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Amanda Lohrey - *The Labyrinth*, Melbourne: The Text Publishing Company, 2020, (pp. 256), ISB: 9781922330109

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The construct of *The Labyrinth* is literally the construction of a labyrinth. The premise is more complex: interrogating the protagonist Erica's difficult past through her unbearable present. A woman of about 60, she buys a fibro shack in the small coastal town of Garra Nalla to be near her adult son Daniel who is in prison for what we glean is a serious crime. The novel is at once a meditation on the random painful and at times poetic aspects of life, and an interrogation of "the family" and its enduring influence. The subtexts of resilience, survival in the face of grief, and the assumption that life demands continuance are set with an epigraph from Jung: '*The cure for many ills is to build something.*'

The Labyrinth opens with a description of Melton Park, the psychiatric hospital where Erica and her family resided, and her father worked: 'I grew up in an asylum. A manicured madhouse.' By the end of this refrain 'There were no bars on windows, though a dry moat ran around a certain high-walled enclosure' (3). I am completely enthralled by both Erica the child and Erica the adult woman I am yet to meet. Having returned to the now-defunct Melton Park to find the labyrinth she remembers from childhood, Erica relays snippets of her experiences growing up there. For instance, the time when her father Ken thought she might like to sit in on some shock treatment sessions, but he decides, after she throws up twice, that she doesn't 'have the stomach for medicine' (10). It is established early that Erica is arty and gifted with arcane languages rather than cut out for medicine which she studies until she runs off with Gabriel Priest, an artist, and the son of a judge.

Once the mature Erica has settled into her fibro beach shack, she begins to plan her labyrinth. Initially, I am a little inured to her preoccupation with it and more interested in the town, its inhabitants and Erica's interactions with them. Not that the significance of the labyrinth with its double-headed axe, symbolic of the womb and a metaphor for rebirth¹ is lost on me. Its symbolism is central to the

maternal focus of the narrative, and its construction allows Erica to dissociate from, and try to process the painful reality – which she describes as a ‘tsunami of dread’ (61) – that her much-loved son, a talented painter, is in prison, and for a long stretch. Daniel’s artistic talent, how culpable he is (if at all), and the nature of his crime slowly unfold, intertwined with the back story of Erica’s parents, their deaths, and Erica’s subsequent estrangement from her brother, Axel. All of which is delivered with a tempo that is almost restful, despite the multiple themes of loss and the tenuous and often-fraught nature of parent-child relationships.

The labyrinth also becomes a metaphor for re-building Erica’s life, one that is philosophically and psychoanalytically framed by her father’s enduring influence and her mother’s absence. Erica’s father Ken was so psychoanalytically inclined, that when she was a child, he made notes on how she played with her toys. Erica remains haunted by the loss of her parents and memories of her childhood at Melton Park, a majestic, but eerily Gothic setting in which murderers and psychopaths roamed freely. In one instance, just before her tenth birthday, Erica relays the details of an argument she recalled hearing between her parents. She remembers that her mother expressed fear of a new inmate – a botanist who had ‘murdered his wife and chopped her up in a blender’ (5). This was why Erica thought her mother had fled ‘the manicured madhouse’, never to return.

Both parents haunt Erica throughout the narrative. Ken’s persistent presence in absence is a tribute to the fact that he cared for both children until *he* was murdered by an inmate who took to him with a garden scythe and severed his carotid artery, just before Erica’s 20th birthday. A fact that is even more pithy because Ken had always promised to reveal the psychological truths of the notes he made while observing Erica playing with her toys when she turned 21. Suffice to say, even without this revelation, Ken leaves an indelible psychological and philosophical legacy.

Erica’s fibro shack at Garra Nalla where ‘the birds and possums shit on the roof and [she] is probably drinking E coli’ (23) is down a dusty, dirt track, from which you can hear the sea. As an Australian idyll, the fibro beach shack is arguably fading, as more and more are “knocked over” and replaced with mansions the size of embassies, but in *The Labyrinth* Erica’s remains intact. Despite being not much more than 100 kilometres south of Sydney (Nowra?), it is still delightfully scrubby and inhabited by an equally delightfully motley crew that suit Erica’s needs, and as it transpires, she theirs. All of whom – with the exceptions of refugee, Jurko, an Albanian stonemason who builds the labyrinth, and the slick neighbour and architect, Lewis Eames, who, retrospectively wishes he had designed it – seem to herald an earlier, less acquisitive era.

The Labyrinth balances two fragile states: the ‘dread’ of living in an unbearable present reality and a painful reconciliation with the past. Erica’s unbearable present focusses on the pain of a mother who is unable to help or even communicate with, her adult child. Even more specifically, Lohrey locates the despair of being disdained by an adult child. Thinking about one of her impending visits to the prison she silently berates herself, ‘I am not a young woman on a date. But I do not want to provoke or upset him’ (25). Humiliated by

Daniel's animosity when she visits, Erica dissects her maternal past, understating her somewhat difficult single motherhood which is realistically depicted in a grungy, roughly 1990s, Sydney.

This novel focusses on parent-child relationships, how formative they are, and how randomly a child's life, and as a result, its parents' lives can be derailed. In this way, *The Labyrinth* could be said to be laying down the fundamentals of survival under siege and how one might attempt a reconciliation of self, both with and independent of one's family. As a reader, I was a little disappointed that Erica's father was killed off so early, but I needn't have worried, his presence pervades as if propelling Erica on and through the life she has come to dread. The meditative quality of the prose, despite the themes of pain and loss, is dreamlike and suffused with Lohrey's elegant take on existentialism. An existentialism that comprises Erica's father's practical advice: *Put the hands to work and the hands will pacify the demons in the brain*'(96), and a gesture to letting go, or giving in ... which in Erica's case is forgiving herself for what she perceives as her mother's rejection of her. As Erica remarks when she visits her aunt Ruth and shows her the postcard of the Ely Cathedral that she'd kept since childhood as a reminder of her absent mother: 'It had consoled me; it had told me that there's madness everywhere, not just at Melton Park, and that my mother absconding was not my fault' (113). Perhaps what Lohrey – who is no stranger to contemplations of motherhood—is also getting at in *The Labyrinth* is that a mother can never win, for as she bemoans when visiting Daniel: 'Despite everything he is still able to mock me. And this is necessary, for who else is there to blame but mother?' (166).

Notes

1 The labrys is a symbol of the female labia at the entrance of the womb and the butterfly, which is connected with rebirth. The double axe is also associated with the even more ancient hourglass figure of the Goddess. The labrys (labyris – labris – labrus) is an ancient Minoan symbol that looks like a double axe and was quite common on the island of Crete. Scholars have reason to believe that the symbol actually represents a butterfly, a symbol of transformation. (...) Later this wand was actually transformed into an axe that was used as a weapon by the Amazons, a matriarchal warrior society. <https://james-ingram-act-two.de/leftMenu/labrys.html>

About the reviewer

Jane Scerri is currently in her third year of a DCA in creative writing at Western Sydney University. She has presented at literature and gender conferences and published short stories, poetry and academic papers. Currently working on a novel, her main interests are feminism, desire and contemporary Australian literature.