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All the Green Year
By Don Charlwood
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It has been a privilege to review this novel, which I have now read for the third time. When I first read it, as a teenager, I was taken along for the ride on a boys' own adventure level; ten years later I picked up a battered copy at a market and found myself still compelled, this time perhaps more with the depiction of family relationships. Now some twenty-five years later, it is the sense of time and location which arrests me, almost as much as the narrative itself.

All the Green Year is set in Kananook, a coastal town based on Frankston, in 1929. Charlie Reeve is fourteen and moves, with his parents, little brother, Ian, and dog Gyp, to his maternal grandfather's cliffside house when the old man is exhibiting increasing signs of dementia. Charlie is a troubled teenager who never seems to be able to satisfy the expectations of two authority figures in his life: his demanding father and his sarcastic, preference-dealing school teacher Old Moloney. Not that this bothers him too much. The only approbation he really seeks is from Fred 'Johnno' Johnston, his physically powerful but tender-minded schoolfriend.

One reason to revisit the novel now in its new *Text Classics* edition is a delightful and revealing Afterword appended by the author in April of this year, just two months before his death. It contains surprising revelations about Jack Smythe, the boy on whom the portrait of Johnno is largely based, which should fascinate readers and re-readers alike. Also contained in the Afterword is a series of questions the author asked of himself, in 1962, concerning how he should narrate the account. Rejecting writing from the viewpoint of a fourteen-year-old boy or a slightly older youth, because of limitations this would impose on vocabulary and 'maturity of observation', he opts for writing as a man reflecting on his pivotal childhood experiences as condensed into one year. What he loses in immediacy, he gains in allowing his boyhood to 'repossess' him and to add an adult's expanded visions.

Another feature of Charlwood's writing is that he telegraphs future events often. This risks becoming annoying as a technique, but I did not find it a problem with Charlwood. We know for instance, from the second paragraph on page one, that there will be a 'fiasco' at the end of the year. That it will involve a bay crossing in an open boat at night, in a fog, with dog, is something we will later see merits the description 'fiasco'. The reflective narrator, right from the beginning, is knowing enough to observe that individual events in the year described are not strictly causally linked but seem to contribute to Charlie's overall predicament.

Because it was first published in 1965, we might expect some of the writing to sound dated to the twenty-first century reader. 'Forlorn' perhaps is not a word today's teenagers would jump to use; neither would they speak of the 'preservation' of a girl's 'honour'. But the words are used in context and Charlwood could justify the use of such vocabulary as being of a piece with a post-war adult idiom. Moreover, readers are likely to be swept along with the precise narratorial style, which nails particulars so tellingly.

In common, also, with many of today's year eights, the narrator declares that he and his mates were 'badly misunderstood', an early indication of what would later be identified as a 'generation gap'. Charlie resents the interference of his career-stunted, insistent father. Young readers may well empathise with Charlie's feelings as he listens to his father's worries about what will happen in the future to his son if he fails certain tasks at school and in the community. Charlie is of a mind to have better fun by 'making his own mistakes'.

Charlwood organises events on the page seamlessly. The confluence of Charlie and Johnno's efforts to earn swimming certificates with the arrival of a late afternoon storm segues into the behaviour of temperamentally stormy Grandfather McDonald, who rages on his back veranda about everything from phantom shipwrecks to deficiencies in Darwin's theories. When all-night family 'watches' are divided up in the family to look after the old man, Charlie is called in at six in the morning, 'while dawn crawled to the windows' and we can sympathise with him as he feels, listening to his grandfather's laboured breathing, 'more alone than if I had been in the middle of the bush'.

This perspective, sometimes lonely, but always rigorously honest and sensitive, continues throughout the text despite Charlie's daily boisterous boy-bound life. When he is obliged to take some respite in Melbourne, Charlie recounts the muted sounds of horse-drawn taxis on Victoria Parade from his bed in his aunt's double-storey terrace house. Later, in the room of a place he and Johnno have illicitly entered, Charlie feels 'the house listening and watching'.

When the glue of the friendship between two boys threatens to come unstuck after the more physically prepossessing Johnno is the first to succumb to the attractions of the opposite sex, Charlwood renders Charlie's incredulity in blunt terms. 'You're mad, Johnno.' One boy sees 'a beaut', the other 'a drip'. Charlie cannot believe his best mate would start 'prancing'. So changed has he become that Charlie concludes, 'Johnno's company was as good as gone'. Here again, the knowing, reflective perspective works well.

Notwithstanding the depiction of urgent adolescent issues, the novel is laced with humour, often animal-based. Charlwood incorporates a riotous camel riding sequence written earlier as a stand-alone piece. A rogue bull and a hypnotised chook also enliven proceedings. Charlie's neighbour, crafty 'Squid' is often the catalyst and his character is a neat counterweight to Johnno's decency.

Michael McGirr, in his endearingly rambling introduction to this edition, points out that World War One casts a shadow over the novel in parts, not least in the character of 'Birdy' whose full name is Birdwood Monash Peters. Young readers, even if they do not pick this up, should recognise and gravitate towards what McGirr characterises as the book's 'wise innocence' and Charlie's 'open heart'.

Kananook is represented by a series of credible minor characters as well. There is Sergeant Gouvane, the policeman, pretty Miss Beckenstall, the encouraging teacher, 'colourless' Mr Wetherby, the funeral director, and Theo Matthias, a crusty Bolshevik by inclination and Grandfather McDonald's loyal debating partner. Each of these, and others, contribute to the authenticity of the depiction of period and place. It is a time when consequences follow you home from school, almost literally, in the shape of people involved.

The final word should go to Charlie, for whom 1929 has been such a momentous year. 'It was moonlight and very still, and for late November cool and misty. The light winked at the end of the pier and the answering lights far out in the channel winked back. Everything was the same – lights, stars, house, sea; everything except me.'

What a marvellous legacy Charlwood has left for readers new and old in *All the Green Year*.

Bill Wootton is a reviewer who lives in Cottles Bridge

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