be and where they don't belong.
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Hooper goes on to state: "The novelist by following decades of history, quietly captures the way cycles of repression keep repeating. The novel ends with a brutal government response to the islanders' strike over conditions and pay, which took place on Palm in 1957."

Our readers' comments included: 'Powerful, disturbing, the despair conveyed real and raw'; 'sublime writing, clever to build story around the book's characters'; 'beautiful insights into tragedy'; 'excellent and intense'; 'the rhythm of the writing conveyed feeling'; 'felt shame at the behaviour of the Whites'; 'rich and evocative language, the climate permeated the story'; 'insightful history lesson'. For some it was a painful read but all agreed this is a book of immense importance for historical interpretation and the brilliance of the author.

Di, Lyn, Pauline 4; Suzy, Norma, Jo, Lynda, Kim, Margie, Janet, Sandy 4.5; Jenny DNF.