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Walking a tightrope

Walk to Kulentufu

By Gail Morgan

Dent, \$24.95

165 pages, hard cover

Reviewed by Christopher de Bono

WALK to Kulentufu is not a novel for the faint-hearted. It is an aggressive, tense novel of ideas, full of acute observations and analogies. It tells the story of two people balancing on an emotional tightrope. What humor there is, is ironic. From beginning to end, Gail Morgan's novel is fraught with impending doom, yet it isn't a melodrama. Rather, the author spotlights the desperation of two very modern, very fragile people. And she has done this very well.

In Morgan's first novel, *Promise of Rain*, she concentrated her critical gaze on her upbringing and experience of outback Australia. Her second novel, *Walk to Kulentufu*, tells the story of Wotjek Zawodzinski, a refugee from political oppression in Poland and the stifling culture of old Europe. Wotjek is extremely sensitive. He is embittered by a sense of personal and national betrayal and is seeking freedom and "a place in the sun" in the new world. However, he seems incapable of being happy in Australia. He discovers that the promise of freedom from political oppression is "the promise that we'll be

neither noticed nor disturbed again". He finds himself floundering in a country that is indifferent to him, to his virtues and his history as well as his vices. He discovers the "immense loneliness of being trusted".

Wotjek is shocked from his lethargy when he meets Anne, a sensitive but straight-forward Australian. He falls in love with her but finds that, just as he is unused to being trusted, he is incapable of trusting. The relationship is further complicated by his cultural disorientation. Anne doesn't recognise the rules of courtship and Wotjek is uncomfortable in a world without social guidelines. He is attracted by her honesty and her love. Anne may hold the key to understanding Australia. She may end his loneliness. However, he cannot escape his need to play conqueror.

Anne suggests that Wotjek accompany her on a trip to Papua New Guinea to exorcise his Polish ghosts. He decides not to go, refusing to play a subordinate role and flexing his emotional muscles. However, he finds that he misses her love more than he expects and follows her.

When he arrives Anne is preoccupied. She is involved in the establishment of a trout hatchery in a midland village. Wotjek finds New Guinea as stimulating as Anne prom-

ised, but is so obsessed with his private demons that he fails to take adequate account of his new, dangerous surrounds. He breaks a taboo to his, and Anne's detriment. The climax of the story is quick, sharp and tragic.

If the book has a failing it is that it is populated by extremists. You need to imagine a wealth of off-stage activity to see the characters as human beings. Sometimes I found myself wondering why Anne bothered with such a bitter self-obsessed man. The two central characters spend a lot of time talking, but they never seem to talk to each other. Their conversations have all the hallmarks of repartee and none of those of communication. Yet, with this failing, Morgan manages to make the characters seem disturbingly real. This is a minor complaint.

Walk to Kulentufu is not a light read but it is a good book. Morgan's observations contain some sharp truths about the nature of Australia, of people, of culture, politics and relationships. She has written an angry, gripping novel, almost frightening in its intensity. *Walk to Kulentufu* is a big novel, with some shortcomings, but with even more real virtues.

● Christopher de Bono has worked as an editor, copywriter and book-seller.

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