



***I'm working on a building* by Pip Adams. Wellington: VUP (2013). RRP: \$30. Pb, 200pp. ISBN: 97680864738981. Reviewed by Jane Orchard.**

In an author's note, **Pip Adams** says: '[t]his book began as the creative component of a PhD which asked: in what ways can the language

of structural engineering inform, alter or enlarge fiction?'

With this question as the *raison d'être* of the novel, readers are inevitably faced with an interesting literary experience – to decide whether this novel does indeed confirm her thesis.

This is an unusual novel. Catherine is depicted to be remote and dispassionate. Near the beginning, she recalls how her tutor told her she didn't relate well with others. We get a description of her viewing herself from a distance. Like a building, she can be dismantled. She imagines herself melting into a building: to '[b]urn and burn until she was melted to the permanence of it, the pieces that had always been: mountain, rock, tower, and at the very end somewhere there would be a building left that still stood alone in the darkness under a red sky.' People are as separate and detached as buildings, their relationships with each other as purely functional as the elements of a building's structure. The building metaphor for human life is always present.

The buildings have a place at the forefront of the story which confirms that they are the dominant features of Catherine's world. She is always working on a building. She never predominates over the building. The force is in the inanimate world as it absorbs the animate.

Background information on thearts.co.nz says:

Pip's aim is to write our relationship with the built environment in ways that highlight the strangeness of surroundings that we normally take for granted in order to amplify what might usually be a muted aspect of fiction. She argues that 'strangeness' is a useful term since it suggests something of the paradox of a large built form, that it is both manifestly solid and still but also basically a machine for balancing forces that are constantly in motion.

Structurally, the story starts at the present and works backwards to Catherine's childhood. Although this is unusual in a novel, it is actually the way we usually learn the stories of the people we know, albeit that happens in a less chronological way.

The parts of the story that feature Catherine are told in the third person. When, for example, the narrative switches to her sister Isabel, she uses the first person and we learn far more about the family. Depicting a remote and isolated character can also leave the reader remote and isolated.

Adam's task then is to make us believe we know the character by systematically exploring her life, but within a context which must always leave her remote and separate. Each chapter goes back a step in her life, works its way forward, then jumps back another step, leaving a very discontinuous narrative.

The blurb says: 'Everything becomes clearer in reverse – because sometimes, things have to be taken apart to be understood.' Whether things do actually become clearer in reverse is a moot point and in this case the reverse becomes close to being a gimmick. The cover photograph of a building (presumably the Dubai building being copied in West Coast bush at the beginning / end of the novel) is upside down, and the back page is also upside down.

The language of the novel certainly encompasses the language of structural engineering. Who could forget the description of living in Catherine's basement flat in London: 'London was sleeping in on Saturdays, not moving, waiting for the water to find its way again through clay, concrete. Listening, neck stiff, back sore, listening for the dribble, the wash, the flood. Praying that nothing was watertight. Then concrete. Concrete laid and then laid in floor; walls that fail in several ways; they overturn, slide forward, overload the ground that supports them, or break, but they don't $P_p W \tan \phi > 3Pa$.'? Catherine's London experience does not come across as a happy one!

This is an interesting novel which becomes an artificial conduit for a thesis and vice versa. Adams has taken a significant risk.